The Return of the Native: A Cultural and Social-Psychological Critique of Durkheim’s *Suicide* Based on the Guarani-Kaiowá of Southwestern Brazil*

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This article argues that Durkheim’s theory of suicide is deficient because of its monocausal reasoning, its conception of suicide as an action without subjects, and its characterization of preliterate societies as harmonious, self-contained, and morphologically static. It shows that these deficiencies can be overcome by including cultural and social-psychological considerations in the analysis of suicide—specifically by including culture as a causal force in its own right and drawing links between social circumstances, cultural beliefs and values, and individual dispositions. The authors make their case by analyzing ethnographic and quantitative data on the preliterate Guarani-Kaiowá of southwestern Brazil, one of the most suicide-prone groups in the world.

More than a 100 years after its publication, Durkheim’s *Suicide* continues to inspire debate over its theoretical, methodological, and empirical claims. Yet few authors have ventured a critique that shows the impact of each of those claims on one another. The importance of such a critique lies in the fact that it is not possible to resolve some of the contradictions in Durkheim’s work unless one examines both the underlying meta-theoretical assumptions and the data that account for its explanatory limitations.

An especially interesting case for illustrating the explanatory limitations of Durkheim’s theory of suicide is the Guarani-Kaiowá people of Brazil. The Guarani are an ethnic group characterized by a unique religious system and language (Guarani). They reside in Argentina, Paraguay, Uruguay, and Brazil (in the states of Rio Grande do Sul, Santa Catarina, Paraná, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, and Mato Grosso do Sul). In 2003, 34,000 Guarani lived in Brazil, subdivided into three groups:

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the Kaiowá (between 18,000 and 20,000 individuals), the Ñandeva (8,000–10,000), and the Mbya (5,000–6,000) (Almeida and Mura 2003). The Guarani have become known worldwide for their extremely high suicide rate, particularly among the Kaiowá in Mato Grosso do Sul and Paraguay (where they are known as pa-tavyterá) and, to a lesser degree, the Ñandeva. The phenomenon is not known among the Mbya. The Kaiowá of Mato Grosso do Sul are the most prone to suicide, with estimated suicide rates varying between 43 per 100,000 population (between the 1940s and the 1980s) and 305 per 100,000 population (in 1995) (Levcovitz 1998). In 1995, the suicide rate among all indigenous peoples in Mato Grosso do Sul was nearly 21 times higher than the Brazilian annual rate of 3.6 per 100,000 people, and, in 2003, it reached 128 per 100,000 people (Table 1). At that time, 59 percent of the indigenous people were Guarani-Kaiowá, 38 percent were Terena, and 3 percent were of other ethnicities.

The high rate of suicide among the Kaiowá is puzzling. Many explanations have been proposed, but none covers the variety of situations in which suicide has been observed. Some explanations are anthropological, others historical, still others psychiatric-psychological, but most rely on the Durkheimian approach, either by classifying the form of suicide as altruistic (Meihy 1991) or anomic (Brand 1995) or by reformulating the anomic explanation so that suicide is seen as a result of maintaining certain cultural patterns in a greatly changed environment (Levcovitz 1998; Table 1. Characteristics of Suicide Among the Indigenous Peoples in Mato Grosso do Sul, 1991–1995 and 2001–2003 (n = 230)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rate (per 100,000 population)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total rate, 1995</td>
<td>75</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total rate, 2003</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual rate in the most suicide-prone settlement (Pirakua)</td>
<td>324</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual rate in second most suicide-prone settlement (Porto Lindo)</td>
<td>208</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average annual rate in third most suicide-prone settlement (Panambizinho)</td>
<td>148</td>
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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Propinquity (in km)</th>
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<tr>
<td>Maximum distance between settlements in rectangle</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Pirakua and Porto Lindo</td>
<td>267</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Pirakua and Panambizinho</td>
<td>155</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Between Porto Lindo and Panambizinho</td>
<td>197</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average age of suicide</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of suicides under age 19</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percent of suicides under age 33</td>
<td>91</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male to female gender ratio under age 17</td>
<td>0.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male to female gender ratio over age 16</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male to female gender ratio, total</td>
<td>1.6</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Method</th>
<th></th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Percent by hanging</td>
<td>90</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Sources: Compiled from Ministério da Saúde (2003, 2002, 2001) and Instituto Socioambiental (1995). These data undoubtedly exclude suicides among Guarani who are either isolated (living far from government offices) and dispersed (who refuse to leave their ancestral lands and live on reservations). Nonetheless, we believe they are sufficiently comprehensive to establish the broad patterns that interest us.
Almeida 1998, 1995). In the latter view, the cause of the extremely high suicide rate among the Kaiowá is not a process of acculturation or social disintegration, a thesis that runs against the grain of most contemporary interpretations of suicide among aboriginal peoples. Instead, the decision to take one’s own life is explained with reference to Guarani “supernatural and cosmological themes” (Almeida 1998:21).

