

It's the End of the World:
Re-Imagining Durkheim's *Suicide* through the Case of the Zombie Apocalypse

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Summary

How would you feel if you woke up to the end of the world? We use the case of the zombie apocalypse to explore why society matters to mental health and suicide. This essay introduces Durkheim's ideas while also illustrating how sociologists use cases to construct or improve theory.

Introduction

There is little doubt that massive upheavals within societies can be profoundly disturbing. No upheaval is perhaps as profound as the prospect of the zombie apocalypse. With the rise of shows like the *Walking Dead*, many of us have had ample time to consider how we would respond to the fall of humanity. Perhaps we hope to be among the resilient, who skillfully adapt to our changing circumstances and form alliances with other reasonable humans. But not everyone can cope with the demise of society. Indeed, suicide is a recurrent theme in apocalyptic entertainment. For example, the first season of the *Walking Dead* concludes with a double suicide at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) when the last remaining scientist –Edwin Jenner- sets the building to explode and tries to compel his companions to join him in suicide. One of the characters who had just met Jenner, Andrea, gets it. She sobs “You know it's over. There's nothing left...there's nothing left.”

This idea – that when there is nothing left of a formal society, suicide becomes a more salient option – is prominent within our imaginations of the apocalypse, or any profound social upheaval. Following the unexpected election of Donald Trump, for instance, the media was awash with stories of increased calls to suicide hotlines. Indeed, the demise of society provides a unique opportunity to examine why a functional society matters to our sense of security and wellbeing.

A Classic Explained: Durkheim's *Suicide*

Sociology's beloved Durkheim, in his foundational classic *Suicide*, provides impressive guidance towards understanding why the end of the world goes hand-in-hand with suicidal despair. Durkheim argued that “[people] cling to life more resolutely when [they belong] to a

group they love [which] prevents their feeling personal troubles so deeply” (209-210). Like most sociologists today, Durkheim saw human life as inseparable from the social web in which we live and felt that to dissolve that web would be akin to destroying the self; not in a physical or biological sense, but in a more terrifying way, akin to floating through outer space, isolated, directionless, and profoundly lost. Durkheim was able to see this insight so clearly because the landscape in which he wrote *Suicide* shared many characteristics with apocalyptic worlds. Modernization, urbanization, and democratization seemed to be irreversibly altering the traditional, small, close-knit version of society that provided most humans, from birth to death, with strong social bonds and clear moral codes. Instead of zombies, the anonymity of densely populated cities, their endless sources of pleasure (and pain), and extreme cultural heterogeneity were the terrifying opposite of bucolic life. In this new type of society, Durkheim wondered where humans would find social support and a sense of purpose.

Durkheim leveraged two concepts to describe the changes he observed in society: social integration and moral regulation. Durkheim conceptualized social integration as the structure of social relationships surrounding an individual in their social groups or society at large. Social integration matters as it provides social support to individuals. Moral regulation captures the guidance that a group or society’s culture provides individuals through shared values, norms, (etc.) regarding what they should do and who they should be. Durkheim theorized that modern societies could generate two ideal-types of suicides: egoistic and anomic. Egoistic suicide, he posited, occurs when societies provide insufficient levels of integration, while anomic suicides occur when societies lack moral regulation.

Interestingly, many of Durkheim’s early insights into egoistic and anomic suicide have held up to empirical verification. Research has shown that social relationships serve as important sources of biological, psychological, and social support, and reciprocal obligations that anchor individuals to something greater than themselves, thereby promoting mental health. Social groups also serve as the very well from which we develop and maintain a sense of who we are, how we feel about who we are, and who we see ourselves becoming. All things that matter to wellbeing.

Durkheim’s Limitations

Despite the novelty of Durkheim’s insights into suicide, there are some limitations to his approach that warrant attention. First, Durkheim provided little guidance regarding how these group-level phenomena (integration and regulation) trickle down and matter to the suicide risk of individual people. Durkheim even committed what is called an “ecological fallacy” in statistics, by drawing conclusions about individuals based on aggregate data. Second, Durkheim largely neglected to consider how membership in multiple, sometimes embedded, social groups shape people’s vulnerability to suicide, a limitation Bernice Pescosolido has pointed out in her research. Third, Durkheim emphasized his typology of suicides (as egoistic and anomic), which we argue distracts from the main point of his argument – that *society* matters. We should focus on characterizing *social groups* as lacking integration or regulation, rather than characterizing *an individual’s* suicide as egoistic or anomic. Labeling a suicide as egoistic or anomic oversimplifies the motive for an individual’s suicide and forces a false dichotomy between egoism

and anomie. Though integration and regulation represent two distinct and meaningful sides of social groups, they often overlap (a point Peter Bearman has previously made). Where we find low integration, we are also likely to find low regulation. Even Durkheim ultimately acknowledges this. Hence, we argue it is important to emphasize integration and regulation over egoism and anomie, and the group's characteristics over an individual's motives. This is not to say that motives do not matter, but sociology's strength is in linking human action to meaningful social groups.

