

Durkheim's Inequality Paradigm: Global Disparities and Nigeria's Olympic struggles at Paris 2024

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Émile Durkheim, one of the founding figures of sociology, extensively analyzed the social structures that contribute to inequality. While Durkheim's work predates the modern Olympic games, including the recently concluded Paris 2024 Olympics, his theories provide a valuable framework for analyzing how such global events can reflect and reinforce social inequalities.

Durkheim viewed society as a complex system where various parts, such as institutions, norms, and values, function together to maintain stability and order. He believed that inequality was an inevitable feature of social life due to the division of labour, which creates different roles and statuses. However, Durkheim argued that inequality becomes problematic when it leads to what he called anomie—a state of normlessness or social instability caused by a breakdown of social norms and values (Durkheim, 1897). In Durkheim's view, inequality can be classified into two types—mechanical and organic solidarity. Mechanical solidarity, common in simpler societies, is based on the homogeneity of individuals, where people share similar tasks and responsibilities. Inequality here is minimal and based primarily on age and gender. Organic solidarity, on the other hand, emerges in more complex societies where the division of labour becomes more specialized. In this context, inequality is more pronounced as different roles in society lead to varying levels of prestige, wealth, and power (Durkheim, 1893). Durkheim believed that inequality could be justifiable if it contributed to social cohesion and the efficient functioning of society. However, when inequalities are excessive or unjust, they can threaten social cohesion and lead to anomie (Durkheim, 1897).

The Paris Olympic games can be analyzed through Durkheim's lens of inequality. The Olympics are often celebrated as a global event that brings nations together and promotes values like excellence, friendship, and respect. However, the reality is that the Games often highlight and exacerbate existing social, cultural, and economic inequalities that Durkheim believed could threaten social cohesion (Maguire, 2016). For example, the Olympic games often result in significant economic benefits for host cities, but these benefits are not evenly distributed. The construction of infrastructure such as stadiums and transportation systems often lead to the displacement of lower-income communities. In Paris, concerns have already been raised about the potential gentrification and rising costs of living in areas surrounding Olympic venues (Short, 2018). This can be seen as an example of how the division of labour in society, as Durkheim described, creates roles (e.g., construction workers, service providers) that are unevenly rewarded, thereby reinforcing social inequalities (Harvey, 2012).

The Olympics also bring to light issues of social inequality, particularly in terms of race and gender. While there have been efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the Games, disparities still exist. Female athletes, for instance, often receive less media coverage and lower pay compared to their male counterparts. This is indicative of the gendered division of

labor that Durkheim discussed, where societal roles are stratified not just by economic function but also by gender, perpetuating inequality (Cooky et al., 2015).

From the opening and closing ceremonies, which are opportunities for the host nation to showcase culture, one could observe cultural inequality, whereby there is a marginalization of minority cultures within the host nation or among participating countries. Durkheim would view this as a form of mechanical solidarity, where shared cultural values bind a group together but can also exclude those who do not conform, leading to cultural inequality (Smith, 2000).

Global Inequality and the Nigerian Experience

Durkheim's concept of organic solidarity, where specialized roles in society lead to unequal rewards, can be applied to the global stage of the Olympics. The disparity in resources, training, and infrastructure between wealthier countries and those like Nigeria is a key factor that contributes to differences in performance at the Olympics (Gaffney, 2010). Wealthier nations have the financial resources to invest in state-of-the-art sports facilities and advanced training programs for their athletes. These resources contribute significantly to the success of athletes from these countries on the global stage. In contrast, Nigeria's struggles at the Paris 2024 Olympics can be linked to the lack of adequate investments in sports infrastructure, training, and athlete development within the country (Adetayo, 2024). This resource disparity is a direct manifestation of global inequality, where the economic power of a nation directly influences its ability to compete and succeed in international competitions (Giulianotti, 2015).

Athletes of Nigerian origin made their mark on the global stage, winning medals for their adopted countries. The success of these athletes of Nigerian origin representing other countries underscores another dimension of global inequality, which is the migration of talents. Many athletes from less wealthy nations like Nigeria move to countries with better training facilities, coaching, and opportunities for professional growth (Alegi, 2010). These athletes often find greater support and resources in their adopted countries, enabling them to reach their full potential and win medals. This phenomenon highlights how global inequality is not just about differences in wealth and resources between countries but also about the flow of talent from less wealthy to wealthier nations, further exacerbating disparities in performance on the global stage (Hollingshead, 2014).

The fact that Nigerian athletes excel when provided with better resources abroad suggests that the talent is present, but the means to nurture it effectively within Nigeria are lacking. This situation reflects Durkheim's idea of organic solidarity, where different roles (in this case, the roles of nations in providing resources for athletes) lead to unequal outcomes. This situation has implications for national identity and pride, in the sense that it touches on the emotional and symbolic implications of these disparities. While Nigeria itself may have failed to secure medals, the success of Nigerian-origin athletes for other countries serves as a bittersweet reminder of the potential that exists within the nation but is unrealized due to systemic inequalities. This can lead to a sense of national disillusionment, where the population may feel that their country is unable to compete effectively on the global stage, not due to a lack of talent but due to structural disadvantages rooted in global inequality (Akpata, 2024).

On a broader scale, the success of diaspora athletes also speaks to the global inequalities that drive migration in the first place. Many talented individuals from countries like Nigeria seek opportunities in wealthier nations because their home countries cannot provide the necessary support to develop their talents. This migration of talent not only deprives the home country of potential Olympic success but also perpetuates the global inequality that Durkheim's theories highlight – where wealthier nations continue to accumulate resources, talent, and success, while less wealthy nations struggle to compete.

In conclusion, the disappointing performance of team Nigeria at the Paris 2024 Olympics, contrasted with the success of athletes of Nigerian origin for other countries, exemplifies the broader issues of global inequality. The disparity in resources and opportunities between wealthy and less wealthy nations is clearly visible in the outcomes of the Olympics, where nations with more resources and better infrastructure consistently outperform those with less. This analysis, grounded in Durkheim's ideas, suggests that addressing these inequalities is essential for creating a more level playing field in international competitions and beyond.

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