

Suicide: a review of japan essay sample

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Suicide occurs when an individual voluntarily and intentionally takes his/her life. Everyone is said to have a “ suicide potential” which translates to the differing degrees of the individuals’ inclination to end their lives. (Durkheim, Spaulding and Simpson 1951) This “ suicide potential” is very much affected by the collective social actors which have a reality sui generis – unique; of its own kind, and not a mere subset of biological or psychological factors. (Durkheim et al. 1951) Moreover, these collective social actors are exclusively found in each differing society which underscores the stark contrast of suicide rates between countries and even towns. (Durkheim et al. 1951) Whilst suicides in lower societies tend to depict the manifestation of the collective social conscience through the individuals with little regard for their lives, suicides in higher societies are mostly dictated by exigencies that disconcert the conceptualization of habitual social sentiments that individuals have grown accustomed to, resulting in anomie. (Durkheim et al. 1951) Therefore, this essay seeks to understand the causes of suicide with reference to a globalized city, and how the proliferation of globalization exacerbates this social problem.

The Case

In the 21st century, Japan holds a well-known reputation in the modern technological arena, pioneering a plethora of medical and technological advancements. However, Japan also holds the dubious track record of being a suicide nation. During the 11th century, when the Samurai rose to prominence, there was a concomitant rise in the acceptance and act of suicide known as Sepukku – a ritualized suicide by disembowelment of oneself as a means of avoiding capture and preserving one’s dignity and

honor in the face of defeat or failure. (Fusé 1980) It has then been “ socially and culturally prescribed and positively sanctioned” as an institutionalized form of suicide in Japan. (Fusé 1980) Though Sepukku itself is rarely practiced in modern Japan, suicide pertaining to one’s role-performance is still rampant. (Fusé 1980) In 2009, Japan had a total of 32, 845 suicides, which translated to 1 suicide every 15 minutes, ranking 5th on the world’s suicide rate with 24. 6 suicides per 100, 000 people in 2010. (The Guardian Aug 3, 2010; World Health Organization 2011)

Table 1 – Source: World Health Organization: Mental Health To further understand the causes of suicide in a globalized city, Tokyo will be used as a specific case study. With the mentioning of “ Tokyo”, it brings to mind a highly urbanized environment with a huge concentrated populace encapsulated by an array of technology and mixed cultures. According to Wirth (1938), a city is defined as “ a relatively large, dense, and permanent settlement of heterogeneous individuals.” A large population would mean multivariate individuals who display a lack of personal relationship with a tendency to compartmentalize human relations. (Wirth 1938) This highlights a modern ennui in urban city life as urbanization has brought people closer in proximity to each other but instead breeds impersonal and superficial acquaintanceship. (Wirth 1938) A proliferation of heterogeneity also encourages mobility at the expense of stability and security, forming social groups that have tangible, pecuniary benefits with quick turnovers in membership, renouncing strict social structures. (Wirth 1938) Irrevocably, Tokyo also displays a similar disposition of these characteristics that delineates the above notion of a city. Of the 5, 747, 460 households in

Tokyo, 2, 444, 145 are single person households, which accounts for 42. 53% of the population in Tokyo – the highest rate in Japan 2005.

Table 2 – Source: Statistics Japan: Prefecture Comparisons| People Living Alone Similarly, of those 3, 303, 315 non-single person households, 92. 15% of them are nuclear families. By nuclear families, the statistics data captured married couples, married couples and their children, or single parent and their children. (Statistics Japan 2010) This extensive family downsizing is a recent phenomenon in Japan, juxtaposed to the conventional three generational cum extended families that used to dominate the household structures. (Rebick and Takenaka 2006)

Table 3 – Source: Statistics Japan: Prefecture Comparisons| Rate of Nuclear Families In addition, the population density is the highest in Tokyo, with 5, 751 people/km². This adversely affects the amount of urban and social space one has, which is vital for the sustainability of the network of social interactions between a network of individuals. (Tonnelat 2010) According to Tonnelat (2010), this space also mirrors the “ city’s spatial and social organization, which effectively acts as a medium for social change for the betterment of the populace. The idea of density also brings to mind the demand for technical specialisation which portrays Durkheim’s depiction of a shift from mechanic solidarity to organic solidarity. (Flanagan 1993) In organic solidarity, there is a unification of values and beliefs that comes through collective consciousness and shared experiences. (Flanagan 1993) However, this is unviable in the city as specialization forces people to be independent in their work, but functionally dependant on each other for the

service of others. (Flanagan 1993) Again, this suggests that relationships are formed on a whim as a means to an end.

Table 4 – Source: Statistics Japan: Prefecture Comparisons| Population Density The Concept

Durkheim explicitly pronounced four main theories pertaining to suicide, namely, altruistic, egoistic, fatalistic and anomic suicide. Altruistic suicide results from the high integration with society, placing the needs of the community above his own, and giving up his life for the common good. (Durkheim et al. 1951) This is exemplified in Seppuku, where samurais would rather kill themselves than to risk the enemy extracting information from them or bring shame to their clan. (Fusé 1980) Egoistic suicide is the antithesis of altruistic suicide, derived from the excessive individuation from society which posits a low value to human existence. (Durkheim et al. 1951) Fatalistic suicide occurs when an individual is in a highly regulated social environment where little can be done by him to improve his life, thereby seeing suicide as an escape. (Stack 1979)

