The Problem With Diversity:
Émile Durkheim
(1885–1917)
Cultural diversity is a byword in modern society. It generally refers to racial or ethnic diversity. However, if we think about cultural diversity theoretically, the phrase “racial or ethnic diversity” begs the question: How is it that racial or ethnic groups come to have different cultures? Most people simply assume that different races and ethnic groups have diverse cultures. Yet there is no necessary relationship between what we think of as race and cultural diversity. In fact, race itself is a cultural designation. For example, did you know that at one time in the United States, “Irish” was considered a “black” racial group? They were referred to derogatorily as the “black Irish.”

Theoretically and sociologically, then, it is much better to ask how cultural diversity is created rather than simply assuming it exists. Besides, cultural diversity is much broader than merely race and ethnicity. For example, it is quite possible that the cultural differences between the elite and the poor are greater than the differences between racial groups within the same society. So, how is cultural diversity created? More specifically, what are the general processes through which cultural differences are created, whether among racial, ethnic, class, or gender groups? Émile Durkheim provides us with answers to these kinds of questions.

Yet Durkheim is actually concerned with a more important issue, one that few people think about when considering cultural diversity. His concern is based on the insight that every society needs a certain level of cultural integration and social solidarity to exist and function. Durkheim’s main concern is this: How much cultural diversity can a society have and still function? Think about an extreme situation as an example: Picture two people who speak totally different languages. How easy would it be for them to carry on a conversation? If it was necessary, they undoubtedly could find a way, but what they could talk about would be limited and it would take a great deal of time to have even the simplest of conversations.

The same is true with cultural diversity. Cultural diversity includes language, but it also encompasses nonverbal cues, dialects, values, normative behaviors, beliefs and assumptions about the world, and so on. The more different people are from one another, the more difficult it will be for them to work together and communicate, which is the basis of any society. Durkheim, then, specifically asks, how can a diverse society create social solidarity and function?

One of the reasons that Durkheim is concerned with cultural diversity and moral integration is due to his assumptions about human nature. Where Marx assumes that humans are social and naturally altruistic, Durkheim assumes that people apart from society are self-centered and driven by insatiable desires. While Durkheim gives us an answer to the question of integration in the face of cultural diversity, he also addresses the deeper problem of human egoism. If we assume, as Durkheim does, that individuals tend to go off each in his or her own direction, then how can this thing called society work? Durkheim came up with an ingenious answer: the collective consciousness. Today, sociologists usually talk about norms, values, and beliefs, but in back of those terms lies Durkheim’s idea of the collective consciousness.
THEORIST'S DIGEST

Brief Biography

David Émile Durkheim was born in Epinal, France, on April 15, 1858. His mother, Melanie, was a merchant’s daughter, and his father, Moïse, was a rabbi, descended from generations of rabbis. Durkheim did well in high school and attended the prestigious École Normale Supérieure in Paris, the training ground for the new French intellectual elite.

The first years (1882–1887) after finishing school, Durkheim taught philosophy in Paris, but felt philosophy was a poor approach to solving the social ills he was surrounded by. In 1887, Durkheim was appointed as Chargé d’un Cours de Science Sociale et de Pédagogie at the University of Bordeaux. Durkheim thus became the first teacher of sociology in the French system. Durkheim and his desire for a science of morality proved to be a thorn in the side of the predominantly humanist faculty. During this year, Durkheim also married Louise Dreyfus; they later had two children, Marie and André.

In 1902, Durkheim took a post at the Sorbonne and by 1906 was appointed Professor of the Science of Education, a title later changed to Professor of Science of Education and Sociology. In this position, Durkheim was responsible for training the future teachers of France and served as chief advisor to the Ministry of Education.

In December 1915, Durkheim received word that his son, André, had been declared missing in action (World War I). André had followed in his father’s footsteps to École Normale and was seen as an exceptionally promising social linguist. Durkheim had hoped his son would complete the research he had begun in linguistic classifications. The following April, Durkheim received official notification that his son was dead. Durkheim withdrew into a “ferocious silence.” After only a few months following his son’s death, Durkheim suffered a stroke; he died at the age of 59 on November 15, 1917.

Central Sociological Questions

Durkheim is intensely concerned with understanding how social solidarity and integration could be preserved in modernity. He recognizes that society is built on a foundation of shared values and morals. Yet he also realizes that there are structural forces at work in modernity that relentlessly produce cultural diversity, something that could tear away this foundation of social solidarity. His project, then, is to discover and implement the necessary social processes that could create a new kind of unity in society, one that would allow the dynamics of modernity to function within a context of social integration.

Simply Stated

Durkheim sees individuals apart from society as concerned only with their own desires that, because of human nature, are insatiable. Thus, the one thing society needs above all else is a common, moral culture—a set of ideas, values, beliefs, norms, and practices that guide us to act collectively rather than individually. Given that moral culture is the basis of society, Durkheim argues that society first began in religion. Modernity, however, creates a problem (Continued)
Concepts and Theory: The Reality of Society

As we saw in Spencer, the idea of society changed with the beginning of modernity. For the first time something collective, something grander than simple association, was seen to exist. People began to wonder about and try to understand this new entity modernity had brought into existence. Most of the speculations of the time were formed in philosophical terms and began with certain assumptions about the natural state of human beings apart from society. Thomas Hobbes, for example, argued that human nature is basically warlike; on the other hand, John Locke believed that humans are naturally peaceful.

In contrast to philosophical beginnings, Charles Montesquieu argued that the study of society should begin empirically: with what we see, not with what we think. In some ways, Montesquieu's book *The Spirit of Laws* may be considered the first empirical work of sociology. In it, Montesquieu argues that society must be viewed as an empirical object. As an independent object, its properties and processes could be discovered through observation. Interestingly enough, Montesquieu also argues that the human being is really the product of society, not the other way around. It follows, then, that any attempt to understand society that begins with human nature would have to be false, since human nature is itself a creation of society.

Social Facts

Durkheim draws from Montesquieu in his thinking about society. He argues that society exists as an empirical object, almost like a physical object in the environment. Durkheim uses the concept social fact to argue for the objectivity of society and scientific sociology. According to Durkheim, social facts gain their facticity because they are external to and coercive of the individual. We can’t
smell, see, taste, or touch them, but we can feel their objective influence. Durkheim distinguishes between material and nonmaterial elements in social facts. Material elements are like cultural artifacts: They are what would survive if the present society no longer existed. For example, a wheelbarrow is a material social fact. Nonmaterial elements consist of symbolic meanings and collective sentiments. Often such features are attached to material objects, like the meanings behind statues and flags, but many times our most important meanings and feelings have a more abstract existence, like love and freedom.

In addition, society exists as a social fact because it exists sui generis—a Latin term meaning “of its own kind.” Durkheim uses the term to say that society exists in and of itself, not as a “mere epiphenomenon of its morphological base.” Society is more to Durkheim than simply the sum of all the individuals within it. Society exists as its own kind of entity, obeying its own rules and creating its own effects: “The determining cause of a social fact should be sought among the social facts preceding it and not among the states of the individual consciousness” (Durkheim, 1895/1938, p. 110, emphasis original).

Let me give you an example of what Durkheim means when he says that the cause of social facts is other social facts. One of Durkheim’s most famous studies is Suicide. In it, he studied suicide rates, not individual suicides. The suicide rate (“the proportion between the total number of voluntary deaths and the population of every age and sex”) is a social fact. The suicide rate measures a collective’s “definite aptitude for suicide” at any given historical moment and “is itself a new fact sui generis, with its own unity, individuality and consequently its own nature” (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 46). The suicide rate of any given society can be understood through social types—egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicides—and each of these types is caused by its relationship to two other social facts: group attachment and behavior regulation. In other words, the suicide rate (a social fact) is caused by other social facts (group attachment and behavior regulation).

