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CLASSICAL SOCIOLOGICAL THEORY AND FOUNDATIONS OF AMERICAN SOCIOLOGY

CONTENTS

20. Le Suicide (1897) – Introduction/Book 2

“One can only explain what can be compared.”

NOTE ON SOURCE: This passage is from Durkheim's *Le Suicide: Etude de Sociologie*, published in 1897 in Paris by Alcan Press. It was first translated as *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* in 1951 by Spaulding and Simpson and published by the Free Press. This is generally the translation used in most reprinted editions. A second translation was made in 2007 by Robin Buss for Penguin Publishing. This translation is recommended if you want to read the entire work.

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Introduction – Why this is important and what to look for

When reading an important but difficult work like Suicide, it is often useful to spend the most time reading the introduction. Here, Durkheim, always very organized, sets forth the problem and the methods he will use to address the problem. As always with Durkheim, he first sets out a definition of any key concepts – here, “suicide.” Before reading the Introduction passage, you may want to contemplate for yourself what a useful definition of this term would be. After the introduction, we move to some key passages in Book 2, where Durkheim sets forth both the method and results of his study of suicide. This book is crucial for understanding Durkheim’s overall theory on society and its collective problems.

Introduction

One hears the word suicide used many times in the course of conversation, so one could believe that everyone knows what it means and that defining it would be unnecessary. But in reality, the usual words used, like the concepts they express, are always ambiguous and the researcher who uses the everyday language without further elaboration exposes herself to grave confusion. Not only is the understanding of the term so vaguely defined that it changes from one circumstance to another, but it also results in categories of very different things being called the same thing or else things that are quite the same being called by different names. One can only explain what can be compared. A scientific investigation can only be successful if it deals with comparable facts. The more comparable facts, the likelier the success of analysis. The scientist cannot use the groups of facts as categorized in everyday speech, however. She must construct the groups that she wishes to study, in order to ensure the homogeneity and specificity of what she is comparing.

Our first task then is to determine the order of things we propose to study under the name of ‘Suicide.’ ...

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But this definition is incomplete. [What about the confused man who jumps out of a window, thinking it is level with the ground?] Should we say that suicide is only an act resulting in death when the victim has that result in mind? [But how can we ever get into another's mind this way and know if he or she intended to die?] Intention is a thing too intimate to be grasped by an outsider...how many times have we ourselves mistaken the motives of our own acts! For example, when we explain what we do in terms of generous intentions or elevated considerations when we are really inspired by petty jealousies or blind habit.

[After much more back and forth, we are led to the following:]

Suicide is any death which results directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act by the victim and which the victim should know will produce such a result.

But is the thing we have so defined of interest to the sociologist? Because suicide is an act of the individual that affects the individual as such, it appears to depend exclusively on individual factors and to be more psychological than sociological.

We can, in fact, look at this from a different perspective. Instead of seeing particular events, isolated from one another, each suicide the result of its own individual factors, we can consider all the suicides committed in a given society over a given period of time. By doing so, we actually arrive at something that constitutes a new fact – not simply a sum of many parts, but a wholly new social fact to be observed and analyzed.

Each society, at each moment of its history, has a particular aptitude towards suicide. We can measure the relative intensity of this aptitude by figuring the total number of voluntary deaths in the population of every age and sex. We call the resulting figure the *rate of mortality-suicide* for that particular society.

Our intention is not to provide a complete inventory of all the possible conditions that can give rise to particular suicides, but to investigate what lies behind the social rate of suicide. There are surely many individual conditions that are not general enough to affect the social rate. These individual conditions may lead this or that isolated individual to commit suicide regardless of whether the society has a strong

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those which have an effect on the whole of society are of interest to us. The suicide rate is the product of these factors, which is why we must consider them.

That is the aim of the present work, which consists of three parts.

FIRST, the phenomenon we are trying to explain must result from extra-social causes, generally speaking, or specifically social ones. In the first section we ask what is the influence of the former, and see that it is almost nothing, or very little.

SECOND, we determine the nature of the social causes, the way they produce their effects, and the relationship with the individual states that accompany the different kinds of suicide.

THIRD, we will be able to state with more clarity of what consists the social element of suicide, that is to say, the collective tendency of which we have spoken, how it is connected to other social facts and the means by which it is possible to act upon it.

Book TWO: Social Causes and Social Types

Chapter 1: Method of Determining Them

We have established that there exists for each social group a specific tendency towards suicide that is explained by neither the physiological makeup of individuals nor the physical environment.^[1] After eliminating these extra-social factors, we see that the rate of suicide must depend upon social causes and itself exist as a collective phenomenon. This collective tendency toward suicide is what we now must study.