The partial character of the explanations listed above results from problems in Durkheim’s work. For one thing, Durkheim regarded “primitive” societies as harmonious and static. He did not consider that social norms, values, and beliefs are constantly reinterpreted by social actors without this leading to social disintegration. Moreover, although Durkheim always stressed that the moral rules governing society are grounded in the belief systems from which they emerge, it was not until The Elementary Forms of Religious Life that he started paying more attention to belief systems under the general category of collective representations. In this sense, Suicide largely overlooked cultural aspects of social life, with particularly damaging consequences for Durkheim’s own definition of suicide as a form of action. Here, we call for the integration of culture into any consideration of the causes of suicide: the return of the native, as it were.

A second problem concerns the mutually exclusive types Durkheim proposed. This mutual exclusivity is probably due to his having built his typology of suicide on a shaky methodological assumption—that a single cause corresponds to a single effect, so that “if suicide depends on more than one cause, it is because, in reality, there are many species of suicide” (Durkheim 1980:140). This monocausal reasoning renders his mixed types of suicide—egoistic-anomic, anomic-altruistic, and egoistic-altruistic—meaningless because they are at odds with Durkheim’s methodological prescription, noted above. A more complex typology would require attributing a more important role to values and beliefs and allowing for the possibility of multicausal analysis.

Our aim here is not merely to show why Durkheim’s theory fails to explain one case—the high suicide rate among the Kaiowá. Rather, we analyze the case of the Kaiowá as a means of pointing to certain limitations of Durkheim’s theory and ways of overcoming them. In particular, we emphasize the need to include culture as a causal force in its own right and to draw links between social circumstances, cultural beliefs and values, and individual dispositions to arrive at a more adequate, multicausal theory of suicide.

DURKHEIM’S THEORY OF SUICIDE: AN IMMANENT CRITIQUE

According to Durkheim (2000:4), Suicide should be viewed as the concrete application of the main methodological problems described in his previous work, The Rules of the Sociological Method. One of the main aims of the Rules is establishing a conception of the methods and forms of scientific explanation that could be applied to social facts. However, Durkheim himself argues that the study of suicide requires a “reversal” of the method described in the Rules, meaning that, instead of establishing the social character of suicide by a morphological classification, suicide can be classified (and thereby shown to vary according to specific social traits) only by an etiological classification, that is, by establishing the particular social causes that give rise to different types of suicide (Durkheim 2000:166–69). Only after establishing the etiological classification did Durkheim attempt to build a morphological classification based on the manifest characteristics of types of suicide (melancholy, apathy, irritation, anger, etc.).
This procedure raises two questions. First, it suggests the impossibility of defining social facts on the basis of their external and “immediately visible characteristics” (Durkheim 1980:64). According to Durkheim (2000:166–67), defining social facts pertaining to suicide on the basis of their external and immediately visible characteristics is not feasible because one would need a great many descriptive accounts of (a) the psychological states of the victims at the moment when they decided to kill themselves and (b) how they prepared for and carried out the suicidal act. Moreover, he claims that even when such descriptions are available (through letters or notes left by the suicide), they cannot be trusted because the suicide might not be aware of his or her true psychological state. Instead Durkheim suggests that social facts should first be identified on the basis of underlying causes established on theoretical grounds and not by examining the characteristics of suicide empirically (cf. Benton 1977).

The second question raised by Durkheim’s approach is that his morphological classification suggests that the underlying cause of a particular “suicidogenic current” also explains the psychological states of those who commit suicide (e.g., by showing that anomic can produce a particular type of apathy that induces suicide). As Steven Lukes (1973:219) notes, taking this insight seriously would require supplementing Durkheim’s theory of suicide with a social-psychological theory of suicide proneness. This point is important because such a theory would allow one to establish how a given society can make individuals more or less prone to suicide by helping one understand the meaning attached to that kind of death and, therefore, how it can represent a particular emotional response to social pressures. However, given Durkheim’s focus on the independent and objective character of social facts, he neglected the role of subjective or motivational factors among those who commit suicide, even though they constitute the basis of both his morphological classification and his definition of suicide as “any death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows must produce this result” (Durkheim 2000:14). Intention lies at the very heart of his definition. Accordingly, Jack Douglas’s critique of suicide statistics focuses on unearthing “the whole complex of shared and individual meanings of the actions involved in the suicidal process” (Douglas in Varty 2000:60). An obvious problem thus arises: how to gain access to those meanings.

