



An overview of Durkheim and Merton's social anomie

Fatih Irmak¹
Taner Çam²

Abstract

The goal of this study is to explain Emile Durkheim's and Robert King Merton's social anomie. Durkheim and Merton are the two prominent sociologists of functionalist tradition. American sociologist Merton is accepted as the successor of European Sociologist Durkheim in this tradition. Merton examines the works of Durkheim by accepting, criticizing, finding the gaps, and/or offering new thoughts/notions. Social anomie is one of the most well-known notions among them. Their introduction of social anomie into sociological knowledge has also become stepping stones for many contemporary researchers in literature. Social anomie was first mentioned and discussed in "Suicide" by Durkheim and in "Social Structure and Anomie" by Merton. In this regard, this study aims at tracing the influence of Durkheim on Merton in the explanation of social anomie. Finally, this paper sheds light on the social anomie from the perspective of these two philosophers and provides a thorough analysis of the concept.

Keywords: Social Anomie; Durkheim; Merton; Functionalism; Abrupt Change; Social Structure; Social Order.

Introduction

Durkheim claims that observation is the only scientific method to examine social facts in the social system (1951). Therefore, he uses observation method, which is one of the central approaches within functionalist tradition, and sees society and all social systems as organic unities. For him, all systems have also sub-systems and all parts within the system have some vital functions (Maryanski and Turner 1991:107).

Merton shares the same intellectual ideas and becomes one of the prominent followers of Durkheim in the United States. He establishes his theoretical framework on Durkheim's scientific approach. Merton also accepts that social systems have some vital functions. Yet, Merton develops many of Durkheim's ideas, identifies gaps and fills them up with new concepts and theoretical

¹ Ph.D., A. Gaffar Okkan PMYO, Sociologist, irmax09@hotmail.com

² Ph.D., Turkish National Police, Sociologist, taner.cam@gmail.com

illustrations. Merton revises unidimensional approach of Durkheim on postulates of functional analysis, his macro approach to the social phenomena as well as his concept of anomie (Merton 1968).

Social anomie has become one of the important notions profoundly explained within the functionalist tradition. In simple terms, anomie refers to a state of normlessness emerging due to lack of social control or dysfunctionality of control mechanisms in a society during the transition periods (Coser and Rosenberg 1969:503) such as economic turmoil, political changes and social revolutions. Durkheim and Merton specifically focus on this notion in their works (Coser and Rosenberg 1969:504). On the basis of their understanding of social anomie, this paper aims at explaining the notion of anomie, and investigates the influence of Durkheim on Merton in terms of theory of anomie.

Social Anomie and Durkheim

Durkheim is the first sociologist to introduce the concept of anomie into sociology. Durkheim discusses his notion of anomie for the first time in “The Division of Labor in Society”, and later more concretely in “Suicide”.

In “The Division of Labor in Society”, Durkheim claims that social life comes from similarity of social “consciousness and division of social labor” (1964:226), and argues that the division of labor creates social solidarity under normal circumstances, but sometimes produces contrary results. According to Durkheim, as the labor is divided into many parts due to the industrial developments and the changes in society, it is quite common to witness some problems in the division of labor (1964:353).

Moreover, Durkheim says, “If, in certain cases, organic solidarity is not all it should be, it is certainly not because mechanical solidarity has lost ground, but because all the conditions for the existence of organic solidarity have not been realized” (1964:364-365). He also maintains, “If the division of labor does not produce solidarity in all the cases, it is because they are in a state of anomy”. At this point, failure of organic solidarity and emergence of the state of anomy refer to the same idea that solidarity organs do not work efficiently and effectively in the maintenance of the roles of the individuals and the rules of the social unity. Durkheim exemplifies this with the problems in the industrial life. In that, the industrial life decreases the level of interaction between the units. Due to the specialization, workers may lose their sense of unity and common solidarity (1964:359). Emergence of the new rules may not be understood among the workers. Therefore,

Durkheim maintains that anomic forms can be present in the conflict between the workers and the employers (1964:370-373).

In this case, for Durkheim, the relationship among social organs needs to be regulated in order to sustain solidarity among them. However, the division of labor is not a root cause for the state of anomie, but instead it is a source of social solidarity, if regulated necessarily.

