

Conceptualization and Analytic Unit in Durkheim: Comment on Art Evans, 1977, "An Examination of the Concept of 'Social Solidarity'", *Mid-American Review of Sociology* 2 (Spring):29-46.

In his paper on Durkheim's concept of social solidarity, Evans suggests that: 1) Durkheim's definition of social solidarity included both beliefs and practices, but it has been currently operationalized, especially by "macro" sociologists, to mean only practices; and 2) to approach "empirical reality", both practice and belief must be examined. Evans writes (1977:42) "I have argued that actions and feelings should not be separated in the study of social solidarity. Durkheim regarded both of these phenomena as important in his definition of the term." Evans also suggests (1977:31) that "Social solidarity for Durkheim was the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments that are common to the average members of society. These beliefs have a life of their own (Martindale, 1971:89)." Furthermore, (1977:30) "To Durkheim, social solidarity was the essential property of all societies. It was the bond that united individuals."

From this reading of Evans, the reader gets two ideas of what social solidarity means to Durkheim: 1) that it is the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments common to the average members of society; and 2) that it is the unifying bond. Although Evans presents these two concepts of the meaning of social solidarity, he chooses to utilize the first for his argument.

This paper will argue that these two ideas, or "definitions", represent two different concepts for Durkheim; and that the first, the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments, is *not* Durkheim's definition of social solidarity. It was the second concept, the unifying bond, that is social solidarity.

If the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments is not social solidarity, what is it? Durkheim wrote (1933:79-80):

The totality of beliefs and sentiments common to average citizens of the same society forms a determinate system which has its own life; one may call it the *collective* or *common conscience*. No doubt, it has not a specific organ of substratum; it is, by definition,

diffuse in every reach of society. . . . It is, in effect, independent of the particular conditions in which individuals are placed; they pass on and it remains. . . . it connects successive generations. . . . It is, thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them.

Thus, the ensemble of beliefs and sentiments forms the collective conscience, not social solidarity, as Evans suggests (1977:31).

What is social solidarity? It is the bond which unites individuals. For Durkheim, social solidarity was of two kinds: mechanical and organic (1933:64).

. . . social solidarity is a completely moral phenomenon which, taken by itself, does not lend itself to exact observation nor indeed to measurement. To proceed to this classification and this comparison, we must substitute for this internal fact, which escapes us, an external index which symbolizes it and study the former in the light of the latter. This visible symbol is the law.

Evans recognizes this; for he uses it in his discussion (1977:30):

In order to get a grasp on social solidarity, it was necessary to substitute the internal fact for an external index which symbolizes it. Durkheim chose to use legal codes as indicators of social solidarity. . . ."

Evans states this, but then ignores it.

Further, Evans recognizes that social solidarity is a bonding that unites (1977:30). But what he fails to note is that the collective conscience unites *only* the mechanical, so that his discussion, which is based on "belief and practice", must by definition be limited to mechanical solidarity.

Evans ignores organic solidarity, and equates "social solidarity" with mechanical solidarity by equating social solidarity with the collective conscience. This can be seen in his illustrative use of religion (1933:31):

In Durkheim's definition of religion, solidarity is brought out more clearly. Religion to Durkheim was a unified system of beliefs and practices that were relative to sacred things. Beliefs and practices united a single moral community.

Durkheim (1933:285) wrote, "Religion, the eminent form of the collective conscience. . . ."

The point here is that Evans' understanding of and use of "social solidarity" does not distinguish that concept from the collective conscience. This is severely limiting, for as Durkheim noted (1933:173) "It is the division of labor which, more and more, fills the role that was formerly filled by the common conscience. It is the principal bond of social aggregates of higher types." Further, in his discussion of why he chose the terms "mechanical" and "organic" for his two kinds of social solidarity, Durkheim (1933:130-131) wrote. ". . . we propose to call this type of solidarity mechanical. . . . We call it that only by analogy to the cohesion which unites the elements of an inanimate body. . . . What justifies this term is that the link which unites the individual to society is wholly analogous to that which attaches a thing to a person. . . . It is quite otherwise with the solidarity which the division of labor produces. Whereas the previous type implies that individuals resemble each other, this type presumes their difference."

Evans, by equating the collective conscience with social solidarity has limited himself to a discussion of the uses of collective conscience; and by implication to societies governed by mechanical solidarity. Thus, it is not surprising that when he seeks examples of studies that he feels have utilized both belief and practice, he is forced to conclude that (1977:40) "The better studies of social solidarity come from anthropologists." Furthermore, Evans suggests that (1977:41-42) "In studying social solidarity, the sociologist must have the ability to place himself in the position of the individual or collectivity. He must also be able to identify the significant objects of group concern; the observations must be relevant to the group." If one substitutes

“collective conscience” for “social solidarity”, these assertions become more convincing, and more in keeping with Durkheim’s work.