It is precisely because individuals are subject to customs, rules, laws, and so on, of which they may be ignorant, that social facts are “external” to individual consciousness. As Ted Benton (1977:91) notes:

Sometimes it will be possible to rectify this state of ignorance by checking an authoritative text (for example, in the case of a codified system of laws), but this will not always be the case. A whole category of social facts, what Durkheim calls “currents of opinion,” for instance, are not in this way “crystallized” and can only be “detected” or “isolated” by a statistical analysis of the rates of suicides, births, marriages, etc., which they “impel.”

Such statistical analyses do not necessarily show that observable phenomena are causally related. On the contrary, Durkheim often employed a realist conception of cause based on generative mechanisms, such as when he established that mechanical solidarity is not an observable phenomenon that can be correlated with repressive law but “an underlying reality which generates repressive law, along with other perceptible phenomena as an effect” (Benton 1977:87; cf. Durkheim 1994:29). Durkheim does not
explicitly state that the identification and classification of social facts require both observation and theoretical interpretation. Nonetheless, that is just what he does in his etiological classification of suicide.

Durkheim employs two types of generative mechanisms to classify suicide. The first—and most evident from his writings—is a combination of material and moral density. The volume of society corresponds to the number of its social units. Density is defined as “a function of the number of individuals who are effectively related not merely commercially but morally, that is, who not only exchange services and engage in competition, but live a common life” (Durkheim 1980:127). The second—and less reflected upon—generative mechanism is composed of the collective representations that are a part of moral density. The combination of material and moral density represents particular modes of social being, and they determine the strength and complexity of collective forces or, more appropriately, the type of social solidarity that binds society together. These ideas, developed in The Division of Labour, lead to a differentiation of two basic social species: simple or “primitive” societies, characterized by mechanical solidarity, and modern or industrial societies, based on organic solidarity.

On the basis of these assumptions, Durkheim begins his etiological classification of suicide by examining suicide rates in different social institutions, such as religion, education, the family, and politics. He then proceeds to relate these rates to the form and content of the conscience collective that characterizes the different types of social institutions. He concludes that suicide rates vary according to the degree of social integration and social regulation that corresponds to each type.

In this phase of his work, the content of the conscience collective does not yet correspond to those aspects of collective representations that refer to particular sets of values and beliefs but merely to the existence of these values and beliefs. In other words, collective representations are treated here as epiphenomena because they are insufficiently crystallized.

It is not abstract ideas that govern men and one cannot explain the development of history by the action of metaphysical concepts. Among peoples, as among individuals, the function of representations is, above all, to express a reality that is not made by them; on the contrary, they arise out of this reality and, if they can later help to modify it, it is always in a restricted measure. Religious conceptions are products of the social milieu, they do not produce it and, if once formed they react on the causes that generated them, this relation cannot be very deep (Durkheim 2000:282–83).

The social facts that represent the causes of suicide arise out of the degree of integration and regulation that comprise the material and moral density of a given society. Very strong regulation means individuals have little leeway for expressing their passions because they are subject to oppressive discipline. Very strong integration means there is little space for individuality because collective life is too intense to allow for individual development. Too little regulation means individuals are not subject to collective norms. Therefore, there is no control over the limits of their needs and passions. Finally, weak integration means individuals are little connected to the groups they belong to and tend to disregard rules of behavior that are not based on their private interests. Each of these extreme conditions represents a “suicide-inducing” collective force that operates according to its own logic: fatalism, altruism, anomie, and egoism. It is only under conditions of moderate integration and moderate regulation that suicide rates are low, as in Figure 1.
Despite the analytical distinction between regulation and integration, Durkheim emphasizes that these dimensions are not independent. If individuals in a society do not interact enough, they cannot share and strengthen their rules, beliefs, and feelings. In his words, “the density of a group cannot diminish without its vitality also diminishing” (Durkheim 2000:248). In this sense, mixed types seem logically impossible because they require a high degree of regulation and a low degree of integration or a low degree of regulation and a high degree of integration. It is thus no surprise that Durkheim’s etiological classification does not lead to the establishment of hybrid types. His morphological classification of suicide does.

According to the latter, each type of suicide is characterized by a particular emotional state that follows from the social force at stake (anomie, egoism, or altruism). (Durkheim does not develop the idea of fatalistic suicide, relegating it to a footnote. On fatalism, see Acevedo 2005; Pearce 2001:118–33; Lockwood 1992:38–66; Bearman 1991.) Durkheim implicitly assumes that a high degree of egoism produces apathy, and the apathetic state of the individuals who commit suicide is manifest in an “indolent melancholy with self-complacency, the sceptic’s disillusioned sangfroid.” Likewise, too much altruism produces an “energy of passion or will” that is manifest in “calm feelings of duty,” “mystic enthusiasm,” and “peaceful courage,” while strong anomie generates “irritation and disgust,” manifest through “violent recrimination against life in general” or “violent recrimination against one particular person (homicide-suicide)” (Durkheim 2000:377).

