

Durkheimian Theory of Violence Epidemiology

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Abstract

Durkheim's theoretical and methodological approach to collective violence becomes more relevant as violence rises globally. The scope, depth, and sophistication of his approach provides the basis of a framework for integrating criminological theory and research in the middle-range, and focused on community or interpersonal patterns of violence. His combination of macro social conditions, with epidemiological, correlation, historical, and qualitative analysis, and with at least an implicit logic of emergent patterns of violence as an expression of transitional threshold states of society, offer a unique conception of the larger society as exerting a determinant tendency toward collective violence with community and interpersonal problems as contingent conditions increasing vulnerability to the general tendency. A “worst-case” violence syndrome is suggested as an example of Durkheim's multidimensional approach and as a hypothetical model of collective violence in the 20th century United States and likely in the near future.

Introduction

Durkheim's relevance today paces the rapid mass leveling, chronic rise in structural complexity, and loss of traditional cultures, on a global scale that is associated with criminal, fanatical, or totalitarian violence ranging from the sadistic, to the instrumental, to the symbolic, within and between modern and transitional societies. His theory of collective violence provides a macro framework of unique range and depth—if his focus on symbolic collective representations and epidemiological patterns of collective violence; and his concept of collective consciousness and recognition of collective unconsciousness (Durkheim:1895, pp. 85, 206, 212, 218, 220) and psychosocial pathology (Durkheim:1895, pp. 96, 123, 229), are retained. In addition, there is a need for a clear fundamental focus on predator versus victim relationships, without a priori omissions of types of violence or social identities. In sum, Durkheim would overcome any disconnect between violence epidemiology, theory, and ideology, with emphasis on the larger society as context for localized and interpersonal behaviors.

Significantly, as a subset of his general emphasis on patterns of social interaction, Durkheim's method begins with collective violence as indicated by rates, epidemics, or effervescences of homicidogenic or suicidogenic and homicidal or suicidal behaviors, and actual homicides or suicides, as the master classification system for both quantitative and qualitative data, analysis, and theory, i.e., different epidemiological classifications indicative of fundamentally different social dynamics that reflect and contribute to different social meanings attached to religious, ethnic, class, family, and other core elements of social status in mass existential consciousness and in symbolic collective representations forming collective consciousness (i.e., a continuum of collective consciousness-unconsciousness). Fundamental differences in consciousness are also implicit in any escalation of intensity and prevalence of sadistic homicidal assaults, e.g., the hold on a people's consciousness exerted by entrenched racist, gender, religious, class, and political biases, contribute to violence endemicity, epidemics, and effervescence potential. Amid such complexity, the following “worst-case” syndrome of collective violence is intended as a hypothetical, simplified, example of Durkheim's theory as applied to one of many possible violent trajectories leading to the escalation of collective violence among a people or peoples.

Worst-Case Collective Violence Syndrome

Durkheim's theory of collective violence resolves to three primary states of society in a worst-case syndrome:

1. Normative Endemicity: Every intact normal “social type” of society has an inherent tendency toward relatively stable endemic violence according to the relative value placed on collective versus individual life in the collective consciousness and unconsciousness of a people. A homogeneous division of labor contributes to greater solidarity, collective consciousness, and erethic passionate intensity, with consequent altruistic suicidal and homicidal tendencies of those who only value their collective identity; while a heterogeneous division of labor increases individuality, dilutes passion and shared consciousness, and encourages egoistic suicide due to neurasthenic hypersensitivity and lack of higher obligation among those concerned largely with themselves (Durkheim:1895, pp. 40, 171, 238). Long range stability of correlations among variables indicating social type, collective consciousness, and collective violence is expected due to a determinant interdependency among such social facts in a favorable environment. Still, sporadic cases of violence so brutal or otherwise deviant that the common conscience is shocked might be the first stirrings of moral decline or conflict:

“the conscious collective...as the set of beliefs and sentiments common to average members of a society [that] forms a determinant system that has its own life. (Durkheim: 1893, p. 79). “

“Law and morality are the totality of ties which bind each of us to society, which make a unitary, coherent aggregate of the mass of individuals. Everything which is a source of solidarity is moral, everything which forces man to take account of other men is moral, everything which forces him to regulate his conduct through something other than the striving of his ego is moral, and morality is as solid as these ties are numerous and strong (Durkheim:1893, p. 398).”

