

Essay

## An Insight to the Sociological Explanation of Suicide: A Perspective Based Article

Nasar Khan <sup>1,✉</sup>, Arab Naz <sup>2</sup>, Waseem Khan <sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Lecturer in Sociology, University of Chitral, Pakistan

<sup>2</sup> Associate Professor in Sociology, University of Malakand, Pakistan

<sup>3</sup> Lecturer in Sociology, University of Malakand, Pakistan

Submitted to SOL: July 12<sup>th</sup>, 2017; accepted: November 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2017; published: November 29<sup>th</sup>, 2017

**Abstract:** This article provides an insight to the sociological explanations of suicide and related behaviours. There are three pre-dominant sociological perspectives e.g. functionalism (also known as structural functionalism), conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism. Each of the mentioned perspective examines and explains society from its unique point of view. Suicide being a social phenomenon can be examined and explained through sociological perspectives. For this purpose, literature has been studied and cited where a short introduction to sociological perspectives have been given along with a brief discussion over explanation of suicide with reference to each sociological perspective. The citations and discussion reveals that each of the sociological perspectives explains suicide successfully, for instance, structural functionalism asserts that various social structures are responsible for suicide; conflict perspective asserts that inequalities and tensions leads to suicide while symbolic interactionism explains that suicide and related behaviours are the outcome of observing others, social interaction, defective socialization, imitation and labelling.

**Keywords:** sociological, suicide, structural functionalism, conflict perspective, symbolic interactionism

Copyrights belong to the Author(s). Suicidology Online (SOL) is a peer-reviewed open-access journal publishing under the Creative Commons Licence 3.0.

Among the classical sociological thinkers, Emile Durkheim has been the first one who dealt with the issue of suicide within a social context empirically (Germov, 2002). Earlier conceptions and approaches towards suicide revolved around a certain set of personal characters or dispositional patterns that tended individuals to commit such acts of self-annihilation. Surprisingly, the same mind-set is still operative in the general masses that views suicide as a complete personal experience backed by purely personal and psychological problems. In contrast to such a traditional view point, sociological theories, with special focus on Durkheim's frame of reference can

be used to understand the problem of suicide as a product of destabilized social and cultural milieu. In this regard, Durkheim's contention was his belief that a high suicide rate was symptomatic of large scale societal problems (Durkheim, 1997 quoted in Khan et al., 2017; Kendall, 2007). In this sense, this article provides an insight to the sociological explanations of suicide and related behaviors. There are three pre-dominant sociological perspectives e.g. functionalism (also known as structural functionalism), conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism.

### Perspectives on Suicide

#### *Structural Functionalism*

Structural functionalism is one of the basic paradigms in sociology which examines society as a composition of various parts or structures that

✉ **Nasar Khan:** Lecturer, Department of Sociology, University of Malakand. Email: nasar\_s12@yahoo.com

works together to bring solidarity, stability and order. From such point of view, society is like a system—a system is composed of component parts which work together to achieve certain goals. Structural functionalism being a sociological perspective explains that society have social structures having relatively stable pattern of processes that gives shape to human life i.e. the family, the work place, religion etc. Further, this paradigm focuses over the social functions of social structures i.e. family, religion and education being social structures has various social functions (Macionis, 2012).