Contrary to the etiological classification, the morphological classification does not give an explicit account of the social mechanisms involved in the psychological states that can be observed in each type of suicide. But it is particularly in the establishment of his hybrid types that Durkheim gives up altogether any link between collective forces and psychological states. In fact, his hybrid types are not compatible with the theoretical presuppositions summarized in Figure 1. Even though he states elsewhere that every society combines different degrees of anomie, altruism, and egoism, in order for the types derived from this combination to make sense, they would have to take into account which tendencies reinforce or cancel one another. Said differently, certain types such as anomic-fatalistic and egoistic-altruistic can make sense only if his etiological classification allows for a multicausal analysis that takes into account how, for example, weak regulation at one level of analysis could lead to an increase of regulation at another, thus predisposing individuals to act fatalistically (Bearman 1991). Durkheim’s monicausal model, on the other hand, merely points
to countervailing tendencies that cancel out one another, making it difficult to understand how he came up with his “egoistic-altruistic” type. The only feasible answer is that he cut the causal link between social forces and psychological states. When Durkheim built his hybrid types solely on the basis of external and observable characteristics, he unwittingly gave up the attempt to explain them, given that they presumably rest on individual dispositions. What he seems to have missed is that, even though dispositional attitudes belong to the individual level of analysis, they do not happen in a social void and can, at least in part, be inferred from the values and beliefs that constitute the cultural milieu of agents. Moreover, beliefs and values are not homogeneous. They refer to different social milieux and can be contradictory, ultimately leading individual agents to choose among various normative evaluations.

It is with the aid of cultural elements that one can reconstruct the causal links between certain collective forces and an action. In other words, it is necessary to treat collective representations not as epiphenomena but as real causal forces that influence action to the extent that they may become part of individual dispositions, motivations or reasons. Doing so would allow us to construct a social-psychological theory of suicide proneness by establishing a link between collective forces and individual agency. It is important to note that the establishment of such causal links requires an interpretative moment in the analysis. According to the view we defend here, this interpretative moment does not hinder causal explanation but enhances it.

Before we show how cultural elements can be integrated into Durkheim’s structural analysis, let us establish the explanatory limits of Durkheim’s typology in relation to our empirical case.

SUICIDE AMONG THE KAIOWÁ: A TRANSCENDENT CRITIQUE

One of the main problems in applying Durkheim’s theory to indigenous societies is that such societies do not fit his definition of mechanical solidarity. They are often internally more complex than Durkheim assumed. Moreover, their relations with other populations make it difficult to delimit their societal boundaries precisely and identify the mechanisms that allow their members to maintain a sense of tribal identity despite changes that ensue from contact.

Striking features of Guarani-Kaiowa society include the absence of central political organization and high territorial mobility—features that prompt Viveiros de Castro to characterize the society as “minimalist” or “anti-institutional.” In addition, he remarks on the extraordinary domination of religion over all other spheres of social life—a “morpho-sociological minimalism associated with an hypertrophy of the cosmological order” (Viveiros de Castro in Levcovitz 1998:129).

These features contrast with societies in which there exists what Durkheim calls strong social regulation. An example of a society with strong social regulation is that of the Australian aborigines, which Durkheim examined in *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*. Societies exhibiting strong social regulation are characterized by segmentation and ritualization, and their cosmologies reflect their social structure. The mechanism that guarantees the maintenance of social life in such societies is reciprocity, the exchange of goods and the sharing of values, very much in accordance with Durkheim’s idea that material density is an expression of moral density. Thus, the reproduction of social organization is a function of social morphology.

On the other hand, as Viveiros de Castro suggests, the Guarani-Kaiowa’s minimalist society is characterized by a low degree of institutional specialization and a high level of “plasticity” or resilience and adaptability. Institutionally, it lacks a “preferred”
form. It is always on the verge of institutional disintegration. Moreover, there is no consonance between the cosmos and social life or between religious and political aspects of society. This lack of consonance means that human beings are viewed as in a constant state of becoming never fully realized in social life. A sense of ethnic and personal identity is located in the beliefs and values that are found almost exclusively in spoken language (particularly song and prayer). Identity is not crystallized in norms of conduct (Levcovitz 1998:145).

Many religions pursue heaven on earth by a variety of means. The Guarani-Kaiowá do so by engaging in an eternal search for “The Land Without Evil,” a place where people are immortal, the corn grows without cultivation, arrows find animals on their own, and earthly tribulations are absent. We describe their search below. For the moment, we wish only to emphasize that, in the case of the Guarani-Kaiowá, the search for the Land Without Evil is a cultural imperative with a high degree of autonomy from social structure. It is the lack of institutional crystallization of this cultural element—its weak normative demands—that allows us to speak of minimalist societies in terms of high integration and low regulation or high cultural density and low social density. Having established this analytical distinction as a theoretical possibility, let us examine how the cultural and social spheres are related in our empirical case.

