Review Article

Learning about Suicide: Who Would Bear the Whips and Scorns of Time?

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By way of a review of the reissue of Durkheim's *Suicide* this article offers an evaluation of Durkheim's monograph in the light of current thinking about suicide and the recent and growing work in Durkheimian studies. The question of moral order is also addressed and is related to social capital theory and the development of communitarianism. The matter of increased and unpredicted suicide rates among young men (especially in prison) in the UK is discussed and linked to educational provision for disaffected pupils and to the development of sustainable individual identity. It is posited that a conceptualization of this problem through Durkheimian sociology can provide a better understanding of the phenomenon than many existing approaches to the issue.

Durkheim

From Samson and Socrates to Ophelia and Anna Karenina; from Judas Iscariot and Lucretia to Simone Weil and Sylvia Plath; from Captain Oates to Yukio Mishima, and, more recently to Dr David Kelly – the roll of well known suicides stays with us. The brave, the foolhardy, the misguided, the shameful, the sad and weary, the deluded, the honest, the praiseworthy and the very good all commit suicide. The list they form is composed of as many unrepeated, unique narratives as there are persons upon it, but each special event has as well the press of the social upon it. To commit suicide is to be resolutely human, and, as such it is an important topic for

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psychosocial investigation: a self-willed self-destruction is not something that can be undone and it offers a commentary on a social context that is, in one sense, irrefutable.

Durkheim's *Suicide* has recently appeared in the Routledge Classics series. It is timely then to offer it some auto/biographically oriented discussion and appraisal. *Suicide*'s revolutionary character consists in taking the most individual act and claiming it is not, after all, individual but explicitly social. If Durkheim can show this to be true he has made the case for the discipline of sociology *tout court*. In attempting to do this his critics have argued that he has ridden positivistically roughshod over personal identity and overly de-psychologized the social interactions within any given social system. However, a fuller reading of *Suicide* reveals a conception of society that is complex and intricate featuring extrinsic, instrumental, codes of conduct but, also, divergent narrative identities. The proximity of Durkheimian sociology to Freudian psychology is clear. Parsons refers to the connection as:

> ... a massive phenomenon of the convergence of fundamental insights relating to the internalisation of moral values. This convergence, from two quite distinct and independent starting points, deserves to be ranked as one of the truly fundamental landmarks of the development of modern social science.
>
> (1952: 19)

Anthony Giddens writes of the current reissue of *Suicide* that it 'remains, although now more than a century old, the most significant work on suicide ever produced' (2002: 382). This is not a surprising remark by Giddens; for 40 years (through the development of structuration theory to his recent work on reflexive modernity) *Suicide* can be seen as one of the regulators of his own development. In his original first essay on suicide in 1964 he begins a long-term concern to clarify and extend Durkheimian categories apposite to the sociopathic difficulties of individuals who are unable to find a living context for the realization of their needs.

If Giddens' thinking on Durkheim has developed critically but sympathetically, much of the debate over many years has not. It has been conducted in unproductive terms, with too many unrefined arguments being over-pressed and over-repeated. As such it is welcome that there is now something of renaissance in Durkheimian studies that has chimed with a number of contemporary concerns relating to erosions of social capital, civic disharmony and the ethics of ordinary social exchange. The work of the British Centre for Durkheimian Studies is particularly notable here, as are important

single works by, among others, Susan Stedman Jones (2001), Phillipe Besnard (1987) and Shilling and Mellor (2001). Stedman Jones puts the case for a more expanded appreciation of *Suicide* simply and precisely; she argues that while Durkheim observes that suicide varies between cultural, economic and religious environments, this is far from saying that he was incognizant of the question of individual motives: 'the fact', she remarks, 'that motives are not *sufficient* to bring about suicide does not mean that they are not *necessary* factors' (2002: 156). Further, she says (carrying echoes of a paper by Giddens from 1966) that while acknowledging the importance of prevailing structures, values and norms Durkheim saw them also as engaged with the most personal of circumstances and of relating to individuals at unique and irreducible levels. This may in part be understood through an appreciation of the seeming linguistic imprecision of the term *la conscience*. As Lukes comments 'sometimes what is perfectly intelligible in French cannot be directly translated into seemingly equivalent English ... the French word *conscience* carries the meanings of the two English words ''conscience'' and ''consciousness''' (1973: 3–4). This terminology in fact has advantages, for it unites the moral and cognitive aspects of human apprehension. If this advantage was once recognized among writers on Durkheim, it was lost in much of the subsequent commentary. If we can comprehend *la conscience* in extremis as erratic cognition and implosive moral sense, then the following quotation from *The division of labour* carries greater meaning than a first reading might indicate: 'every strong state of conscience is a source of life; it is a factor of our general vitality. Consequently everything which tends to weaken it diminishes and depresses us' (1984 [1893]: 53). As Stedman Jones observes,