**Collective Consciousness**

But society does more than exist outside of us; and it does more than simply coerce us to perform actions we don’t want to. In fact, society forms our basic awareness of the world around us through the collective consciousness. For Durkheim, the **collective consciousness** is the totality of ideas, representations, beliefs, and feelings that are common to the average members of society. There does exist, of course, the individual consciousness. However, whatever unique ideas, feelings, beliefs, impressions, and so forth that an individual might have are by definition idiosyncratic. In other words, “Individual consciousnesses are actually closed to one another” (Durkheim, 1995/1912, p. 231). The collective consciousness, on the other hand, does allow us a basis for sharing our awareness of the world. Yet the function of this body of culture is not simply to express our inner states to one another; the collective consciousness contributes to the making of our individual subjective states. It is through the collective consciousness that society becomes aware of itself and we become aware of ourselves as social beings.
Durkheim divides the collective consciousness into two basic features: cognitive and emotional. Durkheim argues that the collective consciousness contains primary symbolic categories (time, space, number, cause, substance, and personality). These categories are primary because we can’t think without using them. They form our basic cognitions or consciousness of the world around us. These categories are, of course, of social origin for Durkheim, originating with the physical features of society. (The way the population is dispersed in space, for example, influences the way we conceive of space.) Durkheim did some work (*Primitive Classification*) in this area of cognitive categories, especially with his pupil and nephew Marcel Mauss. His work in this area also influenced Ferdinand De Saussure, the founder of French Structuralism (which led to poststructuralism and influenced postmodernism). However, I think for Durkheim the more important aspect of the collective consciousness is emotional. Social emotions or sentiments “dominate us, they possess, so to speak, something superhuman about them. At the same time they bind us to objects that lie outside our existence in time” (Durkheim, 1893/1984, p. 56).

If, as Durkheim supposes, humans are naturally self-serving, then why will self-centered human beings act collectively and selflessly? Durkheim argues that rational exchange principles are not enough. Because our entire being is involved in action, we need to be emotionally bound to our culture. We have to have an emotional sense of something greater than ourselves. This feeling of something greater is what underlies morality. We act socially because it is moral to do so. While we can always give reasons for our actions, many of our actions—especially social actions—generally come about because of feelings of responsibility: “Whence, then, the feeling of obligation? It is because in fact we are not purely rational beings; we are also emotional creatures” (Durkheim, 1903/1961, p. 112). So to think like Durkheim is to always be concerned with the emotional foundations of social life.

**Concepts and Theory: Religious Roots of Society**

Durkheim had two major purposes in writing *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, his thesis on religion. Durkheim's primary aim was to understand the empirical elements present in all religions. He wanted to go behind the symbolic and spiritual to grasp what he calls “the real.” Durkheim intentionally puts aside the issue of God and spirituality. He argues that no matter what religion is involved, whether Christianity or Islam, and no matter what god is proclaimed, there are certain social elements that are common to all religions. To put this issue another way, anytime a god does anything here on earth, there appear to be certain social elements always present. Durkheim is interested in discovering those empirical, social elements.

**Religion and Science**

Durkheim’s second reason for writing his book is a bit trickier to understand. For Durkheim, *religion* is the most fundamental social institution. He argues that religion is the source of everything social. That’s not to say that everything social is
religious, especially today. But Durkheim is convinced that social bonds were first created through religion. We'll see that in ancient clan societies, the symbol that bound the group together and created a sense of kinship (family) was principally a religious one.

Further, Durkheim argues that our basic categories of understanding are of religious origin. Humans divide the world up using categories. We understand things in terms of animal, mineral, vegetable, edible, inedible, private property, public property, male, female, and on and on. Durkheim says that many of the categories we use are of what one might call “fashionable” origin, that is, culture that is subject to change. Durkheim argues that fashion is a recent phenomenon and that its basic social function is to distinguish the upper classes from the lower. There is a tendency for fashion to circulate. The lower classes want to be like the upper classes and thus want to use their symbols (we want to drive their cars, wear the same kinds of clothes they do, and so on). This implies, in the end, that fashionable culture is rather meaningless: “Once a fashion has been adopted by everyone, it loses all its value; it is thus doomed by its own nature to renew itself endlessly” (Durkheim, 1887/1993, p. 87).

Durkheim has little if any concern for such culture (though quite a bit of contemporary cultural theory and analysis is taken up with it). He is interested in primary “categories of understanding.” He argues that these categories—time, space, number, cause, substance, and personality—are of social origin, but not the same kind of social origin that fashion has. Fashion comes about as different groups demarcate themselves through decoration, and in that sense it isn’t tied to anything real. It is purely the work of imagination. The primary categories of understanding, on the other hand, are tied to objective reality. Durkheim argues that the primary categories originate empirically and objectively in society, in what he calls social morphology.

Merriam-Webster (2002) defines morphology as “a branch of biology that deals with the form and structure of animals and plants.” So, when Durkheim talks about social morphology, he is using the organismic analogy to refer to the form and structure of society, in particular the way in which populations are distributed in time and space. Let’s take time, for example. In order to conceive of time, we must first conceive of differentiation. Time, apart from humans, appears like a cyclical stream. Yet that isn’t how we experience time. For us, time is chopped up. Today, for example, the day I’m writing these words, is March 31, 2010. However, that date and the divisions underlying it are not a function of the way time appears naturally. So, from where do the divisions come? “The division into days, weeks, months, years, etc., corresponds to the recurrence of rites, festivals, and public ceremonies at regular intervals. A calendar expresses the rhythm of collective activity while ensuring that regularity” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 10). The same is true with space. There is no up, down, right, left, and so on apart from the orientation of human beings that is itself social.

The important thing to see here is that Durkheim makes the claim that the way in which we divide up time and space, and the way we conceive of causation and number, is not a function of the things themselves, nor is it a function of mental
divisions. Rather, the way we conceive of these primary categories is a function of the objective form of society—the ways in which we distribute and organize populations and social structures. Our primary categories of understanding come into existence through the way we distribute ourselves in time and space; they reflect our gatherings and rituals. Thus, all of our thinking is founded upon social facts, and these social facts, according to Durkheim, originated in religion.

Durkheim wants to make a point beyond social epistemology. He argues that if our basic categories of understanding have their roots in religion, then all systems of thought, such as science and philosophy, have their basis in religion. Durkheim (1912/1995) extends this theme, stating that “there is no religion that is not both a cosmology and a speculation about the divine” (p. 8). Notice that there are two functions of religion in this quote. One has to do with speculations about the divine—in other words, religion provides faith and ideas about God. Also notice the other function: to provide a cosmology. A cosmology is a systematic understanding of the origin, structure, and space–time relationships of the universe. Durkheim is right: Every religion tells us what the universe is about—how it was created, how it works, what its purpose is, and so on. But so does science, and that’s Durkheim’s point. Speculations about the universe began in religion; ideas about causation began in religion. Therefore, the social world, even in its most logical of pursuits, was set in motion by religion.

Defining Religion

But how did religion begin? Here we turn back again to Durkheim’s principal purpose: to explain the origins of religion. In order to get at his argument, we will consider the data Durkheim uses, his definition of religion, and, most importantly, how the sacred is produced. The data that Durkheim employs are important because of his argument and intent. He wants to get at the most general social features underlying all religions—in other words, apart from doctrine, he wants to discern what is common to all religions. To discover those commonalities, Durkheim contends that one has to look at the most primitive forms of religion.

Using contemporary religion to understand the basic forms of religion has some problems, most notably the natural effects of history and storytelling. You’ve probably either played or heard of the game “telephone,” where people sit in a circle and take turns whispering a story to one another. What happens, as you know, is that the story changes in the telling. The same is true with religion, at least in terms of its origins. Basically what Durkheim is saying is that the further we get away from the origins of religion, the greater will be the confusion around why and how religion began in the first place. Also, because ancient religion was simpler, using the historical approach allows us to break the social phenomenon down into its constituent parts and identify the circumstances under which it was born. For Durkheim, the most ancient form of religion is totemism. He uses data on totemic religions from Australian Aborigines and Native American tribes for his research.

