

## What is *Anomie*?

The French sociologist Emile Durkheim introduced this concept in his book *The Division of Labour in Modern Society* in 1893. He described a sense of gradual breakdown that was occurring. Essentially, he studied how, as society had made massive advances during the 19<sup>th</sup> Century (Realism and Naturalism), this had destabilised people's traditionally understood modes of living. Anomie describes a condition of 'rootless wandering', in Durkheim's phrase.

There were no norms, Durkheim felt. People did not know how they fitted in to a technologically accelerating, capitalist world with its accompanying factories, mills, slums and grinding poverty. (Think Dickens' London or Jack the Ripper's London). This led to aberrant behaviour and, Durkheim noted, increases in suicide throughout the industrialised world. He suggested that societies had evolved from simple, agrarian ones. Here, people think, work and act alike, performing the same tasks and having group-oriented goals. This was how earlier generations had lived, before the rise of capitalism and the factory age. When this industrial change occurred, society became more complex and challenging. People are no longer tied to one another and social bonds become impersonal. In this context, confusion, rootlessness, dissatisfaction and deviance set in. Crime and suicide rose inexorably during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. So, essentially the individual is rootless, confused, wandering and lacking clear purpose. He has a slum to live in and a factory to exploit him. Earlier generations had faced entirely different problems but had lived in more communal groupings.