

# "death of a salesman" by arthur miller and durkheim's theory essay

[Literature](#), [Russian Literature](#)



In the work "Suicide. A study in sociology" Émile Durkheim expressed the opinion that suicide depends on social conditions for the first time (Giddens, 2006). This view supported the idea of the double nature of the man that exists "because social man superimposes himself upon physical man" (Durkheim, 2006, p. 171).

It appears that the suicide of the main character of the play "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller can be described within the framework suggested by Durkheim. This story becomes an illustration of society conditions influencing suicidal decisions in the modern world.

According to Durkheim (2006), the "term suicide is applied to 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" (p. 17). By relating suicide to different social conditions, Durkheim (2006) defined four types that can be described with the help of two social conditions: social integration and social regulation (Alexander & Smith, 2005, p. 71; Giddens, 2006, p. 15). Apart from that, the author suggested that all the types are not exactly isolated and may be combined (p. 252).

One of the important points of the study claims that "suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration" (Durkheim, 2006, p. 167). The social integration can be defined as the "ties" that an individual has with the society. The "strength" of these ties is what defines the egoistic and altruistic types of suicide (Douglas, 2015, p. 39). In case of egoistic suicide, the social ties of the person are weakened, and his or her integration into society is weak (Giddens, 2006). In this respect, Durkheim (2006) mentions

religion and marriage as a kind of integration mechanisms that tend to decrease the chances of egoistic suicide. Alternatively, in case the integration of a person into the society is so high that the value of individual life is denied, altruistic suicide may take place. This kind of suicide is connected to faith and patriotism that border on fanaticism.

The intensity of social regulations is connected to anomic and fatalistic suicide types that are the exact opposites of each other. The lack of regulation (caused, for example, by the changes in society or personal life) upsets the balance between a person's wishes and capabilities which can lead to anomic suicide. On the other hand, when the control is excessive, fatalistic suicide can take place. In "Suicide", fatalistic type description appears as a footnote, which shows that Durkheim did not consider this type especially relevant (Riley, 2014, p. 191; Alexander & Smith, 2005, p. 72; Giddens, 2006, p. 15). Still, the existence of the fourth type makes the system of the suicide forms more complete and consistent.

Apart from that, Durkheim (2006) pointed out that individual characteristics of a person (including mental diseases) may also contribute to the process of making the fatal decision (pp. 241). Therefore, while insisting on the importance of social factors, the author did not deny the role of the victim's individuality. The emotional state of the victims was also described as a significant part of the types' definition (Riley, 2014, pp. 191-121). Durkheim (2006) found that particular emotional states correlate with different types of suicide. For example, egoistic suicide presupposes depression, altruistic is

associated with "violent emotion", and anomic suicide involves the feelings of anger and disappointment (Durkheim, 2006, pp. 246-247).

The functional requirements of systems (including society) suggested within the functionalism theory include four points: adaptation, goal attainment (ability to identify goals and achieve them), integration, and the maintenance of the latent patterns that presuppose values in the context of society system (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008, p. 361). It is not difficult to perceive that the suicide theory by Durkheim (2006) pays particular attention to the integration of the system, which has been shown above (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008, p. 90). According to functionalism, in order to survive, a system needs to manage the named requirements, maintain their levels.

The elements that fail to meet the requirements are not functional and are, therefore, disposed of. The people who lose the ties with the society, therefore, fail to meet the requirement of integrity, and consequently, are not entirely functional and cannot support the system while the system cannot support them (Appelrouth & Edles, 2008). Therefore, the suicide theory of Durkheim (2006) appears to emphasize the integrity requirement of the social system, and, possibly, points at a mechanism of its regulation.

The story of William Loman, the central character of the play "Death of a Salesman" by Arthur Miller includes an example of suicide caused by the lack of both integration and regulation.

Willy Loman is a very ambitious but not very successful man, which indicates the conflict between his desires and capabilities. Willy seems to have had thoughts of suicide, which is suggested by the "accidents" that Linda mentions (Miller, 1998, p. 42). Apart from that, Willy seems to have invented a number of facts from his biography, for example, the "big year" he claims to have had despite the protests of Howard (Miller, 1998, p. 62). These facts prove his dissatisfaction with his life.

As a result, Willy wants his son, Biff to become a businessman, that is, to achieve the success his father never managed to. Willy tends to believe that his son should share his dream. The salesman is convinced that both himself and his elder son are exceptional: "I am not a dime a dozen! I am Willy Loman, and you are Biff Loman!" (Miller, 1998, p. 105). However, Biff does not share his father's ideas. In fact, the lack of social integration of the salesman can be demonstrated by his weakening ties with Biff.

The misunderstanding between the son and the father is especially vividly illustrated at the end of the play when Willy seems to misjudge his son's behavior, believing that Biff is going to start a business which is not true. Apart from that, Willy is in the situation of changing environment: he has been fired, and this process also accounts for the decrease of his social integration and regulation.

The suicide that Willy commits seems to have a purpose: he believes that the insurance money that Biff is going to receive will help him in his career. He also seems to have committed suicide in a strange state of elation

connected to his dreams about Biff achieving success. Willy appears to deny the importance of his own life in favor of helping his son achieve the goals the latter does not have. From this point of view, Willy's suicide acquires some features of the altruistic kind. Therefore, it can be concluded that the type of Willy's suicide is a mixed one.

The theory suggested by Durkheim (2006) demonstrates the correlation between social integration and regulation and suicide. The type of Willy's suicide appears to be a mixed one. Still, the underlying reason for the suicide consists in the deep dissatisfaction that Willy experiences due to the differences between his expectations and capabilities, which is characteristic of anomic suicide. Apart from that, Willy Loman's story seems to demonstrate the high level of individualism in the modern society.

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