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- 1) Identify a contemporary social problem using a list of articles from the Strait Times or any other newspaper. Demonstrate the capacity of Durkheim's theories and concepts to understand and analyze them. (Examples of social problems: Aging, Drug Abuse, Corruption, Poverty, Environmental pollution, Hate Crime). You have to list the articles you used in the submitted assignment.
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Racism and xenophobia have always posed a contentious social issue, and appears manifestly more so in recent years. With globalization, national borders have grown increasingly porous over the past years (despite recent moves towards nationalism and protectionism), and globally, societies have become increasingly integrated with more diversified communities. A diverse community threatens Durkheim's idea of a "collective conscience", in which a set of shared beliefs, ideas, and moral attitudes acts to unify society and shape social norms. According to this concept, different ideas and beliefs can produce fault lines that threaten social order. In the case of racism and xenophobia, the source of discord is attributed to one's difference in race or nationality. With the COVID-19 pandemic, there has been an upsurge in expression of racist and xenophobic sentiments, with hate and aggression particularly directed towards certain groups of people. As the Singapore Minister for Culture, Community and Youth, Grace Fu, aptly highlighted, "in the worst of times, it is easy to blame someone who is different from ourselves, when it is due to race, religion or nationality. What we must realise is that viruses do not discriminate, people do" (Tai, 2020).

The development of a "collective conscience" in society solidifies divides based on any one disparity, by constructing the notion of an "in" and "out" group, and creating a "us versus them" mentality. In the case of racism and xenophobia, people are categorically identified as outsiders of a group due to their different race or nationality. This is prominently demonstrated by attitudes displayed during COVID-19, where the propensity to jump at any chance to attack

or direct hate at certain groups of people has notably increased. For instance, many overseas Chinese have reported hate crime and abuse directed at them for their race and nationality, as people associate them with the origins of the coronavirus and blamed them for its spread. By extension, any Asians who are mistaken as mainland Chinese also bear the brunt of coronavirus-related racial abuse. A Singaporean Chinese male was assaulted in London and told “I don’t want your coronavirus in my country” (Iau, 2020). In a similar case, two Singaporean and Malaysian girls were assaulted in Melbourne and told by the perpetrators to “get out of our country” (The Straits Times, 2020).

Individuals who are identified as outsiders are also subjected to increased scrutiny from members of the “in” group, and to greater condemnation whenever they deviate from social norms established by the group. A recent case of expatriates flouting social distancing rules at Robertson Quay has gathered much online vitriol, with a sizeable number of furious commentators denouncing their lack of respect for local rules given their status as foreigners in the country. A lawyer representing two of the accused noted the disproportionate online abuse directed at them, and pointed out how similar cases involving Singaporeans had only resulted in fines whereas his clients were subjected to much harsher punishments (SCMP, 2020). In recent times, reported acts of deviance have also often been immediately written off as the doings of a foreigner, even when the nationality of the perpetrator was uncertain. One case in point is when a lady refused to wear her mask and kicked up a fuss, online sentiments were quick to express that the woman must be “another foreigner”, even though it was later divulged that she is in fact a local Singaporean.

The surge in expressions of racism and xenophobia can be attributed in part to the COVID-19 situation, which has thrown the world in flux. This situation is reflective of Durkheim’s idea of anomie, in which a state of “normlessness” arises from an upheaval in

social values, often attributed to a lack of order due to rapid social change. COVID-19 has overturned way of life as we know it, on multiple fronts including the economic and the social. Recession and mass unemployment have brought about economic uncertainty for countless people, and the social restrictions in place have also contributed to anxiety. Rising feelings of tension from being cooped at home and economic worries, among others, can result in an upsurge of negative emotions and consequently, an outpouring of anger and hatred. Such anger is then often directed towards people who are deemed “different”, even when it is uncalled for. These anti-social behaviours which may otherwise not have manifested in normal times, surface during such periods of uncertainty.

In conclusion, Durkheim’s construct of societal norms shaped by a collective conscience and his idea of anomie are still highly applicable today, in the case of contemporary social issues such as racism and xenophobia. This is especially so in the context of COVID-19, where societal norms and the “usual” way of life have been severely disrupted, upsetting the lives of many and inciting a host of social anger and problems.

Word Count: 799

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FINAL GRADE

/100

GENERAL COMMENTS

Instructor

Grade: A-

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