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DURKHEIM DID NOT SAY “NORMLESSNESS”: THE CONCEPT OF ANOMIC SUICIDE FOR INTRODUCTORY SOCIOLOGY COURSES

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ABSTRACT

The definitions of anomic suicide presented in introductory sociology textbooks from 1996 to 2007 were compared with the definition given by Durkheim in his own writings both in the original French and the English translation. It was found that only one textbook correctly gave Durkheim's own definition while the other definitions showed little or no relationship to the original concept. The original concept was based on an analysis of the economy, more particularly the business cycle, and refers only to the structure of society and not to the mental state of the individual. An attempt is made to discover the source of such a widespread and well-accepted error.

All of us are concerned about the introductory course in sociology, no matter the august reaches of academe we might have attained. Nearly all of us have taught it at least once, if only as teaching assistants during our graduate school days. Some of us always teach it. The rest depend on it as a basis for their advanced courses, for a supply of research assistants, and ultimately to build public appreciation and support for the field. If we think of the number of students who take introductory sociology in just one small college in one semester, let alone in a major university over many years, we can easily appreciate the influence that these courses have on our discipline. All of us have an interest in the quality of introductory course instruction, including the accuracy of material in the textbooks used in these courses.

Between 1973 and 2003, *Teaching Sociology* published eleven articles whose titles clearly identified the subject as concepts covered in introductory texts: symbolic interaction (Carrothers and Benson 2003), race and ethnicity (Stone 1996; Baca Zinn and Eitzen 1996); scholarly content (Babchuk and Keith 1995) class stratification (Lucal 1994), homosexuality (Phillips 1991), “common sense” (Mathisen 1989) need for material on non-US societies (Sanderson 1985), power (Paap 1981), conflict theory (Wells 1979) and religion (Kelly 1977). In addition, most issues of *Teaching Sociology* review textbooks, many of them introductory, and one issue (1988, Volume 16, Number 4) was wholly devoted to textbooks.

This article joins these efforts to correct concepts poorly or inaccurately presented in introductory textbooks. The discussion here is limited to Durkheim's

definition of anomic suicide presented in a modest convenience sample of textbooks for the introductory sociology course. This paper compares what Durkheim himself said with what the textbooks *say* he said. The topic is further limited to *anomie* as Durkheim applied the term to suicide and does not include the topic of *anomie* as a whole. Although the topic of *anomie* as a whole and the topic of *anomic suicide* obviously overlap, this discussion remains centered on suicide. Many textbooks also include Merton’s concept of *anomie*, notably in the deviancy chapter. These definitions are excluded because they apply only to crime and not to suicide.

METHODOLOGY

The first step was to compare the English translations of Durkheim with the French original for accuracy. What I judged to be errors in the textbook definitions could have come from inaccurate translations.

Four sources were used for Durkheim’s definition. The discussion and definitions in the original French language come from *Le Suicide* (Durkheim 1912:264-311) and *De la Division du Travail Social* (Durkheim 1967:333-365). The discussion and definitions in the English language were taken from *Suicide: A Study in Sociology* (Durkheim [1912] 1951:241-276) and *The Division of Labor in Society* (Durkheim [1967] 1984:291-309). The most important description and definition of anomic suicide is “Chapitre 5. Le Suicide Anomique” (Durkheim 1912:264-311) and the translation, Chapter 5. “Anomic Suicide” (Durkheim [1912] 1951:241-276). The most important source for this paper was *Le Suicide* (Durkheim 1912:282-290) and *Suicide* (Durkheim [1912] 1951:246-259).

The second step was to study the introductory textbooks’ definitions of anomic suicide. This was a convenience sample consisting mainly of textbooks sent to my office from publishers hoping for a sale. Fifty-six items were studied ranging in date from 1956 to 2008, with most dated from 1999. One was a “cheat sheet” of definitions marketed to students. Two old textbooks dated 1956 and 1957 were especially valuable for historical comparison. All sources are given in the Appendix A.

