

Emile Durkheim (1858-1917)

Durkheim introduced a number of ideas and arguments that are still of importance to social theorists today. Durkheim argued that we should treat social facts as things. In other words that we should study the factors that influence social behaviour as if they were concrete objects and external to the individual.

Like all sociologists, Durkheim was interested in the question 'How is society possible?' One of the central themes of his work was to identify the relationship between the individual personality and the wider society. For Durkheim, human consciousness without categories of thought is 'fragmentary' - a constant flow of representations which have no relationship to each other. Moreover, Durkheim was no stranger to uncertainty, his sociology was written against the background of Nietzsche's philosophy; the Franco-Prussian War; the Industrial Revolution, with its urbanisation, social movements, etc., and the First World War. But Durkheim believed that classification does exist and that it extends to all areas of social life. It forms the basis of pre-cognition, and as such allows us to organise our ideas. Categories exercise constraint upon us so that the world appears to be arranged according to a set of rigid principles, which allow us to read acts and signs.

Activity: Durkheim

Look at Durkheim's book *The Rules of the Sociological Method* and read the first chapter: 'What is a social fact?' Then read the following passage and say if you agree with it. Give three reasons for your answer.

Durkheim is very good at explaining the common ways of behaving within a society. However, his understanding of the human agent - what it means to be a person - is very limited. Durkheim assumes that individual people are pushed about by forces outside of their control. That ways of behaving are determined by forces outside of the individual's command so that people are powerless and have limited choice in terms of ways of behaving, what to do and how to do it. For Durkheim, the individual human agent is a 'cultural dope', doing what it is told, following the rules, with question.

All sociology textbooks assume that Durkheim's argument on classification is Kantian in nature. However, adopting a distinctly anti-Kantian stance was one of the positions that Durkheim took in an effort to distance sociology from philosophy. For Durkheim, an empirical analysis of morality is always necessary. In contrast, for Kant all moral concepts are *a priori*, in that what we perceive depends upon our subjective apparatus, which is given and not dependent upon our experiences. Any objective principle which we find compelling Kant termed an *imperative*. There are two forms of imperative for Kant:

- o the **hypothetical imperative** - you must do X if you wish to achieve end Y;
- o the **categorical imperative** - which states that a certain type of action is objectively necessary without any regard to an end.

As Russell explains: 'Kant holds that the mind orders the raw material of sensation, but never thinks it necessary to say why it orders it as it does and not otherwise' (Russell, 1946: 687). In Durkheim's analysis, however: 'There is no rule, no social prescription that is recognized or gains its sanction from Kant's moral imperative or from the law of utility as formulated by Bentham, Mill, or Spencer' (Durkheim, 1973: 25).

Our faculties such as definition, deduction and induction form part of the mechanism we use to 'construct, project, and localize in space our representations of the tangible world' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 3). We have no reason to suppose that the human mind contains within it a framework for classification. No such framework was given by nature: these mechanisms had to be formed from a combination of elements drawn from a range of sources. In addition, people have to be educated in the nature of the categories, and how to use them: 'humanity in the

beginning lacks the most indispensable conditions for a classificatory function' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 7).

Any system of classification, Durkheim argues, is 'extra-logical'. There is no given or preconceived logic for classification. Classification is hierarchical and involves looking for arrangements between categories, but this is not a spontaneous process based upon abstract reasoning, it is the product of a human process. The reasons why we developed such a system of classification may have been forgotten, but the categories remain and new ideas are assimilated into existing categories. However, it is perfectly legitimate to ask why we have classified the world in this way. As Durkheim made clear: 'We have no justification for supposing that our mind bears within it at birth, completely formed, the prototype of this elementary framework of all classification' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 8).

Ideas are organised on a model which is contained within the *conscience collective*. What is the 'conscience collective'? For Durkheim, whenever individuals interact with each other they make expectations of each others' behaviour. These expectations come together to form a 'normative order' which is over and above the individual. Once the *conscience collective* is established, it exercises a constraint upon people, which can inhibit future change within or between the categories. Hence, Durkheim argues that there is a close link 'between the social system and this logical system' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 41). However, the system of classification can change. In *Primitive Classification*, Durkheim and Mauss give the example of the decline of 'totemism' on the islands of the Torres Straits.

