A N Assessment Of Durkheim’s Theory Of Suicide Essay, Research Paper

Unlike most others before him who believed that influences such as inherited mental disorder are of paramount importance in causing suicide, Emile Durkheim chose to look instead at suicide purely as a social fact, rather that the act of an individual. Through analysis of government figures on suicide rates, Durkheim tried to measure and explain suicide as a social phenomena. In his book, “Suicide: a study in sociology”, Durkheim was critical of both physical an psychological explanations of suicide as he claimed that neither accounted for the stability f suicide rates over time and space, and in looking at the act of suicide as a social phenomena, Durkheim developed a way of examining the social world that was both unique to him at the time, and of continued importance to this day. At the time preceding Durkheim’s writings on suicide (published 1897), increasing rates of suicide had led to great speculation as to what was the cause, the main body of thought being that social change was an important factor in determining suicide rates. Durkheim, almost ten years before he wrote “Suicide”, stated that, “…it is quite certain that a consistent increase in suicides always attests to a serious upheaval in the organic conditions of society…” and attempted to prove this through examination of official government statistics on suicide rates in Europe. From his analysis of these figures, Durkheim made three conclusions: that suicide rates remain constant over time in any one society, changing only in times of social change and upheaval; that suicide rates differ between societies; and that suicide rates differ within groups in any one society. One of Durkheim’s greatest contributions to the study of sociology was his methods for ‘variable analysis’, that is, his attempts to measure the effects of various variables on others. For example, Durkheim believed that religion was an important factor in determining suicide rates, and therefore he attempted to prove this by the elimination of other variables that may have been a causational factor in suicide. Firstly he examined the differences in suicide rates between catholics and protestants in the same country and found that consistently there was a higher rate of suicides among protestants than among catholics. He then took this analysis still further and examined whether the relationship was still relevant within regions. He discovered that region and national culture were not relevant and thus he could then claim that the relationship between religion and suicide was one of a causational nature. Through methodology such as this , Durkheim was able to discover what he claimed were three basic types of suicide. Egotistic suicide, he believed, is the most common form of suicide and was caused by under-integration with society, and excessive individualism. He based this theory on the discovery that suicide was less common among married people with children (although breakdown of the family will make suicide likely); in wartime when there was a common cause to unite people; and within religions such as catholicism, due to beliefs of that particular religion that condemns suicide as a sin against their god. Altruistic suicide, which for Durkheim is the opposite of egotistic suicide, is caused by over integration with society, when individuals become so immersed into their social group that they will sacrifice their lives. This could be seen in the past when Hindu women threw themselves on their husband’s funeral pyre, or in the acts of the Japanese kamikaze pilots during the second world war, both can be said to be a result of insufficient individualism. Durkheim’s third type of suicide is termed as Anomic suicide, and occurs at times such as the ‘Wall Street Crash’ in America during 1927, when economic change disrupts the social order and a state of anomie or normlessness seems to exist, but suicide of this type can also occur at times of great prosperity. Durkheim would have seen these example to be extreme, however, and concerned himself more with the gradual pathological increase in suicide rates due to modern society placing greater emphasis on individualism, and less importance on customs and traditions. Durkheim then, placed great importance in one single social factor – the internal cohesion and integration of the social group. The social law the Durkheim believed to exist and influence the acts of individuals is one of a causal nature, and he believed it to be that, “…suicide varies inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual pays a part.” However, these view on suicide are not without criticism, as many sociologists would claim that Durkheim, although placing great importance on the degree of integration with society, did not define this in a way that made it possible to measure integration. It has also been suggested by sociologists preferring more interpretive methodology, hat Durkheim’s use of official governmental statistics invalidates his study somewhat, as individuals are, after their deaths, according to Atkinson, labelled as suicides merely because of a set of pre-judgemental – and perhaps incorrect – assumptions made by coroners. Atkinson studied a number of coronary reports and found that four things were taken into account before labelling a death as a suicide: whether a note stating intent to take one’s own life had been left; whether threats of suicide had been made prior to the death; the mode of death, and the biography of the individual. However, he says that these four considerations are not even universally applied by coroners, as different coroners place more emphasis on one factor than another. A further criticism made of Durkheim’s use of official statistics is that it has been suggested that the intention of a number of suicides is not to die, but a cry for help, or even an example of risk taking behaviour. Risk taking behaviour, according to Stengel, is when an individual does not know whether they want to live or die, and so attempts to leave his or her life in the hands of God, fate or luck, depending on belief. He based this theory on the two basic observations that most suicidal acts are preceded by warnings and threats, and that most suicidal acts allow for intervention. If this is the case, then the official statistics that Durkheim used would not have been adequate measures of what they were supposed to measure, and therefore invalidate Durkheim’s work to a great extent. It is also important to consider when evaluating the strengths and weaknesses of Durkheim’s theory on suicide that suicides were more likely to be reported at that time when they occurred in cities and towns; and more likely to be reported as such in protestant countries rather than catholic countries, often because people would try to hide the real facts as suicide was perceived as shameful. This would mean that the statistics used by Durkheim in developing his theories would be far from reliable. Durkheim’s decision to look at suicide as a social fact was also very controversial, as the majority of writers before him believed suicide to be one of the most individual acts that can be undertaken. Durkheim believed that in studying all acts of the individual, certain social influences could be found to cause behaviour. He came to this conclusion because he found that suicide rates remained constant over time, and because there seems to be no set event in life that serves as a pretext for someone to kill him or herself. Durkheim stated that, “One man kills himself in the midst of affluence, another in the lap of poverty; one was unhappy in his home, and another had just ended by divorce a marriage which was making him unhappy. In one case a soldier ends his life after being punished for a crime he did not commit; in another, a criminal whose crime has gone unpunished.” Therefore the causes of suicide, concluded Durkheim, must have causes external to the individual. In his work on suicide, Durkheim is particularly critical of the work of Drobisch, who claims that the suicide rates remain constant because of there being an equal amount of, “…unhappy marriages, bankruptcies, disappointed ambitions, cases of poverty, etc.” as Durkheim believes that not all persons faced with situations such as this commit suicide, and therefore there must be an underlying social cause. He fails to explain, however, why in situations of social upheaval and change, some people commit suicide, while others do not. For the reasons discussed above, Durkheim’s work appears to be fundamentally different to the majority of works on suicide, as most other writers regard suicide as an individual act, caused by factors internal to the individual. By looking at suicide purely as a social fact, Durkheim effectively created a completely different and uniquely sociological point of view from which to assess the causes of social phenomena. However, in creating this ‘uniquely sociological’ form of analysis, Durkheim has been criticised by writers such as Lukes, who believe that in examining suicide, it should be seen that there is a interlinking relationship between societal and individual factors. Other writers suggest that Durkheim is also incorrect in his attempts to use information on groups of people to make assumptions at to the rest of the society. Although Durkheim’s work on suicide has been heavily criticised, however, his work is still regarded with respect for its systematic analysis of data, if not for its content, and his methodology is still to this day a great influence on the way that many sociologists study areas such as criminology. SORRY, NO BIBLIOGRAPHY WAS SUPPLIED WITH THIS ESSAY MARKED 61%