

Brief overview on suicide and its societal perceptions through recorded history

Dipesh Bhagabati

Professor, Department of Psychiatry, Gauhati Medical College Hospital, Guwahati, Assam, India

Abstract

A society is an organisation of people who have the same way of life. In ancient Greece, from the earliest days of the Stoic School the problem of suicide is a problem of the free will. Followers of Judaism observe the value of life. Christians who died of their own hands were not to be buried in the grace of the church. Islam considers suicide is one of the greatest sins and utterly detrimental to one's spiritual journey. Hinduism generally considers suicide a violation of the code of Ahimsa. "Santhara" is non-violent fasting to death by Jain Munis. Buddhism in its various forms affirms that suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an 'Arhat,' one who has attained enlightenment. Durkheim primarily focused on social correlates. Views on suicide have been influenced by broader cultural views on existential themes: religion, honour, meaning of life. In India, there are large variations of suicide rates across states. Farmers' suicides are another highlight. Assisted suicide is when the patient brings his/her own death with the assistance of physician. Werther effect predicts not only increase in suicide but the majority of the suicides will take place in the same or similar way as the one publicised. It is hoped that a world society free of discrimination would lead to a society free of suicide!

Bhagabati D. Brief overview on suicide and its societal perceptions through recorded history. *Dysphrenia*. 2012;3(1):4-6.

Keywords: Religion. Euthanasia. Werther effect.

Correspondence: dbhagabati@gmail.com

Received on 26 November 2011. Accepted on 6 December 2011.

Society is a continuum or static or evolving? People in general thought of as a large organised group. It reflects attitudes and values prevalent in society. Society is the people who live in a country or a region, their organisations and their way of life. A society is an organisation of people who have the same way of life. Keeping this in context, suicide has got both universality and specificity (societal).

Oxford English Dictionary places the first occurrence of the word in 1651. Prior to that suicide was seen with disgust. Terms used were self-murder, self-killing, self-slaughter etc., later scientists and doctors considered suicide as illness. Still later suicide is an outcome of something else.

Ancient reasons for committing suicide

Some found it the only way to redeem failure. In ancient Greece, from the earliest days of the Stoic School the problem of suicide is a problem of the free will. Many considered suicide a heroic act. There was certain fascination about self-chosen death.

Philosophers in Ancient Greece

Socrates said, "A man who is one of God's possessions, should not kill himself until God sends some compulsions on him." Plato allows a small loophole in his condemnation of the frequent Greek practice of suicide.

He believed that suicide is acceptable in certain circumstances. According to Aristotle, "Taking one's own life to avoid poverty, desire or pain is unmanly or rather cowardly." He also felt that it was allowed if state ordered it.

Society and religion

Are they closely related or symbiotic? Degree of orthodoxy and integration within a religion are more accurate measures of risk rather than single categorisation, according to Durkheim.

In Judaism, suicide, assisted suicide and request for suicide are serious sins. Followers of Judaism observe the value of life. Early Christians so valued the attainment of eternal salvation that suicide was seen and accepted positively, "As a mean of avoiding sinful distractions." Old Testament has five examples of suicide. St. Augustine viewed taking one's life as murder. It was usurpation of the prerogative of God, Church and State. After about a millennium of establishment of Christian Church - Council of Toledo in 639 AD - "excommunication was decreed for suicidal behaviour." Christians who died of their own hands were not to be buried in the grace of the church. Survivors were threatened with social taboos and loss of property. Present view of Catholic Church considers death by suicide as grave or serious sin. One's life is a property of God and a gift to the world. However

“Church prays for the persons who have taken their own lives.” According to conservative Protestants, suicide is ‘self-murder.’ Anyone who commits it is sinning and is equivalent to murdering another human being “but not impossible to find salvation.”

Islam considers suicide is one of the greatest sins and utterly detrimental to one’s spiritual journey. Quran instructs “and do not kill yourselves, surely God is most merciful.” Hinduism generally considers suicide a violation of the code of Ahimsa. Souls of people who commit suicide will remain wandering as “Spirits” (Ghosts?). It accepts non-violent method of ending one’s life - “Prayopavasa” - strictly restricted to people who have no desire or ambition left and no responsibilities in this life. In Medieval India, self(?)-immolation was considered as “Sati.” Jainism permits suicide with restriction. “Santhara” is non-violent fasting to death by Jain Munis. Buddhism advocates “Doctrine of Karma.” First precept is refraining from destruction of life including that of self. Suicide is a negative form of action. The Encyclopaedia of religion states “Buddhism in its various forms affirms that suicide as self-sacrifice may be appropriate for the person who is an ‘Arhat,’ one who has attained enlightenment. It is still very much exception to the rule.”

