

Sociological Theories of Crime & Deviance (1)

Functionalist explanations: Emile Durkheim

Although functionalism is very much associated with American sociology from roughly the 1930s to the 1960s, its origins lay in the work of the **French** sociologist **Emile Durkheim**, writing at the end of the 19th century.

Durkheim argued that deviance and crime can only be explained by looking at the way **societies are socially organised**, i.e. their **social structures**. In other words, crime in the UK is not caused by evil, or by poor parenting or any other individual or family shortcoming – **rather it is caused by the way British society is socially structured or organised**. In this sense, therefore, functionalism is a **structuralist theory** of crime.

Structuralist theories are **positivist**. This means that they see human behaviour, e.g. criminal behaviour as being shaped by **social forces** or **social facts beyond the control of the individual**. In other words, some people are more likely to be criminal because the social forces bearing down on them **propel them (possibly against their will) into a life of crime**.

Crime in pre-industrial society

Durkheim observed that **crime levels were very low in pre-industrial societies**. He argued that this was the result of the **social organisation or social structure of these societies**.

People in pre-industrial Britain generally lived in small rural village communities characterised by '**mechanical solidarity**' – this means that people's sense of **belonging to society (social integration)** was very strong. They strongly identified with each other. **Community was regarded as more important than individuality**. There are basically four reasons for why this was the case:

- (1) Life in pre-industrial Britain was very hard. Life expectancy was low and people needed to pull together to survive. The **division of labour** – the net sum of all the occupational roles or jobs – in rural village communities was quite simple. People occupied a fairly narrow range of jobs – farmers, blacksmiths, bakers, etc – which operated to mutually support one another.

- (2) The division of labour in pre-industrial society did not depend on educational achievement. Rather **status** in terms of what **jobs** people did and the **power** they wielded was **ascribed** in pre-industrial Britain. This means it was based on **fixed family roles**, e.g. if the head of the extended family worked on the land, children and other relatives would be **socially expected** to support him. **Women** were ascribed roles which lacked the status and power taken-for-granted by men. People were encouraged to accept **ascription as the norm** and consequently **it was rarely questioned or challenged**.
- (3) Dissent, protest and deviance were rare in this type of society because the social institutions of **the extended family, community and religion** were extremely **powerful agents of socialisation and social control**. Durkheim suggests that a strong **value consensus** was the outcome of such socialisation. This was extremely influential in shaping people's behaviour and consequently **most people behaved similarly**, e.g. most people believed in God and went to church and children obeyed their parents without question. Community controls ensured conformity.
- (4) Moreover **punishments** for failing to conform to the demands of the community were often extremely **severe** (e.g. public executions, transportation to Australia for life etc) that few people dared to deviate from the norm and commit crime.

In summary, then, Durkheim argued that crime was low in pre-industrial society because people were **successfully socialised** into the rules of those societies by their **families and religious leaders**. Moreover, they had such a great sense of **belonging to society** that **conformity to the greater good was valued more than individualism which was viewed as dangerous and deviant**. Finally, conformity was strengthened by **fear of social controls** such as the extremely harsh punishments which came into play when members of society did not toe the line.

There are still examples of societies characterised by mechanical solidarity in the world today. Can you identify these societies?

Crime in modern industrial society

However, Durkheim noted that **modern industrial societies were characterised by much higher crime rates than traditional societies**. **Deviant behaviour** (i.e.

behaviour that was not criminal but regarded as immoral or socially unacceptable to most people) **was also more likely to be tolerated.**

Durkheim argued that crime and deviance (the opposite of conformity) were also the result of the **social organisation or social structure of these modern industrial-urban societies.** He suggested that modern industrial-urban societies were characterised by 'organic solidarity' and it was this **social fact that shaped people's criminal and deviant behaviour.**

In a society characterised by organic solidarity Durkheim argued that **both value consensus and social integration have grown weaker.** People were less likely to agree and identify with one another. Consequently **community and conformity were less likely to be norms in industrial society.** Durkheim suggested that modern industrial societies were consequently characterised by **moral confusion or 'anomie'** – some members of society were more likely to challenge and reject shared values and norms of behaviour and this '**normlessness**' **often resulted in crime and deviance.**

Durkheim identified a number of **reasons for the change from societies based on mechanical solidarity to societies based on organic solidarity.**

1. Industrialisation led to the division of labour becoming more **specialised** and extremely **complex.** The success of modern societies and economies is **dependent upon hundreds of thousands of skills working together to provide services** such as the production of food, clean water, sewage and sanitation, electricity and gas, health, education, etc. All members of society are dependent for both their survival and lifestyle on this mainly invisible army of workers that make up the specialised division of labour of modern societies. Durkheim argued that **this dependence is the main source of social integration and solidarity today** in such societies because other social institutions have been weakened by industrialisation and its consequences.
2. In modern societies **status is no longer based on ascription. Status today is based on achievement,** i.e. on what you do in terms of achievement in education and the job you have rather than who you are. In modern societies, **people are encouraged to individually compete with one another (rather than cooperate with one another) for qualifications and job opportunities.** As we shall see later, people who fail in this competition may be more likely to experience **anomie** or moral confusion.

3. **Traditional agencies of socialisation and social control such as the extended family and religion are no longer as influential as they were in the past.**

This is probably the result of the **urbanisation** brought about by the industrial revolution. This led to the decline of small-scale rural communities as millions of people gradually emigrated from the countryside into the towns and cities. People broke away from their extended kin to go to the towns in search of jobs in the new factories and mills.

