
Anomie and Alienatio: Tracing Social Fragmentation in Salinger’s The Catcher in the Rye

Waqas Ahmad¹

¹ University of Gujrat (Main Campus) Email: Ahmad.Owlakh@gmail.com

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.70670/sra.v3i2.772>

Abstract

This study critically examines J.D. Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (2010) through the theoretical framework of Émile Durkheim’s Theory of Anomie (2005). Durkheim conceptualizes anomie as a condition of societal normlessness triggered by rapid social change, wherein individuals become estranged from prevailing norms and values. Applying this theory to the post-war American context depicted in the novel, the research focuses on the character of Holden Caulfield—a 16-year-old navigating the liminal space between childhood and adulthood. Holden’s deep-seated alienation, disillusionment, and denunciation of societal “phoniness” are interpreted as manifestations of anomic behavior. His idealization of innocence and longing for refuge in imagined childhood spaces—symbolized by the “field of rye”—underscore his existential struggle against a world he no longer perceives as authentic. The study draws parallels between Holden’s psychological fragmentation and Durkheim’s concept of anomic suicide, which arises from the disintegration of social cohesion. It further incorporates insights from Durkheim’s *The Division of Labor* (1960), highlighting the tension between mechanical and organic solidarity. Ultimately, the research reveals how Salinger’s portrayal of Holden encapsulates the personal consequences of societal disruption, illustrating the psychological toll of rapid transformation on individuals caught in transitional social landscapes.

Keywords: J.D. Salinger, *The Catcher in the Rye*, Emile Durkheim, Theory of Anomie, Social Change, Holden Caulfield.

Introduction

The present study explores Salinger’s novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (2010) through Durkheim’s Theory of Anomy (2005) as a framework. This theory is based on a social condition of “normlessness” in which there is disintegration of social norms and values that were previously common in society. Durkheim puts forth Aetiology of Suicide and categorized it in three individual types of suicide. One of them is “Anomic Suicide which explains theory of anomie in detail. Durkheim is of the view that when society undergoes any change, its values and norms change with it. Anomie occurs, when phases of rapid change occur in a social system and individuals are in the transition phase (Durkheim, 2005). In these phases, individuals feel alienated from society as they do not see current norms and values prevailing in society as their own norms and values. This feeling makes them feel disconnected from others living in society. He says that such individuals consider themselves meaningless as they do not belong to their social setup. The role they play in society becomes worthless for themselves and they start deviating from prevailing norms and values. The feeling of a man, living in such a social setup, encourages deviance and crime, and consequently anomy occurs (Durkheim, 2005). Durkheim describes anomie as a conflict between the ‘mechanical solidarity’ of homogeneous, traditional social orders, and the’

