

A review on the book of suicide sociology essay



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Emile Durkheim (1858-1917) was the greatest French philosopher and sociologist and is recognized today as the father of the Sociology. Durkheim did various investigations in different fields such as labor, suicide, religion, etc. Four of his major books: “ De la Division du Travail Social (The Division of Labor in Society), “ Les Formes Elementaires de la vie Religieuse” (The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life), “ Les Regles de la Method Sociologie” (The Rules of Sociological Method) and “ Le Suicide: Etude de Sociologie” (Suicide: A Study in Sociology) are regarded as a the foundation of further sociological studies. Randall (1975) suggested that Durkheim was the first one who used empirical method correctly in scientific field (Randall, 1975).

Durkheim’s third major work, the book of “ Suicide” was first published in 1897, which aimed to explain suicide rates. Taylor (1982) suggested that prior to Durkheim’s study , suicide act was regarded as individualistic, which rose of individual psychological tendencies (Taylor, 1982) Durkheim’s “ Suicide” challenged the popular academic views and claimed that suicide is a social phenomena, which depended on social causes and it is collective in nature. In his book Durkheim (1951) also rejected statistical data as a source of suicidal rates explanation and argued that official statistics only represented the notion of officials opinions of phenomena’s motives and concluded that suicide occurred due to imbalance of social integration and moral regulation, either being too high or too low (Durkheim, 1951). According to Durkheim (1951) suicide” in all death cases results directly or indirectly from negative or positive act of the victim, knowing that the suicide act will produce this result” (Durkheim, 1951: 44).

In his book “ Suicide” Book One Durkheim first analyzed extra social factors: psychopathic states, normal psychological states, cosmic factors and imitation. Durkheim (1951) examined suicides of the insane suggested by Jousset and Moreau de Tours such as maniac suicide, caused by delirium and hallucinations, where an individual killed himself to escape from imaginary danger; melancholic suicide, caused by extreme depression and sadness, where a person committed suicide due to loss of reality of relationship to others and environment; obsessive suicide, caused by obsessive desire to kill himself, where an individual’s suicide occurred without any real cause; impulsive or automatic suicide, caused impulsive death wish and statistical evidence and concluded that there was no link between suicide and mental illness. To back up his findings he proposed, for example, that women were more likely to be mentally ill compare to men, 54-55 and 46-45 respectively, while suicide data showed that men were among the first to commit a suicide; mental illness among Jews was highest compare to other religions such as Protestantism and Catholicism, however suicide rates showed the opposite in relation to Jews (Durkheim, 1951). According to Hassard (1995), Durkheim eliminated insanity as a cause of suicide because French philosopher claimed that insane individuals had no motive for such acts (Hassard, 1995). Durkheim (1951) also rejected alcohol consumption from suicides and stated that substance abuse had no correlation to suicide rates. He further placed an example of alcohol consumption and suggested that in France substance consumption was low, however suicide rates were high and therefore substance abuse had no link to suicidal tendencies.

Philosopher postulated that heritage also, had no connection in vital role for suicide and questioned the fact if it was, it should then affected both sexes,

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while his research findings suggested that suicide rate was rare among children compare to parents (Durkheim, 1951). Durkheim (1951) stated that there was no correlation between suicide and geographical area or time of year. In his findings he highlighted that suicide rates, for example: varied- in the beginning of 19 century rates were highest in the north of Italy, while by the end in the south of Italy.; during the warm periods were higher compare to the cold months; more suicides were committed during the day compare to the night time, however, claimed that day length had no correlation to suicide rates. Finally, he eliminated imitation and pointed out that the term of imitation associated unexplained repetitions of the actions which occurred in individual's presence and stated that if suicide could become epidemic, it should have been then reflect statistical data of suicide on geographical basis (Durkheim, 1951).

Having rejected the above ideas Durkheim turned, in the following chapter of the book, to explain social causes and social types of suicide. The father of sociology proposed four main types of suicide.

