Suicide in Japan and in the West

Evidence for Durkheim’s Theory

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ABSTRACT

A recent study by Mamuro Iga relies upon psychological and attitudinal survey data to argue that contemporary Japan displays high levels of altruistic, fatalistic, and anomic suicide. We try to corroborate Iga using 1980 ecological data from the 47 prefectures of Japan. Our findings are that the relationships between Japanese suicide rates and indicators of social integration—migration, percent religious, percent married, and the divorce rate—are generally reversed from similar relationships found in the West. These results are consistent with altruistic-fatalistic suicide. Per capita income is related to suicide in a way similar to that found in the West, consistent with Iga’s view that the Japanese are subject to anomic suicide due to unregulated aspirations. There are substantial differences between the correlates of male and female suicide rates. Implications for theory and research are discussed.

IF MAMURO IGA (1981, 1986) is correct, the types of suicide prevalent in Japan are very different from those found by researchers in Western nations. Using Durkheim’s (1897) concepts, psychological data, and information on Japanese culture and society, Iga concludes that altruistic and fatalistic suicides are the dominant types, followed by anomic.1 Iga’s contention contradicts the widely accepted view that altruistic and fatalistic types of suicide are of negligible importance in modern societies (Johnson, 1965).

Support for many of the basic tenets of Durkheim’s (1897) theory of suicide has been accumulating in recent years (Danigelis and Pope, 1979; Boor, 1980; Stack, 1980, 1981, 1983, 1984; Breault and Barkey, 1982; Stark, Doyle, and Rushing, 1983; Breault, 1986; Pescosolido and Georgianna, 1989; Trovato, 1986; Simpson and Conklin, 1989). Each of these researchers has been forced to interpret and, in many cases, revise Durkheim’s views, but the various explications seem to have converged into some degree of consensus. Durkheim is generally seen as having used social integration and regulation as the variables which explain variations in suicide rates (Pope, 1976). Too little integration leads to egoistic and too much integration to altruistic suicide. Too little

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regulation produces anomic and too much regulation fatalistic suicide. The biggest disagreements in the literature are over whether integration and regulation are really distinct variables and whether denominational religious differences affect degree of integration. We shall address these issues as the occasion arises.

One thing nearly all writers agree on is that modernization leads to higher rates of suicide (Morselli, 1882; Durkheim, 1897; Ellner, 1977; Stack, 1978, 1981; Lester, 1987). Durkheim and those using a Durkheimian approach attribute the high rates found in modern nations to decreasing integration-regulation. Thus, egoistic-anomic suicide is seen as characteristic of modern nations while altruistic-fatalistic forms are viewed as irrelevant, as having no empirical support, or as subject only to non-sociological explanations (Johnson, 1965).

If Iga is right about Japan, then a nation which is quite modern in terms of technology and productivity may be characterized by high rates of altruistic-fatalistic suicide. It might also be predicted that Japan’s suicide rate may actually decline as it moves toward less integration and regulation.

In the next section we will examine Iga’s views in more detail. We will then propose a test of Iga’s theory in the form of a comparison of the correlates of suicide in the West, where egoistic-anomic types supposedly prevail, with the correlates of suicide in Japan, where altruistic-fatalistic forms dominate according to Iga.

Iga’s Analysis of Suicide in Japan

Japanese society is seen by Iga (1986; also see Benedict, 1946; Keith, 1975; Lebra, 1976) as highly integrated and also highly regulated in all respects except one. The Japanese reify society, viewing it as part of nature to which the individual must adjust. The value of “groupism” is supreme and expresses itself in the form of authoritarian familism. This authoritarian familism extends to all other social institutions and groups, including the business firm.

Although individual Japanese may be closely regulated by the norms of the groups to which they belong, they are at the same time encouraged by Japanese culture to cultivate extremely high goals of individual achievement, chiefly in education and business. Aspirations, especially among males, are in this sense unregulated. Since only a limited number of openings exist in the better universities and higher level companies, many aspirants are doomed to failure. Thus the means-ends disjunction characteristic of anomic suicide exists, incongruously, alongside all the conditions promoting altruistic-fatalistic suicide.

Other aspects of Japanese society and culture promote suicide. Integration into groups often fails to provide individuals with much social support. Subordinates in hierarchical organizations compete with one another for the approval of leaders and avoid becoming involved in other peoples’ troubles. The cultural value of monism, which is also expressed in Japanese religion, blurs the distinction between humans and nature, between life and death, and