Conceptually, prior to deciding what data to use, Durkheim had to create a definition of religion. In any research, it is always of utmost importance to clearly
delineate what will count and what will not count as your subject. For example, if you were going to study the institution of education, one of the things you would have to contend with is whether home schooling or Internet courses would count, or do only accredited teachers in state-supported organizations constitute the institution of education? The same kinds of issues exist with religion. Durkheim had to decide on his definition of religion before choosing his data sources—he had to know ahead of time what counts as religion and what doesn’t, especially since he wanted to look at it at its most primitive form:

A religion is a unified system of beliefs and practices relative to sacred things, that is to say, things set apart and forbidden—beliefs and practices which unite into one single moral community called a Church, all those who adhere to them.

(Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 44, emphasis original)

Note carefully what is missing from Durkheim’s definition: There is no mention of the supernatural or God. Durkheim argues that before humans could think about the supernatural, they first had to have a clear idea about what was natural. The term supernatural assumes the division of the universe into two categories: things that can be rationally explained and those that can’t. Now, think about this—when was it that people began to think that things could be rationally explained? It took quite a bit of human history for us to stop believing that there are spirits in back of everything. We had gods of thunder, forests, harvest, water, fire, fertility, and so on. Early humans saw spiritual forces behind almost everything, which means that the idea of nature didn’t occur until much later in our history. The concept of nature—those elements of life that occur apart from spiritual influence—didn’t truly begin until the advent of science. So, the idea of supernatural is a recent invention of humanity and therefore can’t be included in a definition of religion, since there has never been society without religion—early societies would have had religion but no concept of supernatural.

Durkheim also argues that we cannot include the notion of God in the definition of religion. His logic here concerns the fact that there are many belief systems that are generally considered religion that do not require a god. Though he includes other religions such as Jainism, his principal example is Buddhism. The focus of Buddhist faith is the Four Noble Truths, and “salvation” occurs apart from any divine intervention. There are deities acknowledged by Buddhism, such as Indra, Agni, and Varuna, but the entire Buddhist faith can be practiced apart from them. The practicing Buddhist needs no god to thank or worship, yet we would be hard pressed to not call Buddhism a religion.

Thus, three things constitute religion in its most basic form: the sacred, beliefs and practices, and a moral community. The important thing to notice about Durkheim’s definition is the centrality of the notion of the sacred. Every element of the definition revolves around it. The beliefs and practices are relative to sacred things and the moral community exists because of the beliefs and practices, which of course brings us back to sacred things. So at the heart of religion is this idea of the sacred.
Creating the Sacred

But what are sacred things? By that I mean, what makes something sacred? For most of us in the United States, we think of the cross or the Bible as sacred objects. It's easy for us to think they are sacred because of some intrinsic quality they possess. The cross is sacred because Jesus died on it. However, the idea of the intrinsic worth of the object falls apart when we consider all that humanity has thought of as sacred. Humans have used crosses, stones, kangaroos, snakes, birds, water, swastikas, flags, and yellow ribbons—almost anything—to represent the sacred. Durkheim's point is that sacredness is not a function of the object; sacredness is something that is placed upon the object:

Since, in themselves, neither man nor nature is inherently sacred, both acquire sacredness elsewhere. Beyond the human individual and the natural world, then, there must be some other reality. (Durkheim, 1912/1995, pp. 84–85)

We could argue that sacredness comes through association; that's true at least in part. We think the cross is sacred because of its association with Jesus. But what makes the image of an owl sacred? It can't just be its association with the owl, so there must be something else in back of it. What, then, can make both the owl and the cross of Jesus sacred? (Remember, with a positivist like Durkheim, we are looking for general explanations, ones that will fit all instances.) Durkheim wouldn't accept the answer that there is some general spiritual entity in back of all sacred things. To begin with, the sacred things and their beliefs are too varied. But more importantly, Durkheim is interested in the objective reality behind religion. So, how can we explain the power of the sacred using objective, general terms? Durkheim begins with his consideration of totemic religion.

Totems had some interesting functions. For instance, they created a bond of kinship among people unrelated by blood. Each clan was composed of various hunting and gathering groups. These groups lived most of their lives separately, but they periodically came together for celebrations. The groups weren't related by blood, nor were they connected geographically. What held them together was that all the members of the clan carried the same name—the name of their totem—and the members of these groups acted toward one another as if they were family. They had obligations to help each other, to seek vengeance on behalf of each other, to not marry one another, and so forth based on family relations.

In addition to creating a kinship name for the clans, the totem acted as an emblem that represented the clan. It acted as a symbol both to those within the clan and those outside it. The symbol was inscribed on banners and tents and was tattooed on bodies. When the clan eventually settled in one place, the symbol was carved into doors and walls. The totem thus formed bonds, and it represented the clan.

In addition, the totem was used during religious ceremonies. In fact, Durkheim (1912/1995) tells us, “Things are classified as sacred and profane by reference to the totem. It is the very archetype of sacred things” (p. 118). Different items became sacred because of the presence of the totem. For example, the clans both in daily
and sacred life would use various musical instruments; the only difference between
the sacred and the mundane instruments was the presence of the totemic symbol.
The totem imparted the quality of being sacred to the object.

This is an immensely important point for Durkheim: The totem represents the
clan and it creates bonds of kinship. It also represents and imparts the quality of
being sacred. Durkheim then used a bit of algebraic logic: If $A = B$ and $B = C$, then
$A$ and $C$ are equal. So, “if the totem is the symbol of both the god and the society,
is this not because the god and the society are the same?” (Durkheim, 1912/1995,
p. 208). Here Durkheim begins to discover the reality behind the sacred and thus
religion. The empirical reality behind the sacred has something to do with society,
but what exactly?

One of the primary features of the sacred is that it stands diametrically opposed
to the profane. In fact, one cannot exist in the presence of the other. Remember the
story of Moses and the burning bush? Moses had to take off his shoes because he
was standing on sacred ground. These kinds of stories are repeated over and over
again in every religion. The sacred either destroys the profane or the sacred
becomes contaminated by the presence of the profane. So, one of Durkheim’s ques-
tions is, how did humans come to conceptualize these two distinct realms? The
answer to this will help us discover the reality behind sacredness.

Durkheim found that the aborigines had two cycles to their lives, one in which
they carried on their daily life in small groups and the other in which they gathered
in large collectives. In the small groups, they would take care of daily needs through
hunting and gathering. This was the place of home and hearth. Yet each of these
small groups saw themselves as part of a larger group: the clan. Periodically, the
small groups would gather together for large collective celebrations.

During these celebrations, the clan members were caught up in collective
effervescence, or high levels of emotional energy. They found that their behav-
iors changed; they felt “possessed by a moral force greater than” the indivi-
dual. “The effervescence often becomes so intense that it leads to outlandish
behavior. . . . [Behaviors] in normal times judged loathsome and harshly con-
demned, are contracted in the open and with impunity” (Durkheim, 1912/1995,
p. 218). These clan members began to conceive of two worlds: the mundane
world of daily existence where they were in control, and the world of the clan
where they were controlled by an external force greater than themselves. “The
first is the profane world and the second, the world of sacred things. It is in
these effervescent social milieux, and indeed from the very effervescence, that
the religious idea seems to have been born” (Durkheim, 1912/1995, p. 220).

In some important ways, Durkheim is describing the genesis of society. Let’s
assume, as Durkheim and many others do, that human beings are by nature self-
serving and individualistic. How, then, is society possible? One answer is found
here: In Durkheimian thought, humans are linked emotionally. Undoubtedly these
emotions, once established, mediate human connections unconsciously. That is,
once humans are connected emotionally, it isn’t necessary for them to rationally see
or understand the connections, though we will always come up with legitimations.
This emotional soup that Durkheim is describing is the stuff out of which human
society is built. Initially, emotions run wild and so do behaviors in these kinds of
primitive societies. But with repeated interactions, the emotions become focused and specified behaviors, symbols, and morals emerge.