In any case, socialized integration within and between collective and personal consciousness mirrors and depends on the integration of symbolic collective representations of society as such, and of its moral prescriptions and proscriptions, expectations and understandings of the environment and human nature, and of both common and shocking profane, sacred, and liminal events:

“...the effect of the cult really is to recreate periodically a moral being upon which we depend as it depends upon us. “(Durkheim: 1911, p. 348)”

Symbolic collective consciousness is the necessary and sufficient variable intervening in the relationship between the objective reality of a people's life together and their responses of collective violence; while ideological representations can be a sufficient intervening variable in the relationship between shared consciousness of the state of social life and the mobilization of social action aimed at preventing, reducing, tolerating, or encouraging collective violence. The failed organic solidarity that is Durkheim's egoistic type of society, depends on rational understanding of the division of labor for solidarity, but leaves many of its citizens too detached from life to face difficulty and duty with active resolve and passion. Modern peoples need symbolic collective representations that compose society by representing the truth of a people's life together to themselves, while sacred representations evoke the greatest sentiments and constitute:

“Religious representations are collective representations which express collective realities; the rites are a manner of acting which take rise in the midst of the assembled groups and which are destined to excite, maintain or recreate certain mental states in these groups. (Durkheim: 1911, p. 10)”

“...a system of ideas and practices well founded in reality. This is what that pseudo-delirium consists in, which we find at the bottom of so many collective representations: it is only a form of this essential idealism. [So it is not properly called a delirium, for the ideas thus objectified are well founded, not in the nature of the material things upon which they settle themselves, but in the nature of society.the idea is the reality (Durkheim:1911, p.716).”

Endemic collectively conscious and unconscious representations might also contribute to epidencity if they encourage suggestibility, mob, gang, or other disorganized or deviant responses to fear, resentment, greed, etc., or if they demand excessive repression of such moods. Epidencity inherent in endemic collective unconsciousness expressed in myth is a reality, as shown by Heine's History of Religion and Philosophy in Germany, 1834-35 prediction of Thor's return in Germany:

“...the philosopher of nature will be terrifying in that he will enter into a pact with the original forces of nature, and call forth the demonic powers of ancient German pantheism...when that taming talisman, the cross, breaks to pieces, .Thor with his giant hammer jumps forward and smashes the Gothic domes to pieces.”...” quoted in (Rosenberg: 2007, p. 24) **“A play will be performed in Germany which will make the French Revolution look like an innocent idyll.”** quoted in (Kossoff: 1983, p. 126).

2. Anomic Epidencity: Deregulation and consequent deranged mass anomie consciousness, releases pathologically repressed primitive instincts of lust, fear, and aggression that energize epidemics of sadistic or callous violence as seen in mobs, gang attacks, or pogroms, which might become pandemics on a national or global front. Social dis-integration undermines personal integration and the morality that depends on both; dysfunction breeds dysfunction; human intelligence and culture are reduced to serving the surge of irrational instincts—ancient evil. Anomie is a psychosocial condition of moral degeneracy rooted in anomic rejection of values and norms which pushes the egoistic pacifist to suicide, while those driven by instincts or of traditionalist altruistic character remain unrestrained by moral individualism from expressing their passions in homicidal attacks. Weakening or reversal of correlations among social type, collective consciousness, and collective violence variables are statistical measures of declining social solidarity contributing to and reflecting anomie which heightens epidencity due to structural and moral restraint.

3.

“... It was when society felt itself seriously endangered that the discouraging theories of Epicurus and Zeno appeared. The formation of such great systems is therefore an indication that the current of pessimism reached an abnormal intensity which is due to some disturbance of the social organism. ...The anarchist, the aesthete, the mystic, the socialist revolutionary...have in common with the pessimist a single sentiment of hatred and disgust for the existing order, a single craving to destroy or to escape from reality. ... morbid development; and so the development of suicide resulting from it is of the same nature. (Durkheim: 1897, p. 370).”

