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| 14. Learning table on suicide | | | | | | |
| **Key assumptions**  1. The study of suicide highlights important methodological issues as it shows how theory and methods are connected.  2. Studies of suicide have had a major impact on the way crime and deviance as a whole is studied and explained.  3. The positivist approach accepts official suicide statistics and offers a structural causal explanation of suicide.  4. The interpretivist approach rejects official suicide statistics and looks at the way suicide is socially constructed. | | | | | | |
| **Durkheim’s (1897) positivist/structural approach** | **Evaluation - ☺ ☹ (ES)** | **Interpretivist/action approach** | **Evaluation - ☺ ☹ (ES)** | **Realist approach** | **Evaluation - ☺ ☹ (ES)** | **Synoptic links** |
| Durkheim’s method - response to oss Durkheim favoured a quantitative scientific approach. He made use of the comparative method. He compared official statistics on suicide between various countries and subgroups within societies. He took these statistics at face value and believed they were reliable social facts that allowed him to establish suicide rates (the number of suicides per million of the population) for different populations. Durkheim then developed a causal theory of suicide rates based around the statistical patterns he observed.  (This methodological approach has influenced the way deviance as a whole is **studied**. For example, subcultural, environmental, and realist theories on crime largely accept take official crime statistics at face value and develop theories around them.)  **Durkheim’s - findings and conclusions**   * He found suicide rates vary between countries and subgroups within countries and that the patterns are relatively stable over time. * He concluded that the stability of the suicide rates suggested that suicide was determined by structurally determined social factors.   **Durkheim’s theory**  Durkheim believes that external social forces determine all human behaviour. He argued that the underlying social cause of suicide was too little or too much social control or constraint of the individual by society. He argued social control was important to create social order in society, but when out of balance it could create four types of suicide. Egoistic suicide is due to a lack of integration. For example, suicide amongst divorced people. Altruistic suicide is due to over integration. For example, suicide bombers. Anomic suicide is due to a lack of regulation. For example, suicide amongst the unemployed. Fatalistic suicide is due to over regulation. For example, suicide by prisoners.  (Durkheim’s structural causal theory of suicide has also influenced the way deviance as a whole is **explained**. For example, subcultural, environmental and left realist theories offer causal explanations of crime.) | Durkheim’s positivist theory has gained empirical support. **Cavan** (1965) found suicide rates in Chicago to be higher in those districts with low levels of social integration. This suggests there is some validity in Durkheim’s positivist ideas. Weakness Durkheim and other positivists too readily accept official statistics on suicide. **Interpretivists** argue that the statistics have serious flaws (e.g. in the reporting and recording of suicide) and therefore cannot adequately be used to generate causal explanations of suicide rates. This suggests that the positivist response to official statistics is not adequate. | **Interpretivist methods - response to oss**  Interpretivists criticise the statistics (hence methodology) which positivists base their theories of suicide on. The validity and reliability of official suicide statistics is questioned, as interpretivists claim they are socially constructed (and therefore not social facts). Interpretivists claim that suicide statistics are the product of a complex process of interpretation, negotiation and decision-making by various social actors. For example, family members can influence suicide verdicts by revealing or withholding certain evidence or information about the deceased.  (This thinking has had a major influence on the **study** of deviance as a whole. For example, interactionists look the various ways in which official crime statistics are socially constructed. They point to the problems of underreporting, invisibility of white collar crime, underrecording, and selective law enforcement.)  **Coroner bias**  **Atkinson’s method**  Atkinson favoured a qualitative approach to studying the processes by which coroners socially construct suicide statistics. He carried out informal interviews with coroners and observed at inquests.  (This methodological approach has influenced the way deviance as a whole is **studied**. For example, Humphrey’s covert non participant observation study into ‘cottaging’, and Dobash & Dobash’s research into domestic violence using informal interviews.)  **Atkinson - findings and conclusions**   * He found coroners look for primary clues. e.g. type of death and secondary clues e.g. biography of the deceased when investigating suspicious deaths. However, coroners use different criteria in classifying particular acts as suicide. * He concluded that coroners are a major source of bias in official suicide statistics. He maintains that variations in suicide rates between and within societies may simply reflect the different ways in which coroners go about categorising suspicious deaths.   **Interpretivist theory - the individual meanings of suicide**  Interpretivists reject positivist explanations that look for the wider structural causes of suicide. Instead they believe sociologists should look at the micro context of suicide by studying **individual meanings**.  (This has influenced the study of deviance as a whole. For example, phenomenologists such as Katz consider individual motivations of crime such as the search for excitement and establishing a reputation.)  **Douglas - methods**  **Douglas** (1967) favoured a qualitative approach to studying the social meanings of suicide. He used case studies, carried out informal interviews and analysed personal documents such as suicide notes and diaries.  (This methodological approach has influenced the way deviance as a whole is studied. For example, Cohen carried out a case study on Mods and Rockers to see the way the media amplified deviance.)  **Douglas - findings and conclusions**   * He found that that acts of suicide could be understood in terms of the following categories of meaning:  1. Revenge 2. Search for help 3. Repentance 4. Escape  * He concluded that suicide is an individual act that has personal and social meaning. | Strength 1. The interpretivist approach has gained empirical support. Using case studies **Baechler** (1979) supports Douglas’ claim that suicidal behaviour has individual meaning and that it can be classified according to the meaning given to the act. For example, escapist suicide for those trying to release themselves from intolerable situations. This suggests there is some validity in the interpretivist ideas. Weakness 1. Interpretivist theories too readily dismiss official statistics on suicide. Official statistics may have imperfections and are subject to biases. However, they do provide a useful starting point for generating explanations of suicide. This suggests that the interpretivist response to official statistics is not adequate. | **Realist methods - response to oss**  Taylor claims suicide statistics cannot be taken at face value, as they are socially constructed. His study of suspicious deaths (none were clear cut suicides) on the London Underground showed that various social factors influenced verdicts. For example, witness testimonies, history of mental illness etc.  NB - Taylor’s rejection of suicide statistics does not fit with the realist response to crime statistics (remember they largely accept them). Taylor’s theory - parasuicides Taylor criticises positivist and interpretivist theories for misunderstanding the nature of suicidal behaviour. He maintains that these approaches wrongly assume that that a clear-cut distinction can be made between genuine and fake suicides. He argues most acts of deliberate self-harm fall somewhere in- between, which he calls **parasuicides**. He believes that this **risk taking** behaviour should be the focus of sociological research.  (The realist approach has had a major influence on the study of deviance as a whole. For example, realist theories are interested in explaining crime in terms of risk.)  **Methods - Taylor investigating suicidal behaviour**  Taylor favours a qualitative case study approach to studying suicidal behaviour, for example his study of 32 people who died after being hit by tube trains on the London Underground.  (This methodological approach has influenced the way deviance as a whole is studied. For example, Marxists look at case studies of white coalar crime such as Nick Lesson and the Bhopal gas disaster.)  **Findings and conclusions of Taylor**   * He found that there were two main types of suicide or suicide attempts:  1. Ectopic - inner directed. 2. Symphysic - other directed.  * He concluded that the key to understanding suicidal behaviour was the way individuals feel about themselves and those closest to them. He claims that suicidal behaviour is complex as some acts involve clear-cut attempts to end life, others are appeal or fake suicides and others (the majority) are risk taking or parasuicides. | Strength The realist approach has gained empirical support. **Ettlinger and Flordah** (1955) found that out of 500 cases of self-harm around 90% were ‘gambles with fate’. This suggests there is some validity in the realist ideas. Weakness Taylor’s realist approach has been criticised on atheoreticallevel. **Postmodernists** would criticise Taylor for attempting to create a grand totalising theory (meta-narrative) of suicide. They claim that all knowledge is uncertain and therefore no single theory can claim to offer the truth in terms of explanations to suicide. This suggests that realist theories only offer a partial view on suicide. | Research methods/methodology  **Positivists** - accept official suicide statistics. They treat suicide rates as social facts.  **Interpretivists** - reject suicide statistics as they see them as a social construction. They explain (using qualitative methods) why the statistics on suicide are socially constructed. They also favour qualitative methods to find out the individual/social meanings of suicide.  **Realists** - reject official suicide statistics, as they are socially constructed. They seek to explain different types of suicidal behaviour in causal terms, using qualitative case studies.  Theories/perspectives  Positivist (structutural), interpretivist (action), and realist.  Other topics  **Health**  Suicidal behaviour can be seen as mental illness.  Interpretivisits would see illness and disability as key individual causes of suicide.  **Power & politics**  This area shows how coroners have the power to define the nature death. The guidelines that coroners follow are partly determined by governments, as these guidelines vary between countries global suicide statistics become socially constructed. |
| **In conclusion** positivist and interpretivist approaches to suicide have made a major contribution to the study of deviance. They have influenced both the methods used to study deviance and the explanations of deviance.  Taylor’s realist theory is strongest. He recognises that suicide statistics are problematic as they are social products. However, he still advances a causal explanation of suicide that can explain a range of suicidal behaviours. | | | | | | |