organic solidarity' that keeps social orders together in complex and better conditioning societies. Anomie does not occur with regard to organic solidarity of individual with his society (Alexander, 1989). As organic society consists of heterogeneous type of solidarity where individuals evolve themselves under the regulation of norms and values of their society and do not desire to achieve beyond possibilities. In such societies, individuals who evolved play a meaningful role and who do not evolve feel themselves discontented and left out (Durkheim, 1952). Durkheim was a modern sociologist and a leading figure in studying society and the prevailing culture of societies. This thesis concerned is written in the context of Durkheim's study of society and the researcher implied this study on American post war society of Salinger in his novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. This study investigates that individuals show anomic behaviours when there is breakdown in fundamental social structure in a particular society. Such issues have been tackled by Salinger in his works. The feeling of oneself being left out in a society is found in Salinger's main character, Holden Caulfield, in the novel *The Catcher in the Rye*. The story describes a few days of a life of 16-years old boy Holden, who remains in the state of betweenness throughout the novel. The story unfolds the changes in Holden's childhood life and adolescent life. He considers purity and impurity as two opposites. The feeling of not belonging to his society always makes himself unworthy of living in it. He always encounters the normlessness prevailing in the social order he is living in and that has changed over time. There is shown a strong contrast between his imaginary world and the world he exists in. This feeling of betweenness causes so many problems even in his mundane life as described by Durkheim in his theory. He always wants to exit from society and seek refuge in most simple and innocent places like a cabin in the wood or the field of rye. Although his innocent places are real, but he always dreams of his childhood places which are considered as left out in current social norms and orders in his society. Knowing the fact that places change over time, he is always in search of places which are complete in innocence. His reality fluctuates between two phases of his life, childhood and adulthood. At one point, he wants to enjoy the perks and feelings of being adult and at the other point he wants to be pure and seeks refuge in innocent things, places and people. It is seen that he is unable to find purity in that rapidly changing society where he finds everything "phony". He becomes physically and mentally weak by searching his reality in the social order where things have changed over time. He always wants an escape from society and be real and innocent as "a catcher in the rye" to preserve the "innocence" in a "phony" world. Although, he has discovered the pointlessness of trying to protect the things in his mind, but he does not give up throughout the whole story (George & Jeffrey, 2021) Holden attempts to build up rigid walls around him, takes refuge in past ideals and always tries to cut himself off from the outside. He is always in need to keep healing qualities such as 'innocence' in his life and non-healing qualities such as 'phoniness' outside from his life. He needs his spaces to be unambiguous. He attempts to draw boundaries among self and society, adolescence and adulthood, desires and reality, what is consoling and what is not. He is extremely particular in what he should keep and what should be out. Nonetheless, Holden is deceived in the event that he imagines that he can choose social orders according to his own ways. Changes spill into and out of his spaces and they contain ambiguities, and Holden is in state of transition when there are going rapid changes in outside world. That is the reason he falls ill and show the qualities of anomic suicide explained by Durkheim. He cannot avoid ambiguity in a world which always seem to him as phony. So, he starts deviating from norms and values of his society and as a result anomie occurs. Durkheim calls this deviation from norms and values as anomie; a social condition in which there is absence of previously existing norms and values in a society. Consequently, he says that individuals feel themselves left out from the society as Holden wants to exit from his society in the novel, *The Catcher in the Rye*. This study explains the transition phase of Holden from childhood to adulthood. The study also explores the structure of society in a novel as described by Durkheim in another book *The Division of Labor* (1960). It also investigates that

how the protagonist of the novel shows anomic behaviours. The analysis will trace the contradictory phases of Holden as a being and the rapidly changing social orders around him.

Literature Review

This qualitative study undertakes a detailed textual analysis of J.D. Salinger's novel *The Catcher in the Rye* (2010), applying Émile Durkheim's Theory of Anomie as the central analytical framework. The theoretical foundation is drawn from Durkheim's seminal works *Suicide* (2005) and *The Division of Labor in Society* (1960). Durkheim conceptualizes anomie as a state of social normlessness that emerges during periods of rapid societal change, resulting in weakened collective values and diminished social regulation. Individuals caught in this transitional phase often experience disorientation, alienation, and behavioural deviance. The study aims to explore how societal transformations, and the breakdown of traditional norms affect the psyche and behavior of individuals, particularly adolescents. Through close textual analysis, the research focuses on the novel's central character, Holden Caulfield, whose persistent sense of estrangement and rejection of societal expectations exemplifies Durkheim's notion of anomic behavior. The study seeks to answer key questions regarding the influence of societal instability on individual consciousness and the psychological consequences that arise from the collapse of moral order. Durkheim's distinction between mechanical and organic solidarity is crucial to this analysis. In traditional societies, mechanical solidarity fosters social cohesion through shared values and uniform beliefs. However, in modern, industrial societies, organic solidarity emerges from the interdependence created by a complex division of labor. Holden, situated in a post-war American society undergoing profound cultural shifts, is unable to reconcile his desire for innocence with the fragmented, impersonal world around him. His nostalgic longing for simplicity, symbolized by his fantasy of being a "catcher in the rye," reflects a deep internal conflict between his personal values and the evolving social reality. This study also considers the role of social integration and regulation in maintaining psychological stability. Durkheim argues that when society fails to limit desires or provide a coherent moral structure, individuals become vulnerable to anomic suicide—a form of self-destruction born out of social dislocation and moral confusion. Holden's deteriorating mental state, his feelings of worthlessness, and his repeated attempts to withdraw from society are read through this theoretical lens, demonstrating how literary texts can reflect broader sociological conditions. The primary research tool employed is discourse analysis, focusing on the protagonist's interactions, inner monologues, and the narrative situations that expose his alienation. This method allows for a critical exploration of how language and context shape meaning and identity in the novel. By drawing textual evidence directly from the novel, the study substantiates its argument regarding the psychological effects of social instability. In conclusion, this literature review positions *The Catcher in the Rye* as a compelling narrative that illustrates Durkheim's theory of anomie. It highlights the psychological consequences of disrupted social structures and offers insight into how adolescent identity formation is impacted by cultural and moral disintegration in modern society.