Durkheim is often presented as a naive precursor of a caricature of Parsonian Functionalism found in sociology textbooks. This view ignores the ontological status of Durkheim's key ideas. He was primarily interested in social facts, which are not 'absolute' facts and have a very different ontological status rooted in the practical ideas and perceptions of human agents.

As we have seen, for Durkheim, classification is simply about the concepts that we use to describe the relations between things. Everything is labelled and given a place within an integrated system: 'such classifications are thus intended, above all, to connect ideas, to unify knowledge' (Durkheim and Mauss, 1963: 81). The classes and the relationship between the classes are social in origin. Concepts are collective representations, they are ideas about the shared ways of doing things in practice. The relationship between the idea and the activity is like the relationship between the rules of a game of football and the activity of playing a game. The rules were clearly made by people, and people can change them if they so wish. However, in order to avoid an extreme relativist position, Durkheim argued that the collective representation was a social fact which exercised a constraint upon people. It is important to note that the external constraint of the social fact is totally dependent upon the internal constraint of the human agent upon itself. We both possess agency and are aware of this shared perception. We can then choose to behave in the way that others do in similar circumstances - classifying this as the 'right' way. Or we can choose to behave in some other fashion. Excessive individualism, as the

root of egoistic suicide, would not be possible otherwise. For Durkheim, if a person becomes separated from the influence of the 'conscience collective' and is no longer subject to its moral constraint they are much more likely to commit suicide. Durkheim refers to this form of suicide as egoistic suicide. One cannot have the Durkheimian conception of 'egoistic suicide' without the ability of the human agent to place itself outside of the expectations of others.

Many commentators assume that if the human agent chooses to reproduce an existing collective representation, behaving in the same way as others, then the person is not exercising their agency. This 'reciprocal imitation' is a psychological factor which is highly social in nature: 'since it is co-operative elaboration of a common sentiment' (Durkheim, 1952: 130). He further explains:

In following a manner or observing a custom one does what others have done and do, daily. But the definition itself implies that this repetition is not owing to the so-called instinct of imitation, but on the one hand, to the sympathy constraining us not to wound the feelings of our fellows, lest we forfeit their intercourse, and on the other, to the respect we feel for collective ways of acting and thinking and the direct or indirect pressure exerted on us by this collectivity to avoid dissension and maintain in us this sense of respect. (Durkheim, 1952: 127)

The question then becomes: why do people want to conform? Here Durkheim assumes that people have a psychological need for attachment, because this increases their chances of survival: 'since morality determines, fixes, regularizes man's conduct, it presupposes a certain disposition in the individual for a regular existence - a preference for regularity' (Durkheim, 1973: 34). The more active people are in their interactions with each other, the more intense will be the collective life of the society. However, according to Durkheim 'whatever is social in us is deprived of all objective foundation' (Durkheim, 1952: 213). People participate in the social because of the direct benefits that such reciprocity can give them.

What is Durkheim's theory of agency?

For Durkheim the human being as a biological entity has biological needs and security needs. For Durkheim, every person has a choice in every area of their lives: they can choose to do what others do or they can choose to do something which is independent of others. In addition, the human being has a need to survive and does not have the skill to survive without the cooperation of others. Hence, the human agent has a practical consciousness. Durkheim's practical consciousness appears to have three elements to it:

- o A **collective expression**: the person may choose to carry out an action which is of benefit to others, in order to enhance a communal response in others: 'behaviour . . . directed exclusively toward the

personal ends of the actor does not have moral value' (Durkheim, 1973: 57).

