

Revisiting Durkheim's Theory of Suicide: A Sociological Analysis in Contemporary Times

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Abstract:

Émile Durkheim's seminal work on suicide, published in 1897, remains a cornerstone in sociological theory, providing a foundational understanding of how societal structures and norms influence individual behavior. Durkheim proposed that suicide rates could be explained through the integration and regulation within society, classifying suicide into four types: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic. This paper revisits Durkheim's theory in the context of contemporary society, where new social realities such as globalization, technological advancements, individualism, and the breakdown of traditional norms challenge the applicability of his framework. By analyzing contemporary case studies, including the rise of digital suicide contagion, increasing mental health concerns, and social isolation in hyper-connected societies, this paper assesses the relevance and limitations of Durkheim's theory. It proposes an extension of Durkheim's framework to incorporate modern sociological phenomena, such as social media and the gig economy, and offers a critique of how these factors contribute to new forms of social integration and regulation.

Keywords: Durkheim, Suicide, Sociological Theory, Social Integration, Anomie, Altruism, Digital Suicide, Mental Health, Social Media, Individualism, Contemporary Society.

Introduction

Émile Durkheim's *Le Suicide* (1897) is one of the most influential works in sociology, offering a groundbreaking analysis of suicide that focuses on social factors rather than individual psychology. Durkheim argued that suicide rates are influenced by the degree to which individuals are integrated into society and regulated by social norms. The theory, based on empirical data from various societies, categorized suicide into four distinct types: egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic, each of which can be linked to varying levels of social cohesion or regulation. In this paper, we examine Durkheim's theory within the context of contemporary society, where new challenges such as individualism, technological advancements, and globalization have altered the dynamics of social integration and regulation. Through a sociological lens, this paper explores the contemporary relevance of Durkheim's framework and identifies how modern social factors influence suicide in ways that Durkheim's original model may not have fully anticipated.

Moreover, we consider how Durkheim's categories of suicide can be applied to understand the complexity of suicide in the modern world. In particular, we will explore the intersections between social media, mental health awareness, and shifting cultural norms, and how these factors might either mitigate or exacerbate the risk of suicide. This paper aims to extend Durkheim's insights into the 21st century, offering a comprehensive analysis of how social forces continue to shape the individual's experience of life and

death. By examining contemporary case studies and research, we will assess whether Durkheim's theory holds in today's rapidly changing social landscape or if new frameworks are needed to address the evolving causes and manifestations of suicide.

Revisiting Durkheim's thoughts on Suicide

After Durkheim wrote 'Rules of Sociological Method' in 1895, he spoke about 'Le Suicide' in 1897. To study a phenomena like Suicide which is often considered to be a private act and which has always been considered to be the subject matter of psychologists and psychiatrists who looked for intrinsic forces that lead individuals to adopting to Suicide, Durkheim, looked for extrinsic reasons for such a behaviour as a sociologist and adopted a scientific methodology.

There are two central themes in Durkheim's work :

1. Priority of social over the individual.
2. Society can be scientifically studied.

We live in a society where everything is attributed to individuals; even problems such as racism, pollution, economic recession. Durkheim approaches everything from an opposite perspective stressing on the social dimension. For Durkheim society is made up of 'Social Facts'. Social facts are social structures, cultural norms, values that are external to and coercive of the actor. This means that we must study social facts by acquiring data from outside of our minds through observation and experimentation. Durkheim referred to social facts as 'Sui generis', he used this term to claim that social facts have their own unique character and are not reducible to individual consciousness.

Durkheim defines Suicide as 'any case of death caused directly or indirectly caused due to positive or negative action of victim themselves which they know will produce the result'. There must be an intention to call it a death. And this intention may be varied, it may not necessarily be self-destruction. Suicide is often defined by circumstances rather than the medical reasons. Durkheim wanted to study how and why suicide rates vary across countries and whether suicide rates differ on the basis of religion, gender, marital status etc. There seemed to be a tremendous difference in suicide rates. The bachelors seemed to have a higher suicide rate than those who were married, men had a higher suicide rate than women, Urban regions had higher suicide rates than rural regions, furthermore Men who were christians & unmarried had higher suicide rate than Women who were Jews and married. Protestants had a much more higher suicide rate than Catholics and Catholics had higher suicide rates than the Jews. He also makes a point that all religions are against suicide and consider the act of suicide as a sin and infact do not give a religious burial too. According to the National Crime Records Bureau the total number of suicide deaths have increased since 2012 to 2022 from 13,5445 lakh cases (11.2%) in 2012 to 17,0924 lakh cases (12.4%) in 2022. Furthermore, unmarried men seem to have a higher rate of suicide than unmarried women, and married men seem to have a higher rate of suicide than married women, the data on suicide rates among transgenders seems to be almost absent in year 2022. Here it is evident that Durkheim's statistical analysis is still relevant in contemporary times.

