

How Emile Durkheim Made His Mark on Sociology

On Functionalism, Solidarity, Collective Conscience, and Anomie

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Émile Durkheim, one of the founding thinkers of sociology, was born in France on April 15, 1858. The year 2017 marks the 159th anniversary of his birth. To honor the birth and life of this important sociologist, we'll take a look at why he remains so important to sociologists today.

What Makes Society Work?

Durkheim's body of work as a researcher and theorist focused on how it is that a society can form and function, which is another way of saying, how it can maintain order and stability (See his books titled [*The Division of Labor in Society*](#) and *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*).

For this reason, he is considered the creator of the [functionalist perspective](#) within sociology. Durkheim was most interested in the glue that holds society together, which means he focused on the shared experiences, perspectives, values, beliefs, and behaviors that allow people to feel that they are a part of a group and that working together to maintain the group is in their common interest.

In essence, Durkheim's work was [all about culture](#), and as such, it remains deeply relevant and important to how sociologists study culture today. We draw on his contributions to help make sense of what holds us together, and also, and quite importantly, to help us understand the things that divide us, and how we deal (or don't deal) with those divisions.

On Solidarity and the Collective Conscience

Durkheim referred to how we bind together around a shared culture as "solidarity." Through his research, he found that this was achieved through a combination of rules,

norms, and roles; the existence of a "collective conscience," which refers to how we think in common given our shared culture; and through the collective engagement in rituals that remind us of the values we share in common, of our group affiliation, and our shared interests.

So, how is this theory of solidarity, crafted in the late 19th century, relevant today? One subfield in which it remains salient is the Sociology of Consumption. In studying why, for example, people often make purchases and use credit in ways that conflict with their own economic interests, many sociologists draw on Durkheim's concepts to point out the important role that consumerist rituals play in our lives and relationships, like giving gifts for Christmas and Valentine's Day, or waiting in line to be among the first owners of a new product.

Other sociologists rely on Durkheim's formulation of the collective conscious to study how certain beliefs and behaviors persist over time, and how they connect to things like politics and public policy. The collective conscious--a cultural phenomenon premised on shared values and beliefs--helps explain why many politicians are elected based on the values they claim to espouse, rather than on the basis of their actual track record as legislators.

The Dangers of Anomie

Today, Durkheim's work is also useful to sociologists who rely on his concept of anomie to study the way violence often crops up -- whether to the self or others -- in the midst of societal change. This concept refers to how societal change, or the perception of it, can cause one to feel disconnected from society given changes in norms, values, and expectations, and how this can cause both psychic and material chaos. In a related vein, Durkheim's legacy also helps explain why disrupting everyday norms and routines with protest is an important way of raising awareness of issues and of building movements around them.

There are more ways that Durkheim's body of work remains important, relevant, and useful to sociologists today.

You can learn more about that by studying him, and by asking sociologists how they rely on his contributions.

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