

Analyzing the Sociological Dimensions of Suicide: Insights from Émile Durkheim's Theory

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Abstract: This essay aims to analyze the specific application of Émile Durkheim's theory, particularly on suicide, in the field of sociology. The research objectives are to understand the role of social factors in suicide and to explore the insights that Émile Durkheim's theory can provide. The research method involves examining the Tianshan Gate incident, a specific case that exemplifies the influence of social factors on suicide. A comprehensive analysis of the incident revealed that social isolation and financial difficulties significantly increase the risk of suicide. This highlights the importance of social integration and support systems in preventing suicide. The findings emphasize the need for interdisciplinary cooperation in studying suicide, as it requires a holistic understanding of individual and social factors. The research concludes that Émile Durkheim's theory offers valuable insights into the complex nature of suicide as a social phenomenon and underscores the significance of addressing social determinants for effective suicide prevention. By understanding and addressing the underlying social factors, society can create a supportive environment that reduces the risk of suicide and promotes mental well-being.

Keywords: Émile Durkheim, Tianshan Gate incident, suicide

1. Introduction

The Tianshan Gate incident, which occurred on April 4, 2023, drew significant attention due to the tragic suicides of four tourists at the Tianmen Mountain Scenic spot in Zhangjiajie City. According to news reports from reputable sources such as The Beijing News and Guangming Net, three of the tourists jumped to their deaths, while the fourth was stopped in time by emergency personnel. The incident has sparked a pressing need to understand the underlying factors that lead individuals to choose such extreme actions.

Upon closer examination, it becomes apparent that the four tourists shared a common thread of experiencing hardships and facing constant changes in their lives. This commonality suggests that poverty and the challenges associated with it may have played a role in their decision to take such drastic measures. By investigating this incident, people can gain insights into the broader issue of suicide as a social phenomenon rather than merely an individual act.

To explore this topic, it is important to adopt a sociological perspective. The theories of Emile Durkheim, a renowned sociologist, provide a valuable framework for understanding the phenomenon

of suicide. Émile Durkheim's work emphasizes the social factors that contribute to suicide rates, highlighting the significance of societal influences on individual behavior.

This research aims to delve into the Tianshan Gate incident through the lens of Émile Durkheim's theory. By analyzing the socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences of the individuals involved, people can gain a deeper understanding of the underlying social factors that may have contributed to their decision to end their lives.

The findings of this study will not only shed light on the specific incident but also offer valuable insights into the broader issue of suicide prevention. By identifying the social determinants that influence suicidal tendencies, policymakers and social workers can develop targeted interventions and support systems to address the needs of vulnerable individuals.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Overview of Émile Durkheim's Theory of Suicide

It is generally believed that *Émile Durkheim's Suicide* (1951) is the first work in social science to systematically study suicide. Based on the thinking of suicide research in the pre-Émile Durkheim period, Émile Durkheim's research on suicide rate, the research on suicide rate in the post-Durkheim period, and the criticism of suicide research in Émile Durkheim and other positivist sociology, this paper combs the evolution process of sociological research on suicide: 1. In the pre-Durkheim period, the academic research on suicide mainly solved two problems: first, the individual has the right to commit suicide; Second, society has an important influence on individual suicide. 2. Émile Durkheim's research on suicide rate is a classic study that attempts to think about and solve the most basic problems in suicide research and theoretical construction. His causal explanation of the classified suicide rate based on social realism, social integration and social norms has laid a solid foundation for the future research of suicide sociology. For this reason, the American sociologist Robert Merton once remarked that *Suicide* is the greatest masterpiece of sociological research to date [1]. 3. The academic criticism of Émile Durkheim in the middle and late 20th century mainly focused on the following points: First, whether the suicide statistics provided by the government can be trusted? Is it possible to use such data from different systems and different collection routes to make the necessary comparisons? Second, the question of Émile Durkheim's definition of suicide: can people who do not want to die but commit suicide be excluded from the study? Can non-fatal suicides also be excluded from the study? Third, can sociology only study suicide rates? Can sociologists provide an interpretative analysis of individual suicide on the path to Weberism? 4. Since the mid-late 1960s, in the process of rethinking Émile Durkheim's theoretical paradigm and theoretical assumptions, sociological suicide research has emerged a new division, interpretive sociology not only entered this research field, but also gradually established its own research methods based on the methodology of individualism [2].

2.2. Related Theories

This essay mainly elaborates on Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide and its connection with Tianshan Gate Incident. Directly related to this case is his book *Suicide*. His book is an in-depth study and analysis of the phenomenon of suicide. The major contributions of this book can be summarized as follows: Social factors of suicide: Émile Durkheim believes that suicide is not individual behavior, but a social phenomenon [3]; Social function of suicide: Durkheim believes that suicide can maintain social order and stability to a certain extent and is a reasonable social response [3]; Suicide is part of a social phenomenon, not just an individual act [3]. Furthermore, He systematically analyzed mortality rates in modern societies and divided his data into four main types: egoistic suicide, altruistic suicide, anomic suicide, and fatalistic suicide [4].

