

Why people commit suicide - essay



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Suicide is a very complex subject triggered by various multifaceted factors. The failure to meet one's expectations which may have been instilled as early as childhood may bring about a wide variety of emotions leading to people committing suicide for various reasons. Depression, physical or sexual abuse, horrible disappointments, severe financial loss, mental or emotional disorders, all trigger feelings of emptiness and hopelessness and are just some of the few psychological factors which may influence an individual's final and distorted decision of committing suicide as a means to put an end to these insufferable emotions. The foregoing, however, is just a superficial analysis touching merely upon the surface of the deep-seated source of suicide. This paper will thus attempt to provide a more in depth analysis of why people commit suicide by looking primarily at the sociological factors and in particular in relation to Durkheim's work.

Durkheim defines suicide as a "general state of extreme depression and exaggerated sadness, causing the patient no longer to realize sanely the bonds which connect him with the people and things about him - pleasures no longer attract" [Durkheim, 1951: 63]. Durkheim further stated that "man cannot become attached to higher aims and submit to a rule if he sees nothing above him to which he belongs to free him from all social pressure is to abandon him to himself and demoralize him" [Durkheim, 1951: 110].

In Durkheim's "Interdiction To Suicide: A Study in Sociology", Durkheim expresses his concern in developing the conduct of sociology. He sees the main problem to be that sociology is mostly constructed on philosophical overviews, and does not answer the exact social questions. He suggests a methodology that will give the science of sociology strong baselines and real

results. In his book, Durkheim applies these propositions and shows how sociology should be conducted, and firmly draws conclusions that expose to us the way in which we should be able to approach the difficulties of society. This study has been presented in such a way that it is probable to assess the relevance and accuracy of its meanings and deductions. Durkheim gives the importance of sociology far more than being just a tool to fix the world, but it is a lens, through which we see reality as a shared reality, one included of individuals who are determined by their realities. In this introductory chapter he investigates the act of suicide and explores its social roots by examining suicide rates in different social classes and correlating that with the characteristics of the society.(Durkheim, 1970)

A differentiation is made between two types of suicide, positive and negative. In Durkheim's words suicide is thus described as " all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result" [Durkheim, 1986: 64]. A positive performance would be to discharge or to suspend an act. In this case, death comes as a straight product of the action. A negative act would be the scenario of remaining in a burning house or to refuse eating to the point of hunger. Death in this case is the indirect result of an individual's act.

Durkheim believed that the areas with the highest rates of mental illnesses and alcoholism are not necessarily the areas with the highest suicide rates. Esquirol wrote that " suicide may be seen to be for us only a phenomenon resulting from many different causes and appearing under many different forms; and it is clear that this phenomenon is not characteristic of a

disease". [Esquirol, 1838: 528]. Durkheim believed that suicide is not an individual act nor a personal achievement. It is produced by some power which is over and above the individual.

Durkheim studied suicide vis a vis the relationship between individuals and society affirmed that suicide is a social phenomenon as well as establishing that there are no societies in which suicide does not occur. He asserted that what most people regard as an individual act is, in reality, the result of the social world. The evidence supporting this view are numerous.

In addition to the stark differentiation made between positive and negative acts of suicide, Durkheim's research concluded that the institution of marriage protects against suicide making the observation that suicide rates are higher among people that have lost their spouse and those who are divorced. Furthermore, Durkheim observes that suicide rates are higher among couples who have no children than couples who do, concluding that a human being needs to be loved and have a purpose in life. People who do not experience love in their life are the ones more susceptible to suicide. (Durkheim, 1951). The institution of marriage may thus play a vital role in ones decision to commit suicide. Whether marriage should be viewed positively in relation to suicide is however debatable. While on the one hand marriage may play a role in protecting against suicide by providing love, purpose, and stability in one's life it may, on the other hand, be a volatile institution that once shattered may instead be an instigator of suicide.

Durkheim interestingly further observed that suicide rates are higher during times of peace than times of war because during the war people need to be

unified in defending their country (Durkheim, 1951). This observation may, therefore, suggest that feelings of patriotism, honour as well as purpose tends to distant an individual from suicide. Furthermore, suicide rates also tend to be higher during rapid economic changes than in economic crises as rapid economic changes are sudden and difficult to endure. (Durkheim, 1951). This observation made by Durkheim may suggest that people are required to work harder in such economic times constantly being pushed to their limits in order to keep up with such rapid changes bringing about feelings of despair, restlessness and being under appreciated.

According to Durkheim's research, religion may also have an affect on suicide rates. Durkheim's collected data suggested that Protestants are more likely to commit suicide than Catholics, due to the fact that Protestants are more idiosyncratic while Catholics are more communitarian (Durkheim, 1951). In other words, Catholics tend to have more social support. According to Durkheim people connecting and validating each other within a community plays an important role in preventing suicide making this kind of social integration important. Without this type of connection, people may experience feelings of depression and isolation pushing them towards suicide. Durkheim, however, seemed to identify two sides of the coin in relation to social integration, pointing out that where social integration is high people are more likely to commit suicide in order to avoid becoming burdens to society. Two distinct features are therefore identified by Durkheim; namely, social regulation and social integration. Integration is described as the " degree to which collective sentiments are shared" and regulation refers to " the degree of external constraint on people"[Ritzer,

1992: 90]. Based on these two social forces, four types of suicide have been proposed by Durkheim.