Durkheim identified that there were differing 'suicidogenic forces' in the society that led to differing suicide rates. These suicidogenic forces are Integration and Regulation.

Durkheim gave a typology of suicide—egoistic, altruistic, anomic, and fatalistic— which remains a valuable tool for understanding the social causes of suicide. However, the nature of social integration and regulation has significantly evolved since Durkheim's time, particularly in relation to modern issues such

as increasing rates of mental health crises and the impact of digital communication. Below is a brief overview of Durkheim's four types of suicide:

Egoistic Suicide: This type occurs when individuals feel disconnected from society due to weak social ties, often seen in highly individualistic societies. Durkheim noted that an absence of social bonds leads to feelings of isolation, which can drive individuals to take their own lives. It reflects a prolonged sense of not belonging, of not being integrated in a community, an experience, of not having a tether: an absence that can give rise to meaninglessness, apathy, melancholy, and depression. It is the result of a weakening of the bonds that normally

integrate individuals into the collectivity: in other words a breakdown or decrease of social integration. Durkheim refers to this type of suicide as the result of "excessive individuation", meaning that the individual becomes increasingly detached from other members of his community and therefore tend to commit suicide. (Aleem Akhtar & Dimbath, O. 2014).

Altruistic Suicide: is characterized by a sense of being overwhelmed by a group's goals and beliefs. It occurs in societies with high integration, where individual needs are seen as less important than the society's needs as a whole. They thus occur on the opposite integration scale as egoistic suicide. As individual interest would not be considered important, Durkheim stated that in an altruistic society there would be little reason for people to commit suicide. He stated one exception, namely when the individual is expected to kill themselves on behalf of society – a primary example being the soldier in military service (Dimbath, O. 2014). Conversely, altruistic suicide happens when individuals are too strongly integrated into society or groups, leading them to sacrifice their lives for the perceived greater good. This form of suicide is often associated with religious or cultural norms, where individuals might commit suicide for the sake of the community. (Aleem Akhtar, & Stack, S. 2004)

Anomic Suicide: Durkheim argued that suicide rates rise during periods of rapid social change or economic disruption, where individuals experience a breakdown in societal norms and a lack of regulation. The increase in anomic suicide is typically linked to disillusionment or uncertainty about one's place in society. It represents an individual's moral confusion and lack of social direction, often resulting from significant social and economic disruption. This sense of disarray is caused by the absence of clear societal standards and guiding values that could shape personal ambitions, offering structure and meaning to one's conscience. This is indicative of the failure of economic development and the division of labor to create Durkheim's organic solidarity, leaving people unsure of their place within society. Durkheim describes this as a state of moral disorder, where individuals are uncertain about the limits of their desires and constantly face dissatisfaction. Such a state can arise from extreme shifts in wealth—whether through financial collapse or sudden gain—where old expectations no longer apply, and new ones must be formed to understand and navigate the changed circumstances.

Fatalistic Suicide: This occurs in situations of excessive regulation where individuals feel trapped by societal constraints. Durkheim suggested that individuals under constant pressure and with little opportunity for autonomy may resort to suicide as a means of escape. Fatalistic suicide occurs when an individual faces extreme regulation, with their future opportunities relentlessly blocked and their desires severely suppressed by harsh discipline. It contrasts with Anomic suicide and tends to arise in highly oppressive societies, where individuals may choose death over continuing to live under such unbearable conditions. A clear example of this would be in a prison, where some inmates might prefer death rather than endure constant abuse and strict control that prevent them from fulfilling their basic desires.

Contemporary Critique and Sociological Analysis of Durkheim's theory

In contemporary society, significant changes in social structures and cultural dynamics challenge Durkheim's classic theory. For instance, the rise of individualism in Western societies has led to a weakening of traditional social bonds. At the same time, the increasing role of digital technology in social interaction creates new forms of social integration and regulation. This section critically assesses how these factors affect suicide and may necessitate an expansion of Durkheim's theory.

