

A Study of the Relationship Between Individuals and the Society

Tianyang Li ^{1,a,*}

¹Department of Sociology, Hong Kong Baptist University, 224 Waterloo Rd, Kowloon Tong, Hong Kong, China

a. 20210114@ntit.edu.cn

*corresponding author

Abstract: Since the foundation of sociology, how an individual and a society interact with each other has become a classical issue for sociologists and philosophers to research. As society has evolved from a primitive society to a capitalist society, individuals also have passed a progress of secularization and modernization. Different sociologists from different schools, including structure functionalism, symbolic interaction theory and social conflict theory, might have their own special ideas. This article is going to discuss the relationship between individuals and society with the theories of Marx and Durkheim. Case studies from modern society would also be applied to explain the theory. Through analysis, this research suggested that individuals and society have a reciprocal relationship. Moreover, as Marx concluded that human nature is the sum of all social relations, Durkheim argued that individual life is produced from collective life and is the product of society itself; the differences between Marx and Durkheim's theories would be concluded, while the latter expanded the discussion from the perspective of occupational division and social integration, the core of Marx's is class and conflict.

Keywords: individual and society, Marx, Durkheim

1. Introduction

Theoretically speaking, the individual could be comprehended as a distinct entity with his/ her own rights, responsibilities and goals in a special social background, and society should be the result of the individual's actions and interactions. For example, in modern China, under the ideological guidance and propaganda of communism, the individual contribution to the realization of a socialist society is encouraged. In the last century, Lei Feng, a soldier who was willing to help others, also finally died because of an accident when he was helping his comrade was praised highly nationally. The manner of collectivism is taught at an early age for children in primary school. In this case, social interests should be the cornerstone of selves' interests; collective interests as well as personal interests are accordant on the whole. According to DiAngelo, socialization refers to the transformation course of an individual from a natural person to a social person who participates in social life, learns social norms, and performs social roles [1]. People could not develop continuously without undergoing socialization to internalize their social habitus and rules of action standards themselves, considered as the basis of social communication by scholars. Hence, human beings must have a unique experience of socialization to be practiced with daily life competence, attain various features of

groups and society, foster dispositions and obtain social enlightenment. Moreover, when discussing the relationship between individual and society, socialization is considered as a procedure moving from the separation of the society and individual to the integration of the two that individuals grow with the social experience. Socialization is as well a distinctive human experience which could be taken place in and only in human society. Compared to feudal society a long time ago, social productivity had boomed rapidly, and activities for production had started to be socialized in capitalist society. However, as the distribution of resources and wealth are still privatized, human growth cannot be developed completely. In the future drawn by Marx, human nature is expected to be fully developed due to exploitation, inequality, and alienation will disappear [2].

This essay will combine the recent or classical scholars of Marx and Durkheim's academic research with examples or cases to explain some theoretical issues such as socialization, superstructure and substructure, moral society and suicide to conclude the relationship between individuals and society by structural functionalism and conflict theory.

2. Marx, with the Methodology of Historical Materialism

According to Morris, from the perspective of Marxist view, Marx believed that individuals are historical and social items or a kind of social existence, and society should be a collectivity of human life based on conjoint corporeal production activities, which are interconnected and developed, while socialization should be a procedure that every individual is necessary to experience [2]. Different from asceticism and extreme egoism, a reciprocal relationship should be constructed between selves and society. Those two items would influence each other rather than a simple one-way relation; if the interests of society could not be protected, everyone's personal interests would be severely impacted. Simultaneously, without the creative and continuous work of selves, which is the effort from numerous individuals and then integrating together a huge power to boost the booming progress of physical and spiritual civilization, the collectivity's interests could not be accumulated.

For instance, before 1929, in the US, American society was flocking to advanced industrialized techniques and brand-new lifestyles; conspicuous consumption and credit consumption had become the fashion of this period. In the Great Depression from 1929 to 1933, the blunder of big banks, the collapse of the stock market and anomic regulation from the government caused a great loss of society; international trade had plunged by a half percent, the unemployment rate in America had soared to 25%, and heavy industry in major capitalist states has been severely hit. From the individual perspective, during this period, at most, 4 million senior students dropped out of school. Many people could not bear bankruptcy and then committed suicide. Public security deteriorated; therefore, the crime rate increased [3].