> ... the concept of *degrees* of conscience is crucial here. Durkheim argues that we have to recognise the profound depths of psychic life ... it is in the psychic depths that dwell the passions, habits and tendencies that make up the substrata of each conscience.
>
> (2001: 156)

Yet beyond even the unconscious can be conjectured a deeper realm, which only the true recipient of the confession can hear; a confession unavailable for understanding by its speaker and having a theological rather than sociological or psychoanalytic referent. This is a voice that in Bakhtin's terms is not suited to and cannot be represented by any form 'of biographical narration: my *I-for-myself* is incapable of *narrating* anything' (1990: 152). In other words no one can have the receptivity of God. Although these concerns seem distant to Durkheim's desire to be empirically scientific Edwin S.

Shneidman, the leading USA psychologist of suicide and founder of the American Association of Sucidology, says of *Suicide* that Durkheim,

> ... discusses and unfolds the meaning of his original ideas ... [but] when you think he must have done ... there are innings to go. He says it, he says it again, and then he turns it another way and says it. *Le Suicide* is a Talmudic document. That in my opinion, accounts for some of its mysterious, murky, open-ended, profound, and endlessly fascinating quality. ... *Le Suicide* is a Mishnah.
>
> (2001: 35)

A further rarely stressed feature (though with honourable exceptions such as Huff, 1975) of *Suicide* is Durkheim's employment of the deductive and *imaginative* method in looking at contemporary indexes of suicide:

> Once the nature of the cause is known we shall try to deduce the nature of the effects, since they will be both qualified and classified by their attachment to their respective sources. Of course, if this deduction were not at all guided by the facts, it might be lost in *purely* imaginary constructions. But with the aid of some data on the morphology of suicides, it may be clearer. Alone, these data are too incomplete and unsure to provide a principle of classification; but once the outlines of this classification are found, the data may be used. They will indicate what direction the deduction should take, by the examples they offer, the deductively established species may be shown not to be imaginary.
>
> (2002: 99)

Following Huff's indebtedness to Peirce's philosophy of logic we can better refer to Durkheim's somewhat unrefined use of 'deduction' in the above quotation as 'abduction' (Peirce, 1931). By abduction Peirce means a form of high guessing, a way of proceeding scientifically by observation and grounded imagination. Peirce's theory of abduction rests on an evolutionary philosophy of mental events. He regards the development of cognition *per se* as (1) coextensive with developing classificatory powers, (2) an ability to codify, complex and not always complete data relating to time, space, force, etc., and (3), crucially, being able to arrange them in terms of *plausible explanations*. Peirce relates this guessing ability to what he regards as the primary abduction underlying *all* research, in which:

> ... the human mind is akin to truth in the sense that in a finite number of guesses it will light upon the correct hypothesis; that the facts in hand will admit of rationalisation ... [abduction requires that an

hypothesis] must consist of experiential consequences with only so much logical cement as is needed to render them rational. We should favour theories that … appeal to our sense of plausibility; we should prefer theories which do not propose inexplicable discontinuities.

(Peirce in Hookway, 1985: 225–26)

The skills of abduction while universal are not experienced equally even if, in general, the insight they provide is 'strong enough not to be overwhelmingly more often wrong than right' (1985: 225–26). Peirce regards the abductive skills of the most significant researchers as being provided by a particular confluence of intellectual need, mental acuity and social circumstance (Peirce, 1958 but see also Banville, 1976). This position has application to Durkheim's formulations in *Suicide*: his own personal circumstances and his defeasible methods of social scientific discovery provide a set of propositions that are open to critique, even possible abandonment, but certainly to revision and elaboration. It would be unreasonable to suppose that the information revealed from his accumulating data would not sharpen any natural anxiety he might hold about the self-destructive qualities of modernity and its consequences for lives. His categorization of suicide and synthesis of empirical findings have often been found to be an impressive early study of the employment of theory and statistical information; but more important than this is a need to highlight his acute summary of his times – through his observations, historical sense, moral fears and abductive method. These Peircian protocols for discovery have recognizable and important parallels with Diltheyian as well as more recent hermeneutical approaches and so, interestingly, can be seen as linking traditional sociology to auto/biographical method.

