

# Durkheim's Sociological Analysis of Suicide

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## Abstract

This effort will suggest that Durkheim argued that suicide is a function of the levels of Social Integration into the Conscience Collective of the social group. Consistent with his hypothesis, Durkheim identified four forms of suicide and their related levels (high/low) of social integration affecting the personal act of suicide. Lastly, this effort is not a traditional research project, as was mentioned above; rather is reevaluation of a classical sociological theory.

## Keywords

Conscience Collective, Mechanical/Organic Solidarity, Suicide, Egoism, Anomie, Fatalism, Altruism

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## 1. Introduction

According to the U.S.A. Center for Disease Control, suicide is the 10<sup>th</sup> leading cause of death in the U.S.A. for all ages. Every day, approximately 123 Americans die by suicide. There is one death by suicide in the USA every 12 minutes. Suicide takes the lives of over 44,965 Americans every year. The highest suicide rates in the U.S.A. are among Whites, American Indians and Alaska Natives. (U.S. Government/Center for Disease Control, 2019, <https://www.cdc.gov/vitalsigns/suicide>).

This effort will suggest that these appalling data are seen by Durkheim as a social manifestation of social integration, and not a personal act. This effort also indicated that this is not a traditional research project, but a visitation of Durkheim's Social Theory.

Durkheim's effort at understanding the problem of suicide can be found in the study of the Moral Collective character in both Traditional (Mechanical Solidarity) and Modern societies (Organic Solidarity). Durkheim suggested that these solidarities can be analyzed using four analytical tools he created: a) *Volume*, b) *Intensity*, c) *Rigidity*, and the d) *Content*.

*Volume* refers to the degree in which individuals hold identical attitudes, values, norms and beliefs. *Intensity* is the extent to which attitudes, values, norms and beliefs have an emotional and intellectual hold on the Conscience Collective. The stronger the Intensity, the more enveloping effect on the collective thought. *Rigidity* pertains to the clarity of definitions associated with practices and sanctions prescribed by the Collective Conscience. Lastly, *Content* refers to the variable of social change profoundly altering attitudes, values, norms and beliefs.

The traditional Collective Conscience or *Mechanical Solidarity* is a social group which tends to be high in Volume, Intensity, Rigidity, and Content is religious. The social unity tends to hold a strongly defined set of values and beliefs, which ensure that the actions of all conform to the common social values. Moreover, every social member is a microcosm of the collective type, restricting the opportunity of a unique self. This form of solidarity is further marked by the nature of the punishment which is doled out when the common values are violated. Indeed, sanctions are repressive based in the collective response to the transgression (emotional and charged with anger and outrage). Lastly, the economy is a simple, segmented structure, consisting of units of families and/or clans all of which are the functional equal (no concept of social diversity).

Over social change/development these formerly separate communities become linked within a single economic system, or what Durkheim labeled *Density*. Density, according to Durkheim fosters the obligation of living in cooperation with one another. The moral homogeneity of the collective is based in ethnic diversification, and the division of labor. Durkheim labeled this Conscience Collective Organic Solidarity (Emile Durkheim 1997, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Free Press N.Y.).

Organic solidarity consists of social ties rooted in social cooperation, based in occupational interdependence within the division of labor. As a result of this social change/transformation arises the “*Cult of the individual*”. This morality provides validation for the specialized division of labor; indeed the more specialized the division of labor, the more individualistic, the social members become (the kind of work one does becomes his/her human identity) (Gerardi, 2010, *A Brief Survey of the Sociological Imagination*, Kendell/Hunt). Indeed, as social integration decreases, individuality increases.

As a result of this social transformation, recitative law replaces repressive sanctions in favor of individual rights and freedoms. The application of these laws requires specialized rational agencies for enforcement. Violation of these laws usually does not stimulate the collective anger or outrage (repressive sanctions does not disappear; rather remains in the values embodied in the individual, not in the social collective) (some may agree with the death penalty and, others simply do not, based in their ethnic and/or religious backgrounds) (Emile Durkheim 1997, *The Division of Labor in Society*, Free Press N.Y.).

## 2. Moral Life and Suicide

Durkheim concluded that suicide is a concrete social problem embedded in level

of social integration; therefore, the differences in suicide are a function of social integration. Thus, the motive for suicide is primarily based in the collective Conscience charter of the social group. Indeed, recognizing that there is no single circumstance that explains suicide Durkheim identified four forms of suicide, which act as an index of the various states of social integration: 1) *Egoism*, 2) *Anomie*, 3) *Fatalism*, and 4) *Altruism*. Durkheim concluded that the degree to which individuals are integrated into a group could motivate these various forms of suicide or social action (*Emile Durkheim, 1995, The Elementary Forms of Religious Life, Simon and Schuster*).

### 3. Discussion: Analysis of Durkheim's Four Forms of Suicide

*Anomic Suicide* signifies a socio-cultural absence of a sense of limits on its members. This absence creates a weak sense of solidarity and integration, causing disorientation, aggression, confusion, and disillusionment.

Indeed, in a non-anomic society there arises a normative sense of limits, becoming a person's second nature. Thus, the root of the individual's self-fulfillment and cooperative reciprocity, maintaining social hemostasis.

On the other hand, *Fatalism* is based in excessive regulations imposing limits on self-fulfillment and reciprocity by a dictator. All passions and aspirations are choked (i.e. emigrants leaving their country in overcrowded sea vessels and drowning in large numbers. Death is better than remaining in the mother country). Therefore, a weak sense of solidarity and integration.

*Egoism* refers to the state in which individualism is carried out to the extreme. A weak attached member to the social order, leading to an overly self-centered act of suicide.

Finally, *Altruism* refers to a state of excessive community. The person loses sight of independent self, in favor of the community marked by a high sense of integration and solidarity. The community's values are benefited by the individual committing suicide (i.e. Terrorist suicide bombers/Kamikaze of WWII).

### 4. Conclusion

Durkheim argued that suicide in most cases is not a personal weakness, rather it is a concrete social problem based in levels of social integration (*Emile Durkheim, 1951, Suicide: A Study in Sociology, Free Press, N.Y.*).

In the case of Anomic, Fatalism and Egoism there is a low level of *Volume*, *Intensity*, *Rigidity and Content* that is secular. On the other hand, Altruistic Suicide is marked by a high level of *Volume*, *Intensity*, *Rigidity, and Content that is religious* (*Emile Durkheim on Morality and Society, 1975, University of Chicago Press*). Generally, Anomic, and Egoism can be found in an Organic Solidarity. By contrast, Fatalism and Altruistic can be observed most often in a Mechanical Solidarity.

*To sum-up* Durkheim hypothesized that the main causes for human suicide are rooted in the levels of social integration (or "moral life" in society). Durk-

heim proves this hypothesis using his four scientific tools (*Volume*, *Intensity*, *Rigidity*, and *Content*), and the four forms, suicide (*Egoism*, *Anomie*, *Fatalism*, and *Altruism*), thereby establishing a social theory concerning suicide (Emile Durkheim, 1982, *Rules of Sociological Method*, Translation W.D. Hall, Free Press N.Y.).

Finally this effort has suggested that these appalling suicide data from Durkheim's perspective are a manifestation of social integration, and not a personal act. This effort also indicated that this is not a traditional research project, but a visitation of Durkheim's Social Theory of suicide.

### Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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