Durkheim in *Le Suicide* (1897) primarily focused on social correlates.[1] Human disposition towards suicide was seen as a function of society’s hold on people: exemplified in Altruistic suicide – sacrifice of self for an ideal. Social integration is the hallmark, self-sacrifice for an ideal. Opposite to the integration scale is Egoistic. Lack of social ties to any or all social institutions (family, community, religious bindings) exemplified by increased suicide rate in unmarried, urban dwellers having no community or religious ties. Sudden loss of cultural guide points lead to Anomic suicide such as death of loved one, going into poverty. Durkheim also acknowledged presence of extra-social factors like insanity, race, heredity, cosmic influences. He started the path to today’s biopsychosocial synthesis.

Next three quarters of a century saw criticism, acclaim and modification of Durkheim’s theory in the form of “paid inadequate attention to other more personal and specific motivating factors for suicide.” Views on suicide have been influenced by broader cultural views on existential themes: religion, honour, meaning of life.

Sainsbury examined relationship between suicide and poverty in London.[2] He compared economic status of suicide victims with economic status of neighbours. Conclusion was “indigenous poverty does not foster suicide.” He suggested fall from affluence to poverty indicated instability and potential suicide. People’s Temple (founded in 1955, HQ in San-Francisco) was an

American cult led by Jim Jones in Guyana where in 1978, 918 people died.

Self-immolation or self-sacrifice based on religious motivations is an honoured path in China and other far eastern countries.[3] There are reports of high incidence in young women in rural areas. In Malaysia, differences in the suicide rates of the different ethnic groups were observed. Higher rates in people from Indian origin are seen. In Pakistan, there are high incidences in young persons and married women.[4,5] In Sri Lanka, there was high incidence during ethnic conflict (18.2 in 1971 to 40 in 1996). Variations were seen across regions (20 to 90). Higher rates were reported in rural areas (eight versus 70). Domestic problems were the main reason of suicide.[6]

In India, there are large variations of suicide rates across states. Rapid social change is associated with high rates. There is association with alcohol dependence. Family suicides are increasing. Relative high rates are observed in women. Farmers’ suicides are another highlight. There is negative legal situation in the form of Section 309.

Euthanasia

Modern day debate started in 1870.[7] Felix Adler (1913) was the first prominent American to argue for permitting suicide in chronic illness. Voluntary euthanasia is with the consent of the patient which can be active/passive. Assisted suicide is when the patient brings his/her own death with the assistance of physician. Non-voluntary euthanasia is as in child euthanasia. Involuntary euthanasia is against the will of the patient.

Werther effect

Goethe’s novel “The sorrows of young Werther” (1774) was followed by series of suicide by shooting after publication of the book. Modern day example is about 200 deaths after Marilyn Monroe’s suicide. Werther effect predicts not only increase in suicide but the majority of the suicides will take place in the same or similar way as the one publicised.

Future

It is hoped that non-criminalisation, religious reformation, increase level of tolerance by people in authority e.g. teachers/parents (humiliation, ridicule, unrealistic expectations), a world society free of discrimination would lead to a society free of suicide!

References

1. Durkheim E. *Suicide: a study in sociology*. New York: Free Press; 1951.
2. Sainsbury P. *Suicide in London*. London: Chapman and Hall; 1955.

3. Kitagawa JM. Buddhist medical history. In: Sullivan LE, editor. Healing and restoring – health and medicine in the world's religious traditions. New York: Macmillan; 1989.
4. Khan MM, Reza H. Suicide and parasuicide in Pakistan: time for a change? J Pak Med Assoc. 1998;48:292-3.
5. Khan MM, Reza H. Benzodiazepine self-poisoning in Pakistan: implications for prevention and harm reduction. J Pak Med Assoc. 1998;48:293-5.
6. Hettiarachchi J, Kodituwakku GC. Self poisoning in Sri Lanka: motivational aspects. Int J Soc Psychiatry. 1989;35:204-8.
7. Kemp NDA. Merciful release: the history of the British euthanasia movement. Manchester: Manchester University Press; 2002.