

Research Note: Durkheim's Taxonomy of Collective Violence

John Rankin

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Abstract

This note is intended to summarize and interpret Durkheim's taxonomy of collective violence as put forth primarily in his study of suicide. His taxonomy is structured in terms of six typologies that were and are a significant contribution to the project of a sociological paradigm for analysis of collective violence.

Introduction

Theoretical integration is an important issue for contemporary sociology as a science that engages social problems and potentialities, with results that sometimes significantly and directly influence legislation, litigation, education, executive government policy, and mass media themes, and therefore indirectly contributes to the formation of public opinion. Conceptual and methodological integration is needed to help ensure that the influences of sociological presentations are balanced and optimal for the subjects of such studies. The

following argument is that Durkheim's classical sociology provides a powerful framework for sociological theory integration.

Durkheim's Taxonomy of Collective Violence

This effort to summarize and interpret Durkheim taxonomy of collective violence, involves considerable simplification of the relationships within and among the six typologies addressed. It is not an attempt to contest scholarly interpretations of Durkheim's intent, or to presume that any actual case of collective violence can necessarily be neatly classified as only homicidal or suicidal, or as necessarily progressing through the sequences outlined in this review. Still, the proposed summary of Durkheim's taxonomy may have intrinsic value and show that the range and cohesion of Durkheim's approach is enough to justify a future application of his theory and typologies as an initial framework for a sociological paradigm for analysis of collective violence, e.g., by determining how other theories and typologies match, complement, or compete with Durkheim's approach.

Collective Violence

Durkheim's unique role in the historical origin of sociology and social epidemiology (Berkman and Kawachi 2011, p.1) points to the contemporary

value of his taxonomy of collective violence as an integral part of his inductive-comparative method (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp. 145-147, p.275) (Durkheim 1912 1915, pp. 20, 159), and sociological theory. His focus on collective behavior patterns is critical to his emphasis on collective as against individual factors, i.e., when patterns of violence persist over generations or spread faster and wider than the range of individual influence, so must the causes. For example, “murder” rates in the United States show two great surges in the 20th Century separated by World War II, one from 1900 to 1933 and another from 1960 with recurring peaks through the early 1990s (Crime and Justice Atlas 1998. pp. 38-9).

First, the scope of Durkheim's approach is evident in the weight he places on types of violence---especially homicidal and suicidal behavior, which are taken as indicators of morality in terms of the value placed on individual life (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 316-17, 323-24, `334-36, 355-7, 365). Second, he applies an explicit typology of suicide as endemic (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 147), involving mass or normative behavior; or epidemic (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp. 97, 227, 325, 368), reflecting transmission through an existing or reciprocally emergent social network. Specifically, low volatility rates represent endemic behaviors as an expression of their respective “normal” societal conditions

(Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 357, pp. 361-370), and high volatility epidemic incidence signals an abnormal disruption of whoalistic “social type” pressures toward conformity with a society's “collective conscienciousness”. For Durkheim, it is the persistent commonality of acts contributing to endemic suicide and homicide rates that indicates their normalcy and the eposodic and intense nature of epidemics of suicide and homicide that point to their “pathological” origins (Durkheim: 1895 1951, p. 97-8).

He goes on to identify suicides as the extremes of a continiumn of suicidogenic behaviors and homicides as the extremes of a continiumn of homicidal behaviors (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 45), with each embedded within even broader “collective currents” (Durkheim 1897 1951, 209, 283, 285, 288-9, 300-01, 305, 309, 315-16, 323) of attitudes affecting and expressing the value placed on individual life as an aspect of fundemental tendencies toward collectivism versus individualism and stability versus change. As a general theory of society Durkheim's theory has fundemental revelance for analysis of social problems involving aggressive and self-destrucitve behaviors. His theory of collective violence is further summarized in four additional typologies that implicitly address a population's “endenicity”--a tendency toward endemic behavior and

“epidemicity”---a tendency toward epidemic behavior (Kligler and Badii 1987, p. 243) .