Until the early 20th century, the search for the Land Without Evil took place in migratory waves. For the Guarani, the Land Without Evil was typically located in the east, and groups of Guarani could often be seen moving toward the Brazilian coast (Nimuendajú 1987:107).

The motivation underlying migration was the desire to leave the “Land of Evil.” Prima facie, one might assume that this desire was motivated by heightened competition with other tribes for scarce resources, the disruption of traditional practices because of contact with settlers of European origin, and other sources of deprivation. But this was not always the case (see below). What is more, the population movements typically heightened Guarani deprivation insofar as disease, hunger, and enemies decimated the migrants.

A clue to the Guarani’s real motivation is that migrations were accompanied by acts of asceticism. By singing, dancing to the point of exhaustion, and abstaining from the consumption of meat, the Guarani believed they could free themselves from the perishable part of the person and, through “lightness,” reach the Land Without Evil. Moreover, they abandoned social norms such as matrimonial rules. Economic activity was kept to a minimum. In the 19th century, several Guarani groups from Mato Grosso do Sul moved from the border with Paraguay, where they enjoyed political and economic autonomy and were protected by the forest. Far from looking for better material conditions, the Guarani were looking for an ascetic escape from the world via the negation of culture and society. Hélène Clastres (in Levcovitz 1998:161) describes it as follows:

The search for the Land without Evil is [. . .] an active refusal of society. It is an authentic collective asceticism that, because it is collective, can only doom the Indians to perdition: if the “migrations” are bound to fail, it is precisely because the project that animates them—the deliberate dissolution of society—is suicidal. The idea of a Land without Evil is not reducible to the idea of a strictly spatial elsewhere. It is a matter of positing an Other, a man absolutely free from coercion: God-Man.

It is in this sense that Levcovitz describes minimalist societies in terms of a dissonance between the cosmos and social life: the self-destruction of society is a way out of crisis
that is manifest through countervailing and irreconcilable religious and political tendencies. This goes against Durkheim’s conception of “primitive” societies as harmonious and simple, based on a mechanical solidarity that reflects the supreme value attached to society and the interests of society as a whole. In fact, it is possible to argue that minimalist societies sustain a conception of the person in highly individualistic terms, albeit differently from modern individualism. The individualism of the Guarani is akin to what Louis Dumont (1985) observed in Indian societies, where the exegete renounces social life and turns inward to rid himself or herself of the burdens of everyday life. It is the individual “out of the world” in opposition to the modern individual “in the world.” As we will see, this conception yields insight into the suicide methods adopted by the Kaiowá and the Kaiowá response to the anomic conditions generated by contact with Brazilian society at large.

The notion of the individual among the Guarani can be better understood by considering their dual conception of personhood. The Guarani believe that human beings have two souls: the ayvucué (ayvu for the Kaiowá), the “breath sprung from the mouth” or the “word-soul,” and the acyigua, the “animal-soul.” The word-soul is supposedly what makes people human, able to stand up straight and to speak. It is located in the chest, neck, or the back of the head (the neck or the throat for the Kaiowá). Children acquire their word-soul when they are able to stand up and walk. It is given by the gods and is incorruptible. Whereas the word-soul is held to be responsible for people’s good and tender dispositions, the animal-soul is held to be responsible for their bad and violent tendencies, its precise character depending on the animal that inspires it. After death, the two souls are thought to go to different destinations. The word-soul of a small child can go straight to the Land Without Evil. The word-soul of an adult wanders around until it can be captured by a ritual dance and delivered to the Thunder God. Therefore, death is not a road to the Land Without Evil for adults. In fact, the Guarani believe that the wandering souls of adults can be reincarnated if they have a very strong desire to continue living or if relatives express deep sadness over their death. As far as the animal-soul is concerned, it does not exist in small children because it is formed only when people begin to interact socially through the use of language. When an adult dies, the animal-soul returns to the forest, taking the form of its corresponding animal and becoming an anguéra, a feared creature. The anguéra releases itself as the body decomposes and wanders in the places the dead person used to frequent, haunting the living. It has to be chased away like a dangerous animal. If the anguéra cannot be chased away, the group moves (Nimuendajú 1987).