In general, Durkheim is arguing that human beings are able to create high levels of emotional energy whenever they gather together. We’ve all felt something like what Durkheim is talking about at concerts or political rallies or sporting events. We get swept up in the excitement. At those times, we feel “the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat” more poignantly than at others. It is always more fun to watch a game with other people such as at a stadium. Part of the reason is the increase in emotional energy. In this case, the whole is greater than the sum of the parts, and something emerges that is felt outside the individual. This dynamic is what is in back of mob behavior and what we call “emergent norms.” People get caught up in the overwhelming emotion of the moment and do things they normally wouldn’t do.

Randall Collins (1988), a contemporary theorist, has captured Durkheim’s theory in abstract terms. Generally speaking, there are three principal elements to the kind of interactions that Durkheim is describing: co-presence, which describes the degree of physical closeness in space (we can be closer or further away from one another); common emotional mood, the degree to which we share the same feeling about the event; and common focus of attention, the degree to which participants are attending to the same object, symbol, or idea at the same time (a difficult task to achieve, as any teacher knows).

When humans gather together in intense interactions—with high levels of co-presence, common emotional mood, and common focus of attention—they produce high levels of emotional energy. People then have a tendency to symbolize the emotional energy, which produces a sacred symbol, and to create rituals (patterned behaviors designed to replicate the three interaction elements). The symbols not only allow people to focus their attention and recall the emotion, they also give the collective emotion stability. These kinds of rituals and sacred symbols lead a group to become morally bounded; that is, many of the behaviors, speech patterns, styles of dress, and so on associated with the group become issues of right and wrong.

Groups with high moral boundaries are difficult to get in and out of. Street gangs and the Nazis are good examples of groups with high moral boundaries. One of the first things to notice about our examples is the use of the word moral. Most of us probably don’t agree with the ethics of street gangs. In fact, we probably think their ethics are morally wrong and reprehensible. But when sociologists use the term moral, we are not referring to something that we think of as being good. A group is moral if its behaviors, beliefs, feelings, speech, styles, and so forth are controlled by strong group norms and are viewed in terms of right and wrong. In fact, both the Nazis and street gangs are probably more moral, in that sense, than you are, unless you are a member of a radical fringe group.

This theory of Durkheim’s is extremely important. First of all, it gives us an empirical, sociological explanation for religion and sacredness. One of the problems that we are confronted with when we look across the face of humanity is the diversity of belief systems. How can people believe in diverse realities? The Azande of Africa seek spiritual guidance by giving a chicken a magic potion brewed from
tree bark and seeing if the chicken lives or dies. Christians drink wine and eat bread believing they are drinking the blood and eating the body of Christ. How can we begin to explain how people come to see such diverse things as real? Durkheim gives us a part of the puzzle.

The issues of reality and sacredness and morality aren’t necessarily based on ultimate truth for humans. Our experience of reality, sacredness, and morality is based on Durkheimian rituals and collective emotion (see Allan, 1998). Let me put this another way. Let’s say that the Christians are right and the Azande are wrong. How is it, then, that both the Christians and the Azande can have the same experience of faith and reality? Part of the reason is that human beings create sacredness in the same way, regardless of the correctness of any ultimate truth. One of the common basic elements of all religions, particularly during their formative times, is the performance of Durkheimian rituals. These kinds of rituals create high levels of emotional energy that come to be invested in symbols; such symbols are then seen as sacred, regardless of the meaning or truth-value of the beliefs associated with the symbol.

Another reason that this theory is so important is that it provides us with a sociological explanation for the experience that people have of transcendence—something outside of and greater than themselves. All of us have had these kinds of experiences, some more than others. Some have experienced it at a Grateful Dead concert, others at the Million Man March, others watching a parade, and still others as we conform to the expectations of society. We feel these expectations not as a cognitive dialogue, but as something that impresses itself upon us physically and emotionally. Sometimes we may even cognitively disagree, but the pressure is there nonetheless.

**Concepts and Theory: Social Diversity and Morality**

One of the big questions that drove Durkheim is, what holds modern industrial societies together? Up until modern times, societies stayed together because most of the people in the society believed the same, acted the same, felt the same, and saw the world in the same way. However, in modern societies people are different from each other and they are becoming more so. What makes people different? How can all these different people come together and form a single society? In order to begin to answer these questions, Durkheim created a typology of societies.

A theoretical typology is a scheme that classifies a phenomenon into different categories. We aren’t able to explain things directly by using a typology, but it does make things more apparent and more easily explained. Herbert Spencer—the one to whom Durkheim compares his own theory throughout The Division of Labor in Society—categorized societies as either industrial or militaristic. In order to construct his typology, he focused on the state. So, for example, when a society is in a militaristic phase, the state is geared toward defense and war and social control is centralized: Information, behavior, and production are tightly controlled by government. But when the same society is in an industrial phase, the state is less centralized and the social structures are oriented toward economic productivity:
Freedom in information exchange, behaviors, and entrepreneurship is encouraged. But Durkheim focuses on something different. His typology reflects his primary theoretical concern: social solidarity.

**Mechanical and Organic Solidarity**

*Social solidarity* can be defined as the degree to which social units are integrated. According to Durkheim, the question of solidarity turns on three issues: the subjective sense of individuals that they are part of the whole, the actual constraint of individual desires for the good of the collective, and the coordination of individuals and social units. It is important for us to notice that Durkheim acknowledges three different levels of analysis here: psychological, behavioral, and structural. Each of these issues becomes itself a question for empirical analysis: How much do individuals feel part of the collective? To what degree are individual desires constrained? And, how are activities coordinated and adjusted to one another? As each of these vary, a society will experience varying levels of social solidarity.

Durkheim is not only interested in the degree of social solidarity, he is also interested in the way social solidarity comes about. He uses two analogies to talk about these issues. The first is a mechanistic analogy. Think about machines or motors. How are the different parts related to each other? The relationship is purely physical and involuntary. Machines are thus relatively simple. Most of the parts are very similar and are related to or communicate with each other mechanistically. If we think about the degree of solidarity in such a unit, it is extremely high. The sense of an absolute relationship to the whole is unquestionably there, as every piece is connected to every other piece. Each individual unit’s actions is absolutely constrained by and coordinated with the whole.

The other analogy is the organismic one. Higher organisms are quite complex systems, when compared to machines. The parts are usually different from one another, fulfill distinct functions, and are related through a variety of diverse subsystems. Organismic structures provide information to one another using assorted nutrients, chemicals, electrical impulses, and so on. These structures make adjustments because of the information that is received. In addition, most organisms are open systems in that they respond to information from the environment (most machines are closed systems). The solidarity of an organism when compared to a machine is a bit more imprecise and problematic.

By their very nature, analogies can be pushed too far, so we need to be careful. Nonetheless, we get a clear picture of what Durkheim is talking about. Durkheim says that there are two “great currents” in society: similarity and difference. Society begins with the first being dominant. In these societies, which Durkheim terms *segmented*, there are very few personal differences, little competition, and high egalitarianism. These societies experience *mechanical solidarity*. Individuals are mechanically and automatically bound together. Gradually, the other current, difference, becomes stronger and similarity “becomes channeled and becomes less apparent.” These social units are held together through mutual need and abstract ideas and sentiments. Durkheim refers to this as *organic solidarity*. While organic
solidarity and difference tend to dominate modern society, similarity and mechanical solidarity never completely disappear.

In Table 5.1, I’ve listed several distinctions between mechanical and organic solidarity. In the first row, the principal defining feature is listed. In mechanical solidarity, individuals are directly related to a group and its collective consciousness. If the individual is related to more than one group, there are very few and the groups tend to overlap with one another: “Thus it is entirely mechanical causes which ensure that the individual personality is absorbed in the collective personality” (Durkheim, 1893/1984, p. 242). Remember all that we have talked about concerning culture and morality (Durkheim’s Law and ritual performance). People are immediately related to the collective consciousness by being part of the group that creates the culture in highly ritualistic settings. In these groups, the members experience the collective self as immediately present. They feel its presence push against any individual thoughts or feelings. They are caught up in the collective effervescence and experience it as ultimately real. The clans that Durkheim studies in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life* are a good illustration.

