

# Sociology Factsheet



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## Suicide

Suicide in sociology is a classic topic researched originally by Durkheim and has 3 main issues:

- To demonstrate that sociology is objective and can provide objective data
- To debate the value of different methods of research
- To contrast the usefulness of different theoretical approaches

Each of these also relates to the discussion as to whether or not scientific methods and approaches are appropriate for sociology.

**Exam Hint** Your understanding of suicide and the role of suicide statistics can be applied to any other kind of statistic. You will come across official statistics related to, for example, education (league tables), and crime and deviance (official crime statistics). These topic areas will contain a similar debate about the usefulness of statistics and about whether sociology should focus on wider social forces or individuals actions, interactions and meanings

**Exam Hint** It can be useful to include your knowledge of suicide and the debates around it in your answers to questions on crime and deviance, theory and methods and sociology as a science. However do make it clear how your discussion of 'suicide' is relevant to the question you are answering and don't give lots of detail of suicide studies and their findings in a question that is not specifically about suicide.

### Positivism and Realism

Positivism originated with Comte (1798-1857) arguing that in studying society we should look for observable 'facts'. Social scientists must begin with a hypothesis, collect/measure data to test that hypothesis and then review the hypothesis to identify causes of social phenomenon and generate social laws. In doing this social science mimics natural science and would generally use quantitative data. Durkheim (1895) took forward the idea that social facts could be identified and measured allowing social scientists to identify correlations and causes. There has been debate as to whether Durkheim should be seen as a positivist or as a realist.

Realism sees differences between social and natural sciences but argues that both operate on the basis of underlying structures and mechanisms that cannot be directly observed but whose existence can be inferred. Sayer (1992) suggests that the landlord/tenant relationship is built on hidden mechanisms that can include private property and economic surplus. These terms are not defined sufficiently precisely to be directly observable and measurable. However, the fact that they cannot be directly observed and measured does not mean that they do not exist; we can talk meaningfully about them and have some knowledge of them.



### Explanations

The approaches to understanding suicide are divided into those who believe that wider society effects levels of suicide, so look to study this scientifically by identifying the causes of changes in suicide rates; and those who reject this as inappropriate and prefer to study individuals' motives and meanings, this includes the meanings given to suicide by those who decide whether or not a death should be seen as a suicide.

### Durkheim's theory of suicide

Initially Durkheim (1897) used the study of suicide to demonstrate that sociology is a scientific discipline that can generate 'social facts' that exist outside of individuals and act as constraints on them. He used the comparative method and looked for correlations and causes. He used suicide as test case to show that sociology is a scientific discipline and that:

- Suicide is **not a personal** issue
- **suicide rates** will vary across time, place and social group
- suicide **can be categorised** into different types (Durkheim identified 4 types)
- **key variables** influencing suicide rates will be social.

- Durkheim used official statistics from different European countries
- He claimed suicide rates can be seen as social facts (real phenomena) because there is a relationship between suicide rates and religion, location, age and family situation
- Durkheim showed that variations in suicide rates corresponded to individuals' levels of social integration and regulation. The more the individual is committed to their social group and the more support they have the less likely they are to take their life. Adults with partners or children have greater integration than those without. An individual who is isolated is less integrated. The greater the regulation the society has over the individual the more individual's behaviour is controlled.

### Suicide rates 1975-2000 by age and gender

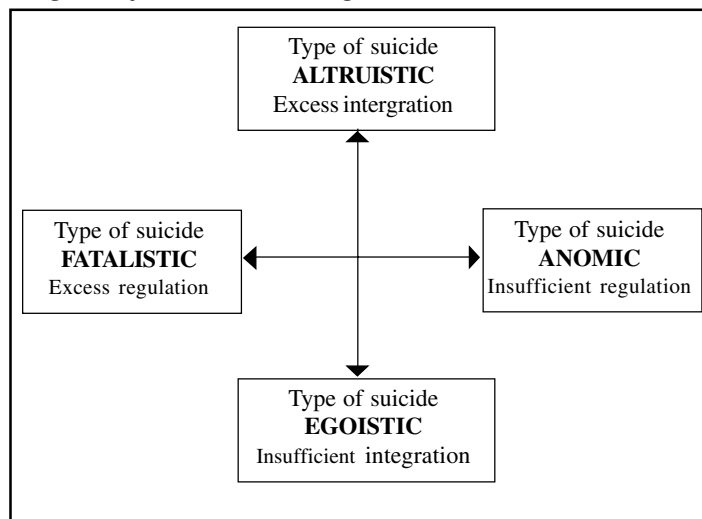
Death rates from suicide1: by gender and age