Durkheim claims that “society is not only something attracting the sentiments and activities of individuals with unequal force but it is also a power controlling them” (1951:241). Therefore, for Durkheim, the individuals confront with social anomie on the occasion of breakdown of the social system. Anomie occurs as a result of abrupt crises, political, economic and social changes. During these periods, society attempts to adjust to the new conditions, but it may dissolve and cannot sustain moral regulation at large. Moreover, social structures may not regulate the expectations and behaviors of the individuals. Durkheim describes the lack of social control as follows:

“The limits are unknown between the possible and the impossible, what is just and what is unjust, legitimate hopes and claims and those which are immoderate. Consequently, there is no restraint upon aspirations.... Appetites, not controlled by public opinion, become distorted... and more impatient of control. The state of... anomie is thus further heightened by passions being less disciplined, precisely when they need more disciplining” (Durkheim 1951:253).

In that sense, anomie is a state of “declassification” and “deregulation” in which the individuals lose their current state and decrease to a lower state than the previous one. For Durkheim, “all the advantages of social influence are lost” ... and society cannot adjust the new situation, while suffering from losing previous position (1951:252-253).

Durkheim exemplifies social anomie in a profound manner with his categorization of anomic suicide. In a general sense, Durkheim defines anomic suicide as the result of “man's activities' lacking regulation and consequent sufferings” in the following period of time (1951:258). In relation to this social change, Durkheim explains suicide cases with the macro-level causes such as “social deregulation and moral degradation” in society (1951:254).

Anomic suicide occurs during the economic crisis in society. Therefore, he also calls this type of anomie as “economic anomie” (Durkheim 1951:259). As a result of abrupt changes in the social life, the social institutions lose their ability to fulfill functions and cannot accomplish its tasks accordingly. For Durkheim, “in anomic suicide society's influence is lacking in the basically individual passions, thus leaving them without a check-rein” (1951:258). Then, the members of society experience normlessness. In other words, the individuals lose the meaning of life. Moreover,

they also cannot adapt to their new environment, and fail in changing their lifestyles according to the new conditions in their social environment. Durkheim states that anomic suicide is inevitable under these circumstances.

Durkheim also believes that industrialization abolishes the limits on human passions and behaviors, while alleviating the influence of society on people in control of needs and desires. For Durkheim, “unlimited desires are, by definition, insatiable, and insatiability is rightly considered a sign of morbidity” (1951:247). More simply, social anomie is inevitable for people living without any limit. In that, they face with misery in case of any significant change such as loss of status, economic capital or property due to economic crisis. Durkheim's main emphasis is that the human beings should be balanced with a moral order that regulates and limits the behaviors of them (1951:248). In that, human beings have moral needs as well as physical needs. As long as social authority provides moral needs, physical needs will also be balanced.

Durkheim claims that although religion appears to relatively lose its power on the individuals, moral order is still required for the regulation of the needs and the expectations of different groups in society. Religion consoles the lower classes...“by informing them of the providential nature of social order, that share of each class was assigned by God himself, and by holding out the hope for just compensation in a world to come in return for the inequalities of this world” (1951:254).

On the other hand, achieving economic prosperity frees industrial and commercial occupational groups from any type of authority including moral order of society and religion. For them, sustaining economic well-being replaces all human law. Wealthy people are haunted by greed for more and the feeling of infinity for desires. In the end, Durkheim adds that, “society has grown to accept them and is accustomed to think them normal” (1951:255-257). Therefore, the influence of moral system and the reality of life are felt alike between upper and lower classes.

In this regard, Durkheim maintains that due to loss of moral values, “disorder is greatest in the economic world” and therefore, people from industrial and commercial positions are readily victims who will be stricken by social anomie. Therefore, the greatest number of suicides is observed among these occupational groups. In comparison to this group, lower classes are less influenced by social anomie, as their needs and expectations from the life are quite modest (1951:257).

Durkheim also gives us another form of anomie called as “domestic anomie” (1951:259) which occurs due to the divorce, death of spouse, and singlehood. Durkheim sees marriage as a

social institute regulating sexual life of the individuals. Marriage sustains social equilibrium between men and women in society (1951:270). According to this, any change in marital status may produce different results for men and women (1951:266). After the end of marriage, men may not adjust new period without a spouse, and attempt to commit a suicide because of social anomie characterized by lack of moral control, normlessness and loss of meaning in the life. Moreover, unmarried men also face with social anomie, as they lack moral authority sustained by the marriage. In that sense, Durkheim states that men frequently become victims of domestic anomie, as they need more social control on them. However, domestic anomie is not serious problem for women (1951:271-272).

Durkheim's Influence on Merton

Similar to Durkheim's approach, Merton attempts to discover the impact of social structure on the individuals, which lead them to social anomie. He also refines his study by analyzing the impact of cultural motives and social norms on the individuals (Coser and Rosenberg 1969:504). Durkheim's ideas on social anomie help Merton improving his own original ideas within the American functionalist tradition.