- o A **reflective expression**: the person may choose to behave in a way which is acceptable within the community; this will reduce feelings of 'otherness' and enhance feelings of solidarity: 'To act morally is to act in terms of the collective interest' (Durkheim, 1973: 59) and: 'If a man is to be a moral being, he must be devoted to something other than himself' (Durkheim, 1973: 79).
- o A **reasoning expression**: the person may choose to limit their own independence as to follow a collective representation. A central element of morality for Durkheim is self-mastery.

But as Durkheim so clearly outlined in his study of suicide, we have a need for independence and a need for the security of regulation; these must be kept in balance. Hence the human being is an agent for Durkheim, it makes decisions in every situation that it finds itself in.

What is Durkheim's theory of morality?

For Durkheim, for any aspect of human behaviour to be called 'moral' it must be common in the sense that it involves a relationship between the consciousness of sentient beings and conforms to pre-established rules. This means that morality has an element of 'duty' about it. The function of morality is then to limit the behaviour of the individual to the expectations of the wider society. However, such rules as do exist are general prescriptions: 'It is up to the person to see how it applies in a given situation' (Durkheim, 1973: 23). In addition, the person has to have an understanding that moral authority is *sui generis* and not simply another name for our own personal habits.

Durkheim presupposes that people have the capacity to choose how to behave and that individuals are capable of behaving in a similar fashion in similar circumstances. The purpose of morality then, is to:

- o determine conduct
- o fix conduct
- o eliminate individual arbitrariness

Morality is characterized by its 'regularity'. It is internalized by the person as 'accumulated experience' but expressed externally; 'irregular behaviour is morally incomplete' (Durkheim, 1973: 31). Beyond regularity we have rules that prescribe ways of behaving; we behave according to the rules not because some innate force is at work, or because we like to behave in that particular way but because we are subject to a regulating moral authority. In what Durkheim termed 'simple' societies, morality tended to be religious in nature. However, as things change, human duties and the roles people adopt whilst performing their duties become more clearly defined and placed in a human context of moral transgression rather than sin. We

start to experience the moral order as an autonomous order independent of the people: 'morality is a totality of definite rules; it is like so many molds with limiting boundaries, into which we must pour our behavior' (Durkheim, 1973: 26).

In a nutshell, morality has several aims in Durkheim's analysis. It helps us:

- o to respect discipline/to accept the rules;
- o to be committed to a social group;
- o to have knowledge of why people behave in the way that they do and to have mastery over our own behaviour.

What is Durkheim's theory of structure?

Social solidarity is the cohesion that people have within a group. For Durkheim, modern society has a cohesion because of the differences between people. He used the term 'organic solidarity' because he saw society as very much like the human body. In a similar fashion to organs in the body, each of which has a different shape, function and purpose, all making a contribution to the effective functioning of the body; so various groups and individuals with their different skills and abilities all contributed to the smooth running of the society. Moreover, just like the human body, the whole was more than the sum of its parts: there was something additional to the social body which was lacking in each of its individual parts. This was very different from earlier forms of solidarity which Durkheim termed 'mechanical solidarity'. This form of solidarity was held together by the similarities between people. There was a rigid *conscience collective* which was used to impose harsh punishments upon people for even a minor breaking of the rules. There was a minimal division of labour: most people did the same type of job or were divided into a narrow range of roles, such as hunters and gatherers.

Organic solidarity with its citizenship rights, emerged from a highly specialised division of labour. As a form of solidarity it was strong because of the differences between people. However, within organic solidarity there was a need to develop some common states of consciousness, such as morality, otherwise there was the risk that there would be no solidarity at all. It was for this reason that Durkheim wrote at some length about institutions such as the education system which would help to generate common states of consciousness amongst the population.

Durkheim was not the only writer at the time to make such a distinction. Ferdinand Tönnies (1855-1936) argued that the process of modernisation could diminish the strength of social solidarity; it may weaken people's sense of community and generate feelings of isolation. Tönnies argued that there was a movement from *Gemeinschaft* (community) to *Gesellschaft* (association) as modernisation progresses.

