In this chapter, concepts developed by Émile Durkheim will be used and applied to public health to explore the role of public health in contemporary society. The first section contains a brief biography of Durkheim, and in the second, relevant concepts will be explained, focusing on Durkheim’s concerns for social solidarity; the importance of his particular ontological position grounded in the concept of *homo duplex*; and the moral forces of anomie, egoism, altruism and fatalism that he sees as underlying social order. His view that contemporary society suffers from an excess of *anomie* and *egoism*, and that social institutions need to develop to temper those forces, is discussed.

The third section of the chapter discusses how Durkheim applied his concepts to the study of social order in his famous book *Suicide*. Work that has drawn on this type of analysis is reviewed – in particular, work on the role of neighbourhoods in providing forms of integration and regulation that can protect people from anomic social forces.

The fourth section of the chapter will consider how public health can act as a social institution to temper anomic forces and foster social order. This will take an historical and cross-national perspective describing how the function of public health has varied over time. In the early period of modern public health, measures functioned to promote a stronger nation-state and enhance productivity. In the latter period, public health has also taken on a role in promoting social justice in the face of neo-liberal ideologies and the power of commercial companies marketing health-damaging products. The chapter concludes by discussing the utility and limitations of Durkheimian ideas in relation to the study of health.

Durkheim provided a range of concepts and approaches that have been influential on sociology generally. His methodological approach, seen clearly in his study *Suicide*, laid the foundations for the quantitative study of ‘social facts’. As will be shown, his use of concepts like anomie, the division of labour and the cult of humanity can be picked up and usefully applied to a range of contemporary social issues.
Biography

Émile Durkheim was born in Épinal, France, in 1858 and died in 1917. His father, Moïse, was a Rabbi (Émile’s Jewish forename was David) and his mother, Mélanie, was from a horse-trading family (Fournier 2013). Durkheim’s home life was one of austerity, adhering to the rules and regulations of Jewish practice, and being part of an historically persecuted religious minority Durkheim noted the strong sense of solidarity within the Jewish community. Events during his formative years had a profound impact on Durkheim and his work. The surprising defeat of France in the Franco-Prussian war of 1870, when Durkheim was 12, led to a widespread desire for regeneration in France and, for Durkheim, an ‘urgent need for a science of societies’ so that the administration of the country could be ‘truly grounded in the nature of things’ (Durkheim [1900] 1973:164). Durkheim was also committed to the ideals of the Third Republic, which was established following the French surrender to the Prussians in 1871. The ideals of democracy, secularism and science can be seen as closely aligning with Durkheim’s approach to his academic work (Fournier 2013). In addition, the Jewish community in France supported the French Republic as its liberal views were seen as important to its survival and development. An overarching concern with the means by which social order could be obtained in the face of upheaval, instability, external and internal threats is a driving force of Durkheim’s approach to sociology.

Although Durkheim did not coin the term ‘sociology’ – that was an achievement of Auguste Comte – he is often referred to as ‘the founder of sociology’ and was the first professor of sociology. In a recent extensive biography of Durkheim, Fournier argued that Durkheim brought about a revolution within the human sciences and founded sociology as a science (Fournier 2013).

Relevant concepts

How to position Durkheim’s work in relation to the intellectual currents of his time is debated. Durkheim developed his thinking through engagements with, and critiques of, a broad range of work including that of English and American anthropology, German experimentalism and empiricism, and French rationalist philosophy.

Durkheim was preoccupied with establishing sociology as a science and a distinct discipline that could be taken seriously and that had its own method. For Durkheim, the young discipline of sociology was threatened by dilettantes and charlatans who too readily resorted to imaginative speculation without a firm basis, and Durkheim positioned himself as a rational empiricist, engaging in logical argument based on evidence. For example, Durkheim’s concern with social trends in suicide and the different rates of suicide by social group was to