Among the books that publishers sent were several by the same authors. Three authors have two editions, two authors have three editions, two authors have four editions, and one author has five editions. In those cases of multiple editions, only one edition is included in the sample if the same definition is used in each, different editions are included if the definitions are different. One author changed the definition four times, so those four different definitions are counted separately. All

together 38 textbooks and the student definition sheet comprised the sample for content analysis of words and phrases used in definitions of anomic suicide. The two historical textbooks and one contemporary textbook received especial attention. The coding of about 10 percent of the definitions, or from five textbooks, was checked by a colleague.

The third step was to compare the textbook definitions of anomic suicide with Durkheim's own words. The textbooks' definitions were first compared to Durkheim's definition by the meaning of the whole definition and then by a count of words and phrases.

FINDINGS

Translation Accuracy

The comparison of Durkheim's original French with the translations of his works satisfied me that the translations are accurate for the passages compared. As I suspected from the beginning, I found the translations to be accurate, correct, and dependable. A few words might have been changed, in my view, but nowhere can the essential meaning of the translation be reasonably challenged. Nonetheless, reading the original increased my own understanding of the translation. Overall, careful reading of the translations led me to the same conclusions as careful reading of the original. Following is a summary of what Durkheim said.

What Durkheim Said

First, underlining that Durkheim identified four types of suicide, not just one type seems important. The four types are egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. Of the four types, only one concerns anomie. To give the complete picture, following is a summary of all the types. They are arranged in two pairs of opposites. The first pair is based on the freedom accorded the individual by the group to which the individual belongs: Much or little freedom. The second pair is based on the external regulation of the individual: Much or little regulation.

Freedom/Individuality/Group Cohesion

Egoistic

In this category, the individual is not tied closely enough to a group, i.e., the group to which the individual belongs grants its members more freedom than is good for the members' well being, or the individual is not closely tied to any group. In this type, the individual suffers from too much individuation (Durkheim [1912] 1951:217). Comparing the suicide rates for Protestants and Catholics demonstrates the point. The Protestant churches grant their members more individual freedom and suffer a higher suicide rate. The Catholic Church has a strict hierarchy and generally grants much less freedom of individual action and thought to its adherents with a consequent lower suicide rate. The point is further made by comparing single and married people. Single people have a higher suicide rate than married people. Obviously, the single are not as closely tied to a group as are the married. In my classes, I give egoistic as the type of suicide we know the most in our society today.

Altruistic

The opposite of a group that grants its members much individual freedom is the group that grants its members little individual freedom. The type of suicide caused by being in this kind of group is altruistic suicide. In this type, the group has so much control over its members that the group can demand extraordinary sacrifice from them (Durkheim [1912] 1951:221). A surprise for most readers will be that Durkheim ([1912] 1951:221-40) gives subtypes for altruistic suicide, but simplification is appropriate for introductory classes. I agree with the textbooks that modern examples are some cults, such as those in the Jonestown and Heaven's Gate cases. In my classes, I give the military as the premier example where ultimately all members could be called on to die for their country, though in fact only a few do.

External Regulation

The basis for the second pair of opposite suicide types is external regulation apart from the internal cohesion of the group. Durkheim presents these two types with anomic suicide treated first and fatalistic second, but they are reversed here for clarity of presentation.

Fatalistic

Fatalistic suicide is presented only in a footnote and given mainly to complete the typology of suicides (Durkheim [1912] 1951:276). The fatalistic type is caused by oppressive regulation. Durkheim finds that it is so unimportant in the modern world, i.e., his time, that he could think of only three examples and did not develop the concept or explain the examples further. His examples are slaves, men married too young, and married women without children.

Anomic

This type of suicide is so badly misunderstood that it requires a long and thorough explanation.

Macro Level. Durkheim's analysis of anomic suicide is at both the macro and micro levels, not just the micro, and the two are necessary to understanding the concept. The full explanation of what he means requires study of anomie in *The Division of Labor in Society* and in *Suicide* equally, with the macro level best explained in *Division of Labor*.