We thus see that Guarani culture and society create a fundamental tension in the Guarani individual that can be resolved only by reaching the Land Without Evil, which is nothing less than the end of culture and of its normative demands. The dual conception of personhood also suggests that high value is placed on individual dignity and independence and on transcendence. According to Margaret Archer (2000), a sense of personal identity is born out of the elements of culture one values, which establish what one is concerned about in the world. For Archer, emotionality is our reflexive response to such concerns. In the case of Tupi-Guarani populations, what Lévi-Strauss has called their fundamental “ouverture a l’autre” derives from their eternal “becoming an other,” a dynamic relationship toward alterity that made Christianization and enslavement virtually impossible. For even though they were apparently eager to give up their ancient beliefs and embrace a new faith, they would soon and without warning return to “barbarism.” Their inconstancy, because of the lack of centralized power, made submission impossible, leading a Jesuit priest to
compare them to myrtle statues that, contrary to marble ones, required the constant tending of a gardener (Levcovitz 1998:196). Together with their search for transcendence, this would explain the usual characterization of the Guarani as tempestuous, nonsubmissive, stubborn, voluntaristic, and unhappy about their conditions as incarnate beings, expressing a kind of “world weariness” (Lebensmüdigkeit) (Foti 2004; Viveiros de Castro 1987:xxiii). Such cultural elements allow us to reconstruct intentions in terms of dispositional statements and thus overcome two of Durkheim’s flaws: his treatment of culture as an epiphenomenon and the role of individual agency in explanation.

Table 2 summarizes our discussion of the characteristics of minimalist societies such as that of the Kaiowá. In such societies, less crystallized elements of collective life (“currents of opinion,” which appear under the general category of conscience collective) are combined with elements of the morphological structure, but there is no strict correspondence between them. This can be noted by certain paradoxes, such as a morphological structure based on resemblances, on the one hand, and the supreme value attached to individual dignity, on the other; by a high moral density and a nonabsolute expression of collective authority; and so on. In addition, the content of social representations allows us to establish a link between collective cultural forces and individual dispositions, such as implied in the dual conception of personhood.

Our approach allows us to explain several otherwise perplexing features of suicide among the Kaiowá, including the prevalence of death by hanging, the abnormally high rate of suicide among young people, and the exceptional propensity of young women to commit suicide. Let us consider each of these features of Kaiowá suicide in turn.

Durkheim argued that the choice of suicide method cannot be explained sociologically. We disagree. Ninety percent of the suicides by Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul are committed by hanging, a frequency far too high to be due to chance (Table 1). Instead, we argue that the choice of suicide method among the Guarani-Kaiowá is culturally determined.

The Kaiowá lack an equivalent of the English term “suicide.” Instead, they speak of jejuvy, a “squeeze in the throat” or strangulation. Jejuvy is not hanging, as we generally understand it. Typically, the Kaiowá suicide ties one end of a rope around his or her neck and the other to a low tree or bush. The suicide walks until the rope is taut, and then kneels or falls forward, eventually causing strangulation. In the suicide by hanging with which Westerners are familiar, a person jumps and then has no recourse; death comes quickly as the full weight of the body tightens the noose. In the suicide by hanging as practiced by the Kaiowá, the person is not suspended in the air but remains touching the ground. The full weight of the body does not tighten the noose; hence, dying may be more protracted, and the person can stop easily at any time before losing consciousness, unless the neck or the throat is fractured. Significantly, the state of mind that typically accompanies jejuvy is known as nhemyrô, which the Kaiowá find difficult to translate into Portuguese. It is characterized by a sudden silence and a mixture of ferocity, anger, despair, and sadness (Mura in Radiobra’s 2004) that makes the individual orekojohu (“as if enchanted”), with a “diffuse aspiration toward transcendence” (Foti 2004:8) that is normally expressed through dancing and singing.

Contrary to Durkheim’s claim that there is no relation between type and method of suicide, we see a clear relationship here. The propensity to commit suicide by hanging is determined by Guarani cosmology. According to the realist view defended here (see above, pp. 45–46), jejuvy should be regarded as the empirical manifestation of an
Table 2. Characteristics of Minimalist Societies

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Morphological or Structural Basis</th>
<th>Type of Norm According to Law</th>
<th>Formal Features of Conscience Collective or Collective Representation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Based on resemblances</td>
<td>• Rules with repressive sanctions</td>
<td>• High volume</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong segmentation</td>
<td>• Prevalence of penal law</td>
<td>• High intensity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Strong (external) interdependence</td>
<td></td>
<td>• High determinateness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relatively low volume of population</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Collective authority not absolute</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Relatively low material density but relatively high moral density</td>
<td></td>
<td>• Highly religious</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Transcendental</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Active denial of society via collective asceticism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Attaching supreme value to individual dignity and independence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Concrete and specific</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
underlying cause: the psychological state described by them as *nhemyrō*, which, in turn, is an emotional response to the impossibility of expressing their concerns about individual dignity, transcendence, and so on via their normal singing and dancing rituals. *Jejuyv* should be seen as an expressive act, a powerful denial of the word-soul, the *avyu*, which, according to the Kaiowá, is located in the throat. Recall that verticality and speech are the defining traits of humanity for the Kaiowá. They are attributes of the *avyu*. And it is precisely the *avyu* that they are killing when they commit *jejuyv* (Foti 2004:8). At the same time, they are acting according to the tempestuous, nonsubmissive, stubborn, and voluntaristic dispositions that characterize them as Guarani.