The standard to evaluate the morality of an action is dependent on if one has the ability to make contributions to society's advancement on the basis of guaranteeing the balance between the community's interests and individual interests. Labor production is the process of material transformation between individual workers and natural objects. These individuals form social relations. On top of this social production relationship, it further forms the whole social relations. Therefore, individuals are always in social relations, not isolated individuals. For instance, in the 19th century Marx was living, he noticed the crucial exploitation from the capitalist class to the working class. As the latter did not have a day for breaking, the time for them to attend religious rituals or ceremonies in the church was not enough, which resulted in dissatisfaction and confrontations of divine power. Thus, free schools in Western Europe and America that supplied religious education, as well as literacy training for the young factory workers on Sundays, began to emerge because of the struggle between theocracy and the bourgeoisie. The working class grasped the method of reading and writing, and then basic literacy helped them to get an advantage in the competition with other

workers whose literacy was relatively lower to improve their work efficiency and bring more profits for capitalists.

Additionally, thinking from the theoretical perspective of superstructure and substructure, the development of superstructure should fit with the economic base [4]. According to Oyinlade et al., economic base refers to the method people use to supply their material needs and the corresponding economic relations, including forces of production and relations of production [5]. Superstructure means the totality of ideology based on a specific economic base and the corresponding legal and political systems with facilities, a classical question to prove the relationship between superstructure and substructure could be demonstrated: Can capitalism be run on slavery? As cited in Quirk, in terms of the possession of means of production, the slave-owner class owned all means of production and the enslaved people, without personal freedom completely, those enslaved people could merely obtain very little means of subsistence to maintain their lives, which was the distribution of the private property products of the enslavers. Nevertheless, under the background of capitalism, the complexity of the division of labor and modernized production way put forward higher requirements for the comprehensive quality of workers. Capital accumulation was also difficult under the background of the slavery system as compared to the enslaved person; free labor in capitalist society had a higher demand for consumption [6].

3. Analysis from the Positivism Perspective of Emile Durkheim

As the same as Marx, who was one of the three founding fathers of Sociology, Durkheim proposed his thinking about the interaction between the individual and society, too. The following content would go to analyze part of his explorations, such as social facts, to analyze his thoughts on individuals and society.

First, Durkheim proposed the theory of moral society, which demonstrates how the individual should act under the guidance of the standards of morality. Although, on most occasions, morality is not recorded in a documentary or book, it is a must for people to comply with, or they would be punished by law or other social members, as morality has the feature of externality and is mandatory. Durkheim believes that society should be a moral society, with the central symbol of worship and esteem for individual honor and human nature. Moral individualism should be the mere moral modality in the modern era with the developing heterogeneity among humans and sophisticated division of labor. Hence, moral education plays a significant role in making efforts to confront the crisis of traditional society's transformation against secularization, industrialism, and individualism and seeks answers to the question: what is the "basis of the new social order" [7]. In addition, inspiration could also be found in the book the division of labor in society. As cited in Beamish, in Durkheim's view, the individual is generally put in a social organism where individuals are not only economically linked with but socially related [8]. In the traditional society before the industrial era, especially in the low civilization stage, the unity and connection between people are dependent on similarity. Living in the traditional society, due to the low level of division of labor, companions from identical collectives took the same deep-rooted culture and daily life habits as well were convinced of the same tribe, and each of the individuals enjoyed equality in the collective. Without someone him/herself, there was merely a society that existed and operated among them. Hence, the collective consciousness, which could be approximately regarded as feelings of a similar sense of belonging from the form of individuals' social interaction, absolutely covered up the emergence of individual consciousness. Based on this exploration, Durkheim demonstrated that the mentioned sort of society was generated from similarity, in other words, a "homogeneous" society with the primary goal of making the individual convinced of the information and traditions of the group to maintain the common consciousness and keep consistency. Thus, he named after the solidarity which ruled the society by traditional power "mechanical solidarity". However, in modern capitalism society, with

the ceaseless development of technology and the division of labor, as the social division of labor has developed at a rapid pace, individual distinctions in beliefs and awareness are increasing day by day. Nevertheless, society has not been disintegrated, and individuals have yet been separated as the co-existence of sustaining communities in the ancient period has been shifted into the modern institution of the division of labor, and every separated part in the procedure of division of labor relies on each other's effort and unity. "Organism" seems to give a description of the division of labor in modern time perfectly; every member makes a contribution to the whole society and cannot be isolated from it. Therefore, the division of labor somehow becomes the belt which integrates the whole, also known as the so-called "organic unity" [7].

