

Industrialization and Worker Suicide: A Sociological Analysis of Labor Conditions, Social Integration, and Institutional Contexts

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Abstract. This study takes the issue of worker suicide in the context of industrialization as its focus, noting that while industrial society improved living standards, it also intensified labor pressure, transformed social structures, and deepened alienation, thereby heightening suicide risks. The purpose of this paper is to examine how industrialization influences worker suicide through labor conditions and social structure, and to analyze why suicide rates differ across countries and institutional environments. The research adopts a literature review and cross-national comparative case analysis, drawing on Durkheim's theory of anomie and Marx's critique of alienated labor, and integrating case studies from Europe, Japan, China, and Northern Europe to construct a cross-national and historical sociological framework. Findings reveal that deteriorating working conditions, fractured social relations, economic instability, and insufficient social protection place workers in high-risk situations, while experiences from Nordic welfare states show that robust security systems and trade union support can mitigate negative effects. Thus, industrialization does not inevitably increase worker suicide, as outcomes largely depend on institutional arrangements and the degree of social integration. The study's limitation lies in its reliance on literature and case analysis without large-scale quantitative data, yet its cross-national and historical framework provides a new perspective for future research and offers scholarly reference for improving workers' living conditions and designing social policies.

Keywords: industrialization, worker suicide, labor conditions, social structure, institutional environment

1. Introduction

In the 1860s, the working class rapidly developed into an emerging class with the promotion of the industrialized society in Britain. Unlike traditional agricultural societies, the industrialized society, although greatly improving the living standards, has also brought about increased labor pressure and changes in social structure. As a result, the risk of suicide has increasingly drawn attention from society. This article focuses on working population and discusses the suicide mechanism of workers under the interplay of industrialization and urbanization. From a sociological perspective, suicide is not merely a manifestation of an individual's psychological disorder, but rather a result of the

imbalance in social structure [1]. However, from a sociological perspective alone, it is not sufficient to explain the predicament faced by workers in the modern industrial system. Marx further pointed out that under the capitalist mode of production, workers experience a profound 'alienation of labor': not only do they separate from the fruits of their labor, lose autonomy during the labor process, but also become estranged from their own essence and their relationships with others [2]. This multiple alienation makes it difficult for the worker to realize a sense of value and belongingness in the highly standardized and highly managed universe of the factory workplace, and thus spawns long-term spiritual emptiness and meaninglessness, and ultimately expands the risk of suicide. Studies have comprehensively revealed the contribution of the lack of social integration, economic fluctuations, and pressure of labor on the risk of suicide [1-3]. These studies, however, mainly depend on the entire population or on some occupation-based populations (for instance, medical staff, construction practitioners, social service practitioners), and systematic studies on the entire working class remain relatively few [3]. Besides, cross-system comparisons on suicide rates of the workers of different cross-national systems and studies that illustrate how the workers face the risk of suicide on the basis of key nodes such as employment, emigration and unemployment life-course perspective remain insufficient [4]. Thus, cross-system and dynamic analysis paying attention to the working class not only allows the extension of the research domain of suicide sociology but also has great significance on the basis of understanding the social vulnerability of the process of industrialization.

Against this backdrop, this paper aims to explore how the industrialization process influences worker suicide through labor conditions and social structure, and further analyzes the reasons for the differences in worker suicide rates across different countries and institutional environments. The study primarily employs a literature review and comparative case analysis. Through an in-depth review of Durkheim and Marx's theories, combined with representative case studies of worker suicide in Europe, Japan, China, and Northern Europe, this paper constructs a sociological framework for this cross-national and cross-historical explanation.

2. Theoretical framework

Durkheim pointed out in "The Study of Suicide" that suicide is not just a revelation of the psychological crisis of an individual, but also one of the consequences of the imbalance of the social structure [1]. He categorized suicide into three forms: the self-interested type, the altruistic type, and the disordered type. Of these three forms, the first two forms were the most fitting to be used to explain the problem of worker suicide during the process of industrialization. The suicide of the self-interested type arises due to the absence of social integration. When a person moves away from traditionally close family, religious or community ties, the sense of belonging weakens and the meaning of life is broken down. The disordered type of suicide arises due to the sudden change of the social norm base. It may be the sense of the uproar caused by economic crises or institutional restructuring that makes people perceive that life has no predictability and no order. During the process of industrialization, the masses of migrant laborers moved en masse from the countryside to the cities, violating the originally close-knit social structure of the village community. Besides, the sudden social change often comes with the lack of social norms. Thus, Durkheim's theory can be used as a system analysis tool to explain such suicide phenomena. Different from Durkheim's structuralist approach, Marx started from the labor process and revealed the deep dilemma of workers under capitalism. In the Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts of 1844, he proposed the concept of "labor alienation", pointing out that workers are not only separated from the fruits of their labor and lose their autonomy in the labor process, but also gradually alienated from their own

essence and relationships with others [2]. This alienation makes it difficult for workers to realize their sense of value and subjectivity in labor. Individuals who are under mechanical repetition and external discipline for a long time are more likely to fall into spiritual emptiness and depression. Labor alienation and social deviance overlap with each other, forming an important sociological explanatory framework for the risk of worker suicide in the modern industrial system.

3. Industrialization mechanism and suicide

Durkheim's explanation and Marx's planned ideas are not theoretical abstractions, but reveal themselves in the form of concrete mechanisms of everyday working and social life of workers. Above all, worsening working conditions directly act on the psychological loading of workers. Long hours of work, low salaries, and high-pressure working conditions place workers under constant stress and strain. Occupational disease and physical traumas further increase feelings of powerlessness. In Japan, research has shown how working hours beyond limits and performance culture have resulted in cases of 'karoshi' (death from overwork). In China, the high-pressure assembly-line patterns of companies like Foxconn have a direct link to worker suicides [5,6].