Research Methodology

In this study Emile Durkheim's Theory of Anomie is used as a framework of the study articulated from his books, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (2005), and *The Division of Labor* (1960). In his book *Suicide*, he puts forth the Aetiology of Suicide, and says that suicide is not an individual phenomenon, rather, it is interconnected with social factors. "The suicide-rate is a phenomenon sui generis; that is, the totality of suicides in a society is a fact separate, distinct, and capable of study in its own terms" (2005, p. 95). He is of the view that human psychology is governed by his societal integration and consequently human beings show deviance and suicide rates become higher in such societies. He relates self-destruction and anomic behavior to social co-occurrences.

According to Durkheim, Anomie is dependent on social regulation in a society. He argues that social integration and social change are key factors in deviant behavior. On the basis of suicide by

a etiological setting, he puts forth three categories of suicides. Durkheim explains that “egoistic suicide results from, lack of integration of the individual into society” (p. 14). In this way individual behavior is responsible for the lack of integration into society. He explains the causes of egoistic suicide in a particular society. The more the individual is the follower of his own instinct, the less will be his integration and the more will be rate of suicide in a particular society. He gives an example of religious society of Catholics. In these religious societies, people do follow the collective consciousness of their religious leaders, who aim is to closely integrate its followers into one belief. As a result, individual is not thrown into his own resources and suicide rate is lesser. On the other hand, the suicide rate is higher in Protestantism, because of their excessive individualism. The development in science and technology and the transformation of a society from close identification of religious values toward non-religious values and secular institutions is the root cause of less integration of the individual into his society. Durkheim claims that science has enlightened the man with the knowledge of universe but has disintegrated the ties of the individual to his group. This is how an individual’s behavior appear to be anomic and result in higher self-destruction rates. The society is a product of change and so are its norms and values. Durkheim is of the view that when society changes, its norms become unclear. As a result, deviant behavior of its individual come into prominence. This theory states anomie, as a state of “normlessness”. It occurs when society is unable to regulate the desires and actions of its members and the members as a result, show deviance. The deviant behavior arises, when the members are allowed to go beyond the possibility of fulfilment. Usually, in better functioning societies, the ambitions are kept limited and the desires are controlled by collective orders. Durkheim talks about Anomic Suicide, and he posits a notion that society regulates the rate of anomic suicide. “But society is not only something attracting the sentiments and activities of individuals with unequal force. It is also a power controlling them. There is a relation between the way this regulative action is performed and the social suicide-rate” (2005). He says that when there is disturbance in society or the economy rise and fall, the rate of suicides also increases. People in such societies are inclined towards voluntary deaths because of their discomfort, poverty and some other factors. The individuals feel difficulty in living such a problematic life. Durkheim in his book, *The Division of Labor in Society* (1960) talks about structure of society. He is of the view that there comes a shift from simple society to complex society as the societies progressed in modern world. He talks about two kinds of society by the nature of their social solidarity, which are traditional and modern society. He says traditional society used to be an amalgamation of homogenous people who had more or less same kind of norms and values. It crashed when modern culture exerted its powerful force on it. Modern society, according to Durkheim has internal binarism, which is a “normal change”. It requires modern needs to be fulfilled in order to meet the individual’s internal quest. Modern people are vulnerable to change, and traditional people were not. In modern world, traditional society is placed as different pieces placed in modern society. He is of the view that social solidarity plays an important role in making up individual’s collective consciousness. It solidifies the society and acts as a glue that binds a society together as a whole. Social solidarity solidifies the internal mechanism of individuals through socialization. On the basis of social solidarity, Durkheim explains the structure of society and the foundations that hold a society together. He explicates two kinds of solidarity that exists in making up individual consciousness. These kinds are as follows:

Mechanical Solidarity

Mechanical solidarity refers to collective consciousness of a group mind that is shared among all the members of society. It binds them together as a moral community. Society has moral boundaries and power to control individual’s acts. When individuals commit any crime or show deviant behavior, it is regarded as sinful and must be punished by the society. It enforces conformity upon individuals in order to maintain mechanical solidarity. These reactions of society or group mind allow individuals to visibly experience the power of the group mind over the self.

These punishments create moral boundaries and set forth two types of consciousness'. Collective consciousness represents the shared beliefs of the group and individual consciousness represents the part of the mind. Durkheim says that "no living being can be happy or even exist unless his needs are sufficiently proportioned to his means" (Durkheim, 1897/1951, p. 246). Individual consciousness is the follower of individual pursuits that were not more common in mechanical societies. Durkheim argues that collective consciousness always dominates individual consciousness. By studying society, he is of the view that society alone has the capacity to provide moral power to its members. This moral power leads its individuals to think about how to control their passions and moderate their desires. When there is a breakdown in the regulation of goals and a person's ambition, the state of anomie comes into action and the members of the society start deviating from the rules and norms. When individuals' desires are not fulfilled, they undergo a rapid change in their behavior. Durkheim says that in better-conditioned societies, people are satisfied with the norms which their society provides them. The individuals of a better society do not exceed their limits, passions, and desires. They try to achieve only that is realistically possible for them to achieve and do not go beyond the possibilities. However, individuals alienate as a result of a social disability and their internal breakdown. The deviant behavior is regarded as "normal" human behavior in "abnormal" social order and social conditions. The sociologists believe that this response is due to the instability that occurs in society. Durkheim says that when an individual shows any kind of deviant behavior or commits any crime, they carry within them it's offenses. He says that this offending is found in all individuals of a society. This offense disrupts sentiments that are present in every individual of a society. The sentiments, the individual carry after showing deviant behaviours are strong and defined. In the modern society, this deviant behaviours is considered as an unfamiliar action. The person who shows deviant behavior is labelled as a vagabond who wanders outside the ordered aspects of social life. Durkheim explains two poles of society. One is normative and the other is structural. According to him, these two poles are interrelated to each other. The defect in either of these poles creates social instability and that is called anomie. He further explains that social values and norms connect different members of society together. This social integrity binds the member of society with common values and beliefs regardless of interpersonal relations. Durkheim talks about social regulation as a phenomenon in which society controls or limits the desires of individuals through the normative or emotional level. He says that this social regulation is the opposite of anomie, which occurs when an individual is unwilling to abide by the regulations of society. The state of anomie arises when an individual fails in regulative processes of society and separates himself from the societal normative limits and follows his own desires and goals (Baldwin & Emma, 2025).

Organic Solidarity

Organic solidarity is found in modern societies where people are interdependent. Durkheim is of the view that organic society has more advantage than mechanical society. In mechanical societies man was regarded as self-sufficient. He had less interactions with people of the group. There was no need of cooperation of people in society. Durkheim in his book *The Division of Labor*, elaborates the structure of differentiated complex society of division of labor. Organic society, he says is social integrity that come into existence out of one's need of cooperation. Unlike mechanical society where people have common belief systems, in organic society, there is moderately more noteworthy division of work. People on different levels associated with each other, however, separated like different organs of human body working together. In modern society under organic solidarity, there is less social regulation. The individuals thus need cooperation with the society. This kind of solidarity and social integration is obligatory to survive in modern society. The individual is considered centre to hold the society together rather than the collective conscience of society. Durkheim clarifies that individual consciousness is itself a social certainty and is socially developed. The individual is recognized by his society and not by human qualities. In modern societies individuals are associated by their dependence on others in the division of

work. Since modern culture is intricate, and the work that people do is so particular, people cannot be self-sufficient and should depend on others to tolerate living in such complex society. Durkheim argues that modern day culture may disrupt the traditional bonds of mechanical solidarity, it replaces them with the bonds of organic solidarity. He says that the individuals deviate by their uncontrol social forces rather than their individualization.