We do not dispute that anomie is a social force that helps to cause Kaiowá suicide. However, we contend that it is an insufficient condition for the existence of a high suicide rate that takes the particular form of *jejuyv*. Our contention is supported by the fact that *similarly* high suicide rates are evident in places with *different* ecological and geographical conditions and stressors. Thus, our suicide data for 1991–1995 and 2001–2003 allow us to calculate suicide rates for 22 indigenous settlements, 21 of which lie within the rectangle shown in Figure 2. In Figure 2, we also identify the three indigenous settlements with the highest suicide rates: Pirakua, Porto Lindo, and Panambizinho. Within the rectangle, these three settlements are about as far from one another as possible, suggesting that similarity of ecological and geographical conditions and stressors is irrelevant in determining the suicide rate (Table 1).

Contrariwise, groups with *different* suicide rates find themselves subject to the *same* anomic forces of apparently similar intensity. Land disputes, territorial confinement, and contact with other ethnic groups, farmers, Christian missionaries, and government officials disrupt the traditional Guarani way of life everywhere, resulting in a high rate of alcohol consumption and other social problems. As Almeida (1998:19–20) notes:

> There are land problems among the Guarani Mbyá in Paraguay, intense contact between the Ñandeva and the Mbyá in other regions, government interventions among Guarani communities outside Mato Grosso do Sul. In spite of that, there are no suicides among those groups.

We conclude that a monocausal explanation of the Kaiowá suicide rate based on anomie is problematic. Social causes should be interpreted as tendencies that are released only under certain conditions (Harré 1986:284). In the case of the Kaiowá, anomie is at work, but the “releasing” conditions are the individual dispositions that result from cultural factors.

A second unusual feature of Kaiowá suicide is its age distribution. Durkheim found that, in general, the suicide rate in 19th-century Europe rose steadily with age. Kaiowá suicide exhibits the opposite tendency. Referring back to Table 1, we see that the average age of suicide victims among the Guarani of Mato Grosso do Sul is 21.4 years. (Life expectancy for all indigenous peoples in Mato Grosso do Sul in the mid-1990s was 37.7 years; “Expectativa de Vida” 2005.) Some 53 percent of suicides are under the age of 19 and fully 91 percent are under the age of 33. How can we explain this pattern?

Considering *jejuyv*, a cultural expression allows us to treat suicide as a form of action and consequently as evidence that suicides of a particular type (or combination of types, as is the case here) actually reflect subjective states, although not necessarily those identified by Durkheim in his controversial morphological analysis. *Nhemyrō*—the mixture of sudden silence, ferocity, anger, despair, and sadness that precedes
suicide—is the result of a cultural trait that is manifest under particular conditions of loss of meaning. Under these conditions, which are now endemic given the state of anomie in which the Kaiowa find themselves, meaning can be found only with reference to the ideal society, the Land Without Evil. Social life is now the Land of Evil—of disease, witchcraft, and disenchantment—where one can no longer come and go at will, where enemies live side by side.

These cultural, social-psychological, and social causes explain why young people are overrepresented among Kaiowa suicide victims. The end of childhood, which coincides with the establishment of the person in the Kaiowa belief system, reveals all the difficulties of a Kaiowa mode of being that values dominance instead of submission, stubbornness instead of compliance, and nonconformity instead of conformity (Foti 2004). These qualities are exceedingly difficult to attain under the conditions of ethnic and land conflict in which the Kaiowa find themselves. Moreover, under these conditions, their sense of social and personal identity tends

Figure 2. Indigenous settlements in Mato Grosso do Sul. Source: Adapted from Instituto Socioambiental (2000).
Suicide represents a solution to the identity crisis to the extent that the victim is also the killer, the person who bears qualities that are strongly valued. In addition, traditional matrimonial rules are being contested by young people now that a dating system, ideals of romantic love, and their corresponding emotional states have been introduced through the mass media and by contact with Brazilian society. Many suicides and suicide attempts among young people are related to their refusal to marry someone chosen by their fathers or to romantic disillusionment. The introduction of emotional individualism associated with feelings of conquest, possession, loss, and suffering may represent a powerful triggering mechanism for a cultural “death wish” that combines strong individual will and “world weariness” (Foti 2004).

Finally, we note the unusually high proportion of female suicide victims among the Kaiowá. Durkheim found four male suicides for every female suicide in 19th-century Europe. With some exceptions, this ratio has remained fairly constant over time and place. As Table 1 summarizes, if we consider Kaiowá suicide victims over the age of 16, the male to female gender ratio is 2.7, close to what Durkheim found for Europe. However, the ratio is just 0.9 for suicide victims under the age of 17. (For all age cohorts combined, the ratio is 1.6.)

