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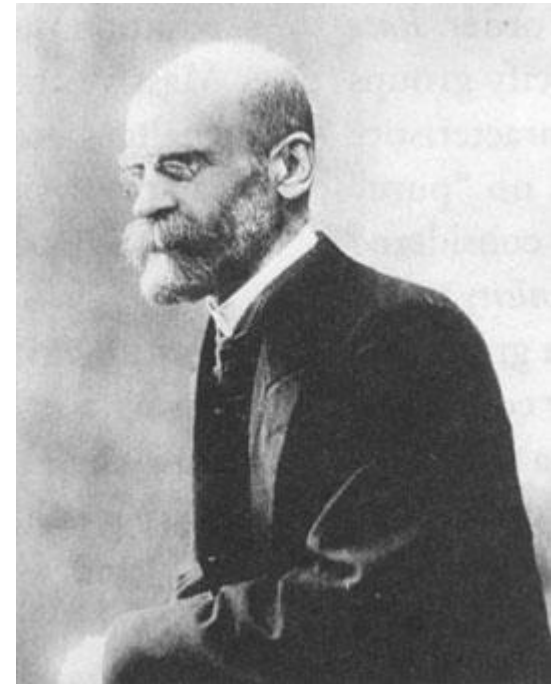
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Sociological accounts of suicide, and their relevance to the lives of autistic people

Dr. Damian E M Milton



- *“Arguably, the topic of suicide has received a disproportionate amount of attention from sociologists...The main reason for this is the fact that Durkheim used this topic to illustrate his own methodological approach.”*
(Haralambos & Holborn, 2000: 873).

Durkheim's study

- The expansion of sociology as a discipline
- Suicide often considered the most 'personal' of acts
- Cultural representations and the collective conscience
- Social currents and social facts
- Alternative accounts of suicide (such as psychopathology) were discounted
- Integration and regulation

Durkheim's four types of suicide

- Integration: Egotistic and Altruistic suicide
- Regulation: Anomic and Fatalistic suicide

- The four types and autistic people
- Altruistic and Fatalistic suicide?
- Intolerance of uncertainty (Boulter et al. 2014), austerity politics and anomie
- Social isolation and wellbeing (Milton & Sims, 2016)

Interpretive theories of suicide

- Douglas (1967) the biases of coroners and pressures put on them by family and friends of the deceased.
- Suicidal acts could not be treated as the same type of events in terms of the meanings and personal constructions attached to them.
- Common motivations in Western societies: transformation of the soul, transformation of self, as a means of achieving sympathy, and as a means of getting revenge on others.
- He suggested that in other societies, differing meanings may be more common.

- Beachler (1979) suicide as a result of an attempt to 'solve a problem'.
- Escapism, aggression, 'oblative' suicide (or sacrifice), and 'ludic' suicide (where deliberate risks are taken that could end in death).
- Although Beachler included in his work the accounts of those who had attempted suicide and framed his discussion around 'suicidal behaviour'.
- The personal meanings attached to 'suicidal behaviour' by autistic people may be similar to non-autistic people, or may be quite different, however, in-depth qualitative research would be needed to look further into this issue.

The critical realist approach

- Taylor (1982) conducted a study of ‘persons under trains’.
- The decisions that coroners came to were often influenced by factors such as whether or not the person had a diagnosis of a mental illness, or had suffered some form of social disgrace.
- When witnesses were close to the person who had committed suicide, accounts often were more likely to frame the person as having wanted to carry on living.

- Taylor's theory of suicide rests upon two intersecting continuums producing four categories of suicide.
- The continuums being in regard to the certainty of outcome, and whether the motivation for the act was inner-directed (ectopic) or outer-directed (symphysic).

- A suicide that is inner-directed and certain in outcome was categorised 'submissive' in the sense the individual already perceives their lives to be effectively over or valueless.
- A suicide that is inner-directed and uncertain was categorised as 'thanatation', when a person is uncertain about themselves and take a chance with their own lives as a kind of gamble.

- A suicide that is other-directed and certain was categorised as ‘sacrifice’, but often used as a way to try and bring a feeling of guilt to others.
- Other-directed and uncertain were classified as an ‘appeal’ to others, to draw attention to the situation the person perceived themselves to be in.
- Whether inner-directed or directed at others in intention, a suicidal act in all the categories Taylor outlined is socially situated, some coming from intense feelings of uncertainty, some from a loss or lack of autonomy over one’s own life.

Conclusion

- When examining the high rates of suicide and suicidal ideation amongst autistic people, we need to look at the meanings people have attached to such acts, and analyse them within their social context.
- Whilst the need for integration and regulation suggested by Durkheim may be experienced in a myriad of ways, social isolation, anomie and alienation, along with too much uncertainty or too little autonomy, must all be factors that are in need of study with regard to the autistic population, as are practical initiatives that could reduce feelings of isolation and anomie, or which are beneficial to personal autonomy.

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