

# Explaining the social basis of suicide

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Croteau, D. and Hoynes, W. (2015) . *Experience Sociology* 2<sup>nd</sup> edition. New York: McGraw-Hill Education.

Why do people intentionally kill themselves? At first glance, suicide seems to be the ultimate example of a private individual act, best explained by psychologists, not sociologists. But sociologist Emile Durkheim broke new ground: he made suicide the subject of the first sociological study to use large-scale data analysis. After examining official government records of suicide cases, Durkheim theorized that certain groups are more or less likely to commit suicide because of their relationship to society. This was a fundamental sociological insight.

Durkheim's study, *Suicide*, showed that a sociological perspective could help explain how individuals are affected by the quality of their relationship with larger social groups, even to the extent of taking their own lives. His research revealed, for example, that unmarried adults had higher rates of suicide than married adults, and Protestants had higher rates than Catholics or Jews. Durkheim explained these differences through an analysis of social *integration*, the strength of social ties that allow people to feel they belong to a group, and social *regulation*, the strength of social norms that control people's behavior. Too much or too little of either would increase the likelihood of suicide. Thus Durkheim identified four types of suicide-egoistic, anomic, altruistic, and fatalistic.

*Egoistic* suicides result from too little social integration and are committed by people who feel isolated and detached from society. For example, married couples are likely to have a strong bond with one another, whereas divorced, widowed, and unmarried people are more likely to lack a strong social connection; thus suicide rates among these latter groups are higher. Protestants lack the intense communal rituals associated with Catholicism and Judaism, which helps explain their higher rates of suicide. At the other extreme, *altruistic* suicides result from too much social integration, leading individuals to sacrifice themselves for the sake of the collective. Consider, for example, the Japanese kamikaze pilots who volunteered to fly suicide missions for their country during World War II.

The absence of regulation in the form of social norms and boundaries is also associated with higher suicide rates. *Anomic* suicide often results from a sudden and dramatic change in the level of social regulation, which leaves the individual without clear rules on how to adapt. These changes can be negative, such as with the death of a spouse or the loss of a job. Ironically, the changes can also be positive, as when entertainers become "overnight successes" and suddenly have access to endless amounts of money and attention. The self-destructive behavior and suicides of many celebrities, such as musician Kurt Cobain and actor and reality television star Gia Marie Allemand, fit into this category. Conversely, too much regulation can result in

*fatalistic* suicide, as in the case of slaves, prisoners, or invalids who see no hope or way to escape their desperate conditions.

Today, the issue of suicide remains a poignant one, and Durkheim's work remains a touchstone. News outlets have been filled with stories about the alarmingly high suicide rate among returning U.S. veterans. In 2013, medical researchers launched a suicide prevention study that monitors Facebook profile content and Twitter posts of veterans who have volunteered to share their social media activity, with the aim of providing clinicians with real-time assessments of risk factors for suicide and other dangerous behaviors. The study's name? The Durkheim's Project.

### Suicide and Social Integration

	<b>Too Little</b>	<b>Too Much</b>
<b>Integration</b>	Egoistic	Altruistic
<b>Regulation</b>	Anomic	Fatalistic