The ethnographic literature suggests that anomie hits young Kaiowá women with particular force. That is because contact with nonindigenous people disrupts traditional family structures, increases the work burden of young women, and exposes them to new forms of sexual exploitation. Meanwhile, parents and husbands react by seeking to enforce traditional gender roles with renewed vigor. The gender divide in Guarani societies, reinforced by contact, suspends Kaiowá women between two moral universes.

Men often leave the reservation to work on farms for months on end, leaving the women behind. On the reservation, women are expected to fulfil their traditional gender roles, caring for children and doing domestic labor, while simultaneously adopting new roles, such as buying and selling produce and working off the reservation as housemaids. According to Margaret Archer (2000:65), role incumbency per se does not hold any emotional implications. Instead, our definitions of what constitutes self-esteem determine which normative evaluations are sufficiently important for us to care about as we perform a given role. In that sense, because young Kaiowá women are well aware of new opportunities—schooling, participation in the paid labor force, and so on—the performance of traditional roles generates frustration, boredom, and depression. Consequently, they often rebel against the traditional requirement of marriage at a young age. As one young Kaiowá woman put it:

Do you know why I am against marriage between young people? . . . It is not because I consider it an old people’s thing . . . An old habit is not always bad . . . However, when young girls marry, soon the children come, and goodbye school, goodbye good jobs . . . They end up clinging to their husbands and depending on their salaries, which amount to nothing, it is very little. The girls who stay in the village end up having big families . . . There is no way out. (in Meihy 1991:120)

Making matters worse is the scarcity of women in the commercial farmhouses where men spend a good part of the year, which alters male sexual behavior. On the farms, men started engaging in a form of group rape they refer to as a feira (fair) with the few women who were available. Later, they introduced this new pattern of sexual behavior into the village. In these feiras, young men force girls to run naked through the fields, where they rape them in order of their arrival. The impact of the feiras on young
women, their parents, and husbands is enormous. Parents and husbands endeavor to increase their surveillance of, and control over, the young women. The young women often get into fights with family members, as they rebel against what they regard as excessive control (Meihy 1991:291).

We do not deny that anomic conditions pervade Kaiowá communities. However, such anomic conditions lead Kaiowá women to experience an unprecedented level of social regulation within the family. They have their “futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline” (Durkheim 2000:353). They feel all the more frustrated, angry, and rebellious because the introduction of new values and opportunities reinforces their culturally prescribed disposition toward individualism. Although suicide among young Kaiowá women bears a resemblance to the fatalistic suicide common among women in rural China (cf. Davis and Neal 2000), their tendency toward individualism, combined with strong anomie, makes theirs a unique case: a combination of anomie outside the domestic sphere and fatalism within it. These social facts push a disproportionately large number of young Kaiowá women to experience nhemyrô and engage in its accompanying expressive act, jejuy.

CONCLUSION

We have argued that Durkheim’s theory of suicide is deficient because of its monocausal reasoning, its conception of suicide as an action without subjects, and its characterization of preliterate societies as harmonious, self-contained, and morphologically static. We showed that by including cultural and social-psychological considerations in the analysis of Kaiowá suicide—by welcoming the return of the native—we can overcome these deficiencies. Some of the problems with Durkheim’s theory can be resolved by developing insights first hinted at by Durkheim himself, albeit in contradictory ways: his frequent use of a realist conception of causation based on underlying nonempirical mechanisms; the analytical distinction between social regulation and social integration that permits the conceptualization of hybrid suicide types with multiple causes; and the view that the moral rules governing society are based in the belief systems (“currents of opinion”) from which they emerge, with the consequence that they can act as causes of behavior in their own right.

The inclusion of belief systems as causal forces allowed us to sketch a social-psychological model of suicide proneness, thus providing the missing link between individual and society in Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Based on Margaret Archer’s model of the human agent, our approach also complements the cultural analyses of anthropologists who have sought to explain the high suicide rate of the Kaiowá of Mato Grosso do Sul. We agree with the anthropologists that culture must be included as a fundamental interpretative element in the analysis of suicide. In fact, we believe culture shapes suicide patterns in postindustrial as much as preliterate societies. How else could one explain, for example, the fact that the suicide patterns of immigrants in postindustrial Canada do not reflect suicide patterns in their host society so much as suicide patterns associated with the culture of their country of origin (Statistics Canada 2004)? However, our approach goes beyond the anthropological analysis of culture by providing a theoretical basis for explaining causally the emotional responses of suicidal individuals to social situations based on their internal dispositions. As such, it suggests a promising direction for developing a more fully-rounded sociological analysis of suicide.
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