Anomic suicide is characterized by disillusionment and disappointment, where social and moral norms are clouded and undefined, resulting in a lack of social regulation. (Durkheim et al. 1951) In contemporary Japan, all four forms of suicide may probably still be ongoing, however, in Tokyo's metropolitan context, egoistic and anomic suicides are much more inclined to occur, given the characteristics of the modern social structure. To better understand this phenomenon, references from urban sociology need to be drawn with regards to the social structure in Japan. According to Tönnies, there are two types of social relation that distinguishes the essence of rural <https://assignbuster.com/suicide-a-review-of-japan-essay-sample/>

living from urban living, namely, Gemeinschaft and Gessellschaft. (Flanagan 1993) The former espouses intimate, emotional and communal relationships as “ends in and of themselves” which is an axiom of rural life, and the latter is said to be goal-driven relationships, existing as a “means to specific ends”, characterized by urban life. (Flanagan 1993; McIntyre 2011)

Therefore, a shift in structure of social relationship is observed, from one that has group identity and moral support to one that is individualistic and self-serving, seeking to profit from the relationships formed. According to Tönnies, “the dominant motive of self-interest insures that each person is truly alone”. (Flanagan 1993) This added integration on secondary relationships rather than primary relationships is especially pronounced in Tokyo, where it has the highest rate of singular living and nuclear families. Irrevocably, this integration could possibly constitute to egoistic suicide in Tokyo, as people simply have less reasons to live, due to a lack of intimacy with each other. (McIntyre 2011) Durkheim’s rendition of anomie in modern society is the failure to implement sufficient norms or regulations pertaining to the desires and ambitions of the people. (McIntyre 2011)

Robert Merton (1938) further revised this concept with regards to contemporary societies, which suggests that anomie happens when there is a mismatch of norms and its social structure, where there is a growing set of common goals prescribed by society, but is met with a poor match of legitimate means to achieve them. (McIntyre 2011) Essentially, there is a widening disjunction between the socially approved goals and means to reach them, explicitly underscoring the changes in cultural and social structures. Moreover, according to Sassen (2000), the urban spaces in cities

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are imbued with the “ dominant corporate culture” which leaves little space for other intrinsically desirable traits like social interactions. There is a tendency by the dominant culture to brush other cultures aside as “ otherness”, cheapening them altogether. (Sassens 2000) As a corollary, the space for social learning and interaction is curtailed, leaving them with little opportunities to establish familiar relations and civil understanding of cultural diversity. (Tonnelat 2010) This impedes the cultural ties and relations that one has to the country and society, resulting in an emptiness that is increasingly filled with material wealth, adding on to the set of culturally accepted goals but yet lacking an increase of legitimate means to achieve it.

The Link

Similar to other global cities, Tokyo has undergone cultural diffusion, which is an exchange of cultures between countries. However, the very fact that globalization is pioneered from the west engenders American culture into globalized cities. (Heiner 2002) Many cities are forced to adopt American capitalism to compete effectively, which promulgates the deregulation of markets and bureaucracies in the name of profit maximization and efficiency. (Heiner 2002) Along with this comes the American consumerist culture, which influences people to mimic American consumerism patterns and abandon their own indigenous ones. (Heiner 2002) This exposes the city to two main problems. Firstly, a cultural leveling threatens to homogenize years of cultural diversity, potentially capable of displacing the remaining shared culture and experience in the concepts of mechanic solidarity and Gemeinschaft with individualistic consumerism. This further exacerbates the

erosion of moral support and cultural identity that are the basis of intimate relations. Secondly, people may substitute this increasing moral and social void with consumerism.

This has come to be a socially accepted goal, where materialism comes into play when people display their socio-economic statuses. Therefore, an increased propensity to consume is observed but this is not met with an equal increase in the legitimate means to command high consumerist power. Ironically, the “ American Dream”, from whence consumerism came, has yet to be realized in America as a result of inequality. (Heiner 2002) This has led to frustration and anomie in global cities who readily embraced consumerism on the pretext that it is inherently good for the economy. (Heiner 2002) The advent of the bureaucracies through globalization also brings about the phenomenon of “ iron cage”. Weber saw the dysfunctional side of bureaucracies which he named “ iron cage”, where “ people become so trapped in following rules and procedures that they lose sight of the reason they are working so hard”. (McIntyre 2011) Therefore, if people get overburdened by rules and procedures, they unintentionally become inept at adapting to adjustments in social circumstances. (McIntyre 2011) As highlighted by Sassen (2000), the inexorable march of globalisation has brought about a proliferation of a digital era.

With urban spaces diminishing, people find means and ways to circumvent this problem by expanding the virtual space. (Sassen 2000) Hence the cascade of online social networking, online gaming, online video streaming, online shopping, all in the solitude of one’s room with a one-eyed monster. Therefore, people escape into the virtual world, building avatars and faux
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profiles to project their ideal identity and use it as a tool to perceive their sense of reality. (Heim 1994) This effectively restrains us from actual face-to-face socialization, which according to Mead (1934) is vital for the development of “ the self” as this arises only through a process of social experiences and activities. Moreover, the proliferation of the internet has brought about a recent phenomenon in Japan named netto shinju – online suicide pacts. The nature of these pacts is somewhat peculiar as they are arranged between strangers, who met on the internet through suicide websites. (Rajagopal 2004) This directly contradicts the traditional suicide pacts, where victims are people who share close relationships.

Epidemiological studies are still on-going, however, there is an inkling that these pacts may be formed by young suicidal individuals living alone, who join others in similar situation. (Rajagopal 2004)

Conclusion

Suicide in a globalized city like Tokyo stems from very different reasons from that of rural areas. This is especially pronounced in a dramatic shift of social structure and space in globalized cities, resulting in a change in relationship intimacy and a homogenization of culture which breeds superficiality and less connectedness to society. Together with the proliferation of the internet, the collective effect alienates people in modern life, having little moral support when faced with difficulties in performance based results and lose sight of their initial goals without the legitimate means of achieving them.

(1936 words)

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