In pre-industrial societies people lived within 'unions of *Gemeinschaft*', where individuals have close links with both family and friends within

village life. From this we move on to 'associations of *Gemeinschaft*', which are small but increasingly more impersonal communities. This leads on to 'associations of *Gesellschaft*', which are large impersonal societies.

Mechanical and organic solidarity		
Trait	Mechanical solidarity	Organic solidarity
Character of activities/Main social bond	Similar, uniform moral and religious consensus	Highly differentiated Complementarity and mutual dependence
The position of an individual	Collectivism, focus on a group, community	Individualism, focus on autonomous individuals
Economic structure	Isolated, autarkic, self-sufficient groups	Division of labour, mutual dependence of groups, exchange
Social control	Repressive laws punishing offences (criminal law)	Restitutive law, safeguarding contracts (civil law)

Source: Szrompka (1993: 105)

Durkheim rejected the sharp distinction between *Gemeinschaft* and *Gesellschaft*, in favour of a more evolutionary transition. There are still many aspects of mechanical solidarity within modern societies. Moreover, it is not a totally pessimistic picture which Tönnies presents: he argues that the final stage of the evolutionary path is when 'unions of *Gesellschaft*' emerge. These unions are large, bureaucratic societies, but they contain welfare programmes which both benefit less fortunate members of the community and establish bonds of community.

What is the relationship between the agency and structure?

For Durkheim 'structures' are the situated activities of human agents, they are formed from practice and are not outside time or space: 'Collective representations are the result of an immense co-operation, which stretches out not only into space but into time as well' (Durkheim, 1915: 16). In *The Rules of Sociological Method*, Durkheim states in his discussion of social facts that: 'It [a social fact] results from their being together, a product of the actions and reactions which take place between individual consciousnesses' (Durkheim, 1966: 9).

In *Suicide*, at several points Durkheim states the relationship between agency and structure, as he did in each of his works. Replying to a critique from Tarde, he explained:

We clearly did not imply . . . that society can exist without individuals, an obvious absurdity we might have spared having attributed to us. But we did mean: 1. that the group formed by associated individuals has a reality of a different sort from each individual considered singly; 2. that collective states

exist in the group from whose nature they spring, before they affect the individual as such and establish in him a new form a purely inner existence. (Durkheim, 1952: 320)

This theme is perhaps more clearly stated in *Moral Education*, where Durkheim states that:

because men live together rather than separately, individual minds act upon one another; and as a result of the relationship thus established, there appear ideas and feelings that never characterized these minds in isolation. (Durkheim, 1973: 62)

The social fact then, for Durkheim, has all the essential principles that you would expect to find in a set of *a priori* conceptions, but is empirical in nature.

Society for Durkheim is expressed in and through the individual. Society is outside of us and is experienced as a 'constraint', but at the same time society is within us: we experience sociality as part of our nature. Mentally we make use of ideas and sentiments from the wider society which allow us to carry out our practices as people with a degree of confidence. Society is then both constraining and enabling. There is nothing 'metaphysical' in the nature of this relationship between the individual and society; this can be seen in the fact that 'morality' as a set of collective representations varies from society to society, as it is a social product.

Durkheim's critics have classed his sociology as conservative in nature. For Durkheim, socialism was built upon the assumption that the person was a worker/producer. In contrast, for Durkheim people participated in an intellectual and moral life that went beyond 'the economic'. In addition, they existed within a society, and socialism could not predict what would happen if there was a destruction of capitalist society. To destroy capitalist society is to run the risk of destroying civilisation.

Durkheim did want people to live in better societies. There was a need to provide welfare services to improve the position of the poor in society, but he could not accept the view that the destruction of capitalist society was the way forward. Rather, Durkheim argued that the moral, legal and political institutions could transform our economic life for the better. As he states in the final part of *The Division of Labour* on 'abnormal forms', there was a need for a more stable society. Lukes quotes Durkheim as saying that the bourgeoisie and the proletariat 'inhale the same moral atmosphere, they are, though they deny it, members of a single society, and as a result, cannot but be impregnated with the same ideas' (Durkheim cited in Lukes, 1992: 545).