To this end, leaving aside the individual as individual, with her motives and her ideas, we will ask what it is about different social walks of life (religious, family, political, professional) that cause the rate of suicide to vary. It is only after doing this, coming back to individuals, that we can discover how these general causes are individualized to produce murderous results.

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Let us first observe in what way the different religious faiths affect suicide.

[Durkheim sets forth some statistics showing that the rate of suicide is relatively low in Catholic countries (Spain, Portugal, Italy) and high in Protestant countries (Prussia, Saxony, Denmark). The rate of suicide among Jewish communities is even lower – only half that of Protestant communities.]

Having established the facts, how are we to explain them?

[Although some might point out the prohibition against suicide as a reason for the lower suicide rate among Catholics, this does not really explain things. Why? Because Protestants also forbid suicide and the prohibition is the least important among Jews, who have the lowest rate]

If Protestantism favors the development of suicide, it is not because it views it more tolerably than Catholicism. If the two religions both prohibit suicide, then their unequal effect on suicide must lie somewhere else, in one of the more general characteristics that differentiate the two. The only essential difference between these two religions is that Protestantism admits much more free inquiry than Catholicism....We are now reaching our first conclusion, that the greater tendency towards suicide among Protestants must be related to the spirit of free inquiry that animates this religion. But free inquiry itself is the result of a previous cause.

[But why is this so? Why does Protestantism allow for free inquiry? For this we need to attend to the history of Protestantism. Free inquiry flows from the context of schisms – free inquiry is permitted in order to permit schisms to develop more freely. Protestantism gives a greater place to individual thought (free inquiry) because it involves fewer common beliefs and practices – that is the nature of Protestantism itself.]

The more ways there are to act and think that are marked as religious and thus removed from free inquiry, the more the very idea of God will be present in every aspect of life and thus make individual wills converge toward a single end. On the other hand, the greater the religious group abandons judgment on particulars, the more it will be absent in the lives of its members, and the less cohesion and vitality

[In a similar fashion, because of anti-Semitism and long histories of hostility, Jewish communities have had to sustain unusually strong feelings of solidarity to survive. This has resulted in a lower than average rate of suicide. They are “protected” from suicide because they are obliged to live more firmly side by side]

Two important conclusions have emerged from this chapter.

ONE, we see why, generally speaking, suicide increases along with scientific knowledge. It is not that science is causing more suicide – it is in itself innocent and nothing is more unjust than this accusation. Rather, these two facts (more suicide and scientific progress) are the result of a single general state. People search for science and people kill themselves at greater rates because religion has lost its cohesion. It is not that science undermines religion but rather that, because religion is falling apart, our thirst for knowledge is awakened. Science is not sought as a way to destroy accepted ideas, but because those ideas are no longer accepted. Far from being the source of the problem, science is the only remedy we now have. Once established beliefs have been cleared away by time, they cannot be reestablished artificially. It is only reflection that can guide our lives. Once the social instinct is deadened, intelligence is the only guide we can depend upon to refashion our moral conscience. However perilous the enterprise, we cannot hesitate, because we have no other choice. Let those who look on the collapse of old beliefs with anxiety and sadness stop blaming science of an evil it has not caused, for it is science, on the contrary, which can provide our only cure! Do not treat science like the enemy! Science is the only weapon we have to permit us to struggle against the dissolution which itself has produced science. It is not by gagging science that one can restore authority to disappearing traditions: we will only render ourselves impotent to replace them.

TWO, we can see why, generally speaking, religion has a prophylactic effect on suicide. This is not, as sometimes said, because it prohibits suicide. Protestants believe in God and in the immortality of the soul no less than do Catholics. It is not the special nature of religious concepts that explains the beneficial influence of religion. If religion protects one against the desire to commit suicide, is it is not because it preaches respect for the person but because religion is a community. It is because

Chapter 3. Egotistical Suicide, continued

But if religion protects against suicide because and to the extent that it is a society, it is probable that other social groups produce the same effect. We can therefore examine the family and political groups from this point of view. [Omitted Examples: (1) suicide rate lower among married men than unmarried men; (2) suicide rate lower during times of political upheaval, when people unite against a common foe, for example.]

We have now established the three propositions:

Suicide varies with the degree of integration of religious society

Suicide varies with the degree of integration of domestic society

Suicide varies with the degree of integration of political society

This similarity in our three propositions shows that, while these different communities have a moderating effect on suicide, it is not because of characteristics peculiar to them but for some reason common to them all. There must be a single property shared by all these group, albeit in different degrees. And the only quality that satisfies this condition is that they are all strongly integrated social groups. So, we arrive at this general conclusion: *Suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups to which the individual belongs.* The more the groups to which a person belong are weakened, the less the person depends upon them and the more she depends upon herself. She recognizes no other rules of conduct than those based on her own individual interests. If we call this state in which the individual affirms himself more than the social self and depends upon the former more than latter, “egoism,” then we might call the type of suicide that results from excessive individualization “egoistic suicide.”

