

Durkheim's Theory of Suicide

Suicide

- Durkheim's third famous book "Suicide" published in 1897 is in various respects related to his study of division of labour.
- "Suicide", the act of taking one's own life, figures prominently in the historical development of sociology because it was the subject of the first sociological data to test a theory.
- Durkheim's theory of suicide is cited as "a monumental landmark in which conceptual theory and empirical research are brought together."

- Durkheim's book "Suicide" is an analysis of a phenomenon regarded as pathological, intended to throw light on the evil which threatens modern industrial societies, that is, "anomie."
- **Suicide is an indication of disorganisation of both individual and society.**
- **Increasing number of suicides clearly indicates something wrong somewhere in the social system of the concerned society.**

Definition of Suicide:

- According to Durkheim, suicide refers to “every case of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative death performed by the victim himself and which strives to produce this result.”
- It is clear from the definition of Durkheim that suicide is a conscious act and the person concerned is fully aware of its consequences.
- The person who shoots himself to death, or drinks severe poison, or jumps down from the 10th storey of a building, for example, is fully aware of the consequences of such an act.

Two Main Purposes behind this Study

- Durkheim used a number of **statistical records to establish his fundamental idea that suicide** is also a social fact and social order and disorder are at the very root of suicide.
- As Abraham and Morgan have pointed out, Durkheim made use of statistical analysis for two primary reasons:
 - **(a) To refute theories of suicide based on psychology, biology, genetics, climate, and geographic factors,**
 - **(b) To support with empirical evidence his own sociological explanation of suicide.**

Durkheim Displays an Extreme Form of Sociological Realism

- *Durkheim is of the firm belief that suicide is not an individual act or a private and personal action. It is caused by some power which is over and above the individual or “super-individual.” It is not a personal situation but a manifestation of a social condition.*
- He speaks of suicidal currents as collective tendencies that dominate some vulnerable persons. The act of suicide is nothing but the manifestation of these currents.
- Durkheim has selected the instance or event of suicide to demonstrate the function of sociological theory.
- **Durkheim Chooses Statistical Method to Know the Causes of Suicide:**
- Durkheim wanted to know why people commit suicide, and he chooses to think that explanations focusing on the psychology of the individual were inadequate. Experiments on suicide were obviously out of question.

Durkheim Rejects Extra-Social Factors as the Causes of Suicide

- Durkheim repudiated most of the accepted theories of suicide.
- (1) His monographic study demonstrated that heredity, for example, is not a sufficient explanation of suicide.
- (2) Climatic and geographic factors are equally insufficient as explanatory factors.
- (3) Likewise, waves of imitation are inadequate explanations.
- (4) He also established the fact that suicide is not necessarily caused by the psychological factors

- **Social Forces are the Real Causes of Suicide: Durkheim:**
- Suicide is a highly individual act, yet the motives for a suicide can be fully understood only by reference to the social context in which it occurs.
- Protestants were more likely to commit suicide than Catholics; people in large cities were more likely to commit suicide than people in small communities; people living alone were more likely to commit suicide than people living in families.
- Durkheim isolated one independent variable that lay behind these differences: the extent to which the individual was integrated into a social bond with others.
- People with fragile or weaker ties to their community are more likely to take their own lives than people who have stronger ties.

Three Types of Suicide:

- On the basis of the analysis of a mass of data gathered by him on many societies and cultures, Durkheim identified three basic types of suicides. They are as follows:
 - (i) Egoistic Suicide
 - (ii) Altruistic Suicide
 - (iii) Anomic Suicide.
- According to Durkheim, all these occur as an expression of group breakdown of some kind or the other.
- These three types of suicide reveal different types of relations between the actor and his society.