When an individual is mechanically related to the collective, all the rest of the characteristics we see under mechanical solidarity fall into place. In Table 5.1, the common beliefs and sentiments and the collective ideas and behavioral tendencies represent the collective consciousness. The collective consciousness varies by at least four features: *the degree to which culture is shared*—how many people in the group hold the same values, believe the same things, feel the same way about things, behave the same, and see the world in the same way; *the amount of power the culture has to guide an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and actions*—a culture can be

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<th>Mechanical Solidarity</th>
<th>Organic Solidarity</th>
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<tr>
<td>Individuals directly related to collective consciousness with no intermediary</td>
<td>Individuals related to collective consciousness through intermediaries</td>
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<td>Joined by common beliefs and sentiments (moralistic)</td>
<td>Joined by relationships among special and different functions (utilitarian)</td>
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<td>Collective ideas and behavioral tendencies are stronger than individual</td>
<td>Individual ideas and tendencies are strong and each individual has own sphere of action</td>
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<td>Strong attachment to family and tradition</td>
<td>Weak attachment to family and tradition</td>
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<td>Repressive law: crime and deviance disturb moral sentiments; punishment meted out by group; purpose is to ritually uphold moral values through righteous indignation</td>
<td>Restitutive law: crime and deviance disturb social order; rehabilitative, restorative action by officials; purpose is to restore status quo</td>
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shared but not very powerful (A group where the members feel they have options doesn’t have a very powerful culture.); the degree of clarity—how clear the prescriptions and prohibitions are in the culture (For example, when a man and a woman approach a door at the same time, is it clear what behavior is expected?); and the collective consciousness varies by its content. Durkheim is referring here to the ratio of religious to secular and individualistic symbolism. Religiously inspired culture tends to increase the power and clarity of the collective consciousness.

As we see from Table 5.1, in mechanical solidarity, the social horizon of individuals tends to be limited. Durkheim is referring to the level of possibilities an individual has in terms of social worlds and relationships. The close relationship the individual has to the collective consciousness in mechanical solidarity limits the number of possible worlds or realities the individual may consider. In modern societies, under organic solidarity, we have almost limitless possibilities from which to choose. Media and travel expose us to uncountable religions and their permutations. Today you can be a Buddhist, Baptist, or Bahai, and you can choose any of the varied universes they present. This proliferation of possibilities, including social relationships, is severely limited under mechanical solidarity. One of the results of this limiting is that tradition appears concrete and definite. People in segmented societies don’t doubt their knowledge or reality. They hold strongly to the traditions of their ancestors. And, at the same time, people express their social relationships using family or territorial terms.

But even under mechanical solidarity, not everyone conforms. Durkheim acknowledges this and tells us that there are different kinds of laws for the different types of solidarity. The function of these laws is different as well, corresponding to the type of solidarity that is being created. Under mechanical solidarity, punitive law is more important. The function of punitive law is not to correct, as we usually think of law today; rather, the purpose is expiation (making atonement). Satisfaction must be given to a higher power, in this case the collective consciousness. Punitive law is exercised when the act “offends the strong, well-defined states of the collective consciousness” (Durkheim, 1893/1984, p. 39). Because this is linked to morality, the punishment given is generally greater than the danger represented to society, such as cutting off an individual’s hand for an act of thievery.

Punitive law satisfies moral outrage and clarifies moral boundaries. When we respond to deviance with some form of “righteous indignation,” and we punish the offender, we are experiencing and creating our group moral boundaries. In punishing offenses, we are drawing a clear line that demarks those who are in the group and those who are outside. Punitive law also provides an opportunity for ritual performance. A good example of this principle is the past practice of public executions. Watching an execution of a murderer or traitor was a public ritual that allowed the participants to focus their attention on a single group moral norm and to feel the same emotion about the offense. In other words, they were able to perform a Durkheimian ritual that re-created their sacred boundaries. As a result, the group was able to feel their moral boundaries and experience a profound sense of “we-ness,” which increases mechanical solidarity.

Organic solidarity, on the other hand, has a greater proportion of restitutive law, which is designed to restore the offender and broken social relations. Because organic social solidarity is based on something other than strong morality, the
function of law is different. Here there is no sense of moral outrage and no felt need to ritualize the sacred boundaries. Organic solidarity occurs under conditions of complex social structures and relations. Modern societies are defined by high structural differentiation, with large numbers of diverse structures necessitating complex interconnections of communication, movement, and obligations. Because of the diversity of these interconnections, they tend to be more rational than moral or familial—which is why we tend to speak of “paying one's debt to society.” The idea of “debt” comes from rationalized accounting practices; there is no emotional component, as there would be with moral or family connections. And the interests guarded by the laws tend to be more specialized, such as corporate or inheritance laws, rather than generally held to by all, such as “thou shalt not kill.” As an important side note, we can see that restitutive and punitive laws are material social facts that help us see the nonmaterial organic and mechanical solidarity within a society.

Organic solidarity thus tends to be characterized by weak collective consciousness: fewer beliefs and sentiments, and ideas and behavioral expectations tend to be shared. There is greater individuality and people and other social units (like organizations) are connected to the whole through utilitarian necessity. In other words, we need each other to survive, just like in an organism (my heart would die without its connection to my lungs and the rest of my biological system).

The Division of Labor

Earlier I mentioned that Durkheim says that similarity and mechanical solidarity gradually become channeled and less apparent. That statement gives the impression that the change from mechanical to organic solidarity occurred without any provocation, and that's not the case. The movement from mechanical to organic solidarity, from similarity to difference, from traditional to modern was principally due to increases in the division of labor. The concept of the division of labor refers to a stable organization of tasks and roles that coordinate the behavior of individuals or groups that carry out different but related tasks. Obviously, the division of labor may vary along a continuum from simple to complex. We can build a car in our garage all by ourselves from the ground up (as the first automobiles were built), or we can farm out different manufacturing and assembly tasks to hundreds of subcontractors worldwide and simply complete the construction in our plant (as it is done today). Our illustration illustrates the poles of the continuum, but there are multiple steps in between.

What kinds of processes tend to increase the division of labor in a society? Bear with me for a moment; I'm going to put together a string of rather dry-sounding concepts and relationships. The answer to what increases the overall division of labor is competition. Durkheim sees competition not as the result of individual desires (remember they are curtailed in mechanical solidarity) or free markets, but rather as the result of what Durkheim variously calls dynamic, moral, or physical density. These terms capture the number and intensity of interactions in a collective taken as a whole. The level of dynamic density is a result of increasing population density, which is a function of population growth (birth rate and migration) and ecological barriers (physical restraints on the ability of a population to spread out geographically).
Durkheim’s theory is based on an ecological, evolutionary kind of perspective. The environment changes and thus the organism must change in order to survive. In this case, the environment is social interaction. The environment changes due to identifiable pressures: population growth and density. As populations concentrate, people tend to interact more frequently and with greater intensity. The rate of interaction is also affected by increases in communication and transportation technologies. As the level of interaction increases, so does the level of competition. More people require more goods and services, and dense populations can create surplus workers in any given job category. The most fit survive in their present occupation and assume a higher status; the less fit create new specialties and job categories, thus creating a higher degree of division of labor.

The Problem of Modernity

Now, let me ask you a question. What kind of problem do you think that increasing the division of labor might cause for the collective consciousness? The answer to this question is Durkheim’s problem of modernity. If people are interacting in different situations, with different people, to achieve different goals (as would be the case with higher levels of the division of labor), then they will produce more particularized than collective cultures. Therefore, because they contain different ideas and sentiments, the presence of particularized cultures threatens the power of the collective consciousness.

There’s an old saying, “Birds of a feather flock together.” Well, Durkheim is telling us just the opposite: “Birds become of a feather because they flock together.” In other words, the most prominent characteristics of people come about because of the groups they interact with. As we internalize the culture of our groups, we learn how to think and feel and behave, and we become socially distinct from one another. We call this process social differentiation. As people become socially differentiated, they, by definition, share fewer and fewer elements of the collective consciousness. This process brings with it the problem of integration. It’s a problem that we here in the United States are very familiar with: How can we combine diverse populations into a whole nation with a single identity? But there’s more to this problem of modernity: As the division of labor increases, so does the level of structural differentiation—the process through which the needs of society are met through increasingly different sets of status positions, roles, and norms. Spencer made this the central issue for his social theorizing. Here we see the same concern. Durkheim argues much like Spencer—structural interdependency creates pressures for integration—but he adds a cultural component: value generalization.