Durkheim differentiated between four types of suicide, the first being egoistic suicide. Egoistic suicide is viewed as stemming from an absence of social integration and is committed by people who are outcast by society and are insufficiently integrated into social groups and societies, they depend more on themselves than on a group of objectives and instructions. They are not socially combined or not socially tied to a community or group. These types of individuals find themselves powerless in finding their own individual place in society and experience problems adjusting to other groups and are given little or no social care. Suicide is therefore perceived as a solution to free themselves of the loneliness or excessive isolation. Durkheim points out that this type of suicide is mostly prevalent amongst those who are unmarried, widowed, divorced, have no children as well as those without any strong attachments to religious, social or community groups.(Durkheim, 1951)

The second type of suicide identified by Durkheim is anomic suicide. Anomic suicide is viewed by Durkheim as disillusionment and disappointment occurring when a person goes through extreme changes in wealth and is ultimately caused by a lack of social regulation. This type of suicide is most notable at times when society is rapidly changing leading to uncertainty. It is a type of suicide that stems from sudden and unexpected changes which Durkheim found mostly occurs during rapid economic changes than in economic crises. Durkheim interestingly points out that suicide is more

evident in crisis that brings out disturbances in one's life rather than being attributed to poverty [Durkheim, 1951: 245].

Altruistic suicide is the third type of suicide that has been identified and according to Durkheim, this type of suicide occurs when individuals or a group are too close and intimate and stems from being overly integrated into society. It is the other side of the spectrum in social integration when an individual is so well integrated into society that they choose to sacrifice their own life in order to fulfil some obligation. Altruistic suicide, being a complex concept, can further be broken down into three types: optional, acute and obligatory altruistic suicide. Optional altruistic suicide is brought about by societal pressures that may, in fact, be well-intentioned. This can be seen in Japan where there is a high level of suicide amongst students because of stress and high expectations from others and the constant pressure to excel at school exams. Often the accompanying stress and anxiety push them to commit suicide; suicide in the victim's perspective becomes the answer to freedom of oppression from what society expects individuals to be.

Acute altruistic suicide occurs when an individual kills himself in order to save another life. For example when a fire-fighter saves a person from a burning fire but the fire-fighter dies as a result. This is an act of heroism and self-sacrifice. It could be argued that it may be flawed to categorise this as a type of suicide because suicide is mainly associated with a troublesome and stressed life, when in fact such an act may be a form of the righteous act.

Obligatory altruistic suicidal refers to a type of suicidal where respect and honour plays an important factor. For example in India, Hindu women should

kill themselves during their husband's funeral as an act of honour expressing that life after the death of their spouse was not worth living. If women from these communities insisted on living they would lose public respect; in some cases, the usual funeral honours are denied, in another a life of horror is supposed to await him beyond the grave (Durkheim, 1951). Connect these two paragraphs. Durkheim points out that altruistic suicide is part of the "collective spirit" (Durkheim, 1970). For example, when the spirit inquires you to do something you are obliged to do so and which we, therefore, see in environments where society places a substantial amount of pressure and expectations on individuals which may, in turn, push an individual towards suicide as a means of escape.

The final type of suicide is fatalistic suicide. Durkheim discussed this type briefly because it was seen as a rare phenomenon in the real world. Fatalistic suicide occurs in social conditions where an individual experiences universal persecution resulting from "excessive regulation" whose "passions [were] violently choked by oppressive discipline" (Durkheim, 1970). Slavery and persecution are examples of fatalistic suicide in which an individual may feel that they are destined by fate to be in such conditions and choose suicide as the only means to escape such conditions.

These four types of suicide are categorised by the degree of integration and regulation of individuals in their surrounding society. According to Durkheim people commit suicide because of either too high or too low integration or regulation, Suicide is a social fact and is due to social forces. Individuals are more likely to commit suicide each time the condition of society leaves from

a state of stability. Society preserves stability by “ integration” and “ regulation”

Durkheim’s work has been critiqued on many grounds, for example, his emphasis on consensus and morality , thanhis positivist method and negligence of the individual as an actor, his description of suicide rates.

Durkheim’s concept of suicide is thought to be more reinforced by argument than by fact. However, he is contributed to the growth of sociology and over a difficult theoretical framework

To conclude suicide is not an individual act it is a social act. People commit suicide because they are not supported by society or they do not feel loved by their own family. If a person has no support in his life and no one to care about thenthey can feel valueless and this will lead to depression which may lead to suicide. Suicide rates are correlated with how well a person is integrated into society and the degree to which society regulates individual behavior. In general, suicide has some connection with social rules or standards and the individual.