

BOOK REVIEW

Durkheim's Suicide: A Study in Sociology

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French sociologist Emile Durkheim published *Suicide, a Study in Sociology*, in the year 1897. Durkheim made a major impact on sociological studies by publishing *Suicide*, which is considered both a theoretical and methodological exemplar (Appelrouth & Edles, 2012). His interest in the study of suicide and the discourses surrounding it was influenced by the suicide of one of his very own close friends (Luke, 1973). As a sociologist, Durkheim proceeded to explore links between causes of suicide and various social factors. His approach to the suicide phenomenon was a polar opposite to suicide being predominantly regarded as a solitary act of an individual. The analysis of suicide rate between societies and certain time periods, and among various segments of the same society helped Durkheim establish that individual pathologies are dependent on social conditions (Appelrouth & Edles, 2012). This allowed Durkheim to exhibit how sociologists can study social behaviour using scientific methods, which he considered to be an instrument to approve of sociology as a viable scientific discipline. The current article reviews Emile Durkheim's study of suicide in terms of its methodological approach, conceptual and subjective understanding.

To establish a proper understanding of Durkheim's study on suicide, it is crucial to assess his objectives behind it. Suicide had been treated as a moral problem in the eighteenth century and ever since then it had been raising a widespread debate (Luke, 1973). However, in the nineteenth century, suicide escalated as a social problem requiring an explanation in terms of social variables. There were several statistical analyses and interpretative works examining the differences in the suicide rate in order to explain suicide as a social problem. Thus, one of the fundamental objectives of Durkheim's study was to synthesize the theories of earlier ideas and findings that regarded suicide as a social phenomenon (Luke, 1973). In his book, Durkheim demonstrates the fundamental principles of social interpretation in action (Simpson, 1951). Durkheim seeks to explain the basic theme that suicide is a phenomenon linked to an individual who in fact is influenced by the social structure and its ramifying functions (Simpson, 1951).

The book persistently elucidates suicide as a social fact and hence explaining its causes in terms of other social facts. The suicide rate of a given society was considered a mere social rather than an individual act of suicide. The suicide rate, as revealed by the statistics, constituted the social fact that helped explain itself as a consequence of a disparity in the social structure. Durkheim (1897) defines suicide as “the cases of the death directly or indirectly resulting from an appositive or negative act of victim himself, which he knows will produce this result” (as cited in Thompson 1982, 110). He also contends that such act of self-destruction occurs in different frequency in various populations, and that it depends on two social variables namely social integration and social regulation (Johnson, 1965).

In the above arguments presented by Durkheim, he clearly takes no consideration of suicide as an outcome of individual choice. He rather emphasized on the suicide rate of a society in order to demonstrate that it is essentially related to the social environment. In doing so, Durkheim dismisses that suicide results from psychological instability, organic-physic factors such as race and hereditary, physical environment such as temperature and climate, and the psychological phenomenon of imitation (Lukes, 1973). However, many critics refute Durkheim’s stance on suicide as sole social phenomenon. For instance, Giddens (1965) posed that even though some variation in suicide rate can be insignificantly related to social and economic changes, such changes play a very small role in aetiology of suicide. Further, it is argued that since suicide is statically trivial in relation to the total population of a society, social factors cannot influence its aetiology (Giddens, 1965). Similarly, Travis (1990) argues that Durkheim’s denial of organic-physic causes of suicide is invalid because a study has shown that the enormous population of suicide is caused by physic terror, loneliness and social isolation. Hence, defining suicide in a sum of generally acceptable biological, psychological and sociological causes could eliminate the validity of Durkheim’s interpretation of the concept.

The book classifies four types of suicides as; egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic suicide. Egoistic suicide is an outcome of weak integration of social groups, which leads to feeble attachment of the individual to his group (Besnard, 2005). Conversely, altruistic suicide results from too strong an integration with the group, which leads to minimal individualization. This kind of suicide is evident in primitive society and in modern society, the military (Besnard, 2005). Durkheim also introduces the concept of anomie, which was the consequences of social change causing a diminution of social regulation, and hence anomic suicides are due to the absence of norms guiding the objectives of human action. The last type of suicide, so-called fatalistic suicide can be characterised “as the impossibility of internalising norms which are too constraining or illegitimate” (Besnard 2005, p.71). However, if we consider the above-mentioned classification

of suicide, Durkheim fails to give a clear-cut distinction amongst the types of social conditions that lead to suicide. Many critics have often observed this lack of distinctiveness in the Durkheim classification of social conditions, and mentioned that Durkheim is often vague about the concepts of social integration, excessive individualism, and anomie, making it difficult to measure them (Travis, 1990).