In general, Merton's theory of anomie is based on the "analysis of behavior deviating from prescribed patterns of conduct" and the explanation of how "frequency of deviant behavior varies within different social structures and how it happens that the deviations have different shapes and patterns in different social structures" (Merton 1968:185).

Merton explains social anomie in a more constructed way. He claims that anomie emerges in a situation that cultural goals and institutional means are in a conflict. In other words, the individuals encounter with social anomie, when they attempt to reach cultural goals with inadequate institutional means or without any means. This state of conflict also results in a breakdown of values at societal as well as at the individual level.

Merton aims at finding how social structure affects the individuals in a way that they adopt non-conformist behavior rather than conformist behavior (1938:672). Similar to Durkheim's ideas on anomie, Merton asserts that malfunctioning of social system is certainly influential on the individuals in the sense that it may generate anti-social behavior due to "dissociation of culturally defined goals and socially structured means" (1938:674).

For Merton, cultural goals and institutional norms are said to be in order or in equilibrium, as long as two of them are in harmony. If cultural goals and acceptable means are conflicted with

each other, then “the integration of society becomes tenuous and anomie ensues” (1938:674). Anomie has certainly an impact on individuals in the sense that it forms the structural basis for deviant behavior. Fraud, corruption, vice and crimes appears to be common because of the disjunction between culturally induced goals and institutional emphasis (Merton 1938:675-676).

At this point, Merton underlines that anti-social behavior emerges as a result of restraints imposed by society, which supports the overall idea that society exerts pressure on the individuals. He also concludes that social constraints on the individuals shape the range of individuals' behaviors. According to this, he develops five modes of adaptation that refers to the individual responses to social anomie. The modes of adaptation also indicate the disequilibrium and equilibrium between cultural goals and institutional means (1938:677).

Merton's adaptation categories “refer to role behavior in specific types of situations, not to personality”. Merton also asserts that the categories are not absolutes in the sense that “people may shift from one alternative to another as they engage in different social activities” (1968:194).

According to this theoretical framework, in “The Social Theory of Social Structure” Merton (1968) defines the modes of adaptation as conformity, innovation, ritualism, retreatism and rebellion. Conformity refers to that individuals conform to institutional means and easily attain the cultural goals. If the individuals achieve conformity, then there exists equilibrium in the social system (1968:195). Society has a sound social order within itself. Moreover, conformity, defined by Merton as the conventional role behavior, allows people to form a society at the aggregate level. Without conformity, “stability and continuity of society could not be maintained” (Merton 1938:677).

Merton categorizes remaining four types of adaptations to the social order on the basis of acceptance or rejection of cultural goals and institutional means (1968:193-211). Innovation points out individuals conform to the cultural goals but do not attain institutional means. In other words, the individuals are in a situation in which they are constrained by the social system. For that reason, Merton thinks that the individuals may develop other behavioral forms including crime in order to reach the cultural goals. This point can also be exemplified with the “American Dream”. Many of the American people realize this dream, as it is a kind of cultural goal. However, many others cannot achieve this goal, as they do not have adequate institutional means such as wealth, education, health and so forth (Merton 1968:195-203).

This frustration motivates the individuals to use illegitimate means to succeed. This state of deviance also explains the crime rates in the US, as Merton illustrates, the criminal tendency emerges as a result of the social constraints. Merton refers to the cultural value of material success in America as one of the causes for anomie:

“Americans are admonished not to be a quitter for in the dictionary of American culture, as in the lexicon of youth, there is no such word as fail. The cultural manifesto is clear: one must not quit, must not cease striving, and must not lessen his goals, for not failure, but low aim, is crime” (Merton 1968:193).

However, social institutions do not provide the individuals with equal means to attain the cultural goals. On the other hand, the American culture portrays material success as the “American Dream” for all living in the USA. Nevertheless, as Merton indicates, realistically a certain segment of the population is endowed with the material success in a traditional way. The other portion of society finds different alternatives to achieve the cultural goals, even if it is attained through crime. Therefore, Merton concludes, “the American stress on pecuniary success and ambitiousness for all thus invites exaggerated anxieties, hostilities, neuroses and antisocial behavior” (Merton 1938:680).

Merton's third mode of adaptation, ritualism, explains that the individuals do not comply with the cultural goals but they significantly abide by the institutional means. Merton asserts that these groups of people adopt institutional means in order to protect their positions in the social system (Merton 1968:203-207).

