

Anomie in the sociological perspective of Émile Durkheim

Abstract

This concept paper seeks to be a contribution to the reflection on the classic concept of anomie, trying to expose the complex meaning from Émile Durkheim. For this purpose, a document analysis based on this content was carried out. It is concluded that, even in Durkheim's work, anomie can be considered a polysemic concept, which entails the need to explicitly discuss its meaning in each empirical research, with its clear definition, so as to take advantage of all its potential, as well as its scientific limitations.

Keywords: anomie, Durkheim, sociology, research, limitations, potential, discuss

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Introduction

Anomie is a classic concept of Sociology since Émile Durkheim mobilised it in *De la Division du Travail Social* (The Division of Labour in Society) (1893), and in *Le Suicide* (Suicide) (1897).¹ However, and although in etymological terms, the word anomie “means the absence of norms, rules or laws”,^{2,3} anomie is a polysemic concept and varied meanings have been ascribed to it.^{1,3,5–11} In Classical Antiquity, Thucydides referred to anomie, impiety and absence of law, of humanity without law or rule to characterizes the «plague» of Athens (430 and 427/426 BC): It was not only a health crisis, it was also a major moral crisis. Nosos, that is, «disease», infection does not destroy just the body; nosos, that is, «dementia», also destroys, even if momentarily, a society, institutions, traditions. An epidemic is not only the devastation and suffering caused by the spread of infection; it is also the brutal chaos that follows the weakening of the State, the disintegration of authorities, social structures and mentalities.¹²

Anomy may mean “a lack of integration or mutual adjustment of the functions stemming from industrial crises, from conflicts between labour and capital, and from specialisation of science”,⁶ “lack of norms or regulation”,⁵ or a profligacy, normlessness and social deregulation.^{7,10} Even in the Durkheimian perspective, anomie may be considered an ambiguous and, to a certain extent, contradictory concept if analysed in all his work.^{10,13} It is in this context that this concept paper seeks to offer a contribution to the discussion of the classic concept of anomie, trying to expose the complex meaning of Émile Durkheim.

Anomie in Émile Durkheim

Durkheim maintains that “man is not a moral being but because he lives in society, since morality consists of being solidary with a group and varies with this solidarity”.¹⁴ For Durkheim, there are two types of social solidarity—types of connection between individuals:

- Mechanical solidarity—emphasis on the principle of similarity, unites individuals in society, fosters internal cohesion, a strong collective awareness and a vigorous coercion over individuals, prevalence of repressive law; and

- Organic solidarity—significant division of labour and specialisation of functions; what unites individuals is the interdependence of social functions, collective awareness is weak and diffuse, spreading through the various institutions, the law of restitution prevails, the function of Law, rather than to punish those who commit a crime, is to restore the order that has been violated; morality regulates social life through the mobilisation of cultural elements (ways of thinking, feeling and acting, which are learned and shared through the processes of socialisation).

Anomie and the division of labour in society

In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim analyses the pathological forms of the division of labour and the division of anomic labour. He sustains that the social causes for the increase of the division of labour in complex societies arise from a combination of factors that involve: an increase of the population, a higher approximation of the members of society in the physical space, greater communication and interdependence of the individuals in the social space. With the growing emergence of organic solidarity resulting from the division of labour, “each one depends more closely on society, the more divided the work is, and, on the other hand, his/her activity is all the more personal, the more specialised it is”¹⁴ continues, stating that Deep changes have taken place, and in a short time, in the structure of our societies; [...] the morale that corresponds to this social type has regressed, but without another one developing quickly enough to fill the space that the former has left vague in our consciences. Our faith has been shaken; tradition has lost its dominance; individual judgment has emancipated from collective judgment. But, on the other hand, the functions that were dissociated throughout the storm did not have time to adjust to each other, the new life that emerged abruptly could not be completely organised and, above all, it was not organised in such a way as to satisfy the need for justice, which more ardently aroused in our hearts (p. 342).

The intensification of the division of labour should increase solidarity and interdependence among the members of a society; however, the division of labour may have opposite consequences. Thus, specialisation in the field of intellectual activities leads

the scientist, not to solidarity, but to isolation.³ Another form of anomic division of labour results from economic development. The development of the production and markets may make it impossible to harmonise economic actions. The producer's rule is not, as in the past, to produce according to identifiable needs, but to produce as much as possible. This situation results in crises that shake economic systems and in social conflicts, which are inherent, on the one hand, to the fact that the worker is confined to limited tasks and, on the other hand, to the fact that contacts between the individuals who participate in the production become looser, via the division of labour.³