Egoistic suicides, he claimed , occurred as a result of low social integration, which resulted due to excessive individualization and suggested that individuals with weak social bonds had little social support and guidance, and therefore suicide continued on increased basis. Durkheim (1951) compared suicide rates among Protestants, Jews and Catholics and founded that protestant suicide rates were higher compare to other religion representatives. As an explanation, he suggested that the cause of suicide rates could be founded within the nature of religious confession itself. For example, Jews lower suicide rates accounted to the response of the hostility

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towards them and therefore their minority status forced them to achieve greater unity and social integration, which eliminated individual differences. While Protestants suicide rates were related to its spirit of free inquiry, in other words, Protestants were allowed a greater freedom of thought and had fewer commonly accepted traditional values and practices. Durkheim (1951) argued that once these commonly accepted beliefs and practices were declined, they could not be re-established. Durkheim (1951) concluded that religion protected individuals from self destruction, because it was considered as society itself; the existence of common practices resulted into stronger integration, which eliminated suicide tendencies. Family and political societies had the same effect, as philosopher claimed. Data examined by Durkheim showed that married couples had lower suicide rates compare to unmarried ones, because the role of the family integrated individuals in collectivity, which especially was true to those who also had children, because larger families provided immunity to suicide. Similarly, during social disturbances such as war or revolutions, suicide rates declined due to increased of collective sentiments such as patriotism, national faith, which encouraged stronger social integration for the single cause. According to Durkheim (1951), suicide rates varied inversely with the degree of integration, where suicide act was seen as a result of egoistic detachment from society itself, where individual recognized no common rules, just private interests (Durkheim, 1951).

Altruistic suicides occurred in societies with high integration, where individuals needs compare to communities was less important. Durkheim (1951) claimed that here collective consciousness was too strong which

forced individuals into suicide. Author further acknowledged that such suicides mainly occurred in primitive societies such as native Americans, Indians and grouped such suicides in following subcategories: obligatory suicide, occurred due to feeling of duty, mainly by men who were old or ill, women after husband's death, servants and followers after masters death; optional suicide, which occurred out of sense of honor or prestige, where even minor offence or jealousy led someone to suicide; and acute suicide, which was based upon spiritual and mystical beliefs (Durkheim, 1951). Durkheim (1951) placed an example that altruistic suicides occurred in civilized societies. He insisted that suicide rates in army reached an epidemic level when soldiers killed themselves due to unjust punishment, honor, jealousy, refusal to leave, or just because of other suicides which they have witnessed in their presence. However, researcher also acknowledged us that suicide rates depended on the rank: non commissioned officers and officers suicide rates were much higher compare to private ones cause, the mentioned above, had to give up much more of their individuality in order to adapt to requirements of military life and therefore made them more vulnerable to such acts (Durkheim, 1951).

Anomic suicides, author claimed, were related to low degree of regulation by society. Such suicides occurred during the periods of economic depression or economic expansion because of disturbances of the collective order. During such events, individuals were misled with their role and place in society, and such state of dysfunction, as Durkheim (1951) highlighted, resulted into acts of destruction, including suicidal killings. Dysfunctions in regulative powers of society resulted in individuals' disappointments because they had

little control over their own passions and desires. However, poverty on other hand, as Durkheim claimed, protected individuals in a way, because such state was a restraint in itself because human's desires depended on the resources, while wealth made individuals suggest that they could depend more on themselves (Durkheim, 1951). Durkheim (1951) also argued that anomie also rose from a disruption of marriage. Philosopher saw marriage as a social regulation both of physical and moral instinct. Divorce, on other hand, was seen as a source of weakening of matrimonial regulations. As an example, he illustrated men suicide rates of widowhood and divorce and suggested that the rates were higher due to individuals' inability to adapt to sudden changes of a loved one loss or a lack of regulation which marriage provided. However, he claimed that this was not true in a women's case and highlighted that any regulation for them was a constrain, and therefore divorce only freed them (Durkheim, 1951).

The fourth type of suicide, fatalistic, was only briefly mentioned by Durkheim, because he considered it as rare. He proposed that such type of suicide resulted in case of excessive regulation, which related to oppressive discipline. The examples of fatalistic suicide were included slavery and childless wives (Durkheim, 1951).

In his study Durkheim (1951) claimed that different social conditions could affect individual at the same time producing combined suicidal effects. For example, egoistic and anomic suicide may have some resemblance because both victims of suicide were unregulated by society. Similarly, anomie may also be related to altruism (internal despair), and egoism and altruism could combine their influence (Durkheim, 1951).