Durkheim's concept of anomic suicide begins with a society's economic conditions. I am certain this is astonishing news to all nonspecialists, since economic variables are far, far from any information on suicide presented in introductory material. In *Division of Labor*, Durkheim says that before industrial times, producers served only a small geographic area and were in close contact with customers. Consequently, producers knew when to increase or decrease supply. With the increased division of labor, or specialization, producers can supply goods over such large areas that they cannot know when they are producing too much or too little for consumption. Under these conditions, either great overproduction or great underproduction causes sudden and drastic fluctuations in the business cycle, and today we know this informally as boom or bust. He said that we have boom and bust in industrial times because production and consumption are not kept in balance, or regulated, whereas in pre-industrial times they were regulated through informal means (Durkheim [1967] 1984:305-6). He further concludes that government is the only entity that can regulate the economy in modern times (Durkheim [1967] 1984:295). The absence of a regulating mechanism is anomie, and the word means "unregulated." The imbalance of production and consumption is not the anomie. The anomie is the lack of regulation of the economy or lack of laws.

In *Suicide*, Durkheim repeats that anomie is lack of regulation of the economy (Durkheim [1912] 1951:241,255-6). The uncontrolled economy leads to bankruptcy for some and to sudden wealth for others, and suicide can result from either situation (Durkheim [1912] 1951:246). Durkheim concluded that the economy must be controlled, and both books together form a critique of pure laissez-faire capitalism. He acknowledged that rising or falling prices eventually bring production and consumption back into balance but not right away. Suicides occur during the time that it takes for price changes to stabilize the business cycle and end the boom or bust (Durkheim [1967] 1984:303).

After a moment's thought, we will recognize Durkheim's argument in our own Great Depression. We are familiar with stories that have come down to us about people jumping off buildings after their life savings have evaporated. We might more vaguely realize that we concluded, along with Durkheim, that our economy could not be left to price mechanisms alone and required closer regulation. Since then we have put many regulations in place to prevent booms and busts. Banks are closely regulated now. For example, they must maintain a minimum amount in reserves, and bank deposits are insured by the federal government to a certain level. The SEC was created to oversee the stock market. Buying stocks is no longer possible “on margin” or for 10 percent of the price. Many years later in our own day we are experiencing the same debate in different form as specialists, politicians, and the public increasingly demand more regulation of the mortgage market.

Micro Level. The explanation of anomic suicide continues on the individual or micro level, which is the level addressed in the textbooks. *Suicide* ([1912] 1951:246-57) explains that the sudden swings in fortune, both good and bad, set up a possibly fatal chain of events for the individual. Individuals experiencing sudden and extreme good fortune can now have anything they want. Nevertheless, human wants are insatiable, and wanting more torments individuals, making them suffer. On top of it, eventually, they will experience a check of some kind, which is the more unbearable because of the recent experience of having no checks at all. The individual does not know how to reign in the desires, which go ever more out of control. Until the person learns those controls or how to live at that new economic level, that person suffers (Durkheim [1912] 1951:247-8). At the other end of the scale, the person suddenly rendered poor through bankruptcy must learn how to reduce desires even further than previously. The suddenly poor person must learn how to introduce more controls or regulation over spending (Durkheim [1912] 1951:252). Durkheim astutely observes that both the rich and the poor have lived

with their wealth or poverty since the beginning of time. They know what the limits are and how to control their desires at either economic level (Durkheim [1912] 1951:249-50). However, the person who enters either state precipitously does not have this knowledge and consequently is vulnerable to self-destruction (Durkheim [1912] 1951:252).

An economy without effective government controls is not the only kind of anomie to affect individuals adversely. The other one is the man's loss of his wife, either through death or divorce. According to Durkheim, when a man loses his wife, his sexual desires are in anomie, i.e., out of control or unregulated. The widower or divorced male no longer has a regular, fixed object for his desires. He looks here and there, experiences hope and disappointment and lives a chaotic and tormented sexual life. The man's passions are in a state of anomie (Durkheim [1912] 1951:259, 270).

Durkheim notes that this is not the fate of the woman who loses a husband either through death or divorce. He says that marriage exerts much more control over women than over men and loss of the husband is often a welcome release for them. Living in the late Victorian era, he also believes that women have less sexual desire. In observing that women profit from loss of their husbands, Durkheim ([1912] 1951:260-6) notes that more divorces are initiated by women than by men.

What Textbooks Say

Many textbooks covered anomic suicide/anomie in more than one place. About half followed the pattern of presenting Durkheim as an historical figure and discussing his suicide work in the first chapter. The chapter was usually titled "Theory and Research" or something similar.

