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Domenico Tosini

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ERRATA

§4, last-but-one line, read: “... **rationality is an unavoidable step...**” instead of
“rationality is an avoidable step...” (August 5th 2013).

- 1 With *Understanding Suicide : A Sociological Autopsy*, Ben Fincham, Susanne Langer, Jonathan Scourfield, and Michael Shiner make an impressive contribution to the analysis of suicide thanks to groundbreaking research resorting to a method called “sociological autopsy”. The empirical part of the book is preceded by a critical overview of the major classical works in the study of suicide (Chapter 2) – Émile Durkheim, Ruth S. Caravan, Jack D. Douglas, and J. Maxwell Atkinson. All things considered, sociology plays a marginal role within the current research on suicide, which is dominated by psychiatry and psychology. When sociologists are engaged, they tend to follow in Durkheim’s footsteps and mainly adopt quantitative approaches. Thus, Fincham and colleagues, without overlooking the importance of such approaches, argue for a methodological pluralism that is also based on new qualitative-driven methods, such as the sociological autopsy.
- 2 The research design consists of an empirical analysis of 100 suicide case files from a coroner’s office in the UK (Chapter 3). Material in the files is considered as both a topic and a resource, in that the authors are interested in two different dimensions at the

same time : “The first dimension concerned the way evidence is constructed by all parties (both living and now dead) and the second concerned the substance of the evidence we have about the circumstances, beliefs and actions of suicidal individuals.” (p. 43). This dual perspective not only fulfills the potential of a balanced combination of constructionism and objectivism, but is also a more nuanced way to discern agency and sense-making, on the one hand, and social and psychological determinants, on the other – which are both parts of the social and psychological dynamics leading to and following suicides. Here, sociological autopsy plays a crucial role. It consists of an in-depth examination of data contained in the individual suicide case files. Unlike mainstream psychological autopsy, the sociological autopsy aims to unfold the interpretative processes of agents who contributed to the creation of the files.

- 3 Within this framework, the authors first follow a constructionist approach (Chapters 4 and 5). The practices and discourse of those agents are taken into account (Chapter 4) : medical scientists and physicians, whose standardized communication was primarily concerned with illnesses and therapeutic treatments ; witnesses, such as relatives and friends, who generally attempted to determine the causes of suicide outside their sphere ; and the deceased themselves, whose notes (which were part of over 40 % of case files) paradoxically portrayed suicide as resulting from both self-assertion and factors beyond their control. Then, a more focused analysis of suicide notes is conducted (Chapter 5), which illustrates their crucial importance for identifying victims’ motivations. While expressing a variety of emotions (shame, anger, etc.), suicide notes operate as a channel to “create, repair and extend social relationships between people across time and between life and death” (p. 94). The deceased use them to convey messages to their bereaved with respect to material and practical aspects, as well as to influence their emotional state.
- 4 A bridge between the constructionist perspective adopted so far and a more objectivist approach is rooted in an investigation of victims’ decision-making (Chapter 6). Here, the authors distance themselves from a stimulus-response model and embrace an interpretative model concerned with the “subjectively situated nature of suicide”. The authors elaborate on the notion of “repertoire of action” to argue that “individual suicidal events can best be understood by the changing relationship people have to their perception of their situation, the perception they have of themselves and the perception they have of what people like them – in their situation – might reasonably do.” (p. 107). Therefore, explaining suicide requires paying attention to the intersection of victims’ values and beliefs with a cluster of circumstances and a stratification of experiences affecting their life-course. As convincingly shown by a series of case studies (p. 113-131), this research strategy ultimately allows suicide to be deciphered as a “reasonable course of action” in the deceased’s eyes. In so doing, Fincham and colleagues masterfully follow Weberian methodological criteria according to which the understanding of agents’ meanings and rationality is an avoidable step to clarify mechanisms responsible for any social phenomenon, including dramatic outcome such as suicidal behaviors.
- 5 The authors are clearly aware of the fact that any exhaustive sociological explanation should also take into account (from an objectivist standpoint) mechanisms that constrain and shape the conditions in which victims make their decisions. Thus, Fincham and colleagues finally employ a quantitative analysis (Chapter 7) that

“compliments and extends the preceding qualitative work by showing how suicide and its associated meanings and motivations are structured by broader social relations, particularly those associated with the life-course” (p. 5). Data question the common idea that young men are particularly at risk of suicide. Statistical analysis reveals a more vulnerable condition among people in their mid-life and allows the identification of a series of gendered patterns in which male victims emerge as highly exposed to relationship breakdown. For cases in which this factor has been the principal trigger, additional qualitative examination revealed that suicides were associated with an attempt to inflict punishment, distress due to over-dependence on women, emotions provoked by sexual jealousy, and separation from children.

- 6 The book ends with an assessment of current prevention strategies in the UK (Chapter 8). The authors criticize assumptions and methods guiding intervention policy, which rely mainly on quantitative evidence and pathological explanations. To more accurately capture risk factors, policy and practice should rather pay attention to qualitative aspects of victims’ life-course, which in turn requires social explanations that focus on victims’ social context, particularly their intimate relationships. The main lesson is that “the consideration of the range of circumstances and experiences that are contributing to an affective state being described as depressed appear as important in some cases as the diagnosis. We would suggest that any diagnosis should ideally be accompanied by a full account of the social circumstances surrounding the individual.” (p. 182).
- 7 Because of the number of cases and certain aspects related to the source of the data, questions can be raised about the generalizability of the results concerning suicide patterns. We also think that a comparative analysis including control samples of non-suicides who share certain characteristics with suicides (*e.g.*, in terms of psychopathological conditions) might help more accurately specify the causal configurations responsible for the outcome of interest. That said, if looking at the state of the art in the sociology of suicide, Fincham and colleagues have replaced nothing with something. Their work is a crucial challenge to the quantitative mainstream that continues to marginalize research on victims’ sense-making. As the book demonstrates, a more comprehensive perspective requires, in tandem with statistical analysis, an examination of documents, such as suicide notes, that can help shed light on micro-level psychological and social dynamics conducive to taking one’s life. The book also accurately combines such an interpretative approach with research on structural conditions made up of relationships molding victims’ experiences. In this sense, overall, the book is successful in building a more articulate framework for analyzing the phenomenon. The book forms a very important basis for new empirical investigation of suicide, which should be inspired by a methodological pluralism and multidisciplinary stance.

AUTEURS

DOMENICO TOSINI

University of Trento – Department of Sociology and Social Research