While there have been significant advances in the study of suicide since Durkheim, not only in sociology (e.g., Lester, 2000) but also through important contributions from history, psychology and neurobiology (e.g., respectively Maris *et al.*, 2000; Minois, 1999; Shneidman, 1996; Stoff and Mann, 1997), it is clear that much research has had little remedial effect. While is often held that suicide is 'a multidimensional malaise in needful individuals' who choose it as an effective solution to their problems this methodological observation has been little honoured. However, it is more than ever true that the issue of suicide *does* require a multidisciplinary approach and not, as at present, ever increasing pieces of abstracted empiricism. As Lester has noted (2000) of the many books and articles on suicide over recent years, none predicted the rise in young male suicide during the past 10 years in the UK. The general assumption

from the 1950s was that following general trends this category of suicide, with all others, would decline. Although the perceptive should have been alerted by the implications for suicide of the work in the 1960s on social capital the link was not made (Coleman, 1990; Putnam, 2000). These concerns were in fact only taken up in a general way a generation later when the issue re-emerged in terms of communitarianism and its attendant debates (e.g., Bourdieu, 1980; Etzioni, 2001; Habermas, 1990; Sandel, 1998; Taylor, 1989; Walzer, 1990). Within this form of community analysis the unpredicted rise of suicide among young males over the last 15 years would, in part, be seen as reflective of a longer-term decline in resources of social capital.

SUICIDE IN PRISON

Some 5000 people commit suicide in England annually. While there has been a continuing falling trend in the incidence of suicide among women and older men the figure for young men has shown a marked increase. The majority of suicides now occur among young adult males, and in men under 35 suicide is the most common cause of death (HMCIP, 1999; ONS, 2000; Towl *et al.*, 2000). The rate of suicide in prison among young men is even larger than would be expected from a correlation with the general rise in the prison population. A significant proportion of young male suicides in prison are amongst those with convictions for violence. In 1998 21% of the prison population was composed of those convicted of violence against the person – 34% of this group committed suicide. In 2000 Her Majesty's Chief Inspector of Prisons referred to suicide in prison as 'everyone's concern', by which he meant a problem that remained unsolved by the existing strategies of the Home Office or by its commissioned research (HMCIP, 1999). Rather, the implicit call was for a public recognition that the wider society had become increasingly insecure at moral and behavioural levels. There is a good deal of information – historical, social scientific and philosophical – that contemporary, advanced societies (especially the USA and the UK) are experiencing some sort of decline in social harmony. There is now a widespread apprehension about alterations in the moral climate most notably connected with a decline in civility, a growth in violence, an increase in no-go areas and an expanded underclass. This returns us to the issue of social capital. The concept as developed by Coleman and Putman refers to:

> ... social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them. In this sense social capital is closely related to

what some have called civic virtue. The difference is that that social capital calls attention to the fact that that civic virtue is most powerful when embedded in dense network of reciprocal social relations. A society of many virtuous but isolated individuals is not necessarily rich in social capital.

(Putnam, 2000: 19)

Because of its conceptual link to mores, reciprocity and trust and because of its distrust of over-bureaucratized state power the social capital thesis is one that posits neither, *a priori*, an ethics of Rawlsian distributive justice, nor a Nozickian ethics of individual rights (Nozick, 1974; Rawls, 1987). This overall thesis is gaining some appeal among a wide spectrum of social analysts, from those pursuing auto/biographical research (e.g., Sixsmith and Boneham, 2002) to those working at explicitly general level (Beck, 1997). The revivification of the social capital theory in its political incarnation as communitarianism has been a reaction to traditionally couched liberal and left social analyses to take account of what may be called the problem of moral order.