In *The Division of Labour in Society*, Durkheim sustains that “if anomie is an evil, it is, first and foremost, because society suffers from that and, in order to live, it cannot deprive itself of cohesion and regularity”.¹⁴ According to Paiva⁵ for Durkheim the maintenance of social order entails integration and societal cohesion in the “transition between traditional order and industrial order” (p. 357), in a social harmony through moral rules shared and respected by individuals. In this socially negative context of reduced social control and cohesion, for Durkheim,^{7,15} in *The Division of Labour in Society* (1893), “anomie is one of the pathological forms of the division of labour, namely: the temporary lack of a social regulation that is capable of ensuring cooperation between specialised functions. It originates in the insufficiency of contacts between social roles”.⁴ Thus, there is anomie in the division of social labour when cooperation is replaced by conflict and competition, and when the values that are accepted or the goals that are set by individuals cease to be collective to become increasingly individualised. The individualisation of goals and values is one of the main sources of conflict. Anomie is a concept that allows characterising societies and individuals. When the division of labour is anomic, it means that individuals do not abide by the rules imposed by society. But it also means that societies are organised in such a way that they do not have the power to impose rules on individuals so as to ensure social harmony. The individualisation of goals and values is a consequence of social organisation itself.³

Anomie and the suicide

Anomie of the division of labour is divided into two components that Durkheim calls egoism and anomie.³ An egoistic individual is one who draws his/her rules of conduct and life, not from an external moral authority, but from him/herself. The egoistic individual gives priority to values that are limited to an individual disposition, whereas the non-egoistic individual abides by values that go beyond his/her own personality. The egoistic, feeling less supported by the community, has more difficulty in finding a meaning for his/her existence. Anomie would characterizes social situations where the individual's desires can manifest freely without being bound by rules.³ Considering suicide as every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act carried out by the victim him/herself, and which he/she knew would produce this result,¹⁴ and methodologically advocating the constitution of social types of suicide, not by classifying them directly according to their afore-described characteristics, but by classifying the causes that produce them,¹⁴ Durkheim identifies several types of suicide: the egoistic, the anomic, the altruistic, and the fatalistic. Egoistic suicide would be embedded in a high degree of individualism that would foster social disintegration. Individuals would be confined to themselves, suffering to make sense of their existences. An excess of collective awareness could impose the group's priority in relation to the individual, who has no value by him/herself and would lead to altruistic suicide. Anomic suicide is connected with situations in

which society ceases to exercise a regulating function over passions. The less governed by collective feelings and values, the more individuals would tend to freely express their desires and to become dissatisfied with the incompatibility between their desires and the possibilities of satisfaction. An excess of rules could lead to fatalistic suicide when, through over-regulation, individuals would lose control over themselves and over their destiny.^{16,17}

According to Paiva⁵ anomic suicide, as defined by Durkheim, “results from a lack of an absence or loosening of social norms” (p. 361) and “usually results from a certain laxity of social rules, from a loosening of religious practices, or from social chaos, a rapid change of norms, as in periods following social upheavals, revolutions, severe economic crises, etc.”¹⁴ In *Suicide*, Durkheim refers to anomic suicide as taking place in a social context in which “One does not know anymore what is possible and what is not possible, what is fair and what is unfair, what are the claims and the legitimate hopes, which ones outweigh the measures. Consequently, there is nothing that is not intended”.¹⁴ This anomic suicide occurs in a situation in which [...] individuals are in permanent competition with each other; expect much of existence and demand much of it, and find themselves perpetually haunted by the suffering that arises from the disproportion between their aspirations and their satisfactions [...] state of irritation and repulse, irritation linked to the multiple occasions of deception provided by modern existence, repulse resulting from the awareness of the disproportion between aspirations and satisfactions.¹⁸ In *Suicide* (1897), anomie characterises social situations in which the individual's desires can manifest freely without being bound by rules,³ configuring the unlimited nature of human desire and the indeterminacy of the goals to attain, being inherent in the system of values, institutions and the functioning of modern industrial societies.⁴ This is a meaning that differs from anomie in *The Division of Labour in Society*.

Conclusion

As discussed throughout this concept paper, for Durkheim, anomie is not necessarily the same according to the work analysed. Yet, in terms of a more general teaching, a certain fusion is understandable, in an attempt to find a definition as comprehensive as possible: TenHouten¹⁹ and Mestrovic & Lorenzo¹ maintain that Durkheim explicitly presents, as synonymous with anomie, the term *dérèglement*—“a rule that is a lack of rule”.^{1,14}

In any case, for Durkheim, the reduction of anomie would be achieved by reinforcing the centrality of the “corporation” or profession in fostering successful social integration.¹⁸ This concept of anomie, if well delimited and defined, may have heuristic capacity in sociological research.^{2,10,19} However, as any scientific concept, this concept can be worked and criticised.²⁰

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

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