

## **DURKHEIM AND THE STUDY OF SUICIDE**

### **WHY DID DURKHEIM STUDY SUICIDE?**

**He did it to establish sociology as an academic discipline with a distinct approach to the 'social' and to establish a 'scientific' methodology and approach.**

Some texts argue that Durkheim was a positivist. More recent evaluations, e.g. Taylor, argue that Durkheim was a **realist**.

### **MAIN FINDINGS**

Factors uncovered through use of official statistics: suicide varies according to: religion, family size, political/national crises, economic conditions, occupational groups, the divorce rate.

### **CONCLUSIONS**

1. Within single societies the SR remains constant
2. SR varies between societies
3. SR varies between different groups within the same society.

Durkheim therefore discounted individualistic explanations of suicide. He also eliminated statistically factors such as climate, seasons, alcoholism, heredity and mental state.

### **ANALYSIS**

Based on 'social bonds' that bind an individual to society:

- · · · 1. "Social integration" the individuals commitment to norms, values, beliefs.
- 2. "Moral regulation" societal/group control over individual desires.
- 3. Equilibrium an appropriate degree of integration and regulation. any imbalance increases suicide.

### **FOUR TYPES OF SUICIDE**

1. Egoistic-inadequate integration
2. Altruistic-excessive integration
3. Anomic-inadequate regulation
4. Fatalistic-excessive regulation

Emphasis on integration which protects individual from suicidal forces is what according to Taylor(1988) makes Durkheim a realist

### **GIBBS & MARTIN (1964) The Social Factors of Suicide**

Gibbs & Martin tried to build on Durkheim and extend the status integration theory. "The suicide rate of a population varies inversely with the stability and durability of social relations within that population." They were relatively successful in their goal and stimulated efforts to replicate their findings with mixed results.

### **J. Douglas(1967) The Social Meaning of Suicide**

Douglas argues that Durkheim worked with an implicit theory of shared meanings. He had no information, other than his own 'common-sense' on the meanings given to suicide by those involved. Thus Durkheim decided, rather than showed, the social meanings of suicide. Thus status loss, anomie etc are Durkheim's way of describing the 'causes' of suicide.

Durkheim also assumed that suicide was considered equally immoral in all the nations and groups of Europe. Bayet(1922), argues that this assumption is false and that even within France there were varying attitudes towards suicide. Durkheim also explained the lower suicide rate of women by arguing that women are more easily satisfied than men, less prone to anomie and happy in the company of a few pets, but provides no evidence.

Douglas argues that sociological analysis should focus on meaning rather than social structure. He argues that to understand suicide sociologically we should examine the meaning of suicide for the

participants-using diaries, suicide notes, psychiatrists notes and biographies. He suggests a number of typical meanings suicide can have in Western society

1. Suicide as reunion-release from cares/pressures.
2. Suicide as atonement-transforming oneself for others.
3. Suicide as revenge-most increased form in 20th century.

### **J. Maxwell Atkinson, Societal Reactions to Suicide: The Role of Coroner's Definitions.**

1. The data problem

Suicide is clearly not easy to study and thus there has tended to be an over reliance on official statistics. Two main data problems have been investigated: investigations into the accuracy of official statistics, and investigations into the validity of such statistics.

2. Problems of the coroner

The coroner has to conduct an inquest where s/he is forced to rely on clues to infer suicidal intent, in fact a coroner constructs a psychological autopsy.

3. Indicators of suicidal intent

#### **A) Suicide notes**

1. Surest sign-but notes can conceal homicide and notes are only found in a minority of cases. Additionally notes might be destroyed (by friends/relatives).
2. Study of suicide notes suggests that genuine notes are rational, give practical advice and have an awareness of the consequences of their death. They also give some idea of the social meaning of suicide.

#### **B) Mode of death**

1. Certain types of death are more likely to be interpreted as suicide than others. for example road deaths are unlikely to be viewed as suicide, but hanging is.
2. Some methods are less clear cut, e.g. drug overdoses, because there is the problem of proving intent, rather than a mistake. Atkinson writes:

In the absence of a suicide note...the way a person died serves as a general initial pointer to the kind of verdict which is expected or to the further kinds of evidence which will be needed to make a decision.

3. The search for clues can lead to idiosyncratic rules of thumb in making a decision, e.g.

A thing I look for in a drowning is whether or not the clothes are left folded. If they are found neatly folded on the beach, it usually points to a suicide.

(We are left to wonder why!?)

#### **C) Location and circumstances of Death**

These give clues as to suicidal intent, for example a deserted place is seen as more likely to be a real attempt. There seems to be a belief that if someone wants to kill themselves they will make a realistic attempt at it and steps will be taken to ensure the maximum probability of death.

#### **D) Life history and Mental condition**

Coroners tend to have ideas about the kinds of circumstance which can lead people to suicide-broken homes, divorce redundancy etc. The general belief is that the suicide is unhappy, so coroners search for a possible cause of unhappiness.

### **S. Taylor(1982) Persons Under Trains, in, Durkheim and the Study of suicide.**

Taylor shows how coroners construct a suicidal biography and negotiate the verdict in a number of apparently identical deaths.

### **Baechler(1979) Suicides**

uses a similar approach to Douglas. he identifies four main types:

1. Escapist-from intolerable situations such as grief or punishment.

2. Aggressive-an attempt to harm others.
3. Oblative-as sacrifice, or to attain a desired state in others opinion.
4. Ludic-as a test to prove oneself.

Interpretive approaches involve the examination of the suicidal individual and the meanings given to the suicidal act, but such an approach tells us very little about how individual experiences of suicide are influenced by wider society. Another criticism is that both interpretive and traditional approaches ignore the complexity of the suicidal act and are based upon certain common-sense and perhaps unwarranted assumptions about suicide. It is this idea that is explored in what are often called micro-social approaches to suicide. These generally employ an ethnomethodological approach and are based upon case studies of suicide.