One of Evans’ arguments concerns methods. He writes (1977:34) “Several problems arise in Fessler’s research. First, is his use of the comparative approach. To use the same scale to compare communities on social solidarity is inappropriate.” (sic) Two Durkheim quotations appear to be in order. Durkheim wrote (1938:139) “Comparative sociology is not a particular branch of sociology; it is sociology itself, in so far as it ceases to be purely descriptive and aspires to account for facts.” He also wrote (1938:140) “To arrive at a just comparison, *it will suffice to consider the societies compared at the same period of their development.*” The points are: a) Durkheim argued that the comparative approach is sociological; and b) Durkheim argued that one could compare communities so long as they were compared when at the same developmental period. If one equates social solidarity with collective conscience, then he can examine only those communities which are characterized by mechanical solidarity. Also, by focusing on belief and (its) practice, one is focusing on only the cultural aspects of society, excluding the relational. When this is the case, it is difficult to use the same scale on different communities. Guttman (1944:150) noted that “Scales are relative to time and population. . . . Comparisons with respect to degree can be made only if the same scaling obtains in both cases being compared.” This was Durkheim’s point earlier in suggesting that comparison must be made at the same period of societies’ development.

Evans’ argument is that we must examine the social meanings, the interpretive process, at the “micro” level of action and belief to “get close to empirical reality” (1977:29) in the study of social solidarity. Evans does not define his meanings of the terms “micro” and “macro”, but does say (1977:32)

The purpose of this section is not to demean macro sociologists. What is suggested is that the concept of social solidarity employed in their research is much different from Durkheim’s conception of

the term. Since the 1950s very little has been written about the term.

Evans also does not tell us explicitly who the “macro” sociologists are. We only know who is “macro” by whether or not he utilizes both belief and practice. One could infer that Evans is for “social meanings”; but what he is against is not clear, except it is “macro”.

It is true that structuralists may not be as concerned with individual meanings as are some other sociologists. But it depends entirely upon the level of analysis the sociologist chooses to study whether or not he focuses on individual meanings. If the sociologist is focusing upon the group level, he chooses to study those aspects of the phenomenon which are characteristics of the group, not of the individual. But he can still be Durkheimian. In fact, by using Evans’ implicit definition, Durkheim would have to be considered a “macro” sociologist. For Durkheim did not concentrate on individual social meanings. Indeed, one “omission” in Durkheim’s work is that he did not explicitly say how the collective conscience is internalized. As noted earlier, he did write that the collective conscience (1933:80) “. . . is thus, an entirely different thing from particular consciences, although it can be realized only through them.” This “lack” in Durkheim can be understood in the sense that Durkheim was arguing for sociology, and avoided discussion of what could be interpreted as psychological; and was arguing for a different level of analysis. It is evident, too, in Durkheim’s argument that “. . . we must substitute for this internal fact which escapes us an external index which symbolizes it and study the former in the light of the latter” (1933:64). Durkheim did not focus on the individual meanings of social solidarity. It was for others, later, to add this dimension to our understanding.

Implicit in this argument are two theoretical issues which should be made explicit. These two issues are problems in all sociological theory. One is the problem of theoretical conceptualization, and the other is the analytic unit of analysis.

Conceptualization is the theoretical forerunner to explanation. Conceptualization is that part of theory which sets

the defining characteristics of the social phenomenon being analyzed. If conception is not clear, explanation suffers. In his arguments, Evans has equated Durkheim's collective conscience with mechanical solidarity. Thus, he has: 1) misinterpreted social solidarity; 2) has omitted from consideration organic solidarity; and 3) has used as positive examples for his arguments studies of mechanical solidaristic societies, in which belief and its practice are the main focus.

The second problem that arises concerns analytic unit. As used here, this refers to the basic unit under study. This could be a dyad, a group, a society. The unit circumscribes the analysis. If a sociologist studies a collective, he chooses that as his unit. His conceptualization and explanation should be based on the characteristics of the collective, not on the individuals in the collective, for that is a different unit of analysis. As noted, Durkheim did not examine individual interaction. He studied the product, the external index, for the internal fact which "escapes us" (1933:64).

The point here is that the sociologist must be consistent throughout his analysis.

Evans prefers to examine social meanings. He argues (1977:39) "Meaning is not located in the group. It is seen as arising in the process of interaction between people. . . . The human group is nothing more than people who are engaged in action. . . . Thus, it is impossible to study meaning by only looking at structures." Further, the scholar (1977:41) ". . . must learn to see objects as the group sees them."

Evans is saying that his unit of analysis is the individual; meaning arises from interaction and is acquired through individual interpretation. Evans is critical of those sociological studies that ignore individual meaning. By implication, this criticism extends to Durkheim, who suggested that individual meaning was impossible to know—it escapes us—and so we should study the external index—the product—of that meaning.

Those sociologists who study structure would agree with Evans that meaning is not located in the group. That is why they do not study meaning. As Durkheim wrote, the group is sui

generis, and study should focus on group characteristics not individual ones.

Perhaps all sociologists should consider all levels of analysis in their work. This would mean that social interactionists must also focus on group characteristics and vice versa. Until that time comes, or until some sociologist comes along that can do that, sociology may well be "stuck" as it now is with a variety of perspectives from which to choose. But in the meantime, constructive criticism—that is, criticism and its solution—should be based on the same analytic unit and the same conceptualization as the work being examined.

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