1. Egoistic Suicide:

- **Egoistic suicide is a product of relatively weak group integration. It takes place as a result of extreme loneliness and also out of excess individualism.**
- When men become “detached from society”, and when the bonds that previously had tied them to their fellow beings become loose – they are more prone to egoistic suicide.
- According to Durkheim, egoistic suicides are committed by those individuals who have the tendency to shut themselves up within themselves. Such individuals feel affronted, hurt and ignored. Introversive traits gain upper hand in them.
- Egoistic persons are aloof and cut off from the mainstream of society and do not take full interest in social matters. Such persons get alienated and find it difficult to cope with social alienation and feel impelled to commit suicide.

egoistic

- Durkheim's belief is that lack of integration of the individuals into the social group is the main cause for egoistic suicide. Durkheim studied varying degrees of integration of individuals into their religion, family, political and national communities.
- He found that among the Catholics suicides were comparatively less than among the Protestants. He also found that Catholicism is able to integrate its members more fully into its fold.
- On the other hand, Protestantism fosters spirit of free inquiry, permits great individual freedom, lacks hierarchic organisations and has fewer common beliefs and practices. It is known that the Catholic Church is more powerfully integrated than the Protestant church.
- It is in this way the Protestants are more prone to commit suicide than the Catholics. Hence, Durkheim generalised that the lack of integration is the main cause of egoistic suicide.

2. Altruistic Suicide:

- This kind of suicide takes place in the form of a sacrifice in which an individual ends his life by heroic means so as to promote a cause or an ideal which is very dear to him.
- It results from the over- integration of the individual into his group.
- In simple words, altruistic suicide is taking off one's own life for the sake of a cause.
- It means that even high level of social solidarity induces suicide.

- **Examples:**

- (i) In some primitive societies and in modern armies such suicide takes place.
- (ii) Japanese sometimes illustrate this type of suicide. They call it “Harakiri.” In this practice of Harakiri, some Japanese go to the extent of taking off their lives for the sake of the larger social unity. They consider that self-destruction would prevent the breakdown of social unity.
- (iii) The practice of “sati” which was once in practice in North India is another example of this kind.
- (iv) The self-immolation by Buddhist monks, self-destruction in Nirvana under the Brahmanical influence as found in the case of ancient Hindu sages represent other variants of altruistic suicide. Wherever altruistic suicide is prevalent, man is always ready to sacrifice his life for a great cause, principle, ideal or value.

3. Anomie Suicide:

- The breakdown of social norms and sudden social changes that are characteristic of modern times, encourage anomie suicide.
- When the collective conscience weakens, men fall victim to anomie suicide. “Without the social backing to which one is accustomed, life is judged to be not worth continuing.”
- Anomie suicide is the type that follows catastrophic social changes. Social life all around seems to go to pieces.
- According to Durkheim, at times when social relations get disturbed both personal and social ethics become the casualties.
- Values of life come down and outlook of some persons changes radically. There are then certain dangerous developments in the society.

anomic

- A sudden change has its vibrations both in social life and social relationship, which paves way for suicide. If the change is sudden, adjustment becomes difficult and those who do not get adjusted to changes commit suicide.
- It is this social disruption which leads to suicide. According to Durkheim, not only economic disaster and industrial crisis but even sudden economic prosperity can cause disruption and deregulation and finally suicide.

Fatalistic

- Fatalistic [Suicide](#) is a type of suicide occurring in social conditions where the individual experiences pervasive oppression.
- Durkheim has defined fatalistic suicide as resulting "from excessive regulation." Suicide by individuals whose passions are choked by oppressive discipline.
- The condition of slavery may make an individual feel that the only way to find escape is suicide.
- We would call it fatalistic suicide because the individual considers himself condemned by fate or doomed to be a slave.
- Here, is a fatalistic situation calling for a fatalistic suicide as a solution or escape.

Concluding Remarks:

- These three kinds of suicide understood as social types also correspond approximately to psychological types.
- “Egoistic suicide tends to be characterised by a kind of apathy, an absence of attachment to life;
- altruistic suicide, by a state of energy and passion;
- anomie suicide is characterised by a state of irritation or disgust” – Raymond Aron.
- Raymond Aron pointed out that Durkheim in his study of “suicide” has been successful in establishing a social fact that there are “specific social phenomena which govern individual phenomena.
- The most impressive, most eloquent example is that of the social forces which drive individuals to their deaths, each believing that he is obeying only himself.”