As Steven Lukes explains, for Durkheim, socialism should be reformist, optimistic and built upon cooperation. Socialism should draw upon social science data in an effort to be both critical and constructive.

Most socialists misunderstand the nature of discipline and their actions may seriously damage the nature of our collective life. This is not to suggest that Durkheim did not take socialism seriously: he recognised that

it was often a collective expression of the oppression felt by some people in the poorer sections of society.

Durkheim on methodology

Durkheim's 'rules of the sociological method' are not simply a set of methodological rules but are part of his wider theoretical position. For Durkheim society is an entity which is over and above the individual. In other words, Durkheim sees society as a 'thing'. Society is treated as a concrete object which we can study in an objective fashion. The subject matter of sociology is the *social fact*, and Durkheim's first rule of the sociological method is to treat social facts as things.

The characteristics of a social fact are that it:

- o is external to the individual;
- o exercises a constraint upon the individual.

The social fact can consist of acting and/or ways of thinking which have a degree of power or coercion over the individual. Even within unorganised crowds there are collective sentiments which put pressure upon individuals to conform to the crowd behaviour. If the constraint is no longer felt by people then this is because new habits have become internalised and new collective representations are at work.

What are we to understand by Durkheim's concept of 'thing'? To treat something as a 'thing' is according to Durkheim to have an objective opinion about whatever it is that we are looking at; to have no preconceived ideas about what it is or how it works. According to Emile Benoit-Smullyan the notion of 'thing' has four characteristics in Durkheim's work. It is:

- o an entity possessing certain characteristics which are independent of people's observations;
- o an entity which can be known only *a posteriori*. The social fact is known through experience not in an *a priori* fashion as described by Kant;
- o an entity which is independent of human volition;
- o an entity which can only be known through 'external' observation, rather than by introspection.

Durkheim on suicide

In his classic study of suicide, Durkheim followed his own rules of the sociological method. The first part of the study (Book I) is a 60-page attempt to outline the inadequacies of non-sociological approaches to the study of suicide. Causes such as insanity, race, heredity, climate and imitation are discussed and then dismissed. But why did Durkheim study suicide? On a personal level, while Durkheim was a student a close friend

committed suicide and this deeply affected Durkheim. On a sociological level, Durkheim wanted to show that wider social forces were at work, and that the causes of suicide were not only of a personal nature. However, at the outset we have to say that Durkheim had a rather odd definition of suicide:

the term suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result. An attempt is an act thus defined but falling short of actual death. (Durkheim, 1952: 44)

Durkheim's four types of suicide Following his own rules of the sociological method, Durkheim attempted to classify suicides and came up with four logical possibilities. However, combined types of suicide are possible and Durkheim discussed them at some length.

First, **egoistic suicide** is caused by lack of integration into the *conscience collective*. Such subjects are described as having 'excessive individualism'. As Durkheim explains, egoistic suicide:

results from the fact that society is not sufficiently integrated at all points to keep all its members under control. If it increases inordinately, therefore, it is because the state on which it depends has itself excessively expanded; it is because society, weak and disturbed, lets too many persons escape too completely from its influence. (Durkheim, 1952: 373)

The second type of suicide that Durkheim looks at is the opposite of egoistic suicide, and he named this type **altruistic suicide**. This is brought about by people having become over-integrated into the *conscience collective*. Even minor infractions of the collective representations can bring about feelings of great shame; people feel they have to kill themselves out of a sense of duty. Durkheim subdivided altruistic into three sub-types: obligatory, optional and acute. These sub-types reflect differences in the degree of altruism experienced by the person. With acute altruism for example, the individual is so fully integrated into the *conscience collective* that they lose their individual personality and identity, they no longer exist as individuals in their own right.