2.3. Appliance of the Theory in the Specific Case

The following content will involve a specific case to analyze the specific application of Émile Durkheim's theory, especially suicide, in sociology. The Tianshan Gate incident provides a specific case to analyze the application of Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide in sociology and the insights it can offer. Émile Durkheim argued that suicide is not just an individual act but a social phenomenon influenced by social factors.

In this case, the four tourists who jumped from the cliff shared a common thread of facing hardships due to poverty and constant changes in their lives. Émile Durkheim's theory emphasizes the significance of social integration and social norms in preventing suicide. The struggles of poverty and the challenges of adapting to new circumstances can disrupt social integration, weakening the social bonds that protect individuals from suicidal tendencies.

Émile Durkheim's concept of anomie is also relevant to this case. Anomie refers to a state of normlessness or a breakdown of social norms and values. The rapid changes and uncertainties experienced by the individuals involved in the Tianshan Gate incident may have contributed to feelings of confusion and disorientation, increasing their vulnerability to suicidal thoughts and actions.

Furthermore, Émile Durkheim's classification of suicide into different types can help analyze the motives behind the incident. Egoistic suicide, which occurs when individuals feel detached or isolated from society, may be applicable to the individuals who choose to end their lives. Altruistic suicide, where individuals sacrifice themselves for the benefit of their community or group, could be seen in the woman who took poison before jumping.

By examining the Tianshan Gate incident through the lens of Émile Durkheim's theory, people can gain a better understanding of the social factors that may have influenced the tragic outcome. This analysis underscores the importance of social integration, the impact of societal changes, and the role of social norms in suicide prevention. Émile Durkheim's insights serve as a valuable framework for studying and addressing suicide as a social phenomenon.

3. Methodology

This literature review is conducted through a systematic and comprehensive analysis of relevant academic sources. The following steps were undertaken to ensure the reliability and validity of the study:

1. Identification of Relevant Literature: A thorough search was conducted using various academic databases, such as Google Scholar, JSTOR, and PubMed. Keywords including "Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide," "sociological research on suicide," and "criticism of Émile Durkheim's suicide research" were used to retrieve relevant articles and books.

2. Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria: The retrieved literature was screened based on predetermined inclusion and exclusion criteria. Only scholarly articles and books published in peer-reviewed journals and reputable academic publishers were considered. Additionally, studies that specifically focused on Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide, the evolution of sociological research on suicide, and the criticism of Émile Durkheim's research were included.

3. Data Extraction and Analysis: The selected articles and books were thoroughly read and analyzed. Key information, such as the research background, objectives, methodologies, and main findings, were extracted and organized using a systematic approach. The evolution process of sociological research on suicide, as well as the major themes and criticisms discussed, were identified and summarized.

4. Synthesis of Findings: The extracted information was synthesized to provide a comprehensive overview of Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide, its significance in the field of sociology, and the

subsequent evolution of sociological research on suicide. The major themes and criticisms were organized thematically to highlight the key arguments and debates in the literature.

5. Limitations: It is important to acknowledge the limitations of this literature review. The study is based solely on published academic literature, which may introduce a potential bias towards certain perspectives. Additionally, the scope of the review is limited to Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide and its evolution in sociological research, excluding other disciplines or perspectives. Furthermore, this literature review is based on the analysis of existing published works, and therefore, no ethical approval was required. Proper citation and acknowledgment of the original authors' work were ensured throughout the review process.

The methodology outlined above ensures a rigorous and systematic approach to reviewing the relevant literature and provides a comprehensive understanding of Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide and its evolution in sociological research.

4. Analysis of the Tianshan Gate Incident

This paragraph will focus on the analysis of the Tianshan Gate incident in detail using Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide.

Background and the analysis of four rural youth:

1. Liu Zhiyong, 34, of Henan Province

Liu Zhiyong is from a small village in Shenqiu County, Zhoukou City, Henan Province. His family situation was very poor. His mother died early, his father suffered a stroke for many years, and his grandmother was in her 90s. Liu Zhiyong left his hometown when he was 16 or 17 years old and went to work in other provinces to make a living. He rarely went home and had little contact with his family. It is reported that Liu Zhiyong was once married, but eventually divorced, and the children were raised by his ex-wife. Later, he had another love affair but was cheated. According to online rumors, he also owes some debt. It can be imagined that a migrant worker who does not have a good income will fall into a bottomless pit and cannot pay off debts once he has borrowed online.

Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide posits that individuals experiencing adverse family circumstances, limited social integration, relationship difficulties, and economic hardships are more susceptible to suicide [5]. In the case of Liu Zhiyong, his poor family situation, limited social connections, failed relationships, and financial difficulties align with these factors that contribute to his suicidal tendencies.

Liu came from a disadvantaged family background, with his mother passing away early and his father suffering from a stroke for many years. Additionally, his grandmother was in her 90s. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals facing adverse family circumstances are more susceptible to suicide. In Liu's case, the loss of his mother and the health issues his father faced likely added to his emotional burden and sense of hopelessness.

Furthermore, Liu's decision to leave his hometown at a young age and work in other provinces resulted in limited contact with his family. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social integration, or a lack of social bonds, are more prone to suicide. Liu's minimal contact with his family may have contributed to feelings of isolation and a weakened sense of belonging.

Liu's failed relationships, including a divorce and being cheated in another love affair, likely added to his emotional distress. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals experiencing relationship difficulties are at a higher risk of suicide. The breakdown of his marriage and subsequent relationship likely intensified Liu's feelings of loneliness, rejection, and despair.

Additionally, Liu's financial difficulties, including owing debts, added to his stress and sense of despair. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals facing economic hardships are more prone to suicide. Liu's status as a migrant worker with limited income may have made it challenging for him to repay the debts he had accumulated, leading to a sense of being trapped and overwhelmed.

2. Chen Ting, the only woman who died in the Zhangjiajie cliff jumping incident

She is only 23 years old from Sichuan Province. There are four people in her family. Besides her parents, she also has a younger brother who is studying in a vocational high school. Due to her poor family, Chen left home after junior high school and worked in hairdressers, beauty shops and service industries. Because his father was diagnosed with cancer hospital treatment, was just over two months thin to only 70 pounds. Now the family's income can only rely on the mother's monthly 2,000 yuan, plus the younger brother is still in school, and it can be said that the family's life is very difficult. It is certain that Chen Ting needs to bear the expenses of her family, but she only graduated from junior high school, has no higher education, and her income is very limited, so she should feel the pressure of life. Besides, Some say she may have caused the tragedy by indulging in "werewolf games". It is a game in which participants deceive each other and conspire to "kill" their opponents. Family members and many online users wondered whether the process had increased the girl's distrust of the outside world, or whether she had met someone to guide her. Coupled with the situation of her family, even if she tried, there seemed to be no future in sight.

The case of Chen Ting fits with Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide in the following ways. Chen came from a disadvantaged background, with a family struggling financially. Her father's cancer diagnosis and ongoing treatment added to the family's financial burden, leaving her mother as the main breadwinner with a monthly income of 2,000 yuan. Additionally, her younger brother was still in school. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals facing economic hardships are at a higher risk of suicide. In Chen's case, the financial struggles and the pressure to support her family likely added to her feelings of hopelessness and despair.

Furthermore, Chen had limited education, having only completed junior high school. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with lower levels of education are more susceptible to suicide. Chen's limited educational background may have constrained her employment opportunities and contributed to her sense of limited prospects for the future.

The potential social isolation that Chen experienced may have also played a role in her vulnerability. Working in hairdressers, beauty shops, and service industries, she may have had limited social interactions or a lack of close relationships. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social integration, or a lack of social bonds, are more prone to suicide. The combination of her financial struggles, limited education, and potentially social isolation may have intensified her feelings of loneliness and detachment.

Additionally, the mention of Chen's involvement in "werewolf games" raises questions about potential influences on her mental state. Participating in a game that involves deception and conspiracy may have contributed to her sense of distrust in the outside world. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals who experience social disapproval and rejection are more susceptible to suicide. It is unclear whether her involvement in this game had any direct impact on her decision, but it may have played a role in her overall emotional well-being.

3. Peng Zhijun, a 33-year-old Hebei resident who had no family warmth

Peng Zhijun, male, 33 years old, is a village of Baiheji Township, Linzhang County, Handan, Hebei Province. He has never married and now has only one father, in his 70s, at home, and his mother has been dead for four years. He also has two older brothers who work in Tianjin. Due to low education and poor family conditions, the life of working outside is not smooth. He was suspected of having some small online loans and experienced the dilemma of robbing Peter to pay Paul. Peng Zhijun has always lived in a closed world, and he rarely shares his inner world with others. Because of his many failures, he will face the ridicule and sarcasm of the villagers when he returns to his hometown, and face the accusations and blame of his family. Everything is related to money, and no human touch. He could not feel the warmth of his family, living at the bottom of society, and could not see hope and dawn, so he chose to commit suicide.

The case of Peng Zhijun, a 33-year-old Hebei resident, highlights several factors that align with Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide. Peng's lack of family warmth and support, coupled with his financial difficulties and social isolation, likely contributed to his decision to take his own life.

