TESTING A DURKHEIMIAN THEORY OF SUICIDE
AND HOMICIDE IN SWITZERLAND

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Durkheim (1897), in his classic theory of suicide, proposed that the suicide rate of a society would be affected by the level of social integration (that is, the extent to which the people in the society are bound together in social networks) and the extent of social regulation (that is, the extent to which the desires, emotions and behaviors of the individuals are governed by the social norms and customs). Suicide would be more common when social integration is very high (leading to altruistic suicide) or very low (leading to egoistic suicide) and when social regulation is very high (leading to fatalistic suicide) or very low (leading to anomic suicide).

Johnson (1965) modified this theory by suggesting that fatalistic and altruistic suicides were rare in modern society and that it was difficult to measure empirically social regulation and integration separately. Johnson, therefore, proposed that the suicide rate of a society would be inversely related to the level of social integration/regulation.

There has been a great deal of theoretical analysis of Durkheim's thesis (for example, Taylor, 1982) and empirical testing. For example, Stack (1990) found that the divorce rate was a stronger predictor of the Danish suicide rate from 1951–1980 than was unemployment, confirming the association between domestic social integration and suicide.

Durkheim himself did not apply his theory to homicide, though later theorists have discussed suicide and homicide in the same framework (for example, Henry and Short, 1954). In most nations, the majority of homicides occur between people who know each other, often family members. Homicide rates rise on weekends and on national holidays, when families gather together and act out angry impulses, typically under the influence of alcohol (Wolfgang, 1958). Thus, it might be argued that homicide, unlike suicide, ought to be more common in societies where domestic social integration/regulation is stronger.

The present study sought to explore the associations between measures of domestic social integration (marriage, birth and divorce rates) and rates of personal violence (suicide and homicide) in Switzerland from 1950–1985 in

order to explore whether the associations for suicide conform to Durkheim's theory and whether homicide shows opposite associations.

Method

Suicide and homicide rates by gender for Switzerland for the period 1950–1985 were obtained from the World Health Organization (annual), supplemented by data obtained directly from the Bundesamt für Statistik (Bern). The multiple regressions were carried using Doan's (1990) statistical package, using the Cochrane-Orcutt technique to correct for the serial autocorrelation in the data set.

Results and Discussion

The results are shown in Table 1. It can be seen that, for both suicide and homicide, divorce rates were positively associated with suicide rates, both in

Table 1

Domestic integration and Swiss suicide and homicide rates, 1950–1985

	marriage	birth	divorce	constant	Durbin-Watson	R^2
Multiple Regression (b coefficients shown)						
total suicide rate	0.92	−0.49	5.36	15.41	2.06	0.90
male suicide rate	1.34	−0.42	8.97	16.63	1.98	0.84
female suicide rate	0.65	−0.36	3.61	8.57	2.15	0.84
total homicide rate	0.30*	−0.05	0.75	−1.24	1.94	0.50
male homicide rate	0.32	−0.11	0.43	−0.09	1.64	0.46
female homicide rate	0.25	0.01	1.02*	−2.07	1.74	0.35
Pearson correlations						
total suicide rate	−0.63*	−0.75*	0.77*			
male suicide rate	−0.52*	−0.65*	0.67*			
female suicide rate	−0.76*	−0.84*	0.86*			
total homicide rate	−0.37*	−0.51*	0.55*			
male homicide rate	−0.38*	−0.51*	0.52*			
female homicide rate	−0.30	−0.40*	0.48*			

* two-t < .05 or better

the multiple regressions and in the simple Pearson correlations. Thus, a higher divorce rate appears to be associated in Switzerland during this period with higher rates of personal violence.

While marriage rates were negatively associated with both suicide and homicide rates in the correlational analysis, in the multiple regressions these associations were positive. Birth rates, in general were associated with lower rates of both suicide and homicide, in both the correlational and the regression analysis.

The measures of domestic social integration were stronger predictors of suicide rates, accounting for between 84% and 90% of the variance, than for homicide rates, where they accounted for only 35% to 50% of the variance. This suggests the existence of alternative correlates of Swiss time-series homicide rates.

Regarding Durkheim's theory of suicide, while the correlational analysis produced associations which conformed to the theory for the total, male and female suicide rates, marriage and births being associated with lower suicide rates and divorces with higher suicide rates, marriages deviated from this pattern in the multiple regression analysis. It would be interesting, therefore, to explore these associations over a longer time period, perhaps from 1900 to the present day, and to explore the associations in later time periods.

The associations between measures of domestic social integration and homicide rates were similar to those for suicide rates, in opposition to the prediction that guided this study. Rather than domestic integration raising the probability of homicide in Swiss society, domestic social integration appears to be associated with a lower probability of homicide occurring. Although these results were not expected, they do suggest the possible relevance of Durkheim's ideas to homicide.

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