Sociology of Suicide

Durkheim's Theory of Suicide

- Emile Durkheim (1858-1917), 19th Century Sociologist
  - Studied suicide at the macro- or societal-level with a focus on **structural insights**
  - **Behavior is caused by social facts**, which are social forces that surround society and act upon individuals, and therefore **suicide is a social fact**
  - Social patterns found in suicide data analysis demonstrate that **suicide is not a random individual act**
- How does the external social world matter to individual psychological pain and suffering?

Durkheim Cont'd

2 Core Principles:

1. That the structure of social relationships shapes the structure of suicide

2. That social relationships vary according to their level of:
   - **Integration -** the quantity and quality of social ties

   - **Regulation -** the clarity of norms and sanctions governing those ties

Integration

The more extensive & denser a collective's social relationships…

The more enmeshed individual group members become…

The more meaning & purpose individuals feel about their lives…

- Refers to the extent to which an individual is bound to the moral demands and social relations of a group.

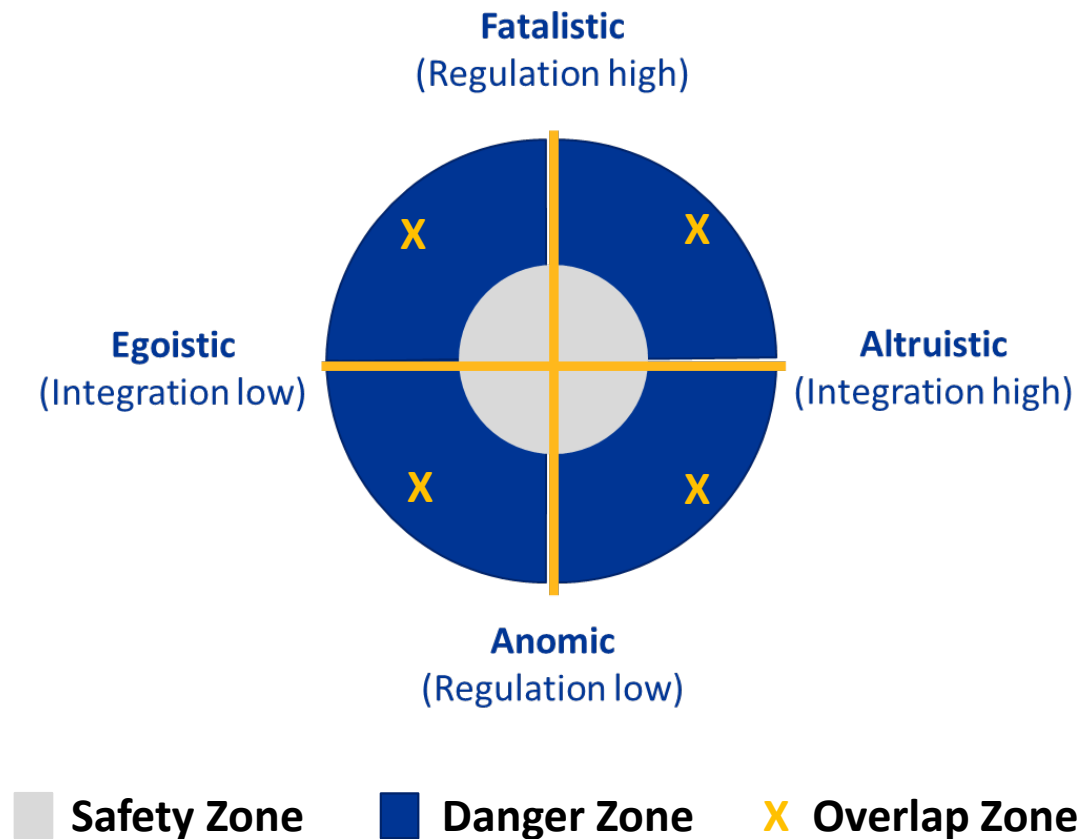- Collective belonging can protect individuals from suicide by providing them with social capital.

Cultural Regulation

- **Culture** not only **shapes us**; it **regulates us**.

- Refers to the **normative or moral demands** placed on the individual that come with membership in a group.

- Collective ways of acting and thinking reinforce integration and provide individual members a sense of *who they are*, *what they are supposed to feel, think, and do* under various conditions, and *what it means to belong* to that group.

4 Social Environments

Fatalistic
(Regulation high)

Egoistic
(Integration low)

Altruistic
(Integration high)

Anomic
(Regulation low)

◻ Safety Zone   ◼ Danger Zone   X Overlap Zone

Fatalistic – a social environment in which there is little to no change in role expectations and individuals are confronted with total social stagnation

Anomic - a social environment in which there is a dizzying amount of social change and lack of social regulation

Altruistic - a social environment in which the group takes precedence over the individual; sacrifice of individual life in order to fulfill some obligation for collective benefit or a group cause

Egoistic - a social environment in which there is profound social isolation or a prolonged sense of not belonging/not being integrated in a community (loneliness or excessive individuation)

Durkheim's Big Ideas

- Focus on the **socioemotional structure** that underlies both the protective and harmful sides of human interactions.

- Cultures/structures play a major role in shaping an **individual's cognition, meaning-making, decision-making, and action.**

- The change agent is **altering a social environment**, not the person.
  - Individuals subject to too little or too much integration or too little or too much regulation, by way of the groups they belong to, are less protected against the impulse toward pathological behavior.

Advances in Research

- Recent theories of suicidology **operationalize integration** through **perceptions about belongingness and connectedness** (as characteristic of a group)

- ***Identities***, and the emotional attachment we have to our identities.

- Emotions (*cognitive appraisals, rather than affect*) can signal success or failure and become **internalized into psychological *well-being or pain***.

- The **social network perspective** demonstrates that the presence of **negative ties** is **potentially more powerful** in affecting individual well-being **than positive ties**

- Cultural meaning - people are motivated to act by the **cultural schema**, **scripts**, and **frames** they are exposed to, internalize, and take for granted as normative

How does the external social world matter to individual psychological pain and suffering?

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