Suicide phenomena, as Durkheim (1951) noted in his last chapter of the book, is socially constructed, which independent of individual. He claimed that collective tendencies, which determine suicide, have their own social and moral mind, so therefore they were external to the individual. Author argued that for example, murder and suicide, which might seemed to be alike were therefore not related, because murder felt into different type compare to suicide, because it rose from different causes. He argued that social regulation and integration were vital in society, and suggested that if society over regulates or under regulates individuals; suicides would result from such states. French sociologist claimed that the true solution to this problem was to create greater moral closeness within individuals (Durkheim, 1951).

However, Durkheim's book of Suicide was a subject of criticism. Douglas (1970) claimed that Durkheim's explanations of suicide were very confusing, unsystematic, and difficult in interpretation and included contradictory theoretical arguments. He further suggested that many of Durkheim's vital statements have different meanings to many sociologists today. He highlighted that the greatest weakness in Durkheim's work was his fundamental ideas, which he had before hand and argued that he, used these ideas to adjust within statistical facts and to demonstrate their validity. Firstly, researcher claimed that his ideas of egoistic and anomic suicide could be seen in works of the romantics and statisticians at that time, with which French philosopher was associated. Secondly, postulated that Durkheim purposely rejected the current approach of testing data theories in order to establish his morphology of data and causes. Thirdly, it was argued that

Durkheim's observations of suicide were insufficiently objective and inconclusive in nature (Douglas, 1970). Harris (2003) argued that Durkheim's analysis missed the influence of alcohol abuse among suicidal individuals. Researcher suggested that substance abuse was an is a vital problem of the society in relation to suicide rates because such suicides mainly occur and occurred due to loss of close relationships and because of the addiction itself (Harris, 2003). Van Tubergen et al (2005) argued that today community norms are not the primary source of suicide prevention between believers and non-believers and highlighted the tendency that Durkheim analysis of religion impact on suicide decreased and suggested that risk of suicide should not be based on differences between Protestants and Catholics (Van Tubergen et al, 2005). Researchers further questioned Durkheim's thesis how religious societies control individual's behavior in relation to suicide and argued that every individual is unique with his/her feelings, motives and intentions and therefore human's behavior cannot be totally predictable (Van Tubergen et al, 2005). Taylor (1982) also expressed concern about the accuracy of suicide rates and suggested that for example, due to lack of evidence, the statistical data of suicide rates is unreliable and therefore cannot be accurate and valid (Taylor, 1982). Douglas (1970) highlighted the fact that Durkheim positivistic approach, in relation to suicide rates, changed to idealistic one during his research mainly because, as researcher proposed, to reaction of his methodical incompetence to accurately examine empirical evidence (Douglas, 1970).

Durkheim's study of suicide rates also made an impact on criminology discipline. Bryant (2003) highlighted that Durkheim's method of collection

and comparison of suicide rates laid a foundation for future analysis of crime statistics. Author further argued that sociologist developed concept of anomie, which occurred due to lack of sense of social regulation, laid foundation of Merton's anomie theory. Researcher suggested that Durkheim's study of suicide questioned a lot of historical misconceptions which involved suicide. He further stressed the fact that historically suicides were considered as criminal acts and the dead bodies were subject to "tortures" in order to stop anyone from copying the act (Bryant, 2003). Bryant (2003) argued that Durkheim showed that suicides were not all in criminal nature, as well as not individual phenomena but insisted that instead it was a problem concerned the whole society (Bryant, 2003). According to researcher, Durkheim's findings not only simplified the people's understanding towards suicide but also advanced the study of sociology to a greater level of acceptability.

After more that hundred years, "Suicide: A Study in Sociology", still remains the most well received book in sociology. Durkheim's pioneering work, on statistical calculation and comparison of suicide rates and realization of effects on some variables which had to be controlled, contributed to emerging new body in sociology. A point of interest to note is that the causes of suicides still remain more or less the same in the modern times. People continue to commit suicide for a similar reasons such as: wars are still fought in the modern days and the solders march ahead to the war fields to commit altruistic suicides; terrorists willingly commit altruistic suicides for their community and religion; similarly, modern depression sees a number of people committing anomic suicides; the 21st century is seeing also an

increase in divorce rates leading to suicides as people feel troubled after the breakup; the race to beat everyone in the game of materialistic affluence also results in disconnection of relationships with the close ones leading to an increase of anomic suicides. As Bryant (2003) pointed out that " thus, for those individuals committed to reason, suicide may indeed be a matter of pragmatic thinking rather than a moral issue, in some instances, suicide may be a reasonable alternative to living" (Bryant, 2003 : 317).