Social Integration

Social integration is a process of interpenetration and synthesis of socially defined norms and values, which are incorporated in individuals in a common social system. Emile Durkheim was of the view that norms, beliefs and social values make up a collective consciousness of individuals or a shared way of understanding each other and behaving in a particular society. This collective consciousness holds individuals together in a social system and creates social integration in society. Social integrity is experienced by every individual when he encounters a new social system. Firstly, the beliefs of individuals, their collective consciousness or shared beliefs of the society, which is termed as social integrity, exert a force on society. Secondly, when this consciousness becomes the part of social order, society forces back this consciousness to individuals. This is how social relationship of individuals builds up.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates how J.D. Salinger's *The Catcher in the Rye* effectively illustrates Émile Durkheim's Theory of Anomie within the context of post-war American society. By analyzing Holden Caulfield's experiences through this theoretical framework, the research reveals that his profound sense of alienation, normlessness, and rejection of societal "phoniness" are emblematic of the psychological distress caused by rapid social transformation. Holden's idealization of innocence and his retreat into the symbolic "field of rye" reflect his struggle to maintain personal integrity amidst a world he perceives as fragmented and inauthentic. Furthermore, the application of Durkheim's concepts of mechanical and organic solidarity offers deeper insight into Holden's internal conflict, caught between traditional social cohesion and the increasingly impersonal structures of modern society. This tension highlights the challenges faced by individuals attempting to navigate the complexities of a changing social order. The study also connects Holden's psychological disintegration with Durkheim's notion of anomic suicide, emphasizing the profound consequences that the erosion of social norms can have on individual well-being. Ultimately, Salinger's novel transcends the narrative of adolescent turmoil to provide a poignant commentary on the broader societal disruptions of the era. The portrayal of Holden Caulfield serves as a compelling illustration of how rapid social change can destabilize normative frameworks and contribute to individual alienation. By integrating literary analysis with sociological theory, this research enriches the understanding of *The Catcher in the Rye* and underscores the enduring relevance of Durkheim's insights into the complexities of modern social life. Through Holden's character, Salinger captures the deep psychological impact of anomie, revealing the fractures within both society and the self that arise from periods of profound social upheaval.

References

- Durkheim, Émile. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Translated by John A. Spaulding and George Simpson, edited with an introduction by George Simpson, Routledge, 2005.
- Durkheim, Émile. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. London, Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1952.
- Durkheim, Émile. *On Suicide*. Translated by Robin Buss, Penguin Books, 2005.
- Alexander, Jeffrey C. "The Meaning of Social Integration." *Sociology*, vol. 23, no. 4, 1989, pp. 535–547.

- Durkheim, Émile. *The Division of Labor in Society*. Translated by W. D. Halls, Free Press, 1960.
- Ritzer, George, and Jeffrey Stapinski. *Classical Sociological Theory*. 8th ed., SAGE Publications, 2021.
- Salinger, J. D. *The Catcher in the Rye*. Little, Brown and Company, 2010.
- Deflem, Mathieu. "Anomie: History of the Concept." *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 2nd ed., vol. 1, Elsevier, 2015, pp. 718–721.
- Durkheim, Émile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields, Free Press, 1995.
- Baldwin, Emma. "The Catcher in the Rye Themes and Analysis." *Book Analysis*, 2025.
- Lukes, Steven. *Émile Durkheim: His Life and Work – A Historical and Critical Study*. Stanford University Press, 1985.