Book Analysis: 'Le Suicide' By Durkheim

Emile Durkheim was a French sociologist, recognised as one of the founding fathers of the subject. He is best known for his theory of ‘functionalism’ which interprets society as an intricate network in which all the parts need to work and correspond together in order to achieve social solidarity. In this essay, I will outline and discuss Durkheim’s argument that the causes of suicide are of social nature more so than psychological.

Durkheim’s book “Le Suicide” published in 1897 explores his theory that suicide rates vary depending on your social experience. He argued that religion, gender, ethnicity, occupation etc all have a greater influence on whether you choose to take your own life rather than one’s mental wellbeing. He argued that the more socially integrated a person is to society, the less likely they are to commit suicide as they would feel more balanced and aware of their place in the social infrastructure. He divided the topic of suicide into 4 main categories; egoistic, altruistic, fatalistic and anomic. Egoistic suicide is when the individual has low levels of or insufficient social integration meaning they feel isolated from communities and like they do not belong. This is the suicide typically associated as ‘self-centred’. Altruistic suicide is then when a person has too much social integration and is too intimate and invested with the wellbeing of the group. An example of this is extremist terrorism. Fatalistic suicide is when a person is over-regulated by society. They lack control of themselves/their situation and are oppressed by social circumstances. An example of this is slavery. And then lastly, we have anomic suicide, when there is an absence of societies control over a situation. Usually when a situation crops up unexpectedly, like the loss of a family member or bankruptcy. These divisions and definitions stray massively from the common belief that suicide is a result of a mental illness taking over one’s life and desire to live. Durkheim’s research was conducted at a time when mental health was only just being acknowledged as a larger issue. The first mental health awareness week wasn’t until 1990, implemented by the US Congress as a means to educate the public on the subject (NAMI).

Contemporary culture now is fluid and everchanging. We’re less defined by strict social norms and codes of conduct. Women can work whatever job they so please and people don’t feel obligated to go to Church. However, one of the main focal points throughout Durkheim’s investigation was religion. During his time as a sociologist, it held mass importance globally and he looked closely at the comparison between the Catholic faith and the Protestant. He found suicide rates to be lower amongst the Catholics and he claimed this was due to their stronger sense of social stability and unity. Durkheim’s ideas and thought processes were gathered through a mind that had not known the world without religion. Looking through it with clear, non-stained glasses we can see that actually in some ways, religion could have been a social factor that was detrimental to a person already experiencing mental health difficulties. If a person felt, they did not identify with any faith (especially the mainstream one for their location) they were outcasted and branded an atheist. During that time period, the word atheist held heavy negative connotations. This individual would be left to feel outcasted and introduced to feelings of harsh rejection… this is what Durkheim meant by egoistic suicide. In modern society, we are more aware of the different mental health issues around, what causes them and their symptoms. As a culture, we are now (usually) more sensitive towards it. There is more information available for disorders like Schizophrenia and Bipolar, however, back in 1890 if a person displayed these

signs they would be labelled a ‘lunatic’, associated with the devil and rushed off to a ‘crazy house’ only worsening a situation. And finally, homosexuality. Most faiths have strict views on same-sex couples which would have prevented many people from being open and honest out of fear they would be pushed out of the community, an example of fatalistic suicide.

Durkheim also looked at the suicide rates between couples and found that individuals in a relationship were less likely to consider suicide as opposed to people who were single as they had a companion they could share things with and confide in. If an individual is a single as a result of having homo-sexual or non-binary feelings and being scared to voice them, then they are even more likely to feel suicidal as they feel they do not fit into society/religion and don’t have a significant other to share their worries with. Thanks to the rise in the LBGTQ community in 19.. it is widely accepted to be queer and it does not inhibit your chances of love and connection like it used to. This is a result of mass social change which required a lot of protesting and activism to break through the phobic attitudes. Durkheim’s findings also concluded that men are more likely to kill themselves than woman and this is still true today. In 2018 statistics showed that men in the UK are 3 times more likely to kill themselves than women (Samaritans, 2018). An Argument for why this is, it that women have been conditioned to be open and honest about how they are feeling. They are expected to be emotional whereas, with men, they are told to ‘man up’ and are seen as inferior when they display signs of weakness. Although this is not as distinguished in today’s society, the stereotypes still live on as it has been embedded into general values for such a long time. Women have a larger opportunity to talk about what’s troubling them and resolve any internal conflict whereas a lot of men tend it bottle it all up until it gets too much.

There is a huge amount of differences in civilization now compared to 1990. Mental health is more widely known and acknowledged and there is more help available for individuals who suffer. There is more education and support around the subject of sexuality, it is less constricted and more fluid for the individual to explore at ease. There is now a mental health awareness week dedicated to men only to encourage them to open up and to target and try to alleviate high suicide rates. Yet suicide still occurs suggesting that social environment does not hold as higher importance as a psychological burden does. However, there is one looming factor now that has a mass influence on a person’s mental health… social media. The internet is the most revolutionary form of communication of this century and allows people to have an ongoing conversation without the constraint of their location. When looking at a factor such as social comparison it’s easy to see why this is one main causes of feeling unhappy. This process involves others living a life online, altering who they are seen, comparing themselves against peers or people they idolise. Within this process there are two types of comparison both down and upward, upward is people comparing themselves to someone they believe is above them and then look for ways to improve themselves as a person to reach that level, and then downward being people who compare themselves to others below them to make themselves feel better (Cherry. K, 2019). Talking to someone in person can improve your mood and give you a higher sense of connection which allows individuals to understand emotion and body language. Furthermore, it can alleviate depression as it enables people to rebuild their self-esteem which helps them develop positive relationships with others. A decrease of social interaction produces the opposite effect of this which is detrimental to our mental health (UCD, 2012).