The third type of suicide that Durkheim discussed was **anomic suicide**, which resulted from the lack of regulation in people's lives. The concept of anomie is a central one in Durkheimian sociology, and this anomic condition is experienced as a feeling of 'normlessness'. The loss of norms, or normal ways of behaving, can have one of two origins: either a person is unaware of the existence of a set of norms, or alternatively, a person may be faced with two or more competing sets of norms. Durkheim gives the following example: if the Romans were to invade Jerusalem this might lead the Jews to commit suicide *en masse* at the prospect of having to lead a life on the basis of Roman Law but also wanting to lead their lives according to their own Hebrew Law (Durkheim, 1952: 288). In either case the result will be the same: a greater risk of suicide.

Durkheim's fourth type is **fatalistic suicide**: 'It is the suicide deriving from excessive regulation, that of persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline' (Durkheim, 1952: footnote, p. 276). Durkheim gives a very limited outline of this type of suicide, because he claims that it is of little contemporary importance and examples are difficult to find. They included the husbands of young married women who were childless, the suicide of slaves and others who experience 'excessive physical or moral despotism'.

Durkheim's treatment in textbooks

Durkheim gets a terrible press. In a recent article I argued that A-level sociology textbooks currently on the UK market read as if they were written by people who have never read Durkheim's book on suicide. Such textbooks have a self-referential nature: later textbooks are written from previous textbooks. The descriptions of sociologists' work become further and further removed from what the original authors said. Such textbooks cannot be authoritative sources on Durkheim.

Most textbooks attempt to force Durkheim's analysis into the rigid caricature of 'structural-consensus' functionalism that bears no relationship to the subtlety and persuasiveness of the original Durkheim. All the textbooks invite the reader to assume that Durkheim had a very poor grasp of human agency, that he believed people were pushed about by forces outside of their control and made assumptions about the validity of official statistics which was beyond belief in its naive acceptance. Also it is assumed that the critiques of Douglas (1967) and Atkinson (1978) are valid.

One textbook informs readers that the social fact is 'a product of social construction: it does not create or mould the individual, but rather, individual action creates the social reality' (Kirby et al., 1997: 462). In contrast, Durkheim in his *The Rules of Sociological Method* clearly states in his discussion of social facts that: 'It results from their being together, a product of the actions and reactions which take place between individual consciousness' (Durkheim, 1966: 9).

The Kirby et al. text goes on to express the view that Durkheim made an uncritical use of official statistics to justify his deterministic view of suicide, failing to take into account that suicide statistics were put together by officials who may have their own point of view concerning the causes of sudden death.

Most sociology textbooks such as Jorgensen et al. (1997) assume that Durkheim's study of suicide is seriously flawed and accept without question the critique of Douglas, Atkinson and other interactionists who:

suggest that such statistics are only a reflection of the officials working in the organizations which produce such statistics. These do not reflect the truth or reality of such events. For sociologists, the proper study of suicide must involve

an examination of the work on the part of officials in arriving at definitions of what is or is not a suicide. (Jorgensen et al., 1997: 310)

Even a more informed text such as Fulcher and Scott (1999) maintains that 'The main problem was that the suicide rates on which he [Durkheim] based his study were calculated from official statistics' (1999: 9). This is followed by a 27-word evaluation of the Douglas and Atkinson position. In their discussion of Durkheim's study of suicide, Barnard and Burgess similarly argue that:

Durkheim's (1897) analysis of the official statistics is regarded by positivists as a masterpiece of sociological enquiry. Durkheim argues that rigorous analysis and comparison of the official suicide statistics provide 'social facts'. But according to interactionism they are social facts compiled by humans - doctors, coroners, the police and the families and friends of the dead person - who all have an axe to grind. Taking these official statistics at face value, they argue, is to ignore the interactive processes which contribute to their creation. (Barnard and Burgess, 1996: 32-3)

In the preceding discussion of Durkheim's analysis on page four, Barnard and Burgess (like most textbook authors) use the term 'collective conscience' which is not an adequate translation of *conscience collective*. This is always left untranslated in Durkheim's work because it might be misunderstood as 'collective conscience'! In English, the word 'conscience' is used to denote a measure of 'rightness' and 'wrongness' that we have inside our minds. However in French the term 'conscience' is used to denote a concept more like 'perception'. Therefore when Durkheim uses the term 'conscience collective', he means something along the lines of common or widely shared perspective, whereas Barnard and Burgess suggest that Durkheim means some form of group mind underpinning the concept of 'conscience collective'.

