

L. Joe Dunman (1999). The Emile Durkheim Archive. The Functions of Crime in Society, according to Emile Durkheim. ONLINE: <http://durkheim.itgo.com/crime.html>

Emile Durkheim

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Crime

"Crime brings together honest men and concentrates them."
(Giddens, 1972, p. 127 [excerpt from *The Division of Labor in Society*])

This quote exemplifies the stance Durkheim took toward crime. He recognized deviance as important to the well-being of society and proposed that challenges to established moral and legal laws (deviance and crime, respectively) acted to unify those that were not in opposition to the laws. Recognition and punishment of crimes is, in effect, the very reaffirmation of the laws and moral boundaries of a society. The existence of laws and the strength thereof are upheld by members of a society when violations are recognized, discussed, and dealt with either by legal punishment (jail, fines, execution) or by social punishment (shame, exile).

Durkheim also proposed that crime and deviance brought people in a society together. When a law is violated, especially within small communities, everyone talks about it. Meetings are sometimes held, articles are written for local news publications, and in general, a social community bristles with activity when a norm is broken. As is most often the case, a violation incites the non-violators (society as a whole) to cling together in opposition to the violation, reaffirming that society's bond and its adherence to certain norms.

A third idea Durkheim held was that deviance and crime also help to promote social change. While most violations of norms are greeted with opposition by the masses, others are sometimes not, and those violations that gain support often are re-examined by that society. Often, those activities that once were considered deviant, are reconsidered and become part of the norms, simply because they gained support by a large portion of the society. In sum, deviance can help a society to rethink its boundaries, and move toward social change, hopefully for the greater benefit of the group.

Durkheim on Crime

"There is no society that is not confronted with the problem of criminality. Its form changes; the acts thus characterized are not the same everywhere; but, everywhere and

always, there have been men who have behaved in such a way as to draw upon themselves penal repression. There is, then, no phenomenon that represents more indisputably all the symptoms of normality, since it appears closely connected with the conditions of all collective life."

(1963, p. 62 [excerpt from *The Rules of the Sociological Method*])

"...We must not say that an action shocks the *conscience collective* because it is criminal, but rather that it is criminal because it shocks the *conscience collective*. We do not condemn it because it is a crime, but it is a crime because we condemn it."

(1972, p. 123-124 [excerpt from *The Division of Labor in Society*])

"Contrary to current ideas, the criminal no longer seems a totally unsociable being, a sort of parasitic element, a strange and unassimiable body, introduced into the midst of society. On the contrary, he plays a definite role in social life. Crime, for its part, must no longer be conceived as an evil that cannot be too much suppressed."

(1963, p. 63 [excerpt from *The Rules of the Sociological Method*])

"Because they are found in the consciousness of every individual, the infraction which has been committed arouses the same indignation in those who witness it or who learn of its existence. Everybody is attacked; consequently, everybody opposes the attack. Not only is the reaction general, but it is collective, which is not the same thing. It is not produced in an isolated manner in each individual, but it is total, unified response, even if it varies according to the case."

(1972, p. 127 [excerpt from *The Division of Labor in Society*])

"We have only to notice what happens, particularly in a small town, when some moral scandal has just occurred. Men stop each other on the street, they visit each other, they seek to come together to talk of the event and to wax indignant in common. From all the similar impressions which are exchanged, and the anger that is expressed, there emerges a unique emotion, more or less determinate according to the circumstances, which emanates from no specific person, but from everyone. This is the public wrath."

(1972, p. 127 [excerpt from *The Division of Labor in Society*])

"It is impossible for offenses against the most fundamental collective sentiments to be tolerated without the disintegration of society, and it is necessary to combat them with the aid of the particularly energetic reaction which attaches to moral rules."

(Durkheim, 1933, p. 397)

"We can thus say that, in general, the characteristic of moral rules is that they enunciate the fundamental conditions of social solidarity. Law and morality are the totality of ties which bind each of us to society, which make a unitary, coherent aggregate of the mass of individuals."

(1933, p. 398)

Sources:

Durkheim, Emile. 1933. *The Division of Labor in Society* Translated by George Simpson. New York: The Free Press.

Simpson, George. 1963. *Emile Durkheim: Selections From His Work*. New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Co.

Giddens, Anthony. 1972. *Emile Durkheim: Selected Writings*. London: Cambridge University Press.

[note: Giddens took excerpts from a different translation of *The Division of Labor in Society*, so quotes taken from that book must be separated from the George Thompson translation.]