A feature of this political analysis has hinged upon an espousal of limits to liberal individualism for any successful encounter with civic life. However, this conservative theme has been leavened by a socialistic recommendation that the organization of social relations move in a robustly egalitarian direction (Beiner, 2001/2). From its viewpoint of egalitarianism *and* conservatism, communitarianism sees a decomposing of the moral order resulting from *both* (a) the effects of a unique, global form of late capitalism, and from (b) an observable decline in everyday, practical forms of social harmony. A part resolution to this problem may be sought in a switching from an ethics in which rules of conduct are based upon law-like provisos towards the ethics based upon dispositions. In other words upon a move from contract to virtue ethics, which rely not on types of formal obligation, but on a mastery of the self (Aristotle, 1962; MacIntyre, 1985).

Such a proposition is, of course, itself a reflection of a state of affairs – it is a noticing of something by its absence, and it takes on propositional form in explicitly recognizing an alteration in the everyday and in the wider economic formation. It may be that the incidence of young male suicides in prison is related to these social changes. It will not be the case that all suicides in this group are victims of a novel form of cultural immiseration, but it is legitimate to propose that a significant number will be, and that, further, will increasingly be members of an underclass (Dalrymple, 2001; Field,

1989; Halsey, 1995; Murray and Phillips, 2000). The young men in this group are poorly educated and are a risk to their own well-being (HMCIP, 1999). This brings us back to Durkheim and the generally informative power of the atypical case – in this discussion, specifically, to his formulations of anomic and fatalistic suicide.

Anomic suicide is a suicide not borne of profound sadness or disappointment at the world. The latter, although extremely unfortunate, are also recognizably, given a situation, legitimate and rational. Anomie is a lack of moral and social relatedness. Anomic states, in Dewey's words, 'preclude the placing of the objects of desire into a perspective of relative values' (1960 [1908]: 168).[1] Anomie has a presence in modern societies and has become, using Parsons' phrase, 'one of the small number of truly central concepts of social science' (1968: 316). In his discussion of anomie Durkheim argues that no living being can be happy or even exist unless their needs are sufficiently proportioned to their desires; 'in other words', he says, 'if [their] needs require more than can be guaranteed they will be under continual friction and can only function painfully' (2002: 207). Our capacity for feeling and our emotional requirements, without some degree of interiorized regulation, can be inexhaustible and insatiable and therefore destructive of reflective function. While it is not the argument here that all suicides among young males in prison are anomic there are reasons to suppose that a significant proportion are of this kind.

Further, beyond the poor interiorization of integrating norms characteristic of anomie this particular group can exhibit a susceptibility to respond negatively to what its members may regard as personal and unacceptable formal regulation. This latter form of reaction when extreme is symptomatic of what Durkheim terms fatalistic suicide. Here the suicidal reaction is to what is regarded as 'oppressive discipline ... and physical or moral despotism ... against which there is no appeal' (2002: 239). The young males under concern here have had a looseness of social connectedness *and* impulsivity towards gratification. In prison no psychological make-up could be worse, for there is now a regime, rule governed and harsh, in which persistent impulsive, anti-social behaviour is not tolerated – a suicide proneness, which is at one and the same time anomic and fatalistic, is present. In Robert MacIver's words a person under such a condition 'lives on the thin line of sensation between no future and no past' (1950: 59).[2]

The issue here has to be the creation of a social capital that can bring potential victims of such suicide into not an unproblematic world, but one where problems can be confronted in terms of a narrative reality and where a life (either their own or that of others) is

not regarded as dispensable. This, within social capital, is a question of education. Current educational provision in young offender institutions is regarded, even by the Home Office itself, as entirely inadequate (Gillborne and Mirza, 2000; HO, 2002). Prior to detentional education the school system itself is not providing the necessary, unsentimental and rigorous education needed by the group from which the suicide victims that have been discussed will preponderantly arise. This is a group for whom the annual media fretting over A-level scores and university places is a sick irrelevancy.

The real matter of education should be the acquisition of formal skills and the establishment of a capacity to understand and appreciate communal purposiveness both at an abstract and (above all else) at a personal level. This last can only be approached by an understanding of the narratives of others. As Hayden White has observed:

> To raise the question of narrative is to invite reflection on the very nature of culture and possibly even the nature of humanity itself. ... Far from being one code among many that a culture may utilise for endowing experience with meaning, narrative is a metacode, a human universal on the basis of which transcultural messages about the nature of a shared reality can be transmitted.
>
> (1987: 168)

The basic version of the self-in-society is an implicit recognition by the self of the lives of others, or rather of the narratives or stories of others. These are learned in myriad ways. However, for some young people the opportunity to learn them is ruptured by a retrograde psychosocial environment. These unscripted and excluded persons are in some ways the educational system's most important charges – because it is their disaffection that may have most consequence for the social fabric. Such children and young people are often from hostile contexts and are often themselves difficult, violent and unpleasant; they are increasingly likely to be suicidal, depressed and to move from truanting to unemployment; they are often in subcultures of delinquency and crime (MacIntyre, 1985; Parker, 2001).