In summary, the sociology textbook version of Durkheim is of a positivistic/functionalist/structuralist - these terms are used interchangeably in many such textbooks - who was naive in his staunch belief that official statistics were absolute facts. He had no understanding of the process by which statistics were created. He was deterministic, believing that people were pushed about by a collective conscience made up of social facts, over which individual people had no control. Individuals were incapable of exercising control over their lives to the extent that their individual psyche was of no use to them whatsoever, and could not even prevent them from killing themselves if the collective conscience so demanded it. The role of the sociologist was simply to identify which of the four rigid types of suicide (three for some textbooks!) a sudden death should be placed into.

Perhaps textbook writers should ask why we should accept without question the 'interactionist' view. After all, by what criteria can 'interactionists' say that coroners' definitions and interpretations of suicide are wrong? Kirby et al. conclude their view of the interactionist critique of

Durkheim by saying: 'Viewed in this way, suicide statistics are created and shaped through strong social and cultural forces.' Yes, but this is not a critique of Durkheim, it is Durkheim's own view!

Durkheim did look at individual forms of suicide, in a chapter on the subject. In addition, he did not rely solely upon official statistics; he looked at some length at the work of Brierre de Boismont, who in *De Suicide et de la folie-suicide* (1865) analysed the personal papers of 1,507 people who had committed suicide. Durkheim was also conscious of the problems involved in the 'social construction' of official statistics:

But as Wagner long ago remarked, what are called statistics of the motives of suicides are actually statistics of the opinions concerning such motives of officials, often of lower officials, in charge of this information service. Unfortunately, official establishments of fact are known to be often defective even when applied to obvious material facts comprehensible to any conscientious observer and leaving no room for evaluation. (Durkheim, 1952: 148)

The Wagner referred to in the above quote did start something of a debate about the validity of a whole range of official statistics in the 1860s following the publication of part two of his *Die Gesetzmässigkeit in der scheinbar willkürlichen menschlichen Handlungen* (1864). Some of the contributions to this debate are to be found in *Année sociologique*. Durkheim was fully aware of issues of validity and reliability in relation to official statistics.

Apart from one line in Fulcher and Scott (1999: 9) there is no discussion in the textbooks of 'combined types' of suicide, in which say anomie and egoism are evident in the same sudden death. Hence, the textbooks give a neat and tidy but rather simplistic caricature of Durkheim's four types of suicide. In contrast, Durkheim's 'four types' of suicide should be viewed as four contradictory forces, any one of which could lead to suicide. Too much 'egoism' can lead to suicide, but similarly too much 'altruism' can also lead to suicide. Too much 'anomic' can lead to suicide but similarly too much 'fatalism' can lead to suicide. The individual has to keep the four forces of egoism, altruism, anomic and fatalism in balance in order to lead a healthy and suicide-free life.

There are, however, some flaws in Durkheim's analysis. Durkheim claims: 'This pressure which is the distinctive property of social facts is the pressure which the totality exerts on the individual' (1966: 102). As an example, he claims: 'the social reaction that we call "punishment" is due to the intensity of the collective sentiments which crime offends; but, from another angle it has the useful function of maintaining these sentiments at the same degree of intensity, for they would soon diminish if offences against them were not punished' (Durkheim, 1966: 96): 'Hence, sociological laws can be only a corollary of the more general laws of psychology; the ultimate explanation of collective life will consist in showing how it emanates from human nature in general' (1966: 95). I have assumed, above, that human nature is built out of the *conscience collective*. However, Anthony Giddens (1978) argues that Durkheim's attempt to 'sociologize' Kant is deficient. Giddens