On introducing anomic suicide, Durkheim states that there is a relation between how regulative action is run in a society and the social suicide rate. He then established that an economic crisis has an aggravating effect on the suicidal tendency. Durkheim had provided the suicide rates data that was seen increasing in times of financial crisis, such as bankruptcy over a period of time. According to him, if the increase in suicide rate attributed is to economic crisis then the number of voluntary death should perceptibly diminish as the society saw economic prosperity. To examine this hypothesis, Durkheim studies the rate of suicides in nations with varying economic conditions considering suicides per million inhabitants. He found out that high poverty did not necessarily result in higher suicide rate. In fact, he found out that there was very little suicide in Ireland, Calabria and Spain, where poverty existed (Durkheim, 1897). Durkheim also explains that poverty may actually protect against suicide because it is a restraint in itself. He concludes that an industrial or financial crisis does not increase the suicide rates because it leads to poverty. Since the economic prosperity saw the same results in the suicide rate, it is rather due to the crisis of change that creates a disturbance of the collective order. Therefore, every disturbance of equilibrium, despite the fact it leads to greater comfort or improved general vitality, acts as a contributor to voluntary death (Durkheim, 1897).

Although Durkheim derives his conclusion from his meticulous analysis of statistical data obtained from different nations, there are several reasons why those data cannot be completely reliable. According to Douglas (1996), Durkheim had not necessarily focused on scientific methods of determining and analyzing because he was already preoccupied on what to prove out of his study of suicide. Furthermore, Selvin (1965) noted that Durkheim lacked adequate statistical equipment leading him to theoretical contradictions in several occasions. Douglas (1996) argues that Durkheim should have carried out a meticulous study of official statistics in terms of its validity and reliability. Another criticism is that the way Durkheim treats the statistical interaction and theories related to it are inconsistent (Selvin, 1965). Durkheim establishes that poverty is not linked to economic crisis and suicide. He argues that poverty “tends rather produce the opposite effect. There is very little suicide in Ireland, where the peasantry leads to wretched life. Poverty-stricken Calabria has no suicide at all; Spain has a tenth as many as France” (Durkheim, 1897). Selvin (1965) criticizes that Durkheim had attributed the link between groups and individual behaviour to only one aspect of the group

that is poverty. He had failed to judge the group on rest of the similar aspects that group shared and unnecessarily singled out poverty as the cause of lower suicide rate in those regions (Selvin, 1965). Thus, it shows the problem of reducing a description of a group in terms of a single variable. Selvin (1965) suggest that such problems can be reduced by holding the rest of the group characteristics constant by cross tabulation similar to what one does with individual characteristics. Durkheim classifies nations or provinces according to their rate of suicide. This analysis is based on large aggregates and we cannot tell for certain if these recorded numbers are actual incidences of suicide. Durkheim's contextual analysis begs questions about how the individual characteristics relate to influence behaviour (Selvin 1965). "Durkheim lacked adequate statistical techniques, he occasionally led into theoretical contradictions" (Selvin, 1965, p. 118).

In conclusion, although the current statistical materials are far more advanced and extensive, and sociological methods are better functioning compared to that of Durkheim's, his work on suicide provided a vital basis to suicide as a study of in sociology. The impact of Durkheim's study should not be neglected because it is still a prototype of the methodological approach that guides modern sociology. Despite the criticisms about overall validity of his study, his work can still be considered remarkable, as it was a breakthrough study in sociology incorporating scientific methods. Durkheim's Suicide is a successful study in terms of providing an important framework to identify patterns of suicide and its relation to the social facts (Hassan, 1998). Although Durkheim has considerably inclined on suicide as a social phenomenon and not an act of an individual, it could be understood as his way of bringing the focus on elucidating how social facts play role in determining the rate of suicide. Durkheim's endeavor to bring forward a highly comprehensive study devoted to the serious social phenomenon of suicide had helped in the understanding the sociology of suicide. His efforts to explain suicide as a social phenomenon has become a trailblazer for many of current scholars, who study this phenomenon for the betterment of the society as a whole.

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