The sheer numbers of people living in these urban areas **made it difficult for religions to exert control over the population of the UK.** For example, church attendance rapidly fell from 40% in 1851 to less than 10% in 1900. Consequently, people living in urban-industrial societies no longer felt that it was necessary to seek the approval of their extended kin or religious leaders for their behaviour.

4. Durkheim notes that value consensus continues to exist in modern societies albeit in a weaker form because industrialisation resulted in people having **greater access to a greater variety of knowledge and ideas**, e.g. (through the mass media and science). Such ideas tended to undermine dominant ideas about normality and deviance. For example, access to scientific ideas about evolution may have undermined religious conformity.
5. Durkheim also noted that modern industrial societies are very **impersonal** because people are less likely to know their neighbours or care about them. **People are much more individualistic** – selfish and egoistic - and **often put their own interests before the community or society.** Consequently people in modern industrial societies are likely to live in **loose-knit neighbourhoods in which community ties, duties and obligations are weak.**
6. As society grew more modern, so traditional ideas were challenged and more liberal laws were introduced. Consequently **the social controls and punishments which had ensured conformity in the past became weaker.** For example, capital punishment was abolished in the UK in the 1960s. Today, there is **greater tolerance of 'different' behaviour and individualism is welcomed.** However, this growing tolerance has also contributed to the **decline of consensus and integration** and the steady **growth of anomie** because competing definitions of normality and deviance inevitably lead to **disagreement and conflict.**

In summary, then, Durkheim concluded that **the speed and extent of the social and economic change associated with industrialisation led to the appearance of 'anomie' – a sense of normlessness or moral confusion** – in modern societies. This means that **people are less committed to society's rules and laws** compared with pre-industrial society.

People living in modern societies characterised by organic solidarity may **depend on one another with regard to services**. However, they are less integrated and community-minded compared with those who live in societies characterised by mechanical solidarity because of the **decline in the influence of the family and religion**. Consequently they are more likely to engage in actions which **challenge conformity and the value consensus** – they are more likely to commit crime and/or engage in deviant behaviour. Durkheim therefore saw **crime as resulting from the consequences of social changes in the organisation of society**.

The functions of crime and deviance

In addition to his work on social change, **Durkheim observed that crime and deviance were present in all societies**. He speculated that even in a society of saints, deviance would exist in some shape or form, e.g. what would seem to us to be extremely minor wrong-doings such as killing an insect would probably be defined as a serious type of deviance by such a society.

Durkheim believed that if social phenomena like crime continue to exist in all types of society, then there must be a **social reason** for it - **it must have a positive social function, or else it would cease to exist**. He therefore concluded that **a certain amount of crime and deviance was actually functional, i.e. it must be beneficial or healthy for society in some way**.

Durkheim and other functionalists influenced by him therefore argued that crime and deviance have the following **beneficial functions** in modern industrial societies:

- **Deviance can provoke social change** by highlighting **problems in the way society is organised or the inadequacies of some current law**. For example, a social group may break the law in order to draw society's attention to some injustice so that the law and therefore social definitions of deviance can be changed.

Examples?

- Some crimes may **bring about social integration by bringing society together in collective moral shock and outrage**. This may particularly happen when a crime is committed against a vulnerable group such as children. The crime produces a sense of **community solidarity** against criminality and **reinforce value consensus**. Such a reaction may result in laws being made stronger.

Examples?

- Criminal trials and the punishment of offenders function **to reassure members of society that the consensus and social order is of benefit to all – members of society agree that certain types of behaviour threaten social order and need to be controlled and punished**.
- The public punishment of criminals also reinforces **social conformity** by reminding members of society about what counts as **acceptable and unacceptable behaviour**. In other words, **it functions to socially control society by reinforcing the rules**.
- **Kingsley Davis suggests that some types of crime may act as a safety valve** for society in that some minor crimes may be worth tolerating because they prevent more serious crimes taking place. Davis argued that **prostitution had a beneficial function** in this respect, whilst **Polsky** has applied Davis's arguments to **the use of pornography** in modern western societies.

In what sense might prostitution and pornography have positive functions for society?

However, Durkheim did concede that **too much crime and deviance** could be a problem because it meant that **too many people were not committed to value consensus** and therefore **social order was in danger of breaking down**. Think about how the **2011 London riots** might fit into this analysis.

He also argued that too little crime could also be a problem because it indicated that **social control mechanisms were too strong** and that whoever was in charge of society was being too **dictatorial**. Such controls were unhealthy because **societies require criticism, dissent and deviance in order to healthily evolve**.

Criticisms of Durkheim

Although Durkheim developed an approach to understanding crime and deviance that was extremely influential, his theory does suffer from some weaknesses:

- **Durkheim never properly explains why some individuals and social groups are more prone to committing crime than others.**
- Durkheim's **concept of anomie** and why it specifically leads to crime rather than some other outcome is **vague**. For example, it is not clear how anomie could be measured.
- Although Durkheim may have a point in arguing that some types of crimes are functional in some way, there are some types of crime (e.g. **child abuse, rape** etc) that are always going to be **dysfunctional** (i.e. **wrong, negative, damaging** etc).
- **Tim Newburn** criticizes Durkheim because **he neglects the role of the powerful in shaping the consensus about what is criminal and what is normal practice**. For example, many of the **'sharp' practices of bankers** that many people clearly see as **immoral** are **not actually illegal** because the wealthy can put **pressure on lawmakers to ensure that their norms are not outlawed**.

- Marxists argue that Durkheim **underestimates the level of conflict** in modern societies. From a Marxist perspective, **crime can be seen as a product of class conflict and inequality**, rather than the product of some people not being fully committed to value consensus or community.