Thus, we are confronted with the problem of modernity. Because groups are more closely gathered together, the division of labor has increased. In response to population pressures and the division of labor, social structures have differentiated to better meet societal needs. As structures differentiate, they are confronted with the problem of integration. In addition, as the division of labor increases, people tend to socially differentiate according to distinct cultures. As people create particularized cultures around their jobs, they are less in tune with the collective consciousness and face the problem of social integration. I’ve illustrated these relationships in Figure 5.1.
Organic Solidarity and Social Pathologies

As social and structural differentiation create problems of integration, they simultaneously produce social factors that counterbalance these problems: intermediary group formation, culture generalization, restitutive law and centralization of power, and structural interdependency. Together, these factors form organic solidarity. First, structures become more dependent upon one another as they differentiate (structural interdependency). For example, your heart can’t digest food, so it needs the stomach to survive. It is the same for society as it differentiates. The different structures become dependent upon one another for survival. Further, in order to provide for the needs of other structures, they must be able to interact with one another. Thus, structural and social differentiation also create pressures for a more generalized culture and value system. Let’s think about this in terms of communication among computers. I have a PC and my friend Jamie has an Apple. Each has a completely different platform and operating system. Yet almost every day, my computer communicates with his. How can it do this? The two different systems can communicate with one another because there is a more general system that contains values broad enough to encompass both computers (i.e., the Internet).

Societies thus produce more general culture and values in response to the need for different subsystems and groups to communicate. In contemporary structural analysis, this is an extremely important issue. Talcott Parsons termed this focus the “generalized media of exchange”—symbolic goods that are used to facilitate interactions across institutional domains. So, for example, the institutional structure of family values love, acceptance, encouragement, fidelity, and so on. The economic structure, on the other hand, values profit, greed, one-upmanship, and the like. How do these two institutions communicate? What do they exchange? How do they cooperate in order to fulfill the needs of society? These kinds of questions, and their answers, are what make for structural analysis and the most sociological of all research. They are the empirical side of Durkheim’s theoretical concern.
Of course, in the United States we have successively created more generalized cultures and values. The idea of citizen, for example, has grown from white-male-Protestant-property-owner to include people of color and women. Yet generalizing culture is a continuing issue. The more diverse our society becomes, the more generalized the culture must become, according to Durkheim. For example, while we in the United States may say “In God we trust,” it is now a valid question to ask “which god?” We have numerous gods and goddesses that are worshiped and respected in our society. To maintain this diversity, Durkheim would argue there has to be in the culture a concept general enough to embrace them all. According to Durkheim, if the culture doesn’t generalize, we run the risk of disintegration.

The fact is that generalized culture is often too broad to invest much moral emotion, so more and more of our relations, both structural and personal, are mitigated by law. This law has to be rational and focused on relationships, not morals. For example, I don’t know my neighbors. The reasons for this have a lot to do with what Durkheim is talking about: increases in transportation technologies, increasing divisions of labor, and so on. But if I don’t know my neighbors, how can our relationship be managed? Obviously, if I have a problem with their dog barking or their tree limb falling on my house, there are laws and legal proceedings that manage the relationship. Increases in social and structural diversity thus create higher levels of restitutive law (in comparison to restrictive/moral law) and more centralized government to administer law and relations. Of course, one of the things we come to value is this kind of law and we come to believe in the right of a centralized government to enforce the law.

Both social and structural diversity also push for the formation of intermediary groups. Remember, Durkheim always comes back to real groups in real interaction: Culture can have independent effects but it requires interaction to be produced. Thus, the problem becomes, how do individual occupational groups create a more general value system if they don’t interact with one another? Durkheim theorizes that societies will create intermediary groups—groups between the individual occupational groups and the collective consciousness. These groups are able to simultaneously carry the concerns of the smaller groups as well as the collective consciousness.

For example, I’m a sociology faculty member at the University of North Carolina. Because of the demands of work, I rarely interact with faculty from other disciplines (like psychology), and I only interact with medical doctors as a patient. Yet I am a member of the American Sociological Association (ASA), and the ASA interacts with the American Psychological Association and the American Medical Association, as well as many, many others. And all of them interact with the U.S. government as well as other institutional concerns. This kind of interaction amongst intermediary groups creates a higher level of value generalization, which, in turn, is passed down to the individual members. As Durkheim (1893/1984) says,

A nation cannot be maintained unless, between the state and individuals, a whole range of secondary groups are interposed. These must be close enough to the individual to attract him strongly to their activities and, in so doing, to absorb him into the mainstream of social life. (p. liv)
As we’ve seen, structural interdependency, culture generalization, intermediary group formation, and restitutive law and centralization of power together create organic solidarity (see Figure 5.2). Increasing division of labor systemically pushes for these changes: “Indeed, when its functions are sufficiently linked together they tend of their own accord to achieve an equilibrium, becoming self-regulatory” (Durkheim, 1893/1984, p. xxxiv). As a side note, part of what we mean by functional analysis is this notion of system pressures creating equilibrium. Notice the dynamic mechanism: It is the system’s need that brings about the change. It’s kind of like pulling your car into the gas station because it needs gas. Society is a smart system, regulating its own requirements and bringing about changes to keep itself in equilibrium. However, if populations grow and/or become differentiated too quickly, the system can’t keep up and these functions won’t be “sufficiently linked together.” Society can then become pathological or sick.

Durkheim elaborates two possible pathologies. (Actually, Durkheim mentions three—anomie, forced division of labor, and “lack of coordination”—but he clearly elaborates only the first two.) The first is anomie—social instability and personal unrest resulting from insufficient normative regulation of individual activities. Durkheim argues that social life is impossible apart from normative regulation. People are naturally driven by individual appetites, and without norms to regulate interactions, cooperation is impossible. If it were necessary to
grope de novo for an appropriate response to every stimulus from the environging situation, threats to its integrity from many sources would promptly effect its disorganization . . . to this end, it is altogether necessary that the person be free from an incessant search for appropriate conduct.” (Durkheim, 1903/1961, p. 37)
The production of norms requires interaction. However, overly rapid population growth with excessive division of labor and social diversity hinders groups from interacting. Links among and between the groups cannot be formed when growth and differentiation happen too quickly. The result is anomie.

The other pathology that Durkheim considers at some length involves class inequality and the forced division of labor. Durkheim argues that the division of labor must occur “spontaneously,” that is, apart from external constraint. Labor should divide because of organic reasons: population growth and density. The division of labor should not occur due to a powerful elite driven by profit motivations. According to Durkheim, it is dysfunctional to force people to work in jobs for which they are ill-suited:

We are certainly not predestined from birth to any particular form of employment, but we nevertheless possess tastes and aptitudes that limit our choice. If no account is taken of them, if they are constantly frustrated in our daily occupation, we suffer, and seek the means of bringing that suffering to an end. (Durkheim, 1893/1984, pp. 310–311)

This, of course, would represent a threat to social solidarity.

This condition is similar to what Marx talks about, but it is different as well. For Marx, alienation is a state of existence that may or may not be subjectively experienced by the individual. Alienation for Marx is defined by separation from species-being, and we only become aware of it through critical and/or class consciousness. Durkheim, on the other hand, assumes that humans are egotistical actors without an essentially good nature from which to be alienated. Durkheim’s alienation comes about only as a result of a pathological form of the division of labor—forced by capitalist greed rather than organic evolution. It exists as a subjective state—we are always aware of alienation when it occurs.