Some texts in the study placed Durkheim and suicide elsewhere. A few, including the student study sheet, placed him in social structure chapters, with various titles. Two books put him in the deviancy and control chapter. When this was done, the chapter gave the same definition of anomie as in other chapters but the focus was on Merton's theory of structural strain, an entirely different subject. One textbook put Durkheim in the chapter "The Economy and Work." One discussed anomie in "Environment and Urban" but in connection with Wirth's work.

Textbook Definitions

Textbooks varied in wordings of definitions and in whether they included or excluded various elements of Durkheim’s definition. However, the following three are representative and should be examined more closely:

- “[. . .] anomie, an uncomfortable and unfamiliar state of normlessness that results when shared norms or guidelines break down (Stolley 2005:113).”
- “Anomic suicide occurs when the disintegrating forces in the society make individuals feel lost or alone” (Andersen and Taylor 2006:173).
- “[. . .] anomie—a condition in which social control becomes ineffective as a result of the loss of shared values and of a sense of purpose in society (Kendall 2006:12).”

Normlessness

By far, the single most common synonym given by authors for “anomie” is “normless” or “normlessness.” Thirty-five definitions used the following vocabulary: “normless,” “normlessness,” “norms weak or unclear,” “loss of direction,” “loss of control,” “social breakdown.”

Contrary to these definitions, I was not able to find the words *la norme* or *pas de norme* in Durkheim’s original French; it could be that those words did not exist then. Furthermore, I could not find that the translator ever used the words “normless” or “normlessness” either. The French words Durkheim used were: *règle, dérèglement, désarroi, rien ne les régle*. These words mean in English just what they seem to mean: “rule or regulation,” “lack of rule or regulation,” “disarray,” “nothing rules/regulates/controls them.” Beyond individual vocabulary words in French, looking at phrases in his work and their translations is instructive: 1) *L’état de dérèglement ou d’anomie* [. . .] (Durkheim [1912] 1951:281), “The state of deregulation or anomy [. . .]” (Durkheim [1912] 1951:253), 2) *... toute réglementation fait défaut pour un temps* (Durkheim [1912] 1951:280), “[. . .] all regulation is lacking for a time” (Durkheim [1912] 1951:253).

Personally, I have never understood how complete normlessness could possibly exist. It pleases me that I am not alone. Garfinkel studied this very problem and found that people reinterpreted experimental anomic situations, defining anomie out of existence (Cuzzort 1989:210). In much the same way, Turner and Killian’s (1987:25-30) emergent norm theory of collective behavior argues that in ambiguous or normless situations, actors will come together and develop new norms.

Nonetheless, seeing where the idea of “normlessness” came from is easy, since the absence of laws governing the economy would be a lack of formal norms. Still, the word “normless” as used in textbooks and elsewhere is far too broad, especially when it is supposed to lead to society’s collapse (Macdonis 2007:644) or dissolving (Hess 1996:81). In the time when Durkheim wrote, as well as today, the myriad norms of daily life were in place outside the limited realm of government (Durkheim [1912] 1951:249). Besides the informal norms in economic life, the other norms of daily life continued in force. The person still wore clothes, ate with a knife and fork, said “good morning” and “good evening” at the appropriate times, and spoke the appropriate language. The norms in the society of the wealthy, the society of the poor, and the middle class, remained as always. No socioeconomic level was an empty vacuum. Even the person who had been displaced socioeconomically still carried around the norms of the previous existence as well as also being exposed to the norms of the new existence. Norms were always around and continued to be observed.

How the Individual Feels

Almost as often as authors used the word “normless/normlessness,” they described the individual’s state of mind. Sixteen definitions used the following vocabulary: “detached from society,” “alone,” “lonely,” “loneliness,” “confused,” “not belong,” “don’t know what group belonged to.” Other frequently used words and phrases were: “does not know what to do,” “meaningless,” “a sense of being detached from society,” “being confused about what to do,” “no meaning in life,” “loss of a sense of purpose.”

Contrary to the textbooks, Durkheim spent little time and space on describing the feelings individuals experience. Durkheim used only two words to describe feelings in the passages I know and then only a few times, perhaps three or four. The French words he used were: *souffrances*, *tortue*. Translations for those words are: “suffering,” “torment” (I would translate it as “torture”). He says nothing more about how a person feels. He only says that a person’s passions/desires are out of control and that this condition makes a person suffer. Durkheim’s focus is on social structure external to the individual and not on the individual or their feelings. None of these words the textbooks used are found in the French passages covered here.