Though these limitations have impacted the potential of sociology to contribute to understanding suicide, they are by no means fatal. Our proposal to resolve these issues is to leverage the ideal-typical case of the zombie apocalypse to improve sociological theory. Indeed, contemplating the first season of the *Walking Dead*, and contrasting the cases of Edwin Jenner (of the CDC) and Rick Grimes (the lead protagonist) allows us improve Durkheim's theory and identify some of mechanisms that link the group-level to the individual.

Rick Grimes: Integrated despite the Disintegration of Society

In the first episode of the *Walking Dead*, we meet Rick (the lead protagonist) as he emerges from a coma and discovers that society has disintegrated. The terror-inducing scenes of society that we see through Rick's eyes reach their fevered peak when we are shown a highway filled with abandoned cars strewn about in unfamiliar chaos, with a major metropolitan core (Atlanta) smoldering in the distance. Upon reaching the core, it is empty (save for the zombies), which is counter to the easily-imagined buzz of people going about their normal day. The message that society has fallen is inescapable. Thus, Rick's world is characterized at the macro-societal level by a profound and inescapable lack of social integration and moral regulation.

Ultimately, Rick manages to join forces with a small group of citizens that include his wife, son, and best friend. Not only that, but the group is in desperate need of a strong and wise leader who is comfortable with guns and violence. Rick, who was a sheriff's deputy prior to the apocalypse, easily assumes this role. He quickly adapts to life in the new chaotic social (dis)order.

What is interesting about Rick's case is that he finds satisfying social integration in a small group that manages to make up for the disintegration on the macro societal-level. This small-group integration also satisfies many of Rick's needs: he has the love of his wife and child, he has friends (new and old), and he has a sense of purpose. Rick's pre-Zombie apocalypse identity, as a sheriff's deputy, remains virtually intact as he continues to be a force of leadership and security for his group. This continuity in his identity is particularly apparent in Rick's clothing: he puts on a sheriff's uniform and iconic hat as soon as he can. With his new group, Rick is able to shed quickly the feelings of profound loneliness, grief, and hopelessness that he expressed as he emerged from the hospital; instead, he expresses pride, a sense of purpose and self-worth built on his expanded, but still similar, identity. From Rick's case, we can modify Durkheimian theory by proposing that:

Proposition 1a: Identity verification and attachment to social groups translate social integration and moral regulation at the group level into mental health outcomes

Proposition 1b: The greater is the degree to which disintegrative processes affect macro-level social organization, the more important identity verification and attachment to smaller, integrated groups are for protection

Edwin Jenner: A Case of Egoistic-Anomic Suicide

Edwin Jenner's life after the apocalypse was quite different than Rick's. Even after the fall of society on the macro-level, Jenner remained integrated into a small group (at least for a while) as Jenner spent the early days of the apocalypse with a team of fellow scientists, sealed within the CDC searching for a cure. Slowly though, members of the scientific team died (many by suicide) or abandoned the project, until only Jenner and his brilliant scientist wife were left. When Jenner's wife dies of the fever that causes people to become zombies, he is left profoundly alone.

Still, Jenner perseveres because he believes he's society's last hope, and he promised his wife he would continue the quest for a cure. Jenner's hope for a cure dies when he has an accident in the lab that destroys his last samples of zombie flesh. Jenner laments to the computer recording his activities: "the TS19 samples are gone. The tragedy of their loss cannot be overstated...I don't even know why I am talking to you, I bet there isn't a single son of a bitch out there still listening...Fine. I think tomorrow I'm going to blow my brains out."

At this point, Jenner has lost his salient social ties: society-at-large, his group at the CDC, and his family. Their loss also destroys his sense of self, which is bound up with his identities as a scientist and husband. These losses generate intense hopelessness and grief, and also shame and guilt at his failure to find a cure. When he ultimately takes his own life, his death represents an ideal-typical case of egoistic-anomic suicide. He has no social relationships and he perceives his life as meaningless. Hence, we can offer a somewhat converse proposition based on Jenner's case:

Proposition 2: The greater are the number of identity attachments lost in the face of rapid change, the fewer are the sources of identity verification, the weaker are the sources for positive affect, and the greater are the vulnerabilities to suicide

Contrasting Rick and Edwin

To summarize, the cases of Edwin and Rick provide insights into (1) possible mechanisms linking the group level to the individual, and (2) the importance of looking at multiple sources of social integration, from small groups to society as a whole. Regarding the former, Rick and Edwin's experiences illustrate how important a person's identity is in shaping their emotional reactions to the characteristics of social groups, particularly in the face of social upheaval. Rick's identity is re-affirmed in the new social (dis)order, while Edwin's is lost. Edwin feels shame, grief, and hopelessness, while Rick is able to temper his fear of his new world with feelings of love, pride and purpose. If Edwin's losses were not so closely tied to his identities, perhaps he too could have weathered the apocalypse, perhaps by joining Rick's group. Indeed, Rick and Edwin highlight the importance of considering the multiple groups that individuals live within. Rick has family and a small society; Edwin ultimately has neither.

