

Suicide, technology and sociological theory



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Consider recent instances of ‘ webcam suicide’ and other cases in which modern digital technology is involved.

By the 1850s, suicide was a growing social problem in Europe. Many people felt that it was related to the huge industrial changes taking place at that time. For Emile Durkheim, studying this phenomenon – which is generally seen to be one of the most private and personal acts – provided the perfect opportunity to show the power of the new science of sociology (Ritzer, 2008). Durkheim developed a theory around four types of suicide which will be outlined below. The affect that Durkheim’s book *Le Suicide* (1897) has had on the suicide research that came after it will be discussed, including issues with empirical evidence to back up his claims around his four types of suicide and their causes. The need for methodological developments from those used by Durkheim is addressed in order for sociological research on suicide to stay relevant. Finally, the introduction of new dimensions to the issue of suicide with the growth of the internet is discussed.

Emile Durkheim was not the first to study suicide rates in the nineteenth century. However, his contribution to the study of suicide in sociology is without doubt the most influential. Quetelet and Morselli, two moral statisticians who attempted to inductively analyse a large body of suicide statistics, were enthralled by the stability of yearly suicide rates, as well as the overall rise in the rates in the modern era (Quetelet and Morselli, in Wray et al, 2011). Masaryk (in Wray et al, 2011) actually proceeded Durkheim in looking to explain the rise in rates by the forces of modernisation. Tarde disputed these statisticians’ theories by postulating that imitation behaviour could account for geographical and temporal clustering of suicide behaviour (Tarde, in Wray et al, 2011). Durkheim, who outright rejected Tarde’s

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imitation theory and went to great lengths to discredit it (Ritzer, 2008), wanted to approach the view that modernisation was the root cause of the suicide rate increase in a more analytical way than his contemporaries (Wray et al, 2011). To this end, he formulated a social theory of suicide in which the causes of suicide lie within a framework of society rather than at an individual's psychological state (Morrison, 1995). What Durkheim was interested in was suicide rates rather than individual causes, in order to explain why one group had a higher rate than another (Ritzer, 2008).

Durkheim's theory on suicide is based on the two continua of social integration and social regulation, at the ends of which are four independent theories of suicide (Breault, 2001). These four theories are egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide. For Durkheim, 'egoistic suicide' occurs in societies or groups where the individual has a low level of integration into the larger social unit, making them feel as if they are not part of society and likewise, society is not part of them (Ritzer, 2008: 91). According to Durkheim, society is where the best parts of being human come from; our morality, values and sense of purpose. Without these, as well as the general moral support that gets us through our daily troubles, 'individuals are liable to commit suicide at the smallest frustration' (Ritzer, 2008: 91). The main protectors against egoistic suicide are, according to Durkheim, membership in well integrated religious groups (for example the Roman Catholic Church), well integrated family units and political or national units. 'Altruistic suicide', on the other hand, results when social integration in a society or group is too strong, for example amongst the military or mass suicides following the death of a leader (Davies and Neal, 2000: 38). Suicide in the group is for the

greater good or because those who commit suicide this way believe it is their duty to do so (Ritzer, 2008).

The other continuum on which Durkheim bases his theory is that of social regulation. Too little social regulation, results in what he calls ' anomic suicide' (Tomasi, 2000: 16). The term anomie can be defined, in simple terms, as the decline in the regulatory powers of society due to the process of industrialisation (Morrison, 1995). It is likely that individuals will be left feeling dissatisfied and frustrated with life as there is little control over their social wants and needs due to these disruptions. Morrison explains how Durkheim believed that this frustration can only happen when:

...individuals constantly aspire to reach ends or goals that are beyond their capacity to obtain. It is important to keep in mind that motives leading individuals to strive for goals which they cannot realistically obtain are due to the failure of the powers of society to set limits and regulate social wants (1995: 184).

The effect on the suicide rate is to be seen in both times of positive disruption (economic boom) and negative disruption (economic depression). These changes put people in ' new situations in which the old norms no longer apply but new ones have yet to develop' (Ritzer, 2008: 93). One the other end of this continuum is what Durkheim calls ' fatalistic suicide' (Ritzer, 2008: 94). This is the least developed of his theories and in fact, was only discussed as a footnote in his book *Le Suicide* (1897). Fatalistic suicide is as a result of too much regulation within a society or group. The example that Durkheim cites in support of this is the suicide of slaves who, he argues, take

their own lives due to the hopelessness caused by the oppressive regulation over their lives (Ritzer, 2008).

These theories on suicide have influenced many pieces of research on suicide to the present day, but are they still relevant to modern society and the study of suicide? Breault argues, in a critical survey of the empirical literature on *Le Suicide*, that the hypothesis with the most empirical research to date is that of egoistic suicide. He believes that, although the other theories may seem plausible, it is impossible to say whether Durkheim was right or not in the absence of empirical research on altruistic, anomic and fatalistic suicide (Breault, 2001).

According to Breault (2001), there is a wealth of evidence and empirical research in support of egoistic suicide. However, the issue as he sees it, is whether this research is meaningful. In the research which he cites in his analysis, investigators have controlled for variables such as age, sex, race/ethnicity, demographic variables, economic variables and socioeconomic variables, but not one single psychological variable. However, he believes that Durkheim's argument against psychological explanations would be considered primitive in the present day in light of considerable research showing that affective disorders, schizophrenia, substance abuse, to name but a few, are consistently related to suicide (Breault, 2001). So Breault (2001) questions, what would be the relationship between social integration and suicide controlling for depression? The fundamental issue is that Durkheim omitted psychological factors in part as he believed that there were no psychological regularities in suicide as consistent psychological correlates had yet to be identified in his day. In light of this, Breault notes:

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Today, Durkheim would not be satisfied with our failure to control for empirically supported psychological variables. Even though he advocated a sharp division between sociology and psychology, his methodological approach would have precluded the exclusion of psychological explanations if such explanations had been empirically demonstrated (2001: 61).

Wray et al (2011) suggest that in order for sociology to stay relevant in the area of suicide research, which is evolving as a multi-disciplinary investigation of suicide as a social problem, three avenues need to be pursued simultaneously. Firstly, they believe there is a need to reconsider the micro-macro dilemma, both theoretically and methodologically. This should include a consideration of how to assemble a data set complex enough to provide rigorous empirical research on suicide (Wray et al, 2011). Second, Wray et al (2011) suggest, there is a need to incorporate the insights from other disciplines into the multiple factors which affect suicide in individuals and society. Finally, sociologists need to move forward with real-life efforts to reduce suicide through demonstrating and evaluation the usefulness of the robust research in this area Wray et al (2011).

The importance of the inclusion of individual level data in studies of suicide, and not just the suicide rates or aggregate data, as well as the need to incorporate findings from other disciplines, can be demonstrated through the discussion of suicide involving the internet and other digital media. Although Shah (2010) found that the prevalence of internet users was correlated with general population suicide rates, he cautioned against causal relationship attribution due to the ecological study design. In other words, the use of <https://assignbuster.com/suicide-technology-and-sociological-theory/>

aggregate data rather than individual data when looking for a causal relationship between internet use and suicide (Shah, 2010). Other studies have taken an individual level approach to investigate the association between internet use and suicide. Indeed, Messias et al (2011) analysed a nationally representative survey from the US (Youth Risk Behaviour Survey) and found that teens who reported five hours or more of video games/internet use daily had a significantly higher risk for sadness, suicidal ideation and suicide planning. Furthermore, a study of Taiwan teens aged 12-18 found that web communication is a risk factor in self-injurious thoughts and behaviour in boys but not in girls (Tseng and Yang, 2015). They also found that family support is a protective factor in both genders (Tseng and Yang, 2015). Although these findings do not in any way negate Durkheim's theories on suicide - and in fact may actually support his claim that egoistic suicide is caused by social isolation - these findings would not have been possible using the methods employed by Durkheim. In essence, just looking at suicide rates, without consideration for individual level data.

The digital age has introduced a new dimension to the study of suicide.

Never before have people had access to the range of suicide information as they do now. As Mishara and Weisstub (2007) explain, there are numerous reports of suicides allegedly related to the internet. Examples include the son of a Danish journalist who was encouraged to end his life on a website which gave him information that he used to kill himself (Weisstub, 2007).

Moreover, reports of young people who have resorted to suicide after a barrage of cyberbullying and online abuse, and a number of suicides which have taken place live on web cam while others watched, some of whom

reportedly egged them on. Furthermore, there is the issue of internet suicide pacts, which are a rising concern in Japan and South Korea. Traditionally, suicide pacts were made between people who knew each other. However, in the internet age, these pacts are formed between complete strangers who meet online (Luxton et al, 2012). The issue at the core of this piece is to assess whether classical sociological theory can explain these newly developing phenomenon? If the person is committing suicide as they no longer feel part of society and society is no longer part of them, then why broadcast it live over the internet for an audience to watch? Is this egoistic suicide or is it a new 'type' of suicide unlike those described by Durkheim?

One area that Durkheim outright rejected in his theories on suicide was that of imitation (Thorlindsson and Bjarnason, 1998). However, there are strong arguments against this omission as Abrutyn and Mueller (2014) found that suicides, like other social behaviours, can in fact spread through social relationships. They found that social ties can be conduits of social support in the positive sense, but also anti-social behaviours such as suicide as well. Luxton et al (2012) address this issue of imitation or contagion through the media. These scholars explain how the media's influence on suicidal behaviour, especially in relation to method used, has been well documented:

A recent study by Dunlop et al. specifically examined possible contagion effects on suicidal behavior via the Internet and social media. Of 719 individuals aged 14 to 24 years, 79% reported being exposed to suicide-related content through family, friends, and traditional news media such as newspapers, and 59% found such content through Internet sources. Additional analysis revealed no

link between social networking sites (e. g., Facebook) and suicidal ideation, but it did find a connection between suicidal ideation and suicide-related content found on online forums (Luxton 2012: Para 12).

Indeed, Luxton et al (2012) go on to discuss how social media platforms, for example, chat rooms and discussion forums, may also influence decisions to die by suicide for some vulnerable groups. They argue that these online interactions may foster peer pressure to die by suicide, encourage their user to idolise those who have already completed their suicide or facilitate the making of suicide pacts (Luxton et al, 2012). In the end, these interactions may reduce any doubts or fears of people who are undecided about suicide and thus, act as another social force contributing to the causes of suicide in modern times.

Society is very different today from that at the time of Durkheim's seminal book *Le Suicide* (1897). However, suicide is still considered a serious social problem, just as it was in the 1850s. Durkheim believed that suicide could be explained by looking at societal factors and their effect on the suicide rates of particular groups. Yet, this essay has shown that suicide cannot be understood simply as Durkheim theorised it. Although his theory of egoistic suicide has for the most part been supported by empirical research, for sociological research to advance in this area, a methodological and theoretical rethink on the study of suicide is necessary. For example, the inclusion of psychological variables, individual level studies and the relationship between the internet and suicide.

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