| United Kingdom Rates per 100,000 population |       |       |       |      |         |       |       |      |
|---|-------|-------|-------|------|---------|-------|-------|------|
|   | Males |       |       |      | Females |       |       |      |
|   | 15-24 | 25-44 | 45-64 | 65+  | 15-24   | 25-44 | 45-64 | 65+  |
| 1975  | 10.1  | 14.3  | 19.7  | 22   | 4.4     | 8.3   | 14.7  | 14.9 |
| 1980  | 9.7   | 18.8  | 21.3  | 24.8 | 4.2     | 8.2   | 15.6  | 16.5 |
| 1985  | 11.6  | 20.8  | 23.2  | 24.6 | 3       | 6.8   | 14    | 15.3 |
| 1990  | 16.2  | 23.2  | 20.7  | 21.6 | 3.3     | 6.5   | 8.4   | 9.6  |
| 1995  | 15.4  | 24.2  | 18.6  | 16.7 | 3.6     | 6.3   | 6.9   | 6.9  |
| 2000  | 15.9  | 23.4  | 18    | 15.7 | 4.4     | 6.4   | 6.3   | 6    |

The UK statistics in the table show that men have higher suicide rates than women, particularly men aged 25-44 and men over 65.

This could be explained by saying that women's behaviour is more socially controlled than men's and that they are locked into caring for families (child care and elder care) so they are both more integrated into the social group and more regulated/controlled by the society than men are.

### Diagram of Durkheim's categories



Durkheim identified 4 categories of suicide:

1. **Altruistic** – for the benefit of others, too much integration, e.g. suicide bombers
2. **Fatalistic** – the individual cannot change their situation, too much regulation, e.g. slavery
3. **Egoistic** – too much individualism, too little integration, e.g. unmarried people or those without children
4. **Anomic** – lack of norms, too little regulation, e.g. in modern society rapid change and individualism mean people's expectations cannot be satisfied.

### Sociology as a science

Durkheim argues that sociology can produce real facts about suicide rates and so can be seen as taking a scientific approach.

### Sociological theory

Durkheim has been seen as a positivist because he claims that sociology is scientific and that scientific methods can be used in sociology (research can establish facts and theories that can help to predict the future). Taylor (1982) suggests Durkheim is not a positivist but a realist, as social integration and regulation cannot be directly observed even though they can be shown to exist.

### Sociological method

Durkheim used social facts and compared them; this is the 'comparative method'. Suicide statistics are a form of quantitative secondary data.

### Responses to Durkheim

Scientific sociologists who prefer the use of quantitative data support Durkheim's work; interpretivist and phenomenologist sociologists are anti-science, prefer qualitative data and challenge Durkheim's ideas.

### Criticisms of Durkheim

- **Atkinson** (1978) challenged the claim that suicide statistics are a real measure of social facts. He claimed that they simply reflect **coroners' decisions** as to how a death should be classified. These decisions are influenced by 'primary cues': whether there is a suicide note; how the person died; and where they died; and 'secondary cues': their recent personal and medical history. As a phenomenologist Atkinson looks at how something comes to be constructed in society or seen in a certain way. Suicide is something that has a meaning of its own and it is this meaning that needs to be understood.

All that studies of suicide rates can show is how coroners classify and explain deaths.

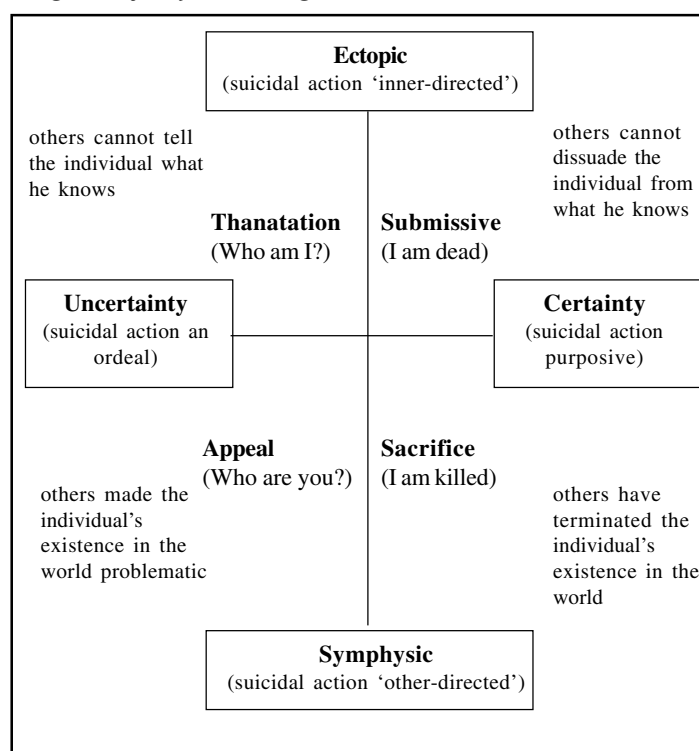
- As an interpretivist **Douglas** (1967) argued that suicide statistics are constructed by a range of actors, they are not facts in their own right. Sociologists need to understand the **meanings** that actors create and use to direct their actions and understand others.

