Durkheim Essay, Research Paper

Emile Durkheim

Emile Durkheim was born in the eastern French province of Lorraine on April 15, 1858. He was the s on of a rabbi and descending from a long line of rabbis, he decided early that he would follow the family tradition and become a rabbi himself. He studied Hebrew, the Old Testament, and the Talmud, while following the regular course of in secular schools. He soon turned away from all religious involvement, though purposely not from interest in religious phenomena, and became a freethinker, or non-believer. At about the time of his graduation he decided that he would dedicate himself to the scientific study of society. Since sociology was not a subject either at the secondary schools or at the university, Durkheim launched a career as a teacher in philosophy. Emile Durkheim made many contributions to the study of society, suicide, the division of labor, solidarity and religion. Raised in a time of troubles in France, Durkheim spent much of his talent justifying order and commitment to order. Durkheim was a pioneer French sociologist, taught at Bordeaux (1887-1902) and the University of Paris (1902-17). He introduced the system and hypothetical framework of accurate social science. Durkheim was author of The Division of Labour (1893), Rules of Sociological Method (1895), Suicide (1897), Elementary Forms of Religious Life (1915). Emile Durkheim has often been characterized as the founder of professional sociology. He has a great closeness with the two introductory sociologists, Comte and Saint-Simon. Durkheim willingly noticed the ideas of the Division of Labor and the Biological Analogy. Both ideas which had been differently well developed by Comte and Saint-Simon. Durkheim’s holism approach said that sociology should focus on and study large social operations and cultures. He used functionalism, an approach of studying social and cultural phenomena as a set of interdependent parts, to find out the roles these institutions and processes play in keeping social order. Because of this importance in large social processes and institutions, Durkheim’s sociology can be described as macro-sociological as compared to a micro-sociological, which takes it’s starting point at the individual. Durkheim’s main purpose was to give sociology a professional and scientific standing like other traditional social sciences. In order to do this, Durkheim argued that it was essential to clearly state the domain or area of study for sociology. He said that sociology’s concern was with the social. This section of the social should be separated from the area of psychological and the individual. If there was to be something called sociology there should be a job just for sociology and sociologists. Durkheim said that the social was an independent physical existence, called a society. Durkheim argued that this society didn’t depend on the plans and stimulation of individuals for its lasting existence. Society was ‘thing-like’. So the social or society had a life and logic of its own. If this was the case then sociology had a purpose. Durkheim also went into the subject of religion. He said that the god concept was a false way [collective representation] of the power that groups used to shape the behavior of members. He thought of religion as a solution to the problem of solidarity, how to hold people together when they have conflicting interests. Durkheim looked to the activities of early religions in rituals. He said rituals were specific tools that implanted illustrations of that society in the members of the society. He suggested that these rituals honored the group and its identity and not the individual’s identity. So the basic purpose of these religions and their rituals was to maintain social solidarity within those societies. So, the function of religion in those societies was the worship not of ‘god’ but of the society. He said there were other ways to get solidarity than by religion. He mentioned the division of labor, which is defined as the assignment of certain tasks, jobs, or work to be done by certain individuals, groups, and classes of people. Sex, age, education type and level, and the occupation area of one’s family are the most traditional bases for distinguishing occupational activities. Durkhiem also explained suicide. He explained suicide in terms of the degree to which a person is joined into social life. At the low end of social unity, there is anomic suicide, in which people destroy themselves because social bonds die and life becomes meaningless to them. Then when people are tightly integrated and there is a threat to the social group, people may sacrifice themselves in order to protect the group. Anomic suicide also proved that suicide increases as society falls apart. Durkheim married Louise Dreyfus and they had two children, Marie and Andre, but not much is known about his family life. His wife seems to have devoted herself to his work. She followed the traditional Jewish family pattern of taking care of family affairs and helping him in proofreading and secretarial duties. So the he could devote all his activity to his intellectual pursuance. Two years after his son Andre died, Emile died on November 15, 1917 at the young age of fifty-nine.