



Durkheim and the Sociology of  
Industrial Safety

Sociological theory =  
Management principles



# Emile Durkheim

(1858-1917)

– The “George  
Washington” of  
Sociology



# Durkheim's Sociological Focus: Optimal Group Functioning



# All groups have:

- Norms
- Values
- Beliefs
- Sanctions



# Norms:

- Social Agreements about what is expected (the rules)
- Not like handshakes or contracts
- Taken for granted, “everyone knows” expectations



# Values:

- Social agreements about what is preferred



# Beliefs:

- Social agreements about what is true





# Sanctions:

- Social agreements about how to enforce norms, values, and beliefs
- Both rewards and punishments
- Ranges from pat on the back, dirty looks, reprimands, death penalty



# The Origins of dysfunction:

- When one or more element is out of step with at least one other element



Anomie –  
Durkheim's term for  
“social chaos” of  
contradictory elements



# Lack of synchronization creates anomie

- Scale from low to high
- Episodic, chronic,  
severe, etc.



# Case studies: anomie in military operations

- Ultimately, military units are workplaces
- Military dysfunction and industrial disasters share characteristics



# Abu Ghraib

## Testimony of supply officer

- Lack of basic supplies (blankets, generators, clean water, food, toilet paper, ammunition)



# Baghdad Canal Killings

- Understaffed
- Soldiers (workers) working outside of competency
- “Catch and release”
- PTSD, mTBI, sleep deprivation



Anomie creates deviance:  
Stress, murder, suicide,  
sickness (sick leave),  
accidents, equipment abuse,  
poor record keeping





# Anomie

- In military, suicide is at an all time high
- In oil industry, more than 30 accidents/week off Louisiana



# Anomie (continued)

- In financial industry, Wells Fargo
- In higher education, nearly 40% of first year students do not return



Solution:  
synchronize elements



# Solutions

- Train managers to recognize anomie
- Continuous effort towards synchronization of elements
- Research to develop managerial techniques and measuring instruments for anomie



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