Suicide in Cross-Cultural Perspective *

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"To do good, one must have wisdom."
Frank Capra, The Bitter Tea of General Yen (1933)

ABSTRACT

As sociologists approach the centennial celebration of Durkheim's Suicide, we can neither relax our attention nor idolize the gifts he has given us; but, we must instead move the science of sociology forward, until no individual feels so much anguish, pain and isolation that he/she feels compelled to commit suicide. Recent data from the World Health Organization clearly indicates that suicide is at crisis proportions in Hungary and in Sri Lanka. Among the elderly world-wide, but most especially in Eastern Europe, suicide is a serious social problem, with rates often eclipsing national averages. Although systematic data is not yet available on each and every society, there is some evidence that alienation, especially in Japan and India, may be one of the primary motives for committing suicide.

Introduction

Since Durkheim's (1951) classic attempt to study suicide using cross-national comparisons, research on suicide has been fundamentally a cross-cultural endeavor among sociologists. Durkheim, however, never fully developed a theory of personality to accompany his predominantly structural analysis of suicide; and many sociologists since his time have promoted this fatal flaw into a "scientific cult" (see Breault 1986 for a recent example of such an axiomatic attempt at replication). Inkeles (1959; 1963), in his formative work, puts the Durkheimian dilemma most succinctly, when he argues that Durkheim's theory of suicide is essentially a "state-rate model" and that it lacks a theory of personality to act as an intervening variable between the social structure and the suicidal outcome.

Halbwachs (1978) provides a theoretical corrective to the Durkheimian model by introducing the notion of the role which consciousness plays in motivating someone to commit suicide. He essentially argues that sociologists must account for the individual's awareness of his/her own alienation in explaining why people commit suicide. When alienation becomes problematic in the mind of the isolated individual, Halbwachs contends it is then that the individual is most prone to suicide. As such, in Halbwachsian sociology, alienation appears to be the "latent cause" of suicide.

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while structural factors, such as marital status, urban residence and religious affiliation (which Durkheim overemphasizes), appear to be "manifest causes."

Giddens' Typology of Suicide

Giddens (1971) argues that sociologists have not fully developed egoistic and anomic suicide—the two major types of suicide in modern societies that Durkheim discovered—into a typology. Giddens contends that egoistic suicide reflects "excessive individualism," as does Durkheim; but the former emphasizes that egoism can be subsumed under the rubric of isolation—that is, it is "a general condition of modern societies leading to social isolation of individuals from closely-knit relationship with others" (Giddens 1971: 98). He asserts that sociologists have tended to make little use of the concept of anomic and, in a sense, they often treat it as indistinguishable from egoistic suicide. Egoism, maintains Giddens, is bound up with institutionalized social conditions which "loosen" or "dilute" social ties binding members of one social group with another.

A major source of such "dilution" in modern societies is to be found in the existence of social values promoting individualism, personal initiative and responsibility in important spheres of social activity. Thus, for example, values which place stress upon romantic love as a basis of marriage thereby place the onus on each individual to search out and win a partner through his own efforts (Giddens 1971: 98-99).

On the other hand, anomie may result from rapid economic change; or it may exist in a chronic state in some sectors of the occupational structure (Durkheim 1951). In each of these cases, social norms tend to exercise only a low degree of regulatory control over individual behavior, as Durkheim correctly points out. Giddens argues though that social norms govern the actions and motivations of individuals in two distinct ways: "they influence the actual setting of goals, defining what is appropriate and legitimate; but as Durkheim emphasized above all, they limit and restrict aspirations" (Giddens 1971: 99). When social norms provide no clear limit upon aspirations, or when norms produce disjunctions between aspirations and their attainment, a state of anomie exists on the social psychological level. Thus, Durkheim's conception of anomie is essentially a social psychology of aspirations, where social change dislodges individuals from the social fabric of society, thwarts their aspirations or drives them excessively, and may subsequently induce suicide.²

Giddens asserts that anomie reflects normative integration, while egoism reflects social integration. His contemporary view is at odds, however, with the "one law of suicide" as put forth in the analytical work of Johnson (1965) and Pope (1976), as well as the research by Gibbs and Martin (1964). Like Taylor (1982) though, Giddens readily admits that individuals sometime experience a low degree of social integration and a high degree of normative integration, or vice versa. How can this be?

On the one hand, Giddens seems to suggest that the alienated individual is one who lacks normative integration in mainstream society and social integration within a reference group. On the other hand, his typology assumes that the non-alienated individual is one who shares the same norms as mainstream society, while at the same time he/she is tightly embedded with a given reference group. What Giddens points to, but fails to explicate, is the condition of the ambivalent individual—that is, some individuals may be tightly embedded within a given reference group, such as members of primary and voluntary associates often are, but they may not adhere to the norms of the larger society. He also seems to take it for granted that individuals who lack social solidarity but who adhere to mainstream norms may be similar to the former