Violence Endemicity

Durkheim sees the value placed on the individual by a society as the net effect of differences among his normal social types (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp. 45. 92, 220, 240, 323, 336, 366) and as the primary explanation for different endemic patterns of homicide and suicide rates (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp. 45. 92, 220, 240, 323, 336, 366). Durkheim's three explicit normal social types are each imbalanced through domination by a collective current associated within a continuum of social solidarity and structured in terms of a type of a division of labor and associated social solidarity---mechanical, organic, forced, or anomic: collective currents are an “altruistic” type with homogenous mechanical solidarity, an intensely shared collective consciousness, and high homicide, or high homicide and low suicide rates (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 341); an “egoistic” type with a failed organic solidarity, diffused collective consciousness, and high suicide and low homicide rates (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 306); and a “fatalistic” type associated with the pathological forced division of labor, implicitly, with little or no truly voluntary solidarity and a conflicted and divided collective consciousness. Although the fatalistic type is not

elaborated by Durkheim (1897 1951, p.275), fatalistic societies might encourage suicide among the oppressed due to hopelessness if fear of the oppressors is sufficient to suppress homicidal tendencies of the exploited. But Durkheim sees that the strength of public morality depends on respect rather than fear (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 252). He also indirectly suggests a fourth balanced social type, i.e., what may be termed *organistic*, with a healthy organic solidarity incorporating a moderate collective consciousness of social individualism based on common values of social justice and understanding of occupational interdependence, e.g., Durkheim's call for a reconstitution of occupational "corporations" based on merit and interceding between the central state and the individual (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 379-383, 390). Presumably, such a balanced society would have low homicide and suicide rates.

Violence Epidemicity

Durkheim explicitly identifies an "anomic" social type, as an abnormal state resulting from an anomic division of labor (Durkheim, 1893 1960), which destroys or challenges the very concepts of norms and deviance by weakening both the web of social interaction and cognitive grasp of socio-economic structures. He finds societal violence epidemicity to be symptomatic of a state of

anomie afflicting one or another of his normal social types, an abnormal disruption of the normal endemic social order and just the opposite of social integration. Anomie is a none self-sustaining state of social disorganization and is always associated with another social type, e.g., anomic-altruistic, anomic-egoistic, anomic-fatalistic, or anomic-organistic. Durkheim observes that chronic deregulated change (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp. 256-7) leads to chronic anomie and chronic elevation of (endemic) rates of violence; while acute deregulation produces acute anomie and acute (epidemic) violence (Durkheim 1897 1951, pp.251-2). If an anomic person blames himself for his overwrought state, suicide may result; if others are blamed, he may become homicidal (Durkheim 1897 1951, p. 285).

Collective Effervescence

Durkheim also provides a more or less explicit typology of four kinds of “collective effervescence”, including what may be termed *benign* ritual, e.g., the “corroboree” of the Australian clans (Durkheim 1915, p. 217), that normally sustains and renews collective consciousness or might produce a *creative effervescence* which reconstitutes or creates collective consciousness when a society represents itself to itself (Durkheim 1915, pp. 211, 214, 221, 224, 83, 301,349, 308, 188, 409); and a chronic “morbid effervescence” (Durkheim 1951,

p. 368), e.g., anomie, that might become a destructive *mortal effervescence* such as The Terror after the French Revolution (Durkheim 1915, p. 211, 293) that destroys or or splits collective consciousness and solidarity. Depending on intensity and whether anomie occurs, the forms of effervescent behavior can be precursors for Durkheim's three types of behavioral epidemics, which he classifies according to the dominant mental process driving situational epidemicity and epidemic mobilization, i.e., “moral contagions”, “mass epidemics”, or “moral epidemics” (Durkheim 1897 1951 , p.131-2).

Caveats

There are of course many qualifiers to Durkheim's theory and types, e.g., size of population, economic conditions, folk and formal cultural differences, historical period, and especially modern means of communication and globalization, etc. But the predictive and diagnostic hypotheses are that endemic violence is an indication of collective moral character, while epidemic violence is a symptom of collective anomie. It also follows that efforts to improve endemic conditions must focus on both living conditions and culture at a not too rapid pace and in a direction that encourages moral growth, and that anomic conditions must be alleviated before endemic social problems can successfully be addressed.