Through Durkheim's exploration of suicide, the relationship between the individual and society could also be found. In Durkheim's view, suicide refers to all cases in which the victim's death is directly or indirectly caused by positive or negative behavior, and the victim knows the consequences of this behavior. According to Allen and O'Boyle, though committing suicide should be considered as a personal decision chosen by a minority group, the rate of suicide could be regarded as a social fact which has their inherent existence and could be restricted to individuals from the outside then be explained by other social facts [9]. Before Durkheim, scholars would regard committed suicide as a spiritual illness or pathological phenomenon, but Durkheim pointed out that suicide was supposed to become a sociological issue led by social problems. When individuals encounter separation from society, they might think of suicide. The more social links suicide attempters have, the less likely they will kill themselves. In *Suicide*, Durkheim proved the general theory that the meaning of an individual's life is endowed with society. Four types of suicides, including egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, anomic suicide and fatalistic suicide, in accordance with the various situations of 2 social currents were identified: regulation and integration. As cited in Fitzi (2022), the latter represents the fact that society organizes countless individual people in terms of norms, systems, culture and functions to form a unity, control conflicts and opposites within a certain range, and maintain unity, while the former includes informal ways like internalizing norms and values through the process of socialization and formal ways like laws which are external sanctions imposed by the government [10]. Although the society could be promoted with methods of better integrating and regulating members, a utopian society without the upset feeling should not be constructed; both the state of regulation and integration should be controlled at a medium degree. Otherwise, the unfortunate consequence of an individual like suicide would take place, and the evolution of society could also be stopped. A balanced and stable society which could potentially satisfy individual and collective is inseparable from people's proper attachment to society and moderate control of itself.

During the covid-19 period in China, numerous miserable tragedies happened to individuals who finally chose to commit suicide to end their lives. For the case study, the author would mainly focus on the group of healthcare workers encountering strong pressure to fight against the pandemic. According to Awan et al., almost 40% of interviewees suffered from psychological discomfort; the nurses and doctors would not only encounter high-intensity work, which has a high possibility of being infected by the virus but be subjected to mental suffering of the ceaseless death of the patients as well as the uncertainty of the viruses' metamorphosis [11]. Besides, specifically speaking in mainland China, as cited in Chalk, social control has been much more enhanced during the pandemic period; daily activities and speech freedom are severely limited by the monitoring system, and the information shared system about the pandemic is not transparent [12]. The zero-covid policy and the mass patients, along with the close contact, strengthen the pressure on medical workers. They were regarded as the executors of the severe zero-covid policy who would usually deal with the discontent feeling of the citizens and be responsible for the nucleic acid sampling of numerous residents. In April 2022, a doctor from a county in Heilongjiang Province killed himself because he received a patient from a high-risk epidemic area. This led to the whole county's seal-off arrangement, which caused

huge economic losses. Therefore, he suffered from the great mental pressure of the police, and eventually, the tragedy happened.

From the case, it could be concluded that suicide might be socially related. Society could have a negative impact on individuals. Individual demands a reciprocal and active involvement in their lives that consists of a separate field within which to cultivate autonomous and independent selfhood. It is obvious that they are clearly complementary, whose presence could mitigate the risk of fatalism and anomie.

4. Conclusions

Different from the direct comparison and explanation of the relationship between individual and society pointed out by Marx and Durkheim, this essay uses an indirect way to analyze other theories of the two sociologists and finally comes to a conclusion. However, due to the limitation of space, this paper does not refer to the theoretical thoughts of more sociologists of different schools about individuals and society, such as Max Weber, Norbert Elias, and Parsons. Secondly, due to the limitations of the author's personal experience and exploration, appropriate examples for some theoretical explanations were not well provided.

Both Karl Marx and Emile Durkheim pointed out that collective interests should be counted as the sum of individual interests; the collective and the individual has a mutual interaction relationship. Generally speaking, Durkheim suggested that society is built on a common order of morality, not on individual rational interest. Society should be prior to the individual and determines the distinctions between the latter. The individual is considered merely as a portion of the social entity instead of the total. Meanwhile, the holistic sociological methodology suggests that the entire social entity is expected to have a better function than the totality of separate parts; what the issue social integrity stresses is the combination between a variety of portions and the new phenomena arising eventually. Marx believed that individuals and society are interdependent and mutually constrained. Human attributes can be broken into 2 kinds: social attributes and natural attributes. Social attribute is the most significant and elementary attribute of human beings. The social life of human is an organic whole, including actions from all walks of life, and any individual's activity will always have a sort of influence on the development of society.

To conclude, through the demonstration of social facts, including suicide and the division of labor, the relationship between society and moral society and the individual could be obviously realized. On the one hand, society should be considered initially before individuals, which should be a portion of society. On the other hand, the development of human's interaction would positively promote society's development. In China, the government should govern the society in accordance with the law and promotes social equality in the aspect of education, welfare distribution and working treatment, or the society and individuals could not develop a reciprocal relationship.

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