Structural functionalism successfully explains the act of suicide and related behaviours. It is imperative to mention that the classical sociology is deeply concerned with the concept of suicide, and functionalism is one the key paradigms emerged in the classical era. For example, the work of Durkheim in 1897 about suicide is of extreme importance where he proposed that suicide is the symptom of problems existing within society such as problems relating to social integration and social regulation. Durkheim proposed that there are two forces in society which maintain social order and stability, and prevents the state of confusion in any given society (Durkheim, 1897). In explanation, for example, social integration binds people in society through norms and values with reference to social groups e.g. the family and the religion bind people through specific norms and values. On the other hand, social regulation is responsible for restricting people from limitless desires and aspirations through defining specific goals and means of maintenance (Lester, 2008). The mentioned explanations provided by Durkheim paved way for the development of theories of suicide under this paradigm, for instance, Maurice Halbwachs who was student of Durkheim continued the work of Durkheim and provided further insights to explaining suicide through structural functionalism. Maurice Halbwachs explains suicide as thermo metrical index which indicates the moral condition and the moral temperature of a given group. Maurice Halbwachs asserted that urbanization is an important indicator for explaining suicide. Urban areas have higher population density with higher suicide rates while areas with lower population density have lower suicide rates. Like Durkheim, Halbwachs suggested that cities were low in social integration and thus have higher rates of suicide. Besides, Maurice Halbwachs argued that city life is impersonal with continuous social change resulting in social isolation and increased vulnerability to suicide (Halbwachs 1930, cited in Giddens 1971).

The work of Sainsbury is another important contribution to the explanation of suicide from view point of functionalism. He coined the term “nature of the community life” which is imperative in explaining the act and rates of suicide in a given community. Keeping in view the nature of metropolis life, the family and religion are unable to bring about social cohesion and social solidarity leading to higher rates of suicide. The relationship in cities are unstable and unsatisfactory to lose bonding because of lack of familial and religious hold over community members thereby leading to higher suicide rates in cities (Taylor, 1988). For further explanation, in words of Sainsbury:

*“...the impassive indifference of the metropolis and its capacity to engender feelings of insignificance and loneliness among its residents is a product of two major social processes: first, the differentiation of districts given over exclusively to lodging-houses, hotels and flatlets; and secondly, the isolation produced by a high mobility which debases human relationships to a formal level and compromises all values by offering so many alternatives. Social isolation is a wider concept than living alone. It includes: the social and cultural isolation of the immigrant; the solitude of old age arising from lack of the ostracism resulting from infringement of a social taboo by divorce or a criminal act, or any similar activity that might diminish relatedness to the community. A high suicide rate is found in all these categories: only the concept of social isolation embraces and accounts for such a diversity of phenomena...”* (Sainsbury, 1971: 254–5). Halbwachs further suggested that religion is a source of binding people in society resulting in social solidarity which can restrain suicide rates (Halbwachs, 1930 cited in Stack, 2000).

Additionally, various other theorists strived to modify and elaborate the Durkheim’s theory of suicide and have suggested that problems within society i.e. problems relating to social status, social networks, social relationships can increase the rate of suicide in a particular culture, community or even society (Maskill et al., 2005). For instance, Kosky, Silburn and Zubrick (1990) are of the opinion that family dysfunctions leads to suicidality i.e. physical abuses, verbal abuses, quarrelling as well as marital problems, and such impact is for all age groups. In a similar context an example can be explained through the study of Gould et al (1996) which indicates that a child can become suicidal in case of lack of parental support. Additionally, to Platt (1984) economy is a structure that can increase suicidality in a given society i.e. unemployment especially among youth. In terms of structure of social networks and relationships resulting from the modern structure and means of

social networking it is evident that internet as well as social media can influence suicide and related behaviours. Many of the highly publicized suicide cases are linked with social media (Luxton, June and Fairall, 2012). In this regard, for example, Biddle et al (2010) systematically investigated that many depressed individual searches for best suicide methods on internet and various social networking sites. Besides, the study revealed that people searches through as specific searching sentence that is "how to kill yourself"? (Luxton, June and Fairall, 2012). The most recent example of the role of modern social networking in suicide can be determined from considering Blue Whale game which got attention worldwide. There are many evident cases whereby individuals were drawn to commit suicide over a period of 50 days after passing various deliberate self-harm stages, and finally committing a suicide (Dawn, 2017). Further, structural functionalism focuses upon social order and stability in society through its structural parts and its functions. However, changes are inevitable, and with the passage of time such changes influence the structural components of society i.e. family, economy etc. Changes in structural components result in changes in functions creating a gap which in many cases can be referred as institutional dysfunctions. Many studies reveal an important association between dysfunctions of structural components of society and suicide. Such associations are further explained as under:

#### *Social Disorganization and Social Change*

Social disorganization and social change are the core aspects in structural functionalism. Going back to history, this shift in paradigm emerged in Western Europe in 18th and the first half of 19th century. Suicide was studied systematically in context of human actions as well as the previous explanation to suicide was modified and criticized e.g. the explanation where suicide was considered as a personal choice was criticized (Fuse, 1997). The new approach emphasized on various kinds of social disorganizations and disorderly outbursts in society. The theory of social disorganization and social change considers situations where changes occurs in patterns of people's relationships; their positions in society; access to resources and cultural norms. This explanation also considers local as well as widespread socio-economic and political changes along with patterns of suicide attached with such changes across different groups and societies (Maskill et al., 2005). Studies related to social change also focuses on modernization, urbanization, industrialization and secular education as important factors while

considering social disorganization. These factors increases the chances of anomie which may result in egoistic suicide as discussed by Durkheim through decrease in subordination of group life, reduction in shared beliefs, tendency towards fulfilment of desires, weakening social relationships and sudden changes in society. Besides, the combination of mentioned factors can lead to a kind of collective sadness further resulting in social disorder and confusions in society. The collective sadness often is responsible for increase in rates of suicide in a given society (Durkheim, 1897; Stack, 1994).

#### *Social Status, Social Mobility and Suicide*

There is evidence that status and social mobility are in association with suicide and related behaviours. In this regard, a theorist Powell theorizes that the risk of anomic suicide is strongly associated with the aspiration and ideals of people link with their social status. In case of any frustration regarding their aspiration, a state of anomie develops which in Powell's opinion is a loss of orientation leading to feelings of emptiness, apathy and meaninglessness in life (Powell, 1958 cited in Lester, 2000a). Powell identified two types of anomie; first, the anomie of disassociation which refers to an aggressive reaction to confusion and disorder in society. The anomie of disassociation is the outcome of self and cultural system. This type of anomie according to Powell is found often among people of lower socio-economic strata. Second type of anomie is the anomie of envelopment which refers to excessive following and commitment of the existing cultural norms and values. This type of anomie is mostly found among people of higher socio-economic strata (Powell, 1958, cited in Lester, 1989). To some thinkers and writers, Powell's ideas are quite similar to ideas of Durkheim apart from modification in the use of terms and concepts (Lester, 1989).

#### *Conflict Perspective on Suicide*

It is a framework work for building a theory that sees society as an arena of inequality that generates conflict and change. Sociologists guided by this paradigm investigates into different factors such as social class, race, ethnicity, gender, age and its link with the unequal distribution of money, power, education and social prestige (Macionic, 2012).

The pioneer of conflict perspective i.e. Karl Marx (1818-1883) discussed suicide in his early career; however, in his later work the issue of suicide is missing probably because of his intense focus on class conflict. Early in his career he wrote three

case histories about women who committed suicide and concluded that oppression was the main reason behind their suicide (Quoted in Plaut and Anderson, 1999).