Extreme Upward Mobility

Three authors in the sample should be complimented for attempting to include the phenomenon of sudden prosperity as a cause of anomic suicide. The importance of upward mobility correctly reflects Durkheim as he gives much more attention to how rapid upward mobility causes suicide than to how rapid downward social mobility causes suicide. Unfortunately, the explanations the textbook writers give are not related to Durkheim’s explanation. On the contrary, the modern authors’ explanations match Durkheim’s definition of egoistic suicide not anomic suicide. “Sudden fame tears people apart from their families and familiar routines” (Macionis 2007:110). Henslin (2005:267) says of lottery winners, “Those who avoid anomie seem to be people who don’t make sudden changes in their lifestyle or their behavior. They hold onto their old friends, routines, and other moorings in life.” Kornblum (2000:32) scrambles “normlessness” with egoistic when he says first of celebrities and musicians that they lead out-of-control lives and feel lost and then that they lack integration into social groups.

Historical Textbook Definitions

The physical differences between the modern textbooks and the two 1950s textbooks are major. The older texts contain no illustrations of any kind, no color anywhere, no tables or graphs at all in one textbook and sparingly in the other, no boxes or inserts with especially interesting tidbits, no practice study questions or discussion topics, though one has readings at the ends of chapters and suggestions for further readings, no career ideas, no inspiring biographies, no cartoons, no study aids, no special definitions and obviously no CDs or computer features. Finally, the older textbooks are at least half the size of the new ones.

A difference between the historical and the modern textbooks more important for the purpose here is the lack of interest in anomic suicide or in suicide itself. Freedman et al. (1956) gives five references to Durkheim in the name index. Most of these are short, two or three general sentences on non-suicide subjects and none on any of the types of suicide or on anomie. The subject index contains no entry for suicide and no relevant entries are in the table of contents.

Koenig (1957) shows 14 entries for Durkheim in the index and three for suicide. Only one entry is for anomic suicide. Interestingly, Koenig’s definition resembles the modern ones: “. . . anomic suicide is caused by a disturbance in the social equilibrium, by a state of *anomie* [author’s italics], or *normlessness* [my emphasis] during which the conduct of the individual ceases to be controlled by the

norms set by society" (p.62). Contrary to the modern textbooks, the only other entry for *anomie* refers to the division of labor, ". . . it [the extreme division of labor] produces an abnormal, anomalous situation in which different parts [of society] do not integrate but are at cross purposes with each other and a state of *normlessness* [my emphasis] which Durkheim referred to as *anomie*" [author's italics] (p.306).

Koenig shows that modern textbook usage of normlessness reaches back many years and is not a new invention. It also shows itself to be as incorrect in representing Durkheim's concept as the present ones.

Quantitative Summary

The preceding discussion is summarized in Table 1 that gives counts of the words and phrases that textbooks and Durkheim used and how they are coded here. The percentages given show the number of times authors used each category of vocabulary. Authors used many other synonyms and alternate phrases than are in the table. The additional vocabulary for each code category is listed in Appendix B.

Noteworthy in the table, and particularly in the appendix, is the large number of different words and phrases authors use to explain their concepts. As already noted, the most important single word is "normless" (6.4 percent) or its variants "normlessness" and "without norms." This is the only category with just one base word in it. Category number two contains synonyms for normless (33.6 percent) and when combined with category number one, accounts for 40 percent of the vocabulary used. The closest other category is number six (13.6 percent) comprised of words that are essentially definitions of egoistic suicide.

Category 12, which correctly uses Durkheim's vocabulary, has a surprisingly high 8.9 percent of the responses, and 5.7 percent of the total definitions clearly state that the cause of anomic suicide is unlimited desires. However, the definitions using "desires unregulated" are a mixture of different types of suicide presented as anomic suicide, but these are clearer than the others. This group of authors contains the most recent textbooks (Curry, Jiobu and Schwirian 2008; Ferris and Stein 2008; Basirico, Cashion, and Eshleman 2005; Bryjak and Soroka 1997; Broom and Selnick 1968) showing that some authors are starting to understand Durkheim better.