"the state of crisis and anomy is constant and, so to speak, normal. From top to bottom of the

ladder greed is aroused without knowing where to find ultimate foothold. Nothing can calm ... since its goal is far beyond all it can attain." (Durkheim: 1897, p. 256)

“appetites superficially restrained are ready for revolt.....seized by a sort of natural erethism...heightened by passions being less discipline, precisely when they need more disciplining.... when society is disturbed by some painful crisis or by beneficent but abrupt transitions... the struggle grows more violent and painful, both from being less controlled and because competition is greater...effort grows, just when it becomes less productive...a morbid effervescence... (Durkheim: 1951, pp. 251, 253, 369).

4. **Regenerative Effervescence:** From Durkheim's humanitarian perspective, a religious or a substitute for religious, progressive or regressive mass excitement rises to evoke a compensatory deterrent collective consciousness driven to impose its “ideal” of order signified through the aesthetic of ancient or emergent mythical symbols and imposed through criminal, fanatical, or totalitarian ethnogenesis involving indigenous or immigrant remnant sub-populations and, or threatened majority populations, with consequent events misunderstood as rational or coincidental in public awareness. Limited institutionalized endemic or localized epidemic violence might be part of such effervescence that itself is a much broader based transition from mass to collective symbolic consciousness, a synthesis of traditional and modern consciousness capable of large scale violence such as national persecutions and intentional wars. With a dynamic the opposite of instinct driven anomie, the powerful emotions produced by unconscious associations of sacred social relationships with various objects and acts can overwhelm “feelings of pity and sympathy” (Durkheim, 1957 [1900]:115). Rapidly increasing correlations among indicators of social type, collective consciousness, and collective violence characterize periods of regenerative effervescence due to its dynamic of coalescence in response to widespread anomie, with the juggernaut potential of mechanical collective consciousness in charge of the power inherent in a large technically advanced population:

“...epochs of crisis when some great collective movement seizes us, lifts us above ourselves, and transfigures us.” (Durkheim: 1924, pp. 29)

“A society can neither create itself nor recreate itself without at the same time creating an ideal. Durkheim: 1911, p. 423)”

“the spiritual state...a morbid hypertrophy of the will, a kind of will-mania...how many modern societies..could be hypnotized...and set in motion like a children’s roundabout.” (Durkheim: 1915, p. 44)

“the most primitive social states are often reproduced at the highest stages of evolution (Durkheim: 1897, pp. 385, 387).”

Methodological Strategy

The proposed worst-case model recognizes the centrality of Hegel's *dialectic* (Knapp:1986, p. 586) of reflexive consciousness mediating the relationship of consciousness of objects with behavioral responses by imputing meaning to what is perceived; and suggests a partial response to Dicristina's critique of interpretations of Durkheimian homicide theory as applied in the criminological empirical literature (Dicristina:2004). That suggestion is to employ Durkheim's

theory of societies as a theoretical frame composed of: 1) Periods of endemic, epidemic or pandemic, or effervescent violence, as the master methodological time-space-population frame for grouping and analysis of quantitative and qualitative data on historical violence and its correlates, and for forecasting future violence in a population by projecting historical patterns; 2) Symbolic collective representations that spontaneously emerge to necessarily and sufficiently intervene into reciprocal relationships among collective living conditions, consciousness, and violence—thereby forming the larger societal context for community and personal representations of and existential experience of objective living conditions, consciousness, and violence; 3) Ideological representations intentionally constructed to sufficiently intervene into relationships between the larger social context and collective violence, particularly with regard to mobilizing violence to express antisocial ideas and sentiments; 4) Violent attacks involving sadistic brutality against, or callous or reckless disregard for victims, as indications of psychosocial pathology.

The Durkheimian refinement of developing different descriptive or causal correlation models of epidemiological threshold societal states of violence in the context of social type, representational, and psychiatric diagnosis statistics, is matched with qualitative “case-oriented historical inquiry” (Emirbayer:1996, p. 264) including systemic functional analysis, qualitative analysis of symbolic collective representations to map folk, religious, ideological, scientific, or other forms of collective consciousness, and assessing the brutality of assaults as markers of unconsciousness psychosocial and, or personal psychopathology.