The issue of suicide has been explained very little by conflict theorists; however, conflict perspective can provide an explanation to suicide and related behaviours. In this context, the concept of social capital is very important. Social capital is a network of relationships whereby for Bourdieu, it is a distinct resource of the struggle for social positioning resulting from the use of a network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance or recognition. During recent years, "social capital" has been in the center of a debate in sociological literature primarily due to its emphasized role in social control, family support, and outcomes mediated by extra-familial social ties (cited in Ritzer, 2011). Social capital can explain suicide through structural inequalities where certain groups in society have lack of access to resources resulting in comparatively high rates of suicides. This factor is also correlated with poor physical and mental health that is an important indicator while examining and studying suicide and related behaviours (Maskill et al., 2005). Explaining suicide in context of social capital, it is necessary to understand that what social capital is? In this regard, Putman (1993) argues that social capital is an essential feature of life which includes social networks, norms and trust that ensures togetherness and participation in order to attain shared goals while to Cullen and Whiteford (2001), social capital is an aspect of society which represents groups, rather than individuals, and thus can be juxtaposed to Durkheim's idea of social integration. Social capital has the characteristics of conflict theory i.e. unequal access to social capital leading to inequalities creating certain problems that are indicators of suicide (i.e. poverty) (Maskill et al., 2005). Further, social capital is imperative while considering the economic structure and condition of society whereby to Spellberg (2001) capital refers to material values which generate income such as physical, financial, environmental, human, cultural or social values. Social capital can explain many aspects in society through its two basic dimensions; first, cognitive social capital; second, structural social capital. The cognitive social capital refers to the norms, values, attitudes and beliefs in a given society in order to promote cooperative behaviour. The structural social capital refers to the social networks, roles and processes. Structural social capital has three sub-categories; first, bonding which is a strong horizontal tie between members of the family, neighbours and friends. Second is bridging that is weaker

horizontal ties between groups i.e. ethnic and religious groups. Third aspect of structural social capital is vertical that refer to links between groups on the basis of difference in access to resources and power such as the government and the local communities (Maskill et al., 2005). These three aspects have close relation with each other and play a key role in increase or decrease of suicide rates in a given society, for example, high degree of social cohesion is achieved in a society where there is vertical and horizontal integration. High degree of social cohesion and integration reduces rates of suicide in society while in case of disintegration in horizontal and vertical aspects the suicide rates increase in a given society (Cullen and Whiteford, 2001).

#### *Symbolic Interactionism on Suicide*

It is a framework for building theory that sees society as the product of the everyday interactions of the individuals. It is based on shared reality that people construct as they interact with one another. The symbolic-interaction approach is traced back to Max Weber (1864–1920) who was a German sociologist. Max Weber focused on the requirement of understanding a setting from the point of view of the people in it. After Max Weber an important contributor to symbolic interactionism is George Herbert Mead (1863–1931). Mead explored how our personalities develop as a result of social experience. Besides, the work of Erving Goffman (1922–1982) is also important where he presented the concept of dramaturgical analysis that describes how we resemble actors on a stage as we play our various roles (Macionis, 2012). Several theories are prominent in this perspective suggesting that how the nature of normal social interactions such as reciprocity, interpersonal role conflicts and interpersonal frustrations may correlate with suicide (Maskill et al., 2005).

Research and studies about social interaction indicates that suicide and related can be framed under symbolic interactionism. In this context, a study suggests that if people are disappointedly unsuccessful in their social interaction, they become socially confused and frustrated leading to an increased risk of suicide and related behaviours (Naroll, 1965). Societies where people are extremely confused and unsuccessful in their social interaction or relations have higher rates of suicides. The possible outcomes of confused and unsuccessful social relations are domestic violence, drug use, marital problems i.e. divorce, and even wars that are important empirical indicators for suicide (Naroll, 1965; Krauss and Krauss, 1968). More recent studies such as Cantor and Slater

(1995), Australian Psychological Society (1999), Corcoran and Nagar (2010) and Samaritans (2012) affirms that people who are confused about their social relationships and are unsuccessful in maintain general and in particular marital relationships are vulnerable to developing suicidal behaviours.

Similarly, studies provide an important link reciprocity and suicide. Reciprocity is a give and take process which is important component of social relation and interaction. Society with high degree of reciprocity has high degree of agreements among people (e.g. families, friends, work place etc.) which in turn brings higher degree of social regulation. The high degree of agreement and regulation results in higher degree of interaction among people leading to high degree of integration among people which prevents suicide and related behaviours (Maskell et al., 2005). Besides, social roles and statuses are in relation with reciprocity i.e. when there is role conflict in society and the level of reciprocity is low then tension and outward aggression increases leading to high rates of suicide and related behaviours (Palmer, 1972).