Chapter 4. Altruistic Suicide

[In this chapter, Durkheim discusses a form of suicide not met with much in modern society. In this form, suicide occurs as a matter of strong social obligation, as the widow who throws herself on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. Durkheim uses

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Society is not only an object that attracts to it the feelings and actions of people, but also a force that directs them. There is a relationship between the operation of this regulatory action and the social rate of suicide.

First, it is in that economic crises aggravate the suicide rate. [Interestingly, both increases in prosperity and economic crises that lead to poverty have the same result.] It is because they are critical, disturbances in the collective order, that we see more suicide. Whenever serious rearrangements take place in society, whether due to sudden growth or unanticipated disaster, people are more inclined to kill themselves. Why? A few preliminary considerations are necessary before we can properly address this question.

Nobody can be happy or alive, really, unless their needs are adjusted to their means. That is, if they demand more than they can be provided with, or desire something that is unavailable to them, they will be constantly frustrated and unable to function without suffering. Any action that cannot be done without suffering tends not to be repeated. Thus, unsatisfied aptitudes atrophy, including the general appetite for life.

In non-human animals, the balance between needs and means occurs somewhat spontaneously, because it depends on material conditions alone. Their reflective abilities are so low that they cannot imagine any ends except those dependent on physical nature. They do not want more than what they can achieve.

But the same is not true for non-human animals, most of whose needs are not dependent on the body alone. There seems never an end to the amount of well-being, comfort, and luxury that a human being can legitimately seek. There is nothing in our make-up that marks a limit to our desires. Our sensibility is a bottomless pit that nothing can fill.

If this is the case, that our desires can only be a source of torment for us. Unlimited desires, by definition, do not satisfy.

For things to be otherwise, it is necessary that passions should be limited. It is only in this way that they can be in line with our actual abilities and so satisfied. But since there is nothing in the individual person that can limit desires, this limitation

power above it accepted by the individual. Society alone has the necessary authority to state the law and to set the point beyond which the passions may not go.

So, at every historical moment, there is a vague feeling in the moral conscience of societies of the relative worth of each job, what is owed to each person for the work they do [e.g., *financial analyst, ditch digger, politician, minister*]. The different jobs are, in a way, hierarchized in public opinion and a certain level of well-being is attributed to each according to the place it occupies in this hierarchy. For example, in the common view there is a certain standard of living that is regarded as the upper limit of which a day laborer can reasonably aspire to, and also a lower limit below which it is considered he should not be allowed to fall, absent some serious failure in his duties.

Everyone has a vague idea, in their particular sphere, of the limit towards which their ambition may reach, and does not aspire beyond that limit. A goal and a limit are thus set for desires. There is nothing rigid or absolute about this, of course. There is a lot of wiggle room within those set limits. In general, each person is in harmony with her condition and wants only what she can legitimately wish for as the normal reward for her activity. The balance of her happiness is stable because it is defined.

However, if we did not consider the way jobs were allocated in the first place as fair, none of this would work. The worker is not in harmony with her social position if she is not convinced that this position is the one that she deserves! If she considers that she deserves another, then the one that she has cannot possibly satisfy her (even if the standard of living for that job is reasonably set).

There is no society that has ever existed that has not a set of rules settling the way in which different social conditions (e.g., *laborer or owner? ditch-digger or financial analyst?*) are open to individuals, although these rules have varied across time and place. In the past, birth was the almost exclusive principle of social classification, while today we accept inherited wealth and merit up to a point, but not “birth” alone.

Today, some have argued that we are approaching a situation where each person

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unfair. Everyone should feel spontaneously that things are as they should be. There is no doubt that as we approach such an ideal of equality, there will be less social constraint needed, but it is only a matter of degree because there will always be some things, such as natural gifts, that are inherited. So, we will always need a moral discipline to make those whom nature has least favored accept the more lowly position that they owe to the chance of their birth.

Yet even this regime can only work if it is considered fair by the people subjected to it. When it is no longer maintained except by custom and by force, peace and harmony cannot exist. A spirit of anxiety and discontent lurks beneath the surface, and appetites which cannot be satisfied break out. This is what happened in Rome and Ancient Greece and recently in our day when aristocratic prejudices started to lose their old ascendancy. But such states of disruption are exceptional and only take place when society is in crisis. Normally, the collective order seems fair by the great majority of its subjects.