Retreatism is the most radical one among other individual responses to the social constraints. In that, the individuals prefer to be passive toward cultural goals and institutional means. They are indifferent to the social life. For Merton, they are “in society but are not of it” (Merton 1938:677). Merton exemplifies the group of people who retreat from the social life as “psychotics, autists, pariahs, outcasts, vagrants, vagabonds, tramps, chronic drunkards, and drug addicts” (Merton 1938:677). For Merton, they are fictional part of the population. Yet, their existence in society may also cause a problem for the individuals of socialized population.

The last mode of adaptation is also as original as the other categories. In that, the people who adapt to rebellion type tend to reject all cultural goals and institutional means. They are inclined to reinvent their own goals and means. For Merton, rebellious people will be the new ruling class of society (1968:209-211).

Conclusion

Durkheim and Merton approach society as an organic unity with its sub-systems and a social fact to be observed with scientific methods. For both philosophers, the social systems have vital functions in order to survive. They also agree on the idea that any failure or breakdown of function within the system will result in problems such as social disorder, disintegration and anomie.

According to Durkheim, anomie is a state of normlessness. Anomie occurs after an abrupt change in a society. During the periods of social change, individuals may not adopt or confirm with the rules, norms and values surrounding them. They may lose the ability to decide what is just or what is unjust. Social bonds and collective consciousness may weaken and the level of solidarity among the individuals and within the society decreases. In Merton's view, anomie is the double facedness of the society. More clearly, even though individuals have subtle ideals, social institutions do not provide them with sufficient means to achieve their goals, as a result, anomie occurs.

Durkheim and Merton view social anomie as a consequence of current social state rather than focusing on individualistic traits. For Durkheim, anomie is a normal phenomenon stemming from the way in which society regulates itself. Similarly, Merton asserts that "social structures exert a definite pressure upon certain persons in society to engage in non-conforming rather than conforming conduct" (Merton, 1968:186). In that sense, for Merton, anomie is quite normal social fact as well.

Both Durkheim and Merton analyzes the individual behavioral responses given to the social constrain or breakdown of social system. In the analysis of Durkheim, suicide is an individual reaction to the current situation. Yet, Durkheim emphasizes that poor morality is the leading cause for social anomie during the macro level developments such as socio-economic changes in society. As to Merton, he also sees restraining force of economic structures in the form of institutional means as the cause of anomie. However, the individuals may adopt different attitudes toward the social structure; either by conforming with or rejecting it.

Merton develops Durkheim's theory of anomie that is exemplified by one kind of deviance (suicide) and bases his ideas regarding the anomie on the conflict between the cultural goals and institutional means, and finally offers a variety of deviant behavior on the basis of this conflict. In that respect, in order to explain social anomie, Merton proposes his comprehensive model on the modes of adaptation.

Moreover, Durkheim's influence on Merton is also apparent that Merton uses the notion of imbalance between aspirations and fulfillments. Durkheim says "the longing for infinity is daily represented as a mark of moral distinction..." and "society has grown to accept them and is accustomed to think them normal" (Durkheim 1951:257). He also claims that individuals who are freed from moral authority but filled with ambition for infinity face with social anomie during the crisis period, as their needs and expectations are limited with the social structure. Similarly, Merton asserts that the individuals encounter with social anomie in a society in which "there is an exceptionally strong emphasis upon specific goals without a corresponding emphasis upon institutional procedures" (Merton 1968:188). In both cases, individuals are motivated by the cultural goals. However, they are frustrated by the availability of means. When the aspirations are not matched with the fulfillments, the individuals act in a deviant way such as suicide, committing a crime and so forth.

Finally, Merton lays out his theoretical explanation on social anomie on the basis of Durkheim's original thoughts. In that, Durkheim provides Merton with the stepping-stones to produce his own ideas on social anomie. In a supportive manner, in order to emphasize Durkheim's influence on Merton, Coser states that Durkheim was Merton's "consciously chosen role model" in his early intellectual life (Coser 1975:88).

References

- Durkheim, Emile. 1951. *Suicide: A study in Sociology*. Glencoe, IL: The Free Press.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1964. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York, NY: The Free Press.
- Coser, Lewis A. and Bernard Rosenberg. 1969. *Sociological Theory: A Book of Readings*. New York: Macmillan.
- Coser, Lewis A. 1975. *The Idea of Social Structure Papers in Honor of Robert K. Merton*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.
- Maryanski, Alexandra R. and Jonathan H. Turner. 1991. "The Offspring of Functionalism: French and British Structuralism." *Sociological Theory* 9(1): 106-115.
- Merton, Robert K. 1938. "Social Structure and Anomie." *American Sociological Review* 3(5): 672-682.
- Merton, Robert K. 1968. *The Social Theory of Social Structure*. New York, NY: The Free Press.