It is also follows that state health departments and law enforcement authorities should profile homicides, suicides, and other forms of violence to determine and report whether the acts are part of an epidemic or an endemic pattern of violence and, or related unhealthy behavior. Such analysis is clearly feasible, as health officials already make such determinations for many forms of death and law enforcement has long engaged in technically demanding forms of analysis such as delination of geographic crime areas, crime syndicates, and offender profiling based on crime scence data.

Reasonably, an intensification of endemic social type dynamics can produce a temporary or chronic increase in rates of violence, which in turn might increace epidenicity and the emergence of epidemic or even “pandemic” (epidemic of epidemics) violence. Or, epidenicity may subside to a new higher level of endemicity with epidemic violence becoming a chronic increace in rates of violence with fuluctuations suggesting mini epdiemics or only partially formed epidemics.

Also, Durkheim's concept of a society-wide collective consciousness cannot validly be applied to the complexity of the United States. Clearly, the modern sociological view that there are multiple class, ethnic, or other populations with their own form of collective consciousness, as well as a broad if not society-wide

conensus is valid; and that points to the need for an analysis of the full set of available statistics to define the changing mosaic of homicide and suicide rates in the 20th Century and early 21st Century United States. A recent analysis of the “Souther Culture of Violence” hypothesis (2007 Lee, Bankston, Hayes, and Thomas) provides an example that might be extended to provide the needed mosaic of United States homicide-suicide patterns, from which to extend or challenge Durhiem's theory.

General Policy Implications

Framed within Durkheim's theory, three sets of hypothetical propositions about collective violence in modern society are suggested:

- 1. Egoistic conditions are endemic and endemic violence is symptomatic of egoistic consciousness: Policies that fail to positively affect egoistic living conditions and culture are unlikely to reduce rates of egoistic violence. High endemic violence encourages tolerance for epidemic violence.**
- 2. Anomic conditions are epidemic and epidemic violence is symptomatic of anomic consciousness: Policies that create anomie**

are likely to encourage epidemic and even pandemic violence.

Epidemic and especially pandemic violence contribute to violence endemicity and chronic epidemicity.

- 3. Altruistic consciousness and endemicity is socio-culturally specific, as is vulnerability to anomie and epidemicity. Epidemic responses to anomic conditions take cultural form from altruistic consciousness and attain magnitude according to the degree and prevalence of anomie.**

Summary

The taxonomy articulated in this paper identifies a logical structure in Durkheim's major works largely through a rearrangement in the order of presentation and to some extent interpreting concepts and relationships among concepts that are considered to be implicit in those works. This taxonomy may be used to classify concepts in other theoretical approaches to determine whether they overlap, extend, complement, or challenge Durkheim's ideas as steps toward theoretical integration in modern sociology. For example: Marxian concepts of a capitalist division of labor, class consciousness, and false consciousness are clearly logically related to Durkheim's later focus on types of

division of labor and solidarity, collective consciousness, and anomie; his emphasis on balanced social integration is a dynamic form of functionalist equilibration theory that nevertheless is not inherently conservative as evidenced in his criticism of actual traditional and modern societies; the central role of symbolization in the emergence of collective representations from collective effervescence and of such representations in constructing and maintain society, is compatible with a focus on symbolic representations in interpersonal interaction; and organic solidarity based on understanding of occupational interdependence is compatible with an emphasis on rational exchanges among informed individuals. Durkheim's emphasis on collective consciousness allows for subcultural consciousness as associated with the military, etc.; while his theory neither addresses or precludes labeling theory, he does in effect propose anomie as an explanation for socially induced "primary deviance" (Lemert 1951, pp. 75-6); and his emphasis on "collective representations" certainly allows for contending subjective experiences and public presentations, especially those of an ideological portent, as a critical component of collective consciousnesses, e.g., "culturalogics" (Curry 2007, p.2). In any case, many or even most contemporary sociological approaches focus on concepts that logically extend Durkheim's taxonomy through

extension of his concepts or by adding to them, while his emphasis on signifying forms of violence and endemic and epidemic patterns provide contextual reference points that apply accross all sociological approaches.

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