

Durkheim's theory of anomie in the division of labor

Division of labor in a society, though controversial, plays a very important role in dividing work effectively i.e. it allows people to do work they are comfortable with to ensure maximum productivity and greater satisfaction levels. Factors that influence division of labor in a society include geographical location and adaptability, physical endurance, training and knowledge, and use of technology. As people often choose to specialize in a particular discipline, it is quite easy to get involved in a specific type of labor, thus aiding division of labor based on individual skill set (Pujari, 2013).

Division of labor in a modern society has a lot of advantages. According to the theory of division of labor by Durkheim, it promotes cohesion or solidarity in a society. As people get an opportunity to choose their occupation, it promotes a healthier lifestyle. It respects and promotes individualism where each person's potential is recognized. However, Durkheim has also feared that in modern industrial societies, division of labor might reduce rather than promote social solidarity (Pujari, 2013).

According to Durkheim, division of labor may be of two types – anomic division of labor and forced division of labor. Anomic division of labor is where a person becomes isolated in his/her field and is unable to explore new avenues. Forced division of labor is where a person is forced into a specific type of occupation due to family pressures or status issues (Pujari, 2013).

According to Durkheim's doctoral thesis, where he has detailed the theory of anomie in the division of labor in detail, such a situation would generally arise during a serious economic failure. Division of labor in such a scenario would lead to a decline in smoothness existing between various occupations, and thus, an overall decline in social solidarity. Due to this, a

society becomes divided into fragments, each having a small group of people specializing in similar occupations. This kind of a situation usually arises during severe industrial and commercial crises. This is when separation between different functions becomes so pronounced that it begins brewing rigidity in the workplace. Examples of possible conflicts between two functions include conflicts regarding capital and labor. Hence, individuals in their specialized roles gain more control over the dynamics of a society leading to a decline in cohesion (Morrison, 2006).

The Great Depression of the 1930s is a classic example of the anomic division of labor. This widespread economic crisis majorly affected the Blacks who faced unemployment and were thrown out of all fields in which they specialized. All politicians and government officials took no steps to ensure that equal employment opportunities were available to all and Blacks were marginalized on a large scale. Also, the salaries that they were offered were below average and no attempt was made to increase it to a decent level. Thus, this led to isolation of the Blacks who found themselves jobless and facing discrimination. They retaliated by forming trade unions and organizing strikes all over the nation as a protest against this injustice. It took a long period of struggle for the Blacks to slowly regain the professional freedom they now enjoy (Sustar, 2012).

As Durkheim's explanation of the consequences of the anomic division of labor is quite alarming, Comte sought to propose a solution to avoid a decline in social solidarity due to this phenomenon. According to him, there should always exist an independent government body to ensure that this professional balance is never disrupted in times of crisis. However, Durkheim was skeptical of this solution as he felt that a government body would be inappropriate to tackle problems related to workers (Jones, 1986).

Karl Marx has also pointed out a number of demerits of the division of labor in general, which seems to contradict Durkheim's theories. According to Marx, in a society where division of labor exists, people have no choice in their occupation. People work only because they need to sustain their families and not because they actually enjoy it. No proper estimate is made of a worker's skills or abilities, and hence, the pay is too less than he/she deserves. It is the cause for creating imbalance in the industry and leads to high rates of unemployment. It leads to alienation of the workers where all major professional decisions are taken by their superiors (Pujari, 2015).

Although, according to Durkheim, division of labor exists in every society, there is a fine line of balance which should never be tilted. A slight mishap can lead to unpleasant circumstances for workers leading to dissatisfied lives, half-hearted task completions and widening gaps in relationships between employers and employees. Most historical economic crisis situations have seen anomalous division of labor in some form or other, and a lot of sociologists have suggested means to overcome this social disparity. Durkheim's concepts have extensively captured the dynamics of different trends in the society in crisis situations.

References

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