Peng's family situation was characterized by a lack of warmth and support. He had never married and only had his elderly father at home, as his mother had passed away four years ago. Additionally, his two older brothers were working in Tianjin, suggesting a lack of close familial relationships. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social integration, or a lack of social bonds, are more susceptible to suicide. In Peng's case, the absence of a supportive and nurturing family environment likely contributed to feelings of isolation and a weakened sense of belonging.

Furthermore, Peng's financial difficulties and struggles with small online loans created a sense of hopelessness and despair. He experienced the dilemma of robbing Peter to pay Paul, indicating a lack of financial stability and an inability to meet his financial obligations. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals facing economic hardships are at a higher risk of suicide. In Peng's case, his financial struggles likely added to his feelings of helplessness and contributed to his decision to end his life.

Peng's social isolation is another factor that aligns with Émile Durkheim's theory. He lived in a closed world, rarely sharing his inner world with others. This lack of social integration and limited social interaction may have intensified his feelings of loneliness and detachment. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social integration are more prone to suicide, as they lack the social support and connections that can provide a sense of meaning and belonging.

Moreover, Peng faced ridicule, sarcasm, accusations, and blame from the villagers and his family, primarily related to money. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals who experience social disapproval and rejection are more susceptible to suicide. The lack of human touch and understanding from his social environment likely contributed to Peng's feelings of worthlessness and further isolation.

4. The fourth youth, Zhang

Born in 2000, he is an only child and unmarried. After graduating from junior high school, he went to work in other places, and worked alone in Guangdong in these years. Zhang's village committee staff said that before the incident, there was no abnormal situation in Zhang's home, but his family situation was not very good; he often worked outside and rarely came home.

Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide provides a relevant framework to analyze the case of Zhang, a 21-year-old individual who tragically took his own life. Émile Durkheim argued that suicide rates are influenced by social factors, such as social integration and social regulation. He stated that "a man cannot die by his own hand when he knows himself to be a member of a community, and when he is aware that his death will inflict a loss upon it" [3]. In Zhang's case, his family situation and social circumstances seem to have played a significant role in his decision.

In Zhang's case, the absence of his parents and their limited presence in his life likely contributed to feelings of isolation and a weakened sense of belonging. Zhang's frequent work away from home further exacerbated his lack of social integration, as he spent significant periods without the support and connection of his family. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social integration, or a lack of social bonds, are more susceptible to suicide. He stated that "the more an individual is integrated into society, the less likely he or she is to commit suicide" [3].

Furthermore, Zhang's decision to leave his hometown and work alone in Guangdong suggests a lack of social regulation or control. Émile Durkheim argued that individuals with weak social regulation, or weak external controls, are more prone to suicide. He stated that "the less society exercises control over the individual, the more likely he or she is to commit suicide" [3]. Zhang's decision to work alone in a different place, away from his support network, may have increased his sense of detachment and lack of social control. This lack of external constraints and guidance could have exacerbated any existing feelings of loneliness and despair.

All in all, Émile Durkheim's theory of suicide provides a useful framework for understanding the factors that may have contributed to Zhang's tragic decision. The absence of his parents, his limited social integration, and his lack of social regulation all likely played a role in his vulnerability to suicide. This case highlights the importance of recognizing and addressing social factors that can lead to feelings of isolation and despair, ultimately preventing such tragic outcomes.

5. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research on the Tianshan Gate incident, viewed through the lens of Émile Durkheim's theory, has provided valuable insights into the complex nature of suicide as a social phenomenon. By examining the socio-economic backgrounds and life experiences of the individuals involved, this essay has identified the significant influence of social factors such as isolation and financial difficulties on their decision to take such extreme actions.

The results of the research emphasize the significance of dealing with the root causes that lead to suicide. It is essential to establish inclusive networks of support and take actions that focus on people who are experiencing economic difficulties and social detachment. By encouraging social cohesion and supplying aid to those who require it, people can establish a more supportive atmosphere that lessens the possibility of suicide.

Furthermore, it emphasizes the need for interdisciplinary cooperation in studying suicide. Collaboration between disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and psychiatry can enhance our understanding and approach to suicide prevention. For instance, leveraging big data analysis to identify at-risk populations and providing targeted psychological support can significantly contribute to improving individuals' well-being and resilience.

The significance of this research lies in its contribution to the field of suicide prevention. By shifting the focus from individual behavior to social factors, people can develop more effective strategies and policies that address the root causes of suicide. This research serves as a reminder that suicide cannot be solely attributed to individual problems but must be examined within the broader social context.

In conclusion, our study not only sheds light on the specific incident at Tianshan Gate but also offers valuable insights into the broader issue of suicide prevention. By understanding and addressing the social factors that contribute to suicide, people can work towards creating a society that supports and protects its vulnerable members. Through interdisciplinary collaboration and targeted interventions, people can make significant strides in reducing the prevalence of suicide and promoting mental well-being for all.

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