

Interviewer 00:00:02

Emile Durkheim's Sociological Theory, Key Concepts.

00:00:07

At the core of Emile Durkheim's sociological theory is the idea of social cohesion. As a functionalist sociologist, Durkheim is concerned about social cohesion or social solidarity. According to Durkheim, social cohesion comes from core institutionalized values that are held in common. Thus anomie, that is, the lack of norms of behavior, feelings of alienation, and social conflict, which are some of the central concepts in Emile Durkheim's sociological theory, are seen as social pathologies.

00:00:42

Let me briefly discuss the key concepts of Durkheim's sociological theory. I will begin with the concepts of collective conscience, religion and mechanical solidarity. According to Durkheim, collective conscience and religion are crucial to social cohesion. This is because first, collective conscience, understood as beliefs and sentiments that are shared in common by members of a society, creates common condition of existence. And religion is the main form of collective conscience, which, according to Durkheim, imposes a uniformity of beliefs and actions. However, it is important to note that Durkheim argues that collective conscience, expressed in religious beliefs and reinforced by ceremony, which eventually brings people in solidarity, is true only to small scale societies, for example, tribal societies. Durkheim calls the kind of solidarity that we can find in small-scale societies "mechanical".

00:01:39

As we may already know, for Durkheim, mechanical solidarity implies the similarity of individuals living in a society. In other words, in a society held together by mechanical solidarity, members share the same basic beliefs about the world and about life, which are essentially based on religion, and engage in the same basic social and economic activities, such as hunting and gathering. These basic beliefs and values constitute what Durkheim calls "collective conscience". For Durkheim, collective conscience, which is understood as the totality of beliefs and values, is a determinate system with a life of its own. Because collective conscience is understood more as norms of society, this system causes the individuals to cooperate with each other or abide by the laws of the society. But it must be remembered that collective conscience is not a social structure but is a form of solidarity found in small-scale societies.

00:02:41

Now, as we can see, advanced societies moved away from this type of solidarity, which results in the weakening of the hold of collective conscience. However, for Durkheim, the paradox of modern societies is that as they become more individualized so they become more integrated. Thus, Durkheim did not view modernization as the cause of the disintegration of the old society. As a matter of fact, as already hinted above, modernization has ushered in a new type of solidarity. And for Durkheim, this is made possible through the concept of the "division of labor".

00:03:19

On Division of Labor and Organic Solidarity

00:03:23

As already hinted above, the organization of society into tribes corresponds to what Durkheim calls the segmental structure of mechanical solidarity. Here, a society is made of small groups or segments organized into tribes with close proximity to one another and where the division of labor is along domestic lines. As we can see, there is little division of labor in a society held together by mechanical solidarity. Now, as societies become more advanced, the segments turned into organs with more specialized functions. Also, advanced societies are now characterized by industrialization and increased division of labor.

00:04:07

These highly complex and organized societies, therefore, as Durkheim would have us believe, are no longer held together by mechanical solidarity but by organic solidarity. The collective conscience may have remained but become less and less important as the type of solidarity that hold these societies together now comes from occupation rather than kinship, and social interactions are now based on contracts. With this, Durkheim argues that organic solidarity bases itself on a more specialized form of social interactions with the individuals linked more to each other rather than to society as a whole.

00:04:46

As we can see, the shift from mechanical solidarity to organic solidarity has led to the idea of system integration in contradistinction to social integration. In social integration, individuals or groups come together or integrated into the mainstream society and they are integrated because they share common beliefs and values. In system integration, the society has become more advanced and complex, and the division of labor has become high organized through the markets, the state, and so on. In system integration, individuals are integrated through the roles that they played in the society.

00:05:25

Indeed, it is here that the notion of the division of labor comes in. In fact, according to Durkheim, the division of labor in advanced societies makes individuals more reliant on each other and, in particular, on the economic functions that different people perform. This is indeed the paradox of the modern society held together by organic solidarity.

00:05:48

As Ian Craib rightly puts it, the paradox of organic solidarity based on the division of labor is that members of society become both more individuated and more dependent on society at the same time; more individuated because in modern societies, people fulfill many different social roles, behave differently in those roles, and work with different, specialized bodies of knowledge. Beliefs and knowledge shared by the whole community are no longer sufficient to enable each individual to fulfill his or her task. We become more dependent on everybody else fulfilling their tasks, vitally dependent. If I were a member of a hunter-gatherer society, I could go off by myself for long periods of time, looking for food, finding my own shelter, and so on. In contemporary society, I am dependent on other people - many of whom live on the other side of the world - to grow my food, make my clothes, supply me with warmth and light, print the books that I read, service the word processor I write on, and so on. I could have or done none of these things without society.

00:06:56

On Law, State, and Social Cohesion

00:06:58

Because social bonds become more like contracts in modern societies, law therefore is necessary according to Durkheim. For Durkheim, law is important for social cohesion because law reproduces the principal form of social solidarity. Two kinds of law for Durkheim: penal and restitutive. According to Durkheim, penal law is based on repressive sanctions, which predominates in less advanced societies. The origin of penal law is religion and it serves to maintain collective sentiments in order to preserve social cohesion. Thus, as Durkheim argues, punishment's true function is to maintain social cohesion intact, while maintaining all its vitality in the collective conscience. Restitutive law, on the other hand, is based on restitutive sanctions, which predominates in modern or more advanced societies. The origin of restitutive law, according to Durkheim, are contracts, which bind people together in solidarity. And for Durkheim, the true function of contractual laws is not to inflict harm in order to maintain social cohesion, but to return things to their normal state and to reestablish what has been disturbed. As we can see, organic societies are restitutive rather than repressive and aim not so much to punish, but to secure compensation for damage.

00:08:28

Now, in terms of crises which threaten social cohesion, Durkheim emphasizes the role of the state in maintaining social cohesion through its regulative powers. Thus, for Durkheim, it is the state that can ultimately promote and maintain social cohesion, especially in more advanced societies. Durkheim provided three important reasons why it is the state that can promote and maintain social cohesion in more advanced societies. First, the state ensures justice and offers protection to the individual. Second, the state preserves social unity out of diversity, especially of the function brought about by increasing division of labor. And third, the state, whose primary concern is policy-making, law, and government, interacts with the rest of society, ensuring that society becomes more consciously directed, as opposed to being the product of unthinking custom and tradition.