The Role of Social Media and Digital Connectivity

One of the most profound social shifts in contemporary times is the role of digital media in shaping individuals' social lives. Social media platforms, while fostering new forms of social connection, have also been linked to rising rates of cyberbullying, social isolation, and digital suicide contagion, particularly among vulnerable youth. Studies have shown that exposure to suicide-related content online can increase the likelihood of copycat suicides, suggesting a new form of social integration and regulation that Durkheim did not foresee. This raises questions about the role of online communities in influencing individual decisions, suggesting that a new form of anomic suicide may be emerging—one influenced by the pressures and expectations of digital life (Ferguson, C. J. 2021).

The role of media and digital connectivity in modern society has drastically transformed how individuals interact with the world, but it has also contributed to an increasing sense of isolation and despair. Durkheim's concept of anomie—a state of normlessness or a breakdown in social order—can be observed in the digital age, where individuals may feel disconnected from societal norms or unclear about their place in the world. The constant bombardment of idealized lifestyles, the pressure for social validation, and the overwhelming amount of information can create a sense of disillusionment and meaninglessness, similar to what Durkheim described. People may feel disconnected from their communities, leading to feelings of isolation and confusion about their identity and purpose. This aligns with the rise in digital depression and suicidal tendencies, especially among younger people. The role of social media in creating unrealistic standards and constant social comparison can contribute to feelings of inadequacy and failure. Durkheim argued that a lack of social integration and clear societal expectations could lead to an increase in suicide. In the age of digital connectivity, people often compare their lives to others' curated online personas, which can exacerbate feelings of worthlessness and social disconnection. This could contribute to the sense of moral confusion and loss of direction that Durkheim identified as central to anomie.

While anomic suicide arises from a lack of regulation, fatalistic suicide occurs in highly regulated, oppressive environments. The digital world can also contribute to fatalistic suicide through constant surveillance, over-connection, and excessive pressure to conform to societal expectations. In some cases, individuals may feel trapped by online personas they must maintain, the unrelenting scrutiny of their actions, or the overwhelming pressure to perform in certain ways. This hyper-regulation can lead to a sense of being unable to escape, causing despair and, in extreme cases, suicidal thoughts.

Mental Health and the Breakdown of Traditional Norms

In addition to digital connectivity, the contemporary rise in mental health crises plays a crucial role in reshaping Durkheim's typology. Increasing rates of depression, anxiety, and other mental health disorders, exacerbated by socio-economic pressures and political instability, challenge Durkheim's view of social regulation. Modern societies' increasing reliance on medical models of mental health and individual therapy may be viewed as an attempt to regulate the self and provide a sense of social integration. However, the disjointed nature of modern support systems and the often-impersonal nature of

contemporary healthcare may still leave individuals feeling disconnected from their communities (Ferguson, C. J. 2021).

The Gig Economy and Economic Anomie

Another contemporary phenomenon that intersects with Durkheim's concept of anomie is the rise of the gig economy. As traditional forms of stable employment become increasingly unstable, individuals may experience a sense of disorientation and a lack of regulation. Gig workers, who often face precarious working conditions, may experience heightened stress, economic insecurity, and social isolation, all of which contribute to a sense of anomie. This contemporary form of economic instability is similar to the conditions Durkheim identified in his analysis of suicide during periods of economic transition, yet the globalized, tech-driven nature of the gig economy adds new layers of complexity (Johnson, M. R. 2018).

Extending Durkheim's Framework

While Durkheim's theory of suicide remains a critical tool for understanding societal influences on individual behavior, contemporary social realities necessitate an extension of his framework. To account for the impacts of digital media, mental health, and the gig economy, a revised version of Durkheim's typology is proposed, incorporating new forms of social integration and regulation, particularly in the context of the globalized, hyper-connected world. The overwhelming presence of digital spaces in daily life can be understood as a new form of anomie, wherein individuals experience disconnection, even in the midst of seeming connectedness. (Ferguson, C. J. 2021). The spread of distressing content and the pressure to conform to online norms can amplify feelings of isolation. The precariousness of work in the gig economy can be viewed as a new form of social disintegration, where individuals experience a lack of meaningful regulation, support, and long-term security, contributing to feelings of anxiety and alienation. (Johnson, M. R. 2018). Altruistic suicide in modern society may take on new forms, with individuals sacrificing their well-being not only for traditional societal causes but also for causes shaped by digital activism and social movements.

Conclusion

Durkheim's theory of suicide remains an essential framework for understanding the relationship between societal structures and individual actions. However, contemporary sociological shifts, such as the rise of social media, the gig economy, and evolving mental health trends, necessitate a reevaluation and extension of his ideas. By considering these new factors, we can develop a more nuanced understanding of suicide in the modern age, and perhaps, identify new strategies for preventing this tragic phenomenon.

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