gives the example of the category of time. In contradistinction to Kant, for Durkheim all time is 'social time' and as such is a social fact. Both time and space are collective representations, which express a collective reality and 'correspond to the most universal properties of things' (Durkheim, 1915: 9). Time reflects the rhythms of social life or collective activities, for example feasts and public ceremonies. The function of time 'is to assure their regularity' (1915: 11). However, a key element in Durkheim's thinking is that when it comes to regular events or our conception of time itself 'by right we are free to conceive them otherwise . . . or to represent them to ourselves as occurring in a different order' (1915: 14).¹ For Giddens, the argument that the categories of thought which Durkheim called 'social time' presuppose the discrimination which it purports to explain. In other words, a person could not grasp concepts such as space or time without having the intellectual faculty to organise their experience in terms of space and time.

Durkheim never considers the possibility that categories of thought may be based upon ideology; that powerful groups within society may manipulate the ideas of others.

There is also in Durkheim's analysis the assumption that there is only one mode of interpretation, notably of moral obligation and discipline. Also Durkheim only discusses education as a mechanism that people can make use of to share the *conscience collective*. What other mechanisms exist to allow people to share values, attitudes and beliefs which make up the *conscience collective*? Durkheim is unclear about this.

In terms of the scope of the *conscience collective*, there are some areas which are not under its control, which Durkheim terms 'circles of physical necessities'. This sphere of human activity is usually the private sphere of our lives.

Finally, Durkheim's sociology tends to ignore conflict - except for the conflict between the individual and the collective.

In conclusion, for Durkheim, to live in society means to live under the domination of the commonly held ideas or beliefs which form the *conscience collective*. It is often the case that even though people formulate the collective representations that help to create the *conscience collective*, they are unaware that they are following common ways of behaving. However, the categories that make up collective representations are said by Durkheim to be *functional* to society. Many of the arguments and assumptions that Durkheim made about the world and the practice of sociology were carried forward into the sociological theory that we call functionalism. And it is to functionalism that we now turn our attention.

Talcott Parsons: the functionalist approach

For Talcott Parsons there are two essential reference points for his analysis of social systems:

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- o categorisation of the functional requirements of a social system;
- o categorisation of the cybernetic hierarchy within a social system: an analysis of the processes of control within the social system.

The starting point for this analysis is the *action frame of reference* - the social actions and interactions of individual people which make up the social system. Parsons argued that action was not simply an *ad hoc* reply or response to a stimulus. Individual people developed a strategy of responses based upon a range of possible expectations about a given situation. This range was often based upon the needs of the person and a prediction of the possible gains and losses to the person from various responses to action. This form of interaction is possible because there is a system of shared cultural symbols which are understood within a community. Parsons's definition of a social system is as follows:

a social system consists in a plurality of individual actors interacting with each other in a situation which has at least a physical or environmental aspect, actors who are motivated in terms of a tendency to the 'optimization of gratification' and whose relation to their situations, including each other is defined and mediated in terms of a system of culturally structured and shared symbols. (Parsons, 1951: 6)

Moreover, it is because we are not in a position, claims Parsons, to develop a complete dynamic theory of action that he opted for a developing a theory of the social system in 'structural-functional' terms.

Parsons attempted to describe the 'parts' and 'processes' which he believed were to be found within real social systems. The categories he used were applicable, he argued, to all social systems.

As a functionalist Parsons believed that the social system had to overcome four basic problems:

- o adaptation - which was dealt with by the economy;
- o goal attainment - which was dealt with by the political system;
- o pattern maintenance/tension management - which was dealt with by the family;
- o integration - which was dealt with by a range of cultural organisations such as schools and the media.

The social system was made up of individual people interacting with each other within institutions and those institutions performed functions both for the individuals and for the social system itself. Underpinning the social system was a 'common value system'. In a simple society Parsons describes the common value system as characterised by pattern variables A, whilst in a complex society the common value system was characterised by pattern variables B. The concept of pattern variables is used by Parsons as a form of classifying the norms and values of different types of society. The modern industrial society is seen by Parsons to be underpinned by pattern variables