When we say that authority is necessary, we do not mean violence is the only means it can be established. People should follow authority out of respect and not fear. It is not true that human activity can be freed from all restraints. There is nothing in the world that can enjoy such a state of things, since each creature on the planet exists in relation to all others. Its nature depends not only on itself but on other creatures. It is only a matter of degree the difference between a mineral and a thinking subject. What is peculiar to human creatures is that the restraint we find ourselves in is not physical but moral, which is to say, social. We receive our laws not from a material environment which is brutally imposed on us, but from a conscience which is greater than our own. Because the greater and best part of our life goes beyond the body, we escape from the yoke of the body, but bow beneath that of society.

[And now to our question...] However, when society is disturbed, either by a painful crisis or by a fortunate but too-sudden transformation, it cannot exercise this constraining function; as a result, we see a rise in the suicide rate.

If *anomie* [the state of unregulation] were to occur only in occasional bursts and in the form of acute crises, it might from time to time vary the social rate of suicide, but it would not be a regular constant factor. However, there is one area of social life

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For more than a century, economic progress has consisted primarily in deregulating industry. Until modern times, a whole system of moral powers was in place to discipline industrial relations (religion, custom, government power).

Now, the state of crisis and anomie is constant – the new normal, one could say. From top to bottom, desires and wants are aroused that cannot be satisfied. The real seems worthless beside what is seen as possible by fevered imaginations. One thirsts for novelty. These circumstances are so well established that society has got used to them. People constantly say that it is part of human nature to be constantly discontented, to keep wanting more, pressing forward, to some indeterminate goal. The doctrine of progress no matter what and as fast as possible has become our article of faith.

Industrial and commercial professions are among the most suicide-prone of all professions, much more so than agriculture, for example.

Anomie is therefore a regular and specific factor in suicide in our modern societies. This form of suicide depends not on the way in which people are attached to society but on the way in which it controls them (or fails to do so). Egotistical suicide happens when people no longer see any sense in living; altruistic suicide from the fact that this sense appears to them to be situated beyond life itself; and the third kind, anomic suicide, from their activity being disrupted and from their suffering as a result.

Anomic suicide is not unrelated to egotistical suicide. Both occur when society is not sufficiently present for individuals. But whereas in egotistical suicide society is lacking in collective activity, leaving it deprived of object and meaning, in anomic suicide society is absent as a brake to control individual passions. Though the two are related, they are interdependent. These two kinds of suicide do not recruit their victims from the same social contexts: the first recruits from the world of thinking people; the second from the industrial and commercial field.

Economic anomie is not the only kind of anomie that can produce suicide, however. A few other non-economic cases include: widowhood, divorce. Marriage appears to favor the wife in respect of suicide to the extent that divorce is more common (with

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wife, protecting her from sexual attacks of men in general. Monogamy is often presented as a sacrifice that men make to their polygamous instincts in order to raise and improve the condition of woman through marriage. In reality, whatever the historical causes that made men decide to impose this restriction on himself, it is the man who most benefits from it. The freedom which he has given up could only be a source of torment for him. Women are a different matter. One can say that, by submitting herself to the same regime, she is the one who truly makes the sacrifice.

[In a footnote here, Durkheim proposes a fourth form of suicide that would result from “an excess of regulation” and gives as an example the historical case of slaves and the modern example of married women without children. Otherwise, he notes, we do not see many cases of it and gives it the name, “fatalistic suicide.”]

Questions for Contemplation and Discussion

1. Why is it important to define your concepts before engaging in research? How would you have defined suicide before reading this passage? Do you agree with Durkheim’s definition? What, if anything, is not included in the definition?
2. To critics who say that suicide is a psychological problem, rather than a sociological phenomenon, how does Durkheim respond? Why is the suicide rate of importance to the sociologist?
3. What is Durkheim’s explanation for the lower suicide rates among Catholics and Jews than Protestants? Is his answer related to religious aspects of these communities, or something else (or can we separate the two)?
4. What does Durkheim think of science? What is its relationship to the rate of suicide? What role does it/ should it play in modern society? Ask some friends and colleagues what they think the “upper limit” and “lower limit” of a day laborer’s standard of living should be. How much agreement did you find in their answers? What about a CEO?

6. In the 1970s, the average CEO earned 35 times more than the average worker at his or her company. Now, the CEO: worker pay ratio in the US has ballooned to 333 to 1. Does this seem a fair allocation of reward? What might be the consequences of this change, according to Durkheim?
7. What is the key to happiness?
8. What does it mean to say that social positions were open or closed by “birth” as a social classifier? Can you provide examples? How does this compare with what Weber had to say about *Stände*?
9. Durkheim’s lengthy digression on marriage has been much abbreviated here, leaving but his main point, and an observation which flies in the face of much of what was written at the time about marriage’s protective function for women. What is his observation and how does it undercut 19th century views on marriage? What implications for the social policy of divorce follow?

Concepts

Suicide (and three (or 4) forms)

Social suicide rate

Anomie

1. Read the original text if you would like to see how this was established. [↗](#)

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