

Interpretivists approach to suicide

[Science](#), [Statistics](#)



Suicide is a phenomenon understudied in early 1960's. One of the reasons was due to Durkheim's "Le Suicide" (1897) had been widely ruled in sociology. Durkheim used a scientific approach to study the causalities of suicide. It was believed that there was little more to study on suicide. However, interpretivists such as Douglas criticised Durkheim's study as not being reliable due to the fact he used quantitative data. Douglas believed that he failed to take into account society is constructed through people's interactions and all statistics are social construct.

Interpretivists seek to find the reasons of suicide by find how society is socially constructed through the social interactions between people in society. Recently, there has been a new interpretive approach which has formed new explanation significantly diverse explanations to Durkheim's positivistic approach. Although interpretivists approaches have produced a more valid meaning to suicide as some may say, it is still flawed. Douglas classification of suicide was through social meaning through revenge, self-destruct, sympathetic, guilt etc.

He believed that suicide was a way of responding by try to solve a problem. He looked at categorizing suicides according to their social meanings because the causes and responses to suicide vary from society to society. Douglas criticised Durkheim's study of suicide rates based on it's methodological grounds. He argued that suicide statistics hardly lacked any form of validity mainly because it could be misinterpreted by the coroner's verdict.

For example, Durkheim suggested that suicide rates were low in Catholic countries due to high social integration. Douglas criticised this he would say <https://assignbuster.com/interpretivists-approach-to-suicide/>

that as for Catholics suicide is a mortal sin families would put pressure on coroners to reach an alternative verdict and the suicide figures were low due to inaccuracies. Douglas sees suicide statistics as the result of negotiations between the different parties involved which can lead to distorted statistics.

He thus says that Durkheim's study of suicide isn't useful in society because the statistics were based on coroner's interpretations (therefore suicides are socially constructed) and so his study wasn't reliable. He suggests it is more important to look at the meaning of suicide. He also suggested that we need to study them with qualitative methods and use case studies. However he denies that suicide could be explained by external factors. In this case, Douglas theory was considered invalid as he failed to show any kind of evidence to back his research.

Atkinson (1978) believed that coroners had a common sense theory of suicide. They categorise suicide based on information from this theory; they consider four types of evidence relevant for reaching a verdict and if the evidence matches the incident then it is considered suicide. Their verdicts are based on suicide notes, location and circumstances, life history and finally the mode of death. Atkinson also criticises Durkheim's method of studying suicide, he identified that different cultures imply different interpretations for suicide.

For example, he studied four English and Danish coroners and gave them the same case studies . He found that the Danish coroners are much more likely to come to a verdict on suicide based on probability of balance, whereas the English coroners looked for evidence to reach to a conclusion if a suicide was intent. Furthermore, Jean Baechler argued that Durkheim's study of suicide

isn't useful because suicide can't be explained wholly in terms of external factors. Not everyone whose business fails, or whose spouse dies, or who is a protestant in an urban area, kill themselves.

Thus, to Baechler, suicide must always be at least partially explained through 'personal factors' that are particular to an individual and this isn't possible with the use of official statistics – he thought that it would be more useful to study individual suicide cases and to categorise them – therefore suggesting that Durkheim's study of suicide isn't particularly useful in society because it was impossible to find the true meaning behind the suicides using only statistics.

On the other hand, however, Steve Taylor criticises both Douglas and Baechler for failing to recognise the value of Durkheim's work. He criticises Douglas for contradicting himself. At some points Douglas implies that suicide statistics can never be reliable since its always a matter of judgement whether a death is a suicide, but at other times he suggests that causes of suicide can be found; it's difficult to see how this can be true if its impossible to be certain whether an act is a suicide.

Commenting on Baechler, Taylor points out those individual cases often fit a number of categories, depending on the interpretation the researcher makes of the victim's motives, and there is no reason to believe that these interpretations are any more reliable than suicide statistics. From this he suggested that suicides could be classified into four types such as thantation, submissive, sacrifice and appeal. Taylor approach is useful as it combined both qualitative and quantitative methods making his study both reliable and valid.

However, Taylor has received a lot of criticism over the fact he used a lot of secondary data and is unaware of the inaccuracies it contained. It has also been shown that in reality you cannot simply classify suicide into four types. In conclusion, there are many criticisms against Durkheim's study on suicide which suggest that it is not suitable to study the causalities of suicide and maybe the interpretivists. We should instead examine the interpretive theories of suicide.

However, Hindess argues that such writers, whilst criticising the social construction of suicide statistics, simply ask us to believe that their interpretations of the "reality" of suicide are more valid than Durkheim's. He also states that interpretivists have no evidence to support their approach on suicide and simply want us to believe in their interpretations which are no more useful than Durkheim's study on suicide. Nevertheless, Durkheim's study was published in the 19th century so maybe it isn't useful in modern industrial society as the results may not generalise to contemporary society.