**SOC 3150: Classical Sociological Theory**

**Lecture 15: Durkheim: The Problem of Suicide**

Durkheim’s ideas set out in the *Division of Labour* form the basis of his outlook. His later works represent elaborations on its themes

His study of suicide (1897) is a specific problem through which wider social issues could be analyzed

Reasons for Durkheim’s interest in the problem:

* Suicide a growing problem in Europe by 1850, something many felt was linked to the rise of industrial society.
* Industrial society placed the economy, self-interest, and economic gain over the collective. The individual became the center of society, calling into question the social.
* The Dreyfus Affair of 1894 dealt a blow to national unity and showed how much egoistic forces/social dissolution had replaced the collective authority of society.
* Comparative mortality data linked suicide to social factors such as industrial change, occupation, family life, and religion rather than psychological variables.
* The suicide of Victor Hommay, Durkheim’s close friend and colleague.
* The opportunity to forcefully demonstrate the explanatory power of sociology.

**A Social Theory of Suicide:**

Rather than seek the cause of suicide in personal, psychological factors, Durkheim sought it in relation to the framework of society.

This was disturbing to many.

The commonsense view was that suicide resulted from a nervous disorder, weak disposition, and a psychological response to the burdens of life. Durkheim objected:

* Social causes of suicide precede individual causes
* There is a need to focus on the various social environments to which the individual is connected

Durkheim summed this up when he said: “The causes of death are outside rather than within us, and are effective only if we venture into their sphere of activity.”

Durkheim’s study thus sought to show that it was possible to study the suicide rate independently of the individual.

**The Social Suicide Rate:**

Durkheim analyzed public data on 26,000 suicides from France, Prussia, England, Denmark, and Austria, which he broke down according to age, religion, sex, occupation, and marital status and mapped out geographically.

The “social suicide rate” is a term he used to describe the number of suicidal deaths in a given society and the extent to which the rates themselves could be seen as establishing a pattern therein.

Some of his findings:

* Suicide rates varied from society to society (e.g. higher in France than Germany, lower in Denmark than England)
* Between 1841-1872, suicide rates within various countries remained *stable*, suggesting the power of particular social factors in the framework of each society
* Each society had a distinct social environment comprised of different religions, patterns of family life, military obligations, etc. These produced different suicide rates.
* The suicide rate showed far more consistency than the general mortality rate, which fluctuated randomly.

Durkheim concluded:

1. The stability of the rates showed that, while individual motives may vary from case to case, the regularity shown by social suicide rates was consistently stable
2. Though rates varied between societies, its stability in a particular society meant each society effectively produces a “quota of suicidal deaths.”
3. The suicide rate = a “factual order” separate from individual disposition, a regularity that can – and should - be studied in its own right.

In examining this problem, Durkheim’s analysis of the data led him to conclude that variations in the social suicide rate could be attributed to variations in two broad social factors:

1. *Social integration*: the links that attach individuals to groups outside themselves and society.
2. *Social regulation*: the degree of external constraint on individuals (i.e. the extent to which society consistently sets moral boundaries and places limits on individual and social needs and wants).

By cross-tabulating high and low scores on each of these dimensions, Durkheim was able to discern four distinct types of social suicide:

(1) *Egoistic* suicide: too little social integration. The person is not well meshed with the larger social unit, leading to a feeling that the person is not part of society and society is not part of the individual. In such contexts, there are:

- “currents of depression and disillusionment”

- politics is dominated by a sense of futility

- morality is seen as an individual choice

- religion is absent, or stresses individualism

- popular philosophies stress the meaningless of life

- this particularly affects unattached individuals

(2) *Altruistic* suicide: too much social integration. In such contexts we see:

- suicide in the name of the greater good

(e.g. hara-kiri, terrorist bombers/martyrdom, cults).

(3) *Fatalistic* suicide: too much social regulation. In such contexts we see:

- “persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline” (e.g. slaves; those

made to feel worthless).

(4) *Anomic* suicide: too little social regulation. In such contexts we see:

* the regulatory powers of society disrupted
* people with little control over their passions, which are free to run wild in an insatiable race for gratification

- occur in both rapid economic booms or in depressions which render the collectivity temporarily incapable of exercising its authority over individuals

- anomie, moods of rootlessness and normlessness, are unleashed, leading some to crash in the abyss of frustration, disappointment, and angst.

In the end, Durkheim sees some level of suicide to be normal, and that attempts to dissuade particular individuals from it futile, as the ultimate causes are in society.

Some of these causes, moreover, we might not want to eradicate due to their benefits to many, regardless of their negative influence on a few (e.g. economic booms, individual).

That being said, however, Durkheim felt that modern society had seen a pathological shift toward egoistic and anomic suicides. This was due to the fact that the division of labour had resulted in low social integration and regulation, leading many to isolation rather than interdependence.

Durkheim saw current social institutions for connecting the individual to society (the state, the church, and the family) as failing, subject to the same corrosive conditions that increase suicide.

Durkheim felt there needed to be a new institution to help provide social integration and regulation, suggesting one based on occupational groups (but this was never really well defined).

Next class: Durkheim on social facts and the sociological method.