How programmes would be developed for the learning of the importance of lives is clearly a detailed matter (both in terms of the maturity and competence of teachers and the development of syllabi). However, there would have to be a dual hinge to any curricular provision: first, that the teaching be essentially a form of social work where marked rejection and insults directed at teachers become a coped-with and routinized matter; and secondly, that the content of classes be biographic and storied, where narratives are chosen solely by their potential for communicative action. These stories or life

accounts can be small or fragmentary and need to be particular. In this way individuals are not required initially to see themselves in ways that are contradistinctive to their ordinary, localized selves. This kind of entry into the curriculum of narrative avoids any description of its recipients as automatically deficient (Dickinson and Erben, 1995).

Pedagogic strategies would be required for this group that would need to prioritize the development of narrative identity before any concern with the national curriculum. In this approach pupils prepare and share life histories that become pathways through which they can counter an unreflective disposition. This is a distinctive approach to learning that has something in common with therapeutic methods developed in health-care settings, amongst gerontologists and in some specialized prison initiatives (e.g., respectively, Asser, 2003; Brody, 2003; Kenyon and Randall, 1997). It is an approach that needs to be driven by a necessary creation of social capital, in which the problematic young person from a dysfunctional context receives the attention, discipline and time that is currently available to the secure and domestically cherished.

Conclusion

The ideas here put forward on education are themselves cast in Durkheimian terms and offer some implicit link between his own work on education (1938) and that on suicide. The battle between the combine harvester of historical necessity and the free-running, jinking hare of self-determination is a conflict unjoined by Durkheim. Durkheim's criticisms of psychological and philosophical explanation do not indicate that he was unaware of the emergent selves of specific and particular lives and their need to redescribe roles and to reflect upon the constitutive features of their being. If Durkheim did not supply the finesse of Dilthey to the question of the psychosocial historical mind (2002) he was not unaware of the individual's potential for interior turmoil, whether as a consequence of orphaned traditions loosed of their origins or of impersonal forces released in the quick-fire, unseeable (and frequently ruinous) operations of financial markets. The genesis of Durkheim's conservatism and advocacy of socialistic, civil organization lies in the results for individuals of the capitalism of late nineteenth-century Paris (Ferguson, 1998; O'Brien, 1971).

If Durkheim operates with schemas, classifications, tables and typologies, then so do most of us. Sometimes his use of these instruments is found wanting and is insufficiently refined and sometimes they are used to call down arguments that they cannot support. However, in the main the manner in which fear, unemployment,

gender division, rebellion and duty are shown to generate themselves is nowhere better realized than in *Le Suicide*. Durkheim notices that as we move to the edges of the society we discover that those different places are remarkably close to the centre: that the sociopathological is frequently the pushed rationality of the centre – playing itself out in disharmony for the community and suicide for the individual.

In what does the unity of a single life consist? The answer is that its unity is the unity of a narrative embodied in a single life (MacIntyre, 1985). It does not matter how contradictory or aporetic the life is, it is still the life. There is no recourse beyond the narrative, and because death must end a particular narrative it can only be from the ubiquity of death that we understand and appreciate the nature of life and the story it can tell. As Walter Benjamin puts it, 'death is the sanction of everything the story-teller can tell. He has borrowed his authority from death' (1970: 94). At the present time Durkheim's *Suicide* remains the surest work on the important and doleful topic of its title.

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 A link between the thought of Dewey and Durkheim has not been often proposed but in a number of directions they have similar concerns. Dewey was the subject of Durkheim's final lecture, in which he expressed the view that the American philosopher and educationalist was the most significant contemporary thinker, and Mauss records that Dewey in many ways represented Durkheim's ideal (Martin, 2002: 369).

2 It can be noted that although Freud approached the issue from a point quite other than Durkheim's, he too outlines an aetiology of suicide emphasizing general psychic patterns, sociohistorical conditions and overwhelming affect (Littman, 1967).

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