Emile Durkheim: Suicide as Social Fact
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In *The Rules of the Sociological Method* (1895), Durkheim examines a category of human facts “which present very special characteristics: they consist of manners of acting, thinking and feeling external to the individual, which are invested with a coercive power by virtue of which they exercise control over him” (*Rules*, 52). Such circumstances he deems *social facts*; these consist of “representations and actions” and not purely “organic” or “psychical” phenomena (*Rules*, 52). Durkheim employs this characterization of social facts in *The Rules* to demonstrate that individuals are social beings, inextricably woven into the fabric of social processes. He begins from the premise that one cannot understand individual behavior without understanding the social forces acting upon that individual. He also notes that an understanding of the fundamentally social nature of humanity will help allow the field of sociology to undergo the necessary process of passing “from the subjective stage…to the objective stage.” (*Rules*, 71).

In *Rules*, Durkheim explicated his understanding of the relationship of social organization and social “currents,” to individual behavior, emotion, belief and morality. Each individual is born into a socially-organized network that both teaches and requires behavior and conforming beliefs. Laws and punishments, religion, politics, language, economics, professions and other forms of custom and rule are all aspects of social organization, and they all influence both an individual’s behavior and his internal beliefs and morality. Their influence is compulsive or coercive, though Durkheim writes that, for the most part, individuals do not feel or recognize these coercive forces, and may attribute their choices and beliefs to internal processes.
Durkheim demonstrates the coercive influence of social organization on our morality and behavior both by describing what we are born into, and by describing what an individual will face if he or she tries to resist. We are born into families, and perhaps religions, and our families and religious leaders teach us what to believe and what to think about right and wrong. We are given language, which is our only means of communication. And we are constrained in every respect by the organization of laws, rules and customs of the societies in which we live. The businessman who tries to conduct business outside of the organized economy will fail. The individual who tries to communicate without language will be unable to do so. The individual who tries to behave outside of the norms established by our laws and customs will be punished. And the individual whose moral compass does not reflect the “public conscience,” as Durkheim calls it, will either be punished by the law or suffer social isolation. If an individual is raised in a religion, resistance against the doctrines of that religion will result in forms of punishment as well.

While Durkheim is quite clear in The Rules about the central importance of social organization and social “currents” (morally and otherwise) as coercive and inescapable, the actual mechanisms of this influence are more vaguely delineated. On the one hand, he describes morality as taught, and he describes the ways in which the organization of society around us constrains our choices. However, he seems to acknowledge that external, social forces may act differently on different individuals, much like a chemical interaction with each individual providing a slightly different chemical to the mix. Still, he insists that the external is necessarily primary to the existence of an individual belief
or a choice. He sees the external, social world as a catalyst that, combined with an individual’s chemistry, produces his or her moral and behavioral choices.

Durkheim’s analysis in *Suicide* (1897) presents both an analysis of social facts, as defined in *The Rules*, and a practical application of the objectivity he espouses for the discipline of sociology. In *Suicide*, Durkheim proposes to uncover the social facts that affect rates of suicides in different countries during different times. To forward this position, Durkheim challenges the view held by psychologists of his time, who maintained that suicide could be explained by individual psychological characteristics. In Part I of his study, Durkheim describes these arguments and dismisses them, focusing on the reasons why psychopathology, race, and heredity cannot explain the changing rates of suicide. He also dismisses arguments that geographical differences, changes in climate, and “imitation” cannot cause changing rates of suicide. Here, his method is familiar to the contemporary sociology student; he uses a variety of statistical data to compare cross-sectionally, over time, and among nations.

Part II of *Suicide* is dedicated to developing a typology of the social currents which produce changes in the suicide rate. Here, Durkheim discusses the differing rates of suicide by religion, family, and political structure to map out the first social current that affects suicide rates: that of “integration.” As a starting point, he argues, Protestants are more likely to commit suicide than Jews or Catholics. He hypothesizes that this difference can be accounted for by the fact that Protestants enjoy a type of “free inquiry” that other religions do not and therefore pursue knowledge with an intensity that others do not. This pursuit of knowledge, however, is not the cause of suicide rates to rise. Rather, it signals a lack of integration of the religious society’s norms and values.
Similarly, the lack of strongly aligned family structures or political structure signals a dangerous lack of integration. As he states, “when society is strongly integrated, it holds individuals under its control, considers them at its service and thus forbids them to dispose willingly of themselves” (Suicide 209). The social currents of differing levels of “integration,” Durkheim argues, affect changes in suicide rates.

Durkheim then develops a second type of “social current” that affects the changing rates of suicide. This current he labels “regulation.” As he describes, for society to regulate individuals’ cohesion into the society, “the passions first must be limited” (248). This is usually done with an establishment of social codes, laws and rules. He argues that these rules function so that an individual can neither expect too much, nor too little, thus maintaining a happy equilibrium as to his place in society.

From these two typologies, Durkheim argues that four types of suicide can result, depending on whether an individual is part of society that is strongly cohesive (integrated) or not, and strongly regulated or not. Anomic suicide, one of these four types, is likely to result when an individual is neither integrated nor regulated. This often comes, Durkheim argues, when an individual simultaneously belongs to a weakly cohesive society, and experiences a change in regulation, usually during a period of rapid change or crisis. During this period, society is without adequate regulation, and an individual is no longer able to recognize or realize realistic goals. Instead, he is left with a sense of hopelessness. As Durkheim states,

All man’s pleasure in acting, moving and exerting himself implies the sense that his efforts are not in vain and that by walking he has advanced. However, one does not advance when one walks toward no goal, or- which is the same thing- when his goal is infinity (Suicide, 248).
Durkheim’s attempt to provide an empirical study of suicide must be measured against the criteria that he sets out in *Rules*. Durkheim’s goal in establishing a social methodology was two-fold; first, he wants sociology to be more scientific and move from the realm of subjectivity to objectivity (*The Rules*, 71) and second, he wants to prove the primacy of the “social fact.” For Durkheim, social facts must be treated as things and not as personal experiences, but must also be observed by a researcher. Durkheim states that, in the past, we analyzed and combined our ideas with our observations and comparisons. These social facts, however, possess resistance (*The Rules*, 70), meaning that they cannot be molded to satisfy any specific situation but will remain independent of the researcher, the individual and, to an extent, the situation, even though these facts are born of the summation of individual experiences.

Durkheim, then, successfully exemplifies this model in *Suicide*. In the chapter entitled “Anomic Suicide,” for instance, he makes the individual act of suicide into a thing. He demonstrates how, though it was previously thought that suicide was an individual experience, it really is a social phenomena. Through his use of statistics, data analysis, and historical comparisons, he presents hypotheses and disclaims those that are not supported by the data he examines. By contemporary standards, Durkheim is the first social theorist to make his data both exhaustive and transparent. The reader is left with little question as to his sources of information, which are numerous, and his presentation allows scholars to directly interact with his data, regardless of whether they agree with his conclusions. This form of analysis keeps the fact independent of personal interference, as through these data we are able to have hard evidence and not merely opinions or ideas. This method of analysis, Durkheim argues, advances the discipline of
sociology, forwarding its recognition as a science and not just another branch of philosophy.

Citations:
