The Issues Of Suicide In Northern Ireland

In contrast to the rest of the U.K, Northern Ireland suicide rates per 100,000 have reached a level significantly higher than those seen in the rest of the U.K and perhaps more notably, at higher levels than those recoded in 1998 (samaritans.org, 2019). In this essay, first, I will give a detailed description of this sociological issue in Northern Ireland over the past 50 years. Then, I will apply Emile Durkheim's theory of anomie and low social solidarity in order to analyse potential macro level influences on this social fact. Lastly, I will evaluate how well this theory aids in explaining high suicide rates in Northern Ireland since the late 1990s compared to significantly lower rates in the three decades prior. Other potential contributing factors to this trend will also be identified in order to evaluate the usefulness in using Durkheim's theory of reduced suicide during times of war.

Describing the Issue

In 2016, 297 people took their own life in Northern Ireland. Per 100,000 of the population that is 27.3 men and 9.2 women. This is decidedly higher than the rest of the U.K population which has an average of 15.5 male suicides and 4.9 female suicides per 100,000. The suicide rate fell by 6.2% between 2015 and 2016, consistent with the decreasing trend seen across the U.K. However, Northern Ireland Suicide rates are substantially higher compared with those of 50 years ago. Even though the 1970s and 1980s saw the suicide rate rise steadily to approximately 10 per 100,000 and this relatively low rate then decreased further for a 10 year period. A spike in suicides after the late 1990s saw an upward trend that has led to the currently above average suicide rates.(Tomlinson, 2012). This essay, attempts to explain this issue from a sociological context to try and answer the question of why suicide rates in Northern Ireland are currently so high.

To begin, it is very important to note the conflict in Northern Ireland's past. The population was broken into two groups; the dominant unionist party, who were mostly Protestant and wanted Northern Ireland to remain as part of the U.K and the nationalists, who were mostly Catholic, and wanted Northern Ireland to become part of the Republic of Ireland. Divided along religious, political, and cultural lines, lines which to a certain extent persist today, low intensity armed conflict and political deadlock broke out across the nation for 30 years. More than 3,500 people were killed and yet, since the 1998 Good Friday Peace Treaty which signalled the end of the troubles, more Northern Irish citizens have died from suicide than the sum of victims from The Troubles. This is supported by a Samaritans report that found per 100,000 of the population, the percentage of men taking their own lives in Northern Ireland has increased by 82% from 1985 to 2015 with a notable spike after 1998.

Describing the Social Theory

One leading authority on sociological explanations for suicide comes from Émile Durkheim (Durkheim (2002 [1897]). Durkheim was a functionalist, who studied phenomena attributes to society at large, rather than being limited to specific actions of individuals. He placed structure above agency as he believed that only a moral power superior to the individual could control man's desire for the unattainable and unlimited. The social forces that impose such an order

cannot only be enforced by custom or force, but by a conscience superior to his own. This is made up of social facts such as family, religion and political parties which work together within their distinct functions to achieve stability. This would create a sense of social solidarity with shared values or institutionalised rule that is based upon a collective consciousness among those who share common beliefs. Durkheim believed that a break down in such solidarity and regulative action within society can lead to a state of anomie and anomic suicide. Durkheim used the examples of economic crises in Vienna 1873 and Italian economic prosperity both increasing suicide rates. He claimed that when the equilibrium of the collective order was disturbed by an abrupt transition the regulative force which gives man a framework to live his life is incapable of exercising its influence leading to higher suicide rates. He described the industrial economic and social changes of the 19th and early 20th centuries due to increasing diversification of society, specialisation of work and decreasing value of religion as causing anomie - a breakdown in the relationship between the everyday citizen and the regulative function of a superior moral power. The more societies evolved to become increasingly individualistic, the less regulative forces such as religion, family and political power were able to influence society and egoistic behaviour and suicides would become more prevalent.

Regarding The Troubles in Northern Ireland, Durkheim said that wars ‘rouse collective sentiments, stimulate partisan spirit and patriotism, political and national faith, alike, and . . . cause a stronger integration of society’ (2002: 166). Therefore, suggesting that in the polarising times of war, the sense of purpose and belonging to one particular group citizens often feel, increases their collective consciousness and social solidarity which reduces anomic suicides. Their aggression and anger was focused outward when battling with their enemy and committing homicides which Durkheim saw as an immunity against suicide. However, after the conflict finishes, such purpose and calling disappears and as a result, the protective effects of war end and suicide rates increase again.

Applying and Evaluation the Social Theory

In many ways, Durkheim’s theory on suicide seems to be quite applicable to The Troubles and its aftermath in Northern Ireland. Official numbers from the Northern Ireland Statistics and Research Agency suggest suicide rates being at their lowest during the late to early 80s and there being a spike around the time after the Peace treaty was signed in 1998. During this time, the economy suffered and unemployment, especially among younger men was rife. Inner city Belfast experienced very high levels of deprivation. One may expect these poorer economic ad social conditions to produce higher suicide rates. However, as Durkheim submitted, the collective consciousness among political lines and high solidarity among religious lines were high. Could this have aided lower suicide rates during this time?

Critics of this suggestion mainly concentrate on two branches of thought. Firstly, they question how successfully official statistics during war, and even in times of peace, can correctly report the social fact of suicide. Although Durkheim acknowledged this ‘paralysis in administration’ for why there can be falls in the rate of suicide during war it is clear that he heavily relies on official reports to make conclusions from. Reports by O’Connor and Sheehy (1997) have submitted that there is a significant discrepancy between official classification and the impression given by inquest papers at that time. As well as this, the amount of suicides that are ‘undetermined’ were reported in high numbers between 1972 and 1983 which can possibly be explained by causes of death such as drowning and explosives being more likely to be classified as

‘undetermined intent’. Also the coroners were struggling to keep up with an increasing number of deaths at the time leading to a back log of official reports and were more readily open to classifications as ‘undetermined.’ Although, it should be noted that suicide statistics are very important when analysing suicide from a sociological context as long as their limitations are acknowledged.

The second branch of criticism for the application of Durkheim’s Theory to the plateau of suicides during the middle period of The Troubles is that if you take into consideration age it would seem to suggest that economic factors were at play. During this period, quite crucially there was still a slight increase in suicides among younger men in the age groups of 15-24 and 25-34. At the same time, unemployment was rising to levels not seen since the 1930s, deprivation in inner city Belfast was growing and public spending was under strain from increased demands due to the conflict. These have been established as contributing factors to suicide rates and social isolation (Blakely et al., 2003).

This leads to another criticism of Durkheim’s Theory when applying it to The Troubles of Northern Ireland. Durkheim does not acknowledge that individual psychology can influence the nature of suicide in a society. It fails to integrate the effects of social forces and the individual experience. This is particularly problematic when examining suicide rates after The Peace Treaty in 1998. There was a period on unprecedented growth after The Troubles with an economic boom. Durkheim’s theory would suggest that the higher suicide rates since then to this day is due to economic and political uncertainty in Northern Ireland and the reduced social solidarity among certain groups in society. However, one may suggest that rather than viewing this time as one of anomie, this peaceful transition was created by greater political integration and stability.

Furthermore, one must acknowledge that there are other factors in play that would cause such a rise in suicide rates. One such factor are the scars on mental health that the violence of The Troubles has left. Ten years after the end of the troubles, the highest upward trend in suicide were at age groups 45-54 and 35-44. They would have been between 5 and 25 years old at the height of conflict in the 1970s. Miller et al., (2003) submit that people who have witnessed the most violence have poorer mental health and the volume of anti depressants prescribed has increased six times between 1989 and 2000). Life in northern Ireland today is still highly politicised; there is currently no sitting parliament due to cross party stalemate and there are many who have internalised their anger and aggression from the time of conflict which could lead to poorer mental health. As well as this, there are still As well as this, there is serious under funding in Northern Ireland for mental health services with 25% more prevalence of mental health problems than in England but a 20% smaller budget. These factors do not fall under low social solidarity. A report based on the Northern Ireland Coroner’s Database, found that, relationship difficulties and employment issues are most often reported as the reason for suicide. These factors can be described as more individualistic and show how psychological, personal and economic factors do actually play a very prevalent role in determine the nature and rates of suicide.

Conclusion

To conclude, although one must acknowledge that Durkheim’s theory of social solidarity and states of anomie around the time of war can provide a broad generalisation of sociological

actors at work, this paper must submit that as a theory it can only go so far as in to explain the trend in Northern Ireland Suicide rates during and after The Troubles. Not only can there be issues in accuracy regarding the recording and classification of death during political unrest and conflict which Durkheim has based much of his conclusions from. As well as this, there is a much bigger and longer lasting influence the legacy of conflict can have on a society. For example, the cohort of children during the height of the troubles having the largest increase in suicide rates after the troubles. This exposure to violence has lasting effects on both a macro societal level and a micro individual level. Previous anger has been internalised and the children of The Troubles are now the parents of the next generation. This essay, concludes that although Durkheim's theories on a structural level can help to theorise suicide rates around the times of the Troubles, it is only on a smaller more individual level through rehabilitation and increased awareness and support of those suffering from mental illness can Northern Ireland successfully fight against their issue of high suicide rates.