

How successful is durkheim's theory of suicide? essay

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In his distinguished book *Approaches to Social Enquiry: Advancing Knowledge*, Blaikie notes that suicide according to Durkheim refers to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from positive or negative acts of the individual in question. Although it is an individual act it affects the society and has social causes. The society is created by individuals and it would therefore not exist if the individuals did not exist. Blaikie N (2007, 72). This paper will focus on the various types or categories as presented by Durkheim and it will also present the arguments raised against it by critics. Suicide according to Emile Durkheim can be classified into four categories: the egoistic, anomic, fatalistic as well as anomic.

He emphasized on the role of social integration in influencing or rather determining suicide rates. The social bonds that exist between the individuals and their society play a vital role in determining the probability of committing suicide. Social regulation which is the opposite of social integration also affects the rates or probability of committing suicide. Morrison K (2006, 214). In egoistic suicide, individuals portray weak commitment to group goals and norms and focus more on individual resources. In altruistic suicide there is more commitment to group goals and norms and suicide is viewed as a duty. Anomic suicide occurs when social changes take place in society and disrupt the social regulatory mechanisms leaving the society members confused as to what they ought to adhere to. The term *anomie* was coined to refer to the state of 'lack of norms' in a society attributed to social changes.

To Durkheim, egoism is the tendency of people to detach themselves from the wider society and concentrating on individual or personal interests. It occurs when the social ties are weakened and favoured by individualism. This tendency is not good for society since it keeps them away from the societal collective attachments. As Ken Morrison in *Marx, Durkheim, Weber: Formations of Modern Social Thought* notes Durkheim established that Protestants are more likely to commit suicide as opposed to Catholics. To him, the role of religious integration was at work here. Religion instils values and morals while placing restrictions on people's autonomy as well as their self reflection.

It makes them more attached to the spiritual world. Morrison K (2006, 216). Durkheim observed that Catholics differed from Protestants in the degree of their authority and they readily accepted without question the religious beliefs. This made the link between them and the church closer. The rituals they conducted also had an important role in increasing the degree of social integration. Protestants were quick to question the religious beliefs and this contributed by a large extent to the break down of social mechanism. Their attachment to religious beliefs is highly reduced and individualism is encouraged. These observations led to Durkheim's conclusion that the lack of effective social integration which leads to individualism that is characterized by self reflection and consciousness increases the rates of suicide.

Another important observation that Durkheim established was that married people were more likely to register higher rates of suicide compared to

single people due to the intimate links. To him, this was attributed to the role of families in the process of social integration. Both religion and families instil collective roles or obligations that give no room for egoistic tendencies.

Morrison K (2006, 217). Egoistic suicide arises from the lack of social integration in the face of weak bonds between the individuals and the groups outside themselves.

It takes place whenever gaps are created between the individuals and the various mechanisms of integration which could be religion, family or political groups. The creation of such gaps according to Durkheim leads to the under emphasis of collectiveness in sharing and leads to individualistic tendencies.

Today's society is highly capitalistic and individualism is highly respected.

Altruistic suicide differs from egoistic suicide in the sense that it occurs due to excessive social integration rather from the lack of it. It occurs in communities where suicide is highly regarded and earns one appraisal from the other members in the society. Morrison K (2006, 219).

It is common in communities where suicide is seen as a social duty and those who do it maintain their dignity and are praised for it. Here, the loyalty to the society is given much emphasis compared to individual loyalty. People are overly absorbed in the societal expectations and attachments and the societal interests are highly regarded.

This is in contrast with egoistic suicide where individualism is the cause.

There is minimal autonomy that creates no room for egoistic tendencies. To

Durkheim, altruistic suicide is further categorized into three that is optional

altruistic suicide, obligatory altruistic and mystical altruistic suicide.

Obligatory altruistic suicide occurs when the society imposes a clear duty on individuals to take their lives but there is less coercive pressure from the community. Those who resist it risk facing social stigma. Morrison K (2006, 222). Optional altruistic suicide is where demand on individuals is not clearly defined or clarified. The duty to renounce life is viewed as a virtue and those who adhere to it earn respect in society.

Acute altruistic suicide is where individuals denounce life and pride in sacrificing their lives. In this extreme condition the individual 'self' is inexistence given the joy derived in the pursuit to go to the next level or blend. Minimal value is attached to one's own life. Examples of acute altruistic suicide in today's society are the cases of suicide bombers. The 911 attack that shook the whole world is a clear illustration of how personal ego can be substituted by social ego. The role of religion in such suicides can also not be underscored as these people believe that suicide will see them gain martyrdom.

Religious passion as well as the overemphasis on attachments that have been created in society is what precipitate altruistic suicide. Morrison K (2006, 220). Durkheim argued that the increased instances of suicide among the military were as a result of their isolated nature. He further suggested that the role of individualism in the military is outweighed by the social interests. The military life or morality calls for much allegiance from individuals and personal interests are often neglected. Morrison K, (2006,

222). This can be backed by the instances where soldiers take away their lives on minute or minor disappointments like issues on appointments.

Anomic suicide according to Durkheim is a common occurrence that intensified after the industrial revolution. He argues that it arises due to the failure of the society to effectively conduct its regulatory functions. He attributes the unchecked or unregulated economic progress for the ineffectiveness of the regulatory mechanism. The economy replaced religion as the dominant institution in society thus undermining the role of religion and other mechanisms in the social order. Economic success substituted religious and traditional beliefs. Morrison K (2006, 224). Fatalistic suicide arises as a result of adjustments in the societies regulatory mechanisms. It is attributed to the excessive social regulation and the overly developed system of control over the individual.

An example of fatalistic suicide is a case of a slave who prefers to terminate his or her life instead of facing the challenges of enslavement. Egoistic suicide arises due to minimal social integration that is characterized by reduced social support. It arises when people find no reason or basis for the existence of life.

Altruistic suicide is caused by excessive social integration where individualism is insignificant. Critics of Durkheim theories of suicide argue that his conclusions were based on the data that relied on the definitions presented by the people who were responsible for categorizing the causes of death and this could have been in much variance from what Durkheim

initially intended. Blaikie N (2007, 72). To them although the conclusions made were accurate the fact that the data used is questionable makes his arguments weak. If Durkheim ensured that the causes of death in these cases of suicide were accurate then the viability of his arguments would have been more viable given the fact that accurate conclusions would be made from accurate and reliable data. Critics also argue that some of his conclusions do not have appropriate backing from reliable sources as to their effectiveness.

The issue of decreased instances or cases of suicide among the married due to intimate relationships is highly debatable as it is not clear whether this ideology is psychological or biological. Durkheim is also criticized for presenting the societies as ideal institutions where he undermines the role of other factors away from the societal influences on people's reactions. (www.reviews.ctpdc.co.uk).

Despite these criticisms Durkheim's theory of suicide can be applied in explaining causes of suicide in today's society. Social problems are still attributed to suicide rates as had been presented by Durkheim. According to the facts provided regarding the suicide rates in 2005 it was clear that out of the 89 cases of suicide recorded daily a high percentage of the victims were either under the influence of alcohol or drugs.

This indicates that the society has failed in maintaining social order. (CDC, 2008). Norms are slowly dwindling and this could be a cause of anomie suicide. Suicide rates also tend to be higher among the minority groups who

have been segregated from the main stream society a factor that has led to their disappointment.

With these observations it suffices to say that Durkheim's suicide theories are applicable in today's society.

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