In addition to it, interactionist considers the process of socialization as an important factor in development of suicide related behaviours. Socialization refers to the lifelong social experience by which people develop their human potential and learn the culture. The process of socialization is carried out by various agencies including family, peers, media, school, church or etc. (Macionis, 2012). For symbolic interactionist, socialization is an essential aspect while studying suicide and related behaviours. Considering the role of media, for example, Martin (1996) is of the view that risk taking scenes plays a significant role in producing suicidal ideation which is an indication for suicidal inclination. In terms of the role of the media Papageno effect is also important to be considered. It refers to the media reporting of suicidal behaviours and suicide. Studies shows that repeated reports of suicide are positively correlated with suicidal behaviours among the viewers. There is further explanations for it, for instance, people learn about methods or means of suicide when they view reporting on suicide. People also view the cause of suicide, suicide notes, and photographs which may trigger suicidal behaviours among viewers by learning it (Niederkrötenhaller et al., 2010).

Further, Kocadas and Ozgur (2001) argue that defective socialization is the outcome of social neighbourhood (family, neighbours, community etc.) and social messages (e.g. observing others acts, behaviours, responses, interaction etc.) which

are significantly linked with suicide and related behaviours. Similarly, Stack (2005) further illustrates that imitation is an important component while considering socialization as a contributing factor to suicide, for instance, romanticizing and publicizing suicide through communication agencies (for example, movies, magazines, drama, theatre etc.) increases the risk and rates of suicide and related behaviours.

#### *Labelling and Suicide*

Suicide can be considered as an example of socially learned deviant behaviour. The essential part of the labelling theory is the reaction of other people and wider society to initial deviant behaviour. In this regard, an individual can influence the future behaviour of another person; for example, when a person is labelled as deviant without any knowledge or intention then he/she is pressurized to maintain himself as deviant in one or another way. Thus, the process of labelling is social in nature which means that it is an institutionalized process defining an individual as deviant, and to define that who is deviant and why he/she is deviant (Clinard and Meier, 1975). Labelling theories suggests that if a person is labelled as deviant i.e. criminal, drug addict, or a person fails economically, there is an increased risk for him/her to develop suicide and related behaviours (Taylor, 1988).

#### **Conclusion**

For the mentioned literature, it is concluded that sociological perspectives has its own unique explanations to suicide and related behaviours. The three dominant sociological perspectives e.g. structural functionalism, conflict perspective and symbolic interactionism explain suicide from its own dimensions. In this connection, structural functionalism illustrates that various social structures such as family and religion are responsible for development of suicide and related behaviours. Further, disorganization and changes in structures disturbs the functioning of social structures leading to suicide and related behaviours. The discussion further concludes that conflict perspective successfully explains suicide and related behaviours where it is assumed that unequal access to social capital (e.g. finances, resources, power etc.) leads to suicide and related behaviours. Social capital include network of relationships through familial ties, norms and material aspects where unequal or unsupportive access to social capital creates a gap in human life leading to suicide and related behaviours. Lastly, symbolic interactionism asserts that suicide and related behaviours are the outcome of observing

others, social interaction, defective socialization, imitation and labelling. Individuals who are not in successful relations or people who are not properly socialized by socializing agencies are more prone to develop suicide related behaviours.

### Suggestions for Future Research

While studying and citing literature and research studies for the current study, it noted that recent and emerging perspectives in sociology e.g. modernism, post-modernism and feminism can be applied in order to provide further explanations to suicide and related behaviours.