The coroner's decision is not made in isolation, family and friends will have their own beliefs about the person and these will influence the final classification of the death. Family may also wish to cover up a suicide.

Douglas also looked at the meaning that the person themselves would give to their suicide. This is done by reading suicide notes and other personal documents, as well as interviewing the friends and family of the deceased. It can also be useful to interview failed suicides.

Douglas produced a list of types of suicides, based on the meanings actors give to their suicides: revenge suicide; search for help suicide; escape suicide; repentance suicide; self punishment suicide.

### Diagram of Taylor's categories



Steve **Taylor** agreed with the critics that statistics are constructed and not simply facts. His research 'Persons under Trains' showed that personal history and statements by witnesses effect the way a death is classified. He went on to argue for a **realist approach** to understanding suicide and suicide attempts. Taylor combined science and meaning, he identified 4 types of suicide:

1. **submissive- inner directed (ectopic)**, the person sees themselves as dead already, e.g. the terminally ill
2. **thanatation- inner directed (ectopic)**, the person is uncertain about themselves and their life so deliberately takes risks or makes attempts at suicide
3. **sacrifice- other directed (symphysic)**, someone else is blamed for making life unbearable
4. **appeal- other directed (symphysic)**, the person is uncertain about themselves and their life, the suicide is an attempt to change the behaviour of another person or situation

Taylor noted that not all suicide victims really intend to kill themselves and connects the meaning of suicide to the levels of certainty/uncertainty a person has about their life and their attachment to/detachment from other people. He recognised that his work did not address the impact of wider society and social changes on levels of suicide but did not believe that wider social influence was irrelevant.

#### Further criticisms:

- Halbwachs (1930) suggested that Durkheim overestimated the influence of religion on suicide but believed that living in an urban area increased suicide rates. Halbwachs supported Durkheim's general approach.
- Gibbs and Martin (1964) used Durkheim's work and tried to define integration more precisely.
- Jean Baechler (1979) developed Douglas' approach categorising suicide in terms of its different meaning for people in different social situations with different intentions. He argued that a structural approach, such as Durkheim's, is not very useful as whatever the wider social conditions there will be many people in similar circumstances, most of whom do not commit suicide. Social conditions may be relevant but the deciding factors must, therefore, connect to the individual.

#### Example exam questions Assess the usefulness of quantitative and qualitative sources of data in studying suicide. (40 marks)

##### AQA SCY6 June 2004

This question is very specifically focussed on suicide and your answer should look at quantitative data (statistics) as used by the scientific approach and qualitative data (suicide notes, in depth interviews) as used by interpretivism. You can use all of the sociologist studies mentioned here but need to concentrate more on the methodology with only brief reference to the studies' findings. You will also need to discuss the science/anti-science approaches as this is what decides what kind of data is considered useful.

#### Evaluate the usefulness of secondary data in sociological research. (40 marks)

##### AQA SCY5 June 2005

This is a methodology question and you should not focus only on suicide. However the methodological debates around suicide and the criticisms of Durkheim would be really useful to include. The scientific/anti-science debate is less useful here, as this question is about secondary data in general not only about quantitative secondary data. Particularly useful, then, would be the criticism of statistics as socially constructed (Atkinson) and ignoring individual's meanings and actions (Douglas). On the other side of the debate changes in suicide rates are seen to demonstrate the effects of social changes, such as secularisation, high unemployment or family breakdown on levels of social integration and regulation (Durkheim).

#### Key words

**Durkheim:** social facts, comparative method, correlations, suicide rates, official statistics, social integration and regulation. Atkinson: coroners' decisions, suicide note, manner of death, personal and medical history.

**Douglas:** construction of suicide by coroner, family and friends, meaning, suicide notes, personal documents.

**Taylor:** realist, meaning, suicide and suicide attempts, inner directed, other directed, certainty/uncertainty, attachment / detachment.

**Positivism, realism:** scientific approach, causes and correlations.

**Interpretivism, phenomenology:** anti-science, rejects explanations of social structures.

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