One Correct Definition

Of all the textbooks reviewed, only one author, Ferrante satisfies my reading of Durkheim. First, unusual among textbook writers, Ferrante

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Table 1. COMPARISON OF WORDS OR PHRASES TEXTBOOK AUTHORS AND DURKHEIM USED TO DEFINE ANOMIC SUICIDE/ANOMIE

DESCRIPTIVES/CONCEPTS AUTHORS USE THAT ARE NOT IN DURKHEIM	FREQUENCY OF WORD OR PHRASE IN DEFINITION
1. Normless, normlessness, without norms.	6.4% (18)
2. Other words for normless/normlessness (focus is on society): Norms weak, conflicting, unclear.	33.6% (94)
3. Individual’s feelings (focus is on the individual): rootless, feels lost or adrift, detached from norms.	12.9% (36)
4. Rapid change, social change, social turmoil, profound social change.	7.1% (20)
5. Society breaks down, collapses, dissolves.	5.0% (14)
6. Lack social support, not integrated in society, (i.e., definition of egoistic suicide).	13.6% (38)
DESCRIPTIVES/CONCEPTS AUTHORS USE THAT ARE IN DURKHEIM	
7. The economy unregulated (Durkheim’s words).	0.0% (0)
8. Stock market crash, business cycle.	2.9% (8)
9. Rapid upward mobility.	6.1% (17)
10. Rapid downward mobility.	2.5% (7)
11. Individual in transition (Durkheim’s words).	0.4% (1)
12. Desires unregulated/out of control (Durkheim).	8.9% (25)
a. Clearly stated.	5.7% (16)
b. Not clearly stated.	3.2% (9)
13. Desires eventually frustrated (Durkheim’s words).	0.7% (2)
Total.	100.1% (280)

NOTE: 52 of 56 items examined. The four items excluded were a 1956 textbook with no anomic suicide/anomie references and Ferrante’s books (discussed in the next section).

explains all four types of suicide, including fatalistic. Secondly, I strongly endorse her definition of anomic suicide:

Anomic describes a state brought on by dramatic changes in economic circumstance—a recession, a depression, or an economic boom. In all cases, a declassification occurs that suddenly casts individuals into a lower or higher status than before. When people are cast into a lower status, they must reduce their requirements, restrain their needs, and practice self-control. When individuals are cast into a higher status, they must adjust to increased prosperity, which unleashes aspirations and expands desires to an

unlimited extent. A thirst to acquire goods and services arises that cannot be satisfied (Ferrante 2006:19).

In a box of short definitions on that page, "Anomic [suicide] A state brought on by dramatic changes in economic circumstances."

In a footnote in the 1998 edition, Ferrante (1998:18) includes the extension of anomic suicide to marriage, entirely absent in other textbooks, "Durkheim also wrote about conjugal anomic suicide, which occurs when people face divorce."

To be thorough, it could be added that Durkheim limited the suicidal effects of divorce to males only and he also included widowhood. The only major change I would make to Ferrante's definition is that the sudden economic change is caused by anomie in the economy or lack of government regulation of the economy.

DISCUSSION

Leaving the subject at this point seems incomplete to me. If my reading of Durkheim is accepted, the immediate reaction is, "Where did all the incorrect definitions come from?" Textbook content is carefully considered and abundantly reviewed and edited. Textbook authors are conscientious researchers and respected scholars, some of them prominent. They cannot be accused of inventing incorrect definitions. Quite unexpectedly I was able to talk to Ferrante herself and asked her where she got her definition for anomic suicide. "I read Durkheim," she told me. What has everybody else been reading? Here are some preliminary considerations and speculations.

First, a cursory look at the non-textbook literature shows that Durkheim's definition is accurately stated in some places, and that the textbooks' definition is not universally followed. One example is Besnard (1988:93) from Durkheim's own country: "Anomie is a situation characterized by indeterminate goals and unlimited aspirations . . . excessive widening of the horizons It is loss in the infinity of desires." Another example is Stack's (1994) chapter in a collection of retrospectives on Durkheim. I believe that Stack (1994:238) accurately reflects Durkheim when he says, "Anomie increases suicide potential by unleashing limitless appetites and by bringing abrupt changes to the lives of individuals." I consider another of his statements also to be accurate, "The rise of laissez faire capitalism was equated with the relative lack of regulation of the economy (Stack 1994:239)."