### References

- Australian Psychological Society. (1999). Suicide. Working group of the directorate of social issues, Australia.
- Cantor, C. H. and Slater, P. J. (1995). Marital breakdown, parenthood, and suicide. *Journal family studies*, 1, 91-102.
- Corcoran, P. and Nagar, A. (2010). Suicide and marital status in Northern Ireland. *Social Psychiatry & Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 45(8), 795–800.
- Clinard M. B. and Meier, R. F. (1975). *Sociology of Deviant Behaviour* (5th ed). New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Dawn (2017). Blue Whale. The daily dawn, 02 October, 2017.
- Durkheim, E. (1897). *Suicide: A study in sociology*. Free Press, New York.(Original work published 1897).
- Germov, J. (2002). *Second Opinion. An Introduction to health sociology*. Oxford University Press.
- Gould, M.S., Fisher, P., Parides, M., Flory, M., & Shaffer, D. (1996). Psychosocial risk factors of child and adolescent completed suicide. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 53, 1155–1162.
- Halbwachs, M. (1930). *Les Causes du Suicide*. Paris. (Cited by Taylor 1988. Also translated by Giddens in Giddens 1971).
- Kendall, D. (2007). *Sociology in our Times*. Thomson Wadsworth Publications.
- Khan, N. Naz, A. Khan, W. Ahmad, W. (2017). Family and suicidality: an exploration of relationship of familial problems with suicidality in Pakistan. *Suicidology Online* 2017; 8: 41-48.
- Kocadas, B. & Ozgur, O. (2011). Social and Cultural Dimensions of Young Suicides “Ad2yaman Case”. *Current Research Journal of Social Sciences* 3(5): 419-425, 2011 ISSN: 2041-3246.
- Kosky, R. Silburn, S. & Zubrick, S. R. (1990). Are children and adolescents who have suicidal thoughts different from those who attempt suicide? *Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease*, 178, pp 38–43.
- Lester D. (1989). *Suicide from a Sociological Perspective*. Springfield, Ill: Charles C Thomas.
- Macionis, J. J. (2012). *Sociology*. Pearson Publications Darling Kindersley, India.
- Luxton, D. D., June, D. J. and Fairall, M, J. (2012). Social media and suicide: A public health perspective. *AM J public health*, 102: 95-100.
- Maskill, C. Hodges, I. Collings, S. McClellan, V. (2005). *Explaining Patterns of Suicide. A selective review of studies examining social, economic, cultural and other population-level influences*. Ministry of Health PO Box 5013, Wellington, New Zealand ISBN 0-478-29656-8 (Book) ISBN 0-478-29604-5 (Website) HP 4167 website: <http://www.moh.govt.nz>
- Narroll R. (1965). *Thwarting Disorientation and Suicide*. Unpublished, Northwestern University.
- Palmer S. 1972. *The Violent Society*. New Haven: College & University Press.
- Niederkrötenhaler et al. (2010). Role of media reports in completed and prevented suicide: Werther effect VS Papageno effect. *The British journal of Psychiatry*, 197: 234-243.
- Plaut EA, Anderson K. (1999). *Marx on Suicide*. Evanston, Ill: Northwestern University Press.
- Powell EH. 1958. Occupational status and suicide. *American Journal of Sociology* 23: 131–9. (Cited by Lester 1989b.)
- Sainsbury, P. (1971). Suicide in London. In: A Giddens (ed). *The Sociology of Suicide: A selection of readings* (pp. 246–58). London: Frank Cass and Company.
- Samartians. (2012). *Suicide: Facts and Figures*. Online Available at WWW. Samaritans.Org.
- Spellerberg, A. (2001). *Framework for the Measurement of Social Capital in New Zealand*. Wellington: Statistics New Zealand.
- Stack, S. (1994). Reformulating Durkheim: 100 years later. In: D Lester (ed). *Emile Durkheim: Le Suicide one hundred years later* (pp. 237–63). Philadelphia: The Charles Press.

Stack, S. (2000). Suicide: a 15-year review of the sociological literature. Part II: modernization and social integration perspectives. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior* 30(2): 163–76.

Stack, S. (2005). Suicide: a 15-year review of the sociological literature. Part I: cultural and

economic factors. *Suicide and Life-threatening Behavior* 30(2): 145–62.

Taylor, R. (1998). Suicide in urban New South Wales, Australia 1985–1994: socio-economic and migrant interactions. *Social Science and Medicine* 47(11): 1677–86.