Durkheim’s solution for this pathological state is “justice” enforced by the state, specifically, price controls by useful labor (equal pay for equal work) and elimination of inheritance. Two of the most powerful tools in producing a structure of inequality are ascription and inheritance. Ascription assigns different status positions to us at birth, such as gender and race, and apart from legislation guaranteeing equal pay for equal work, they strongly influence inequality. For example, studies done in the United States consistently show that women earn about 70% of what a man makes for the same job with the same qualifications. Inheritance is an obvious way to maintain structural inequality; estimates are that by 2055, at least $41 trillion will be inherited in the United States (Havens & Schervish, 2003). Both ascription and inheritance make the perpetuation of class differences appear natural: Our position is ascribed to us, and we are wealthy or poor by birth. America may be the land of opportunity, but it is not the land of equal opportunity: It matters if you are male or female, black or white, or go to school in Harlem or Hollywood. On the other hand, if inheritance is done away with and laws are implemented that bring equal pay for equal work, structured inequality would have a difficult time surviving.
In early societies, the human self was an utterly social self. People were caught up in and saw themselves only in terms of the group. The self was an extension of the group just as certainly as your arm is an extension of your body. Yet as societies differentiated both structurally and socially, the self became more and more isolated and took on the characteristics of an individual. Thus in modern societies, the individual takes on increasing importance. We can think of many benefits from this shift. We have increased freedom of choice and individual expression under conditions of organic solidarity. Yet there are some dysfunctional consequences as well. Though Durkheim didn’t phrase it in this way, in addition to the two pathologies of modern society listed above, we can include suicide.

Suicide

There are two critical issues for the individual in modern society: the levels of group attachment and behavioral regulation. People need a certain level of group attachment. We are social creatures and much of our sense of meaning, reality, and purpose comes from having interpersonal ties (both in terms of number and density) and a sense of “we-ness” or collective identity. To illustrate, imagine having something be meaningful to you apart from language and feeling—what Durkheim would call collective representations and sentiments. You might object and say, “My feelings are my own.” That’s true, but what do you feel? Do you feel “anger”? Do you feel “love”? Or, do you simply, purely feel? We rarely, if ever, simply and purely feel. What are we doing when we say we feel anger? We are labeling certain physiological responses and giving them meaning. The label is linguistic and the meaning is social.

It should be clear by now that it is extremely difficult for us to untangle personal meanings and realities from social ones. Certainly, because we are human, we can create utterly individualistic realities and meanings, although we usually see those realities and those people as either strange or crazy. Most of us are aware, and even unconsciously convinced, that our meanings and realities have to be linked in some way to the social group around us—which is why, when group attachment is too low, Durkheim argues that egoistic suicide is likely: Low group attachment leads to extreme individualism and the loss of a sense of reality and purpose.

However, extremely high group attachment isn’t a good thing for the individual either. High attachment leads to complete fusion with the group and loss of individual identity, which can be a problem in modernity. Under conditions of high group attachment, people are more likely to commit altruistic suicide. The Kamikaze pilots during World War II are a good example. Some contemporary examples include religious cults, such as The People’s Temple and Heaven’s Gate, and the group solidarity the U.S. government fosters in military boot camps. Under conditions of high group attachment, individual life becomes meaningless and the group is the only reality.
It's important to note here that modern societies are characterized by the presence of both mechanical and organic solidarity. It is certainly true that in general the society is held together by organic means—general values, restitutive law, and dependent opposites—yet it is also true that pockets of very intense, particularized culture and mechanical solidarity exist as well. These kinds of group interactions may in fact be necessary for us. This need may explain such intense interaction groups as dedicated fans of rock music or organized sports. Both of these groups engage in the kind of periodic ritual gatherings that Durkheim explains in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. During these gatherings (shows or events), rock and sports fans experience high levels of emotional energy and create clear group symbols. Yet extremes of either organic or mechanical solidarity can be dangerous, as Durkheim notes.

The other critical issue for individuals in modern society is the regulation of their behaviors. Because in the advanced, industrialized nations we believe in individualism, the idea of someone or something regulating our behavior may be objectionable. But keep in mind Durkheim's view of human nature. Apart from regulation, our appetites would be boundless and ultimately meaningless. The individual by himself or herself “suffers from the everlasting wranglings and endless friction that occur when relations between an individual and his fellows are not subject to any regulative influence” (Durkheim, 1887/1993, p. 24). Further, our behaviors must have meaning for us with regard to time. Time, as we think of it, is a function of symbols (the past and future only exist symbolically), and, of course, symbols are a function of group membership.

Thus, there are a variety of reasons why the regulation of behaviors is necessary. Behaviors need to be organized according to the needs and goals of the collective, but the degree of regulation is important. Under conditions of rapid population growth and diversity, anomie may result if the culture is unable to keep pace with the social changes. Under these conditions, it is likely there will be an increase in the level of *anomic suicide*. The lack of regulation of behaviors leads to a complete lack of regulation of the individual's desires and thus an increase in feelings of meaninglessness. On the other hand, overregulation of behaviors leads to the loss of individual effectiveness (and thus increases hopelessness), resulting in more *fatalistic suicide*.

I've listed the suicide types in Table 5.2. It's important to keep in mind that the motivation for suicide is different in each case, corresponding to group attachment and behavior regulation. Also note that the kinds of social pathologies we are talking about here are different from the ones in the previous section. Here we are seeing how

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<th>Group Attachment</th>
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<td>High</td>
<td>Altruistic Suicide</td>
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<td>Low</td>
<td>Egoistic Suicide</td>
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<td>Fatalistic Suicide</td>
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<td>Anomic Suicide</td>
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modernity can be pathological for the individual, in the extremes of attachment and regulation. In the previous section, we looked at how modernity can be pathological for society as a whole and its solidarity.

**The Cult of the Individual**

Both egoistic and anomic suicide can be seen as a function of high levels of individuality, but individuality itself is not the problem. Individualism is in fact necessary in modernity. Before we go on, I need to make a distinction between this idea of individuality and what might be called egoistic hedonism or materialism (what most of us think of when we hear the term individualism: “I gotta be me.”). From a Durkheimian view, individuals who are purely and exclusively out to fulfill their own desires can never form the basis of a group. Group life demands that there be some shared link that motivates people to work for the collective rather than individual welfare. As we’ve seen in our discussion of Durkheim, this kind of group life and awareness is dependent upon a certain degree of collective consciousness. The idea of the individual that we have in mind here is therefore not pure ego. Rather, what is at stake might better be understood as the idea of “individual rights” and how it has progressed historically.

To do the concept justice, we should really go back to early Greek and then Roman times. But in actuality, we need only go back to the founding of the United States. What does the following sentence mean? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.” The history of the United States is the tale of working out the meaning of that line. Obviously, the central struggle concerns the term “all men.” Initially, “all men” referred only to white, property-owning, heterosexual, Protestant males. Somewhere along the line, the U.S. government decided (often in response to fierce civil struggle, such as the fight for women’s rights) that you didn’t have to own property, and that you didn’t have to be male, or white, or Protestant, though you still have to be heterosexual to have full access to civil rights. The reason there has been struggle over this sentence is the basis that is given for these rights. According to the quoted line, the basis for civil rights is simply being human. These rights can’t be earned nor can they be taken away. They are yours not because of anything you’ve done or because of any group membership, but simply because of your birth into the human race. Thus, what matters isn’t what group you belong to; it’s you, as an individual human being. It is this moral idea of individualism that Durkheim has in mind and that has the potential for creating social solidarity.