If accurate definitions are available in the literature, the inaccurate ones are coming from a particular sociological theory. I find persuasive Mawson's

suggestion that it comes from the Marxist tradition. Mawson (1970:298) suggests that instead of using Durkheim’s definition of anomie, authors are using Marx’s definition of alienation. Notice how close at least one definition of Marxian alienation is to the textbook definition of anomie: “... powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement” (Seeman 1959: 783). In explaining “normlessness” Seeman (1959: 787) says that the concept comes from Durkheim’s anomie. Confusion is complete.

Mawson (1970:299) further maintains, I am pleased to see, that the term “normlessness” is meaningless, that attempts to measure it have failed, and that the definitions and measures used are not related to Durkheim’s concept.

Merton is another possible source for the error. Merton (1938) published an article, “Social Structure and Anomie” and his well known, *Social Theory and Social Structure*, in 1949, 1957, and 1964. The 1938 article clearly is the basis for the book Chapter 4, “Social Structure and Anomie,” and Chapter 5, “Social Structure and Anomie: Continuities.” The 1938 article uses the word, “anomie,” only once (p.274). It does not use the word, “normless,” at all as far as I can see. Neither the article nor the book mentions suicide, an unregulated economy or unregulated passions. Both the article and the book are exclusively concerned with Merton’s famous theory of the four categories of deviancy resulting from a contradiction between our society’s high value on material goods and a lower value on the legitimate acquisition of those goods. Unlike the article, both the 1957 and 1964 editions of the book use the words, “normless” and “normlessness,” though not to mean an unregulated economy, unregulated passions, or related to suicide. Merton’s meaning of “normlessness” is the lack of integration of valued goals and legitimate acquisition of those goals. The word “unstable” also appears. It is used the same as in today’s textbooks, “As this process of attenuation continues, the society becomes unstable and there develops what Durkheim called ‘anomie’ (or normlessness)” (Merton 1957, 1963: 135).

Merton’s work is an integral part of the foundation of our discipline. However, it did not center on suicide or even anomie and is not directly relevant to our efforts to understand Durkheim’s concept of anomic suicide. Merton showed he understood Durkheim’s concept when he quotes another author who related anomie to the sudden change of status and role (Merton 1968:242). However, Merton’s own work strikes out in a new direction from Durkheim’s and is not helpful in discovering the origin of these misinterpretations. (See also Featherstone and Deflem 2003:477)

It occurs to me that if more people knew what Durkheim really said, they might not agree with it. The idea that insatiable wants, to use the economist's term, alone cause suicide seems strange to me personally. It seems to me that the wide distance between Durkheim's "real" definition and the contemporary textbook definitions shows that Durkheim's definition was found inadequate almost from the beginning while Marx's concept seemed more reasonable. It could be that the word was retained but the definition was changed.

Bringing more attention to an easily overlooked point of Durkheim's definition might make the definition more reasonable to us, or at least to me, and is worth considering in future definitions and discussions of the concept. In his discussion of anomie, Mawson emphasizes one part of Durkheim's definition more than Durkheim did. The added emphasis, in my view, is just enough to make Durkheim's definition clearer. Mawson (1970:301, 306) says, "Insatiable and uncontrollable impulses by definition must, sooner or later, be frustrated, and *this frustration is responsible for the high rate of suicide* [my emphasis] in countries with abnormal economic conditions." Durkheim's careful explanation centered on the subject of failed regulation and not on frustration, though he included frustration in several places (Durkheim [1912] 1951:247-8, also p.10 above). Bringing attention to the consequences of unbridled desires, which is frustration of those desires, clarifies the connection between desires and suicide.

Another point of Durkheim's work should be considered, in my view, in searching for the reason that his definition has been changed. His repeated insistence that human needs require regulation or even the general idea of regulation and limitation on freedom is foreign to the American high value on freedom and individualism. We demand ever more freedom and lack of regulation, and we accept regulation and control only with reluctance and after much consideration. This part of his concept is not included in contemporary definitions, and I expect that it will not readily find a place there.