Towards a New Theory

Our analysis of the case of the zombie apocalypse suggests several refinements for Durkheim's theory and propositions for future research to test. First, our analysis suggests that integration and regulation are best operationalized at the group level, not the individual; thus we advocate for ditching sociology's focus on egoistic versus anomic suicide and encouraging an examination of how integration and regulation at the group level shape suicide risk. Second, it makes more empirical sense to consider integration and regulation as co-producing protection or vulnerabilities to suicide; that is, one should not be emphasized over the other. Third, we argue that integration and regulation are linked to suicide risk through a person's identity. Thus, incorporating how identity moderates the experience of integration and regulation and social groups is crucial. Ultimately, our re-imagined Durkheimian perspective helps us better understand how feelings about the self and whether life is worth living are in part dependent upon the characteristics of social groups.

Conclusion

With this essay, we aimed to introduce Durkheim and make a clear and compelling case for why sociology matters to understanding suicide and mental health more generally. We also hope to awaken the sociological *theoretical* imagination in our readers. Theory, for many sociologists, was a tedious class either about the "great white men" of sociology or the history of social thought. Our theory classes are often taught at a pace far too fast for most students to become comfortable with mobilizing theory on a significant level in their own work. This inaccessibility produces an image of theory as a nebulous thing that takes up space in literature reviews, but is really only meant for a particular class of sociologists (theorists). We believe that these boundaries around theory limit the potential of sociological research. In fact, the best sociology is work that engages, challenges and ultimately shifts theory through the negotiation of the relationship between an empirical case and one or more theoretical frameworks. Additionally, empirical papers that fail to fully articulate their theoretical implications miss an opportunity to maximize the impact of their work through the illustration of potentially generalizable principals.

Our goal was to show how one might do this. The key is choosing an empirical case that one might use to "think through" a theory. Durkheim used the case of suicide to elaborate his thoughts on social integration and moral regulation. We chose to write about zombies (not just because like many sociologists we enjoy thinking through the complexities of what a total social collapse would mean, but also) because Rick Grimes and Edwin Jenner help us think through who survives in the face of low social integration and low regulation and why. While we drew on the strengths of Durkheim for guidance, we also used our case, along with insights from other theories and existing research (on identity and emotions), to improve Durkheim. Our formal theoretical propositions now need to be operationalized, refined, and/or rejected, all in the service of building our shared understanding of the role of society in suicide and mental health more generally. The unique benefit of formalizing our theoretical insights is that theory can be generalizable in a way that empirics often cannot. Theory, when well done, should provide guidance and inspiration for future research.

The hardest part of this process is usually finding a case that lets you think through a gap in the literature. A good place to start your quest for an excellent case is in existing research.

Read widely. Read across sub-fields of sociology and even into other disciplines. Be somewhat agnostic about your favorite theoretical and methodological approaches. One specific place to look for inspiration is in the limitations of past studies. Another possibility is to look for elements of a theory that are confusing or not well fleshed out (indeed, this is what inspired our initial desire to reformulate Durkheim). Finally, the world is full of pressing social problems in need of the sociological imagination. A surprising number of them receive little sociological attention. Suicide is one such example. Climate change and the environment is another. Why not boldly go where few sociologists have gone before, taking our repertoire with you, of course.

Recommended readings (5)

Durkheim, Emile. 1897 [1951]. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. Translated by J. A. Spaulding and G. Simpson. Glencoe, Ill.,: Free Press.

A classic, Durkheim's Suicide is still highly cited today.

Kushner, Howard I. and Claire E. Sterk. 2005. "The Limits of Social Capital: Durkheim, Suicide, and Social Cohesion." *American Journal of Public Health* 95(7):1-5.

In this engaging piece, Kushner points out some of the limits to the current use of Durkheim in scholarship.

Mueller, Anna S. and Seth Abrutyn. 2016. "Adolescents under Pressure: A New Durkheimian Framework for Understanding Adolescent Suicide in a Cohesive Community." *American Sociological Review* 81(5):1-23.

Mueller & Abrutyn use qualitative data to generate a new way to think about Durkheim while also examining why Durkheim and sociology matter in practical ways to suicide prevention.

Pescosolido, Bernice A. 1994. "Bringing Durkheim into the Twenty-First Century: A Network Approach to Unresolved Issues in the Sociology of Suicide." Pp. 264-93 in *Emile Durkheim: Le Suicide 100 Years Later*, edited by D. Lester. Philadelphia: The Charles Press.

Pescosolido's seminal article addresses some of Durkheim's limitations using insights from social network theories.

Wray, Matt, Cynthia Colen and Bernice A. Pescosolido. 2011. "The Sociology of Suicide." *Annual Review of Sociology* 37:505-28.

Wray et al. offer a comprehensive review of the sociology of suicide that provides the foundation that any scholar of suicide would need.

Bios:

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