For example, a retrospective analysis of the firearm homicide epidemics of the 1920s–1930s, 1960s–1970s, and 1980s–1990s, with elevated endemic rates in the mid-1990s (Christoffel: 2007) and prospective analysis of a hypothetical homicide epidemic in the coming decades; would take account of the larger society as the context of social type structural changes, lack of media and popular attention versus a tendency toward sensationalism, and ideological exhortations against versus justifications of violence. Historic homicide endemic, and rising, peaking, and declining stages of epidemic periods, epicenters, and diffusion paths would be matched with structural change, and psychiatric variables indicated by the brutality of assaults, along with broad patterns in mental health data; and with image, theme, and concept analysis of public representations of those periods, and predator and victim populations, and locations, e.g. the worst-case model superimposed over endemic-epidemic patterns. Forecasting homicide epidemics would reverse the analytical sequence so that endemic and epidemic periods are predicted, with the difficulty inherent in predicting rare events reduced with Durkheim's emphasis on widespread or emergent structural conditions contributing to endemicity and epidemicity as seen in risky or brutal behaviors and homicidal violence treated as population characteristics whether a death results, and antisocial representations preceding or paralleling emergent patterns of violence.

Policy Implications

Hypothetically, useful policy strategies suggested by the worst-case syndrome and Durkheimian theory generally, are fairly straight forward. Endemic violence expresses the interaction of a people's values with social stresses; so antisocial symbolic collective representations of violence and its consequences must be addressed as they appear in folk, popular, commercial, and government culture, to augment social and mental health programs to reduce chronic stress. Excessively rapid, deregulated, and disorienting change in the material and solidarity

infrastructure, and moral superstructure, of a society stimulates personal and epidemic and pandemic violence; indicating a need for moderate and mediated material change, along with maintenance of family and community solidarity and validation of the moral value of both collective and individual life without resort to violence without clear moral justification. Once aroused, emergent collective effervescence must be encouraged structurally and symbolically to follow a moral course midway between extremes of primitive barbarism or fanatical idealism.

Summary

Within the context of Durkheim's theory and method, this paper proposes a dialectic worst-case model of progressive endemic, epidemic, and effervescent social conditions leading to and reflecting ethnogenesis centering on criminal, fanatical, and, or totalitarian violence, and a methodological strategy for analysis of such patterns. Durkheim's theory of social types including social solidarity, morality and collective consciousness, is joined with an emphasis on epidemiological patterns of collective violence, symbolic collective representations of unity versus antisocial ideological representations promoted institutionally or through mass media, the extremeness of brutality and prevalence of sadistic or callous assaults as an indication of psychosocial pathology, and predator versus victim social identities, life styles, roles, and relationships. Such elements of the larger society provide the context for community, group, and individual consciousness, functionality, and behavior; particularly those provoking, enabling, justifying, or tolerating emergent patterns of collective violence, such that predator versus victim roles and relationships are obscured and yet amplified, through their effects on consciousness.

Durkheim's fundamental focus on collective violence as measured in endemic rates, epidemics and pandemics, and broad effervescence of homicides and, or suicides, precludes any explanation limited to individual psychology and agency alone or in mass; although personality types and psychiatric categories of mental disorders typical or at least common in a population are social facts along with social type and other collective factors emphasized in his general theory. In traditional societies folk beliefs or religion, and in modern society ideological or instrumental representations, can be sufficient intervening variables affecting the mobilization of endemic mass violent tendencies into specifically targeted epidemics of violence. Durkheim's analysis of endemic violence explicitly admits the indirect importance of a people's religious, nationalistic, or overtly ideological identifications because of resulting effects on social solidarity, valuations of individual life, and normative violence as a response to the strains, stresses, and conflicts inherent in their way of life or in response to some external threat. Yet, his explanation of epidemic violence points to anomic deregulation and anomie consciousness rather than ethnicity, social structure, and social personality, which are inoperative under conditions of disruption and breakdown of social identity and normative restraint; although epidemics of ideological prescriptions and proscriptions can mobilize epidemic violence among a vulnerable people. While anomie is the primary contingency for a violent effervescence on a local, national, or global scale; the effervescent movement itself is a psychosocially creative social or antisocial response, in that emergent collective excitement, altered states of consciousness, symbolic representations, and derivative social identity, values, and norms are constructed to generate or regenerate a society. Some more obvious policy implications of a Durkheimian theory of violence are suggested.

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