Misinterpreting important authors is not new. David Maines, Jeffrey Bridger and Jeffrey Ulmer show that Park has been misinterpreted in the subfield of human ecology. Maines et al. (1996) uses the term "mythic facts" to describe the phenomenon of treating something as fact that is not. We can all agree with Maines et al. (1996) when they note that we always read from own perspectives. We can also agree that our filtered reading can result in inaccurate understandings of what we read. Maines et al. (1996:522) say that our inaccurate reproductions become embedded in textbooks and in the field. Ulmer extends the concept of mythic fact

to misinterpretations of Herbert Blumer’s work on race relations (2001:294-5). It looks as if what we have here with the textbook definition of anomie is a mythic fact.

The copious use of the word “anomie” in numerous academic disciplines as well as popular art forms and everyday conversation shows that the word and the concept are not only useful in many domains but even indispensable. This word helps people express something important to them and is therefore valuable. The words “anomie” and “normless/normlessness” have taken on their own lives and have spun their own orbits far distant from Durkheim’s meaning. There is no need to interfere with this huge body of knowledge, even if it were possible. What we can do in the field claiming Durkheim as one of its masters is to be careful about keeping Durkheim’s concept with Durkheim’s name. Where the concept is different, we should not give the incorrect origin.

In view of doubts about the definition’s accuracy, I do not teach anomie or anomic suicide in my own introductory course. I teach the egoistic and altruistic types and explain that these types show how much the group influences individual decision making. I emphasize that Durkheim was a pioneer in applying the scientific method to the study of human groups, but in my opinion, anomic suicide should be reserved for the advanced course in the classical authors.

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APPENDIX A

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APPENDIX B

Other Words/Phrases Textbook Authors Use

1. no other words in this category
2. provide little guidance confused how to act, uncertain of right or wrong, don't understand or accept the rules, controls ineffective, no controls, no moral guidance, no effective rules to govern behavior, no common norms, loss of moral controls, no rules, not committed to social norms, place own needs above others', no regulation of individual, people need to know what is expected of them, behavior not constrained by conventional norms, desires not balanced by claims and guidance of society
3. isolated, confused, not know what to do, uncertain about norms, alone, loneliness, free floating, insecure, disillusioned, loss of purpose, no

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common goals, aimlessness, despair, extreme personal unhappiness, alienation

4. no other words in this category
5. society disintegrates, no social order, norms break down, society loses direction, social disorganization, disturbance in social equilibrium
6. lack intimate belonging, detached from society, not maintain contact with friends/family, uncertain which group belong to, alienation, lose connection with groups, weak social bonds, feeling of not belonging, lack of small groups, out-of-control lives, torn from family, loosened social ties
7. no other words in this category
8. economic depressions, periods of prosperity, economic crisis, economy collapses
9. Durkheim’s wording (Suicide p.252): abrupt growth of power and wealth. Textbook wording: lottery winners, performers, celebrities
10. Durkheim’s wording (Suicide p.252): economic disaster...which suddenly casts certain individuals into a lower state than their previous ones. Textbook wording: rich lose money
11. no other words/phrases in this category
12. unregulated free choice, little sense of society’s discipline over personal desires/acts, can’t distinguish between the possible and the impossible, desires unlimited and not satisfied, unrestrained aspirations, ambitions can’t be fulfilled, unleashed passions without restraint, unattainable desires, desires no longer regulated, match their means to their needs
- 12a. Even the clearest definitions/discussions contain elements of all forms of suicide mixed together, but a few contain accurate passages about unlimited passions. One example is from Bryjak (1997:19): “...these desires are held in check by society. For example, during periods of economic stability, means and ends (desires) are in balance as people keep their wants in line with existing mechanisms for satisfying them. In times of economic prosperity, however, desires increase to the point that they are unlimited and, by definition, cannot be satisfied.”
- 12.b. Here is an example of a passage which contains a statement about desires but is mixed with elements of other forms of suicide. “...People become detached from society,⁽⁶⁾ they lack social support,⁽⁶⁾ and their desires are no longer regulated (12) by clear norms.”⁽⁴⁾ (Henslin 1995:13).

Regarding "clear norms," Durkheim said only that desires were not regulated. He did not say that they were regulated by norms, a subtle but important difference.

13. desires can't be realized