Durkheim calls this new moral basis for society the “cult of the individual.” The individual, as he or she is historically separated from the group, becomes the locus of social concern and solidarity. The individual becomes the recipient of social rights and responsibilities, rather than castes or lineages. Today we see the individual as perhaps the single most important social actor. Even our legal system here in the United States is occupied with preserving the civil rights of the perpetrator of a crime because it is the individual that is valued. The individual becomes the focus
of our idea of “justice,” which Durkheim sees as the “medicine” for some of the problems that come with pathological forms of the division of labor. For example, in a society such as the United States, the problems associated with labor issues, poverty, deviance, and depression (all of which can be linked to Durkheim’s pathologies) are generally handled individually through the court system or counseling. Remember that Durkheim sees culture as the unifying force of society, so the importance of these kinds of cases for Durkheimian sociology has more to do with the culture that the practices create and reproduce than the actual legal or psychological effects. In this way, the individual becomes a ritual focus of attention, the symbol around which people can seek a kind of redress for the forced division of labor, inequality, and anomie that we noted above. Today the individual has taken on a moral life. But it is not the particular person per se, with all of his or her idiosyncrasies, that has value. Rather, it is the ethical and sacred idea of the individual that is important. As Durkheim (1957) says,

This cult, moreover, has all that is required to take the place of the religious cultures of former times. It serves as well as they to bring about the communion of minds and wills which is a first condition of any social life. (p. 69)

Summary

- Durkheim is extremely interested in what holds society together in modern times. In order to understand this problem, he constructs a perspective that focuses on three issues: social facts, collective consciousness, and the production of culture in interaction. Durkheim argues that society is a social fact, an entity that exists in and of itself, which can have independent effects. The facticity of society is produced through the collective consciousness, which contains collective ideas and sentiments. The collective consciousness is seen as the moral basis of society. Though it may have independent effects, the collective consciousness is produced through social interaction.

- Durkheim argues that the basis of society and the collective consciousness is religion. Religion first emerged in society as small bands of hunter–gatherer groups assembled periodically. During these gatherings, high levels of emotional energy were created through intense interactions. This emotional energy, or effervescence, acted as a contagion and influenced the participants to behave in ways they normally wouldn’t. So strong was the effervescent effect that participants felt as if they were in the presence of something larger than themselves as individuals, and the collective consciousness was born. The emotional energy was symbolized and the interactions ritualized so that the experience could be duplicated. The symbols and behaviors became sacred to the group and provided strong moral boundaries and group identity.

- Because of high levels of division of labor, modern society tends to work against the effects of the collective consciousness. People in work-related groups
and differentiated structures create particularized cultures. As a result, society has to find a different kind of solidarity than one based on religious or traditional collective consciousness. Organic solidarity integrates a structurally and socially diverse society through interdependency, generalized ideas and sentiments, restitutive law and centralized power, and through intermediary groups. These factors take time to develop, and if a society tries to move too quickly from mechanical to organic solidarity, it will be subject to pathological states, such as anomie and the forced division of labor.

- At the center of modern society is the cult of the individual. The ideal of individuality, not the idiosyncrasies of individual people, becomes one of the most generalized values a society can have. However, the individual can also be subject to pathological states, depending on the person’s level of group attachment and behavioral regulation. If a society produces the extremes of either of these, then the suicide rate will tend to go up. Suicide due to extremes in group attachment is characterized as either egoistic or altruistic. Suicide due to extremes in behavioral regulation is characterized as either anomic or fatalistic.

TAKING THE PERSPECTIVE—FUNCTIONALISM AND SOCIOLOGY OF CULTURE

In some ways, Durkheim has informed sociological theory in more profound yet diffuse ways than anyone in this book. The most obvious at the moment is that he adds to the functionalist perspective that we reviewed in Chapter 2. Durkheim specifically adds culture/collective consciousness to Spencer’s three requisite functions. These four functions are brought together in Talcott Parsons’ theory, which we’ll look at in Chapter 8. More generally Durkheim’s idea of social facts has become part of our cultural capital as sociologists. As you know, sociology is fundamentally based on the idea that there are social factors that influence human life. In that these factors are perceived as institutions or structures, chances are good that the idea comes from Durkheim’s idea of the social fact. We’ve also seen how his study of suicide informs the kind of methodology practiced in sociology. In fact, Durkheim’s concern with social order and integration is one of the primary questions in sociology today.

A more specific influence Durkheim’s had is on culture: “The compelling case can be made that, more than any other classical figure, it is to Durkheim that the contemporary cultural revival … is most deeply in debt” (Alexander, 1988, p. 4). What Durkheim did specifically was to give culture an independent place in sociological theorizing. One of the concepts that the idea of social science is based upon is the notion of independent effects. In other words, if society can be studied scientifically, then it must contain some form of its own laws of action apart from the people who make it up and it must be able to independently act upon people. Durkheim poses this kind of question about culture and argues that culture exists independently and operates autonomously. Another way to put this is to say that culture is structured—signs,
symbols, and categories are related to one another in a way that influences how people think, feel, and act. Durkheim was really one of the first to consider such a thing, but this idea came to form an entire school of research called linguistic structuralism, which later influenced semiotics and poststructuralism (two influential contemporary schools of cultural analysis). We will consider poststructuralism in Chapter 17.

BUILDING YOUR THEORY TOOLBOX

Learning More—Primary and Secondary Sources

- Primary sources: Almost every book of Durkheim’s is worth reading. The following are indispensable:

- Durkheim secondary sources:
Chapter 5 • The Problem With Diversity: Émile Durkheim

Seeing the Social World (knowing the theory)

- Add Durkheim’s contribution to functionalist analysis that you wrote for Chapter 2.
- Compare and contrast Durkheim’s approach to culture and the cultural sociology we talked about in Chapter 4.
- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to define the following terms theoretically and explain their theoretical importance to Durkheim’s theory: social facts, society sui generis, collective conscious, religion, sacred and profane, ritual, effervescence, social solidarity (mechanical and organic), punitive and restitutive law, the division of labor, social differentiation, cultural generalization, intermediary groups, social pathologies, anomic, suicide (altruistic, fatalistic, egoistic, and anomic), the cult of the individual
- After reading and understanding this chapter, you should be able to answer the following questions (remember to answer them theoretically):
  - Explain the organismic analogy and use it to analyze the relations among and between social structures.
  - Define social facts and explain how society exists sui generis.
  - Explain how society is based on religion.
  - Discuss how Durkheimian rituals create sacred symbols and group moral boundaries.
  - Define collective consciousness, social solidarity, and mechanical and organic solidarity.
  - Explain the problem of modernity and describe how organic solidarity creates social solidarity in modernity.
  - Describe how organic solidarity can produce certain social pathologies.
  - Define the cult of the individual and explain its place in producing organic solidarity.

Engaging the Social World (using the theory)

- I’d like for you to go to a sporting event—football, basketball, or hockey would be best. Analyze that experience using Durkheim’s theory of rituals. What kind of symbols did you notice? What kinds of rituals? Did the rituals work as Durkheim said they would? What do you think this says about religious rituals in contemporary society? Can you think of other events that have the same characteristics?
- There are a lot of differences between gangs and medical doctors. But there might also be some similarities. Using Durkheim’s theory and perspective, how are gangs and medical doctors alike?
- Explain this event and the reactions from a Durkheimian perspective: On September 11, 2001, hijacked jetliners hit the World Trade Center in New York and the Pentagon outside Washington, D.C. News headlines around the world proclaimed “America Attacked” and people in places such as San Diego, CA; Detroit, MI; and Comer ville, AZ, wept openly. What Durkheimian processes must have been in place for such an event to happen? And,

(Continued)
how would Durkheim explain the fact that Americans had such a strong emotional reaction to the loss of people unknown to them? Also, explain the subsequent use of flags and slogans, and the “war on terrorism,” using Durkheim’s theory.

• Often in theory class, I will take the students on a walk. We walk through campus, through a retail business section, past a church, and through a residential area. Either think about such a walk or go on an actual walk yourself. Based on Durkheim’s perspective (not necessarily his theory), what would he see? How would it be different from what Marx would see?

Weaving the Threads (building theory)

• Compare and contrast Spencer, Marx, Weber, and Durkheim on the central features of modernity. What do they say makes a society modern? What problems do they see associated with modern society and modern lives?

• Compare and contrast Spencer’s and Durkheim’s theories of social change and the problems of integration. How can they be integrated?

• How does Weber expand Spencer’s theory on the evolution of religion? Compare and contrast Spencer, Durkheim, and Weber on the origins and functions of religion.

• Analyze Marx’s position on religion using Durkheim’s theory. I don’t want you to argue for or against Marx; I want you to understand Marx’s position using Durkheim.