Secondly, the erosion of social relationships weakens support networks of workers. The vast majority of migrants settling in cities have the prospect of losing traditional relationships and kinship support networks. Since there are no operational substitute structures, these migrants become more vulnerable to isolation and less purposefulness, and the prospect of suicide increases [7].

Thirdly, economic insecurity is an important predictor that itself can trigger suicide. Layoffs and unemployment strip workers of income and annihilate aspirations for the future and identification with society. At the macro level, suicide rates have been shown to rise overall in periods of economic depression and rising joblessness among countries with fragile social safety nets [8]. At last, weak social protection keeps suicide danger for workers at a high level. Inaccessibility to healthcare, psychiatric attention, and labour unions is the reason for vulnerability. Meanwhile, some of the Nordic countries give an example of how well-functioning unions and inclusive welfare packages effectively reduce suicide among workers [9]. Overall, working conditions, social linkages, economic security, and access to social protections together make up the key mechanisms of suicide risk in the industrialization setting. They cross-interact and reinforce one another and thus participate in the precarious situation of the worker in industrial societies.

4. Comparative contexts of worker suicide

It is impossible to attribute the effects of industrialization on worker suicide to a single factor. Rather, a variety of factors—from social support and institutional design to working conditions and economic uncertainty—combine to produce it. However, not all nations or eras of history experience these factors in the same manner. Workers' responses to the demands of industrial transformation are influenced by various political structures, cultural norms, and developmental phases. This section examines these differences by contrasting four different cases: China following market reforms, post-war Japan during its period of rapid growth, industrial-era Europe in the 19th century, and the contemporary welfare states of Northern Europe.

4.1. 19th-century Europe

Social unrest was common in early industrial Europe. Many rural residents relocated to urban areas, where they encountered low pay, little protection, and exhausting factory work. Long-standing rural ties—family, village, and community—were severed by the change. Such a loss of social integration frequently leaves people without a sense of structure or belonging, leaving them open to despair, according to Durkheim's theory of anomie [1]. This is supported by historical data, which shows that urban industrial workers committed suicide at substantially higher rates than artisans or peasants [10]. Rapid economic change and a lack of social support combined to leave many workers psychologically isolated in the absence of established institutions or safety nets.

4.2. Japan's period of high industry

The situation in Japan is different. The post-war decades saw a boom in the economy, but workers still faced tremendous pressure. Chronic stress was brought on by strict corporate culture, long work hours, and performance-based evaluation. This eventually led to the well-known *karoshi* phenomenon, which is death from overwork [6]. Existing studies suggest that the rise in worker suicides cannot be fully explained by the extension of working hours alone. Beyond the quantitative burden of labor, deeply ingrained cultural expectations played a crucial role. In many industrial societies, workers were socialized to equate personal worth with unwavering loyalty to their employers and to accept long hours and physical exhaustion as necessary sacrifices for collective prosperity. During periods of economic downturn or industrial restructuring, however, these expectations became sources of acute psychological strain. As job security declined and traditional social bonds weakened, many workers experienced a profound sense of isolation and powerlessness. This clash between enduring cultural ideals of self-sacrifice and the harsh realities of precarious employment fostered identity crises and feelings of meaninglessness. Consequently, the combination of relentless workplace pressures, economic insecurity, and diminished social support contributed to a growing incidence of suicides rooted not only in individual psychological distress but also in structural contradictions of industrial society.

4.3. China's migrant workforce

Since the 1980s, China has witnessed the large-scale migration of millions of rural workers into rapidly expanding cities and industrial zones. This mass movement was driven by the promise of employment opportunities in factories, yet it also created a unique form of dual exclusion. On one hand, these workers were marginalized within the cities because they did not possess an urban household registration (*hukou*), which limited their access to public services such as housing, healthcare, and education. On the other hand, by leaving their villages, they became disconnected from the traditional rural support networks—such as family-based care systems and communal ties—that had previously provided social and emotional stability [5]. The Foxconn suicide cases in 2010 came to symbolize the severity of this structural dislocation. Scholars argue that the phenomenon cannot be reduced merely to individual psychological struggles; rather, it reflects systemic issues within the labor regime. The highly regimented factory environment, characterized by military-style discipline, strict surveillance, and long working hours, reinforced a sense of powerlessness. Workers were often assigned to monotonous and repetitive tasks, which eroded their sense of purpose and personal agency. Moreover, their freedom of movement and expression was

heavily constrained by both corporate regulations and broader institutional barriers tied to their hukou status.

In this context, suicide emerged not only as an expression of mental health distress but also as a tragic symptom of alienation, detachment, and neglect within the broader socio-economic system. It revealed how limited autonomy, combined with the erosion of both rural and urban support structures, left many migrant workers in a precarious position—physically present in the modern industrial economy, yet socially and institutionally excluded from its benefits [5].

4.4. Nordic welfare states

The Nordic countries present a striking contrast. Despite being heavily industrialized, they report some of the lowest worker suicide rates. A key reason is their strong welfare infrastructure—universal healthcare, labor protections, and mental health support all play a role [9]. Here, workers are more insulated from economic shocks. Even during recessions, social systems help maintain a sense of safety and dignity. These policies do not eliminate stress, but they prevent it from becoming unbearable. The Nordic case shows how thoughtful institutional design can counteract many of the risks that industrial change brings.

Industrialization alone does not determine suicide rates among workers. The real question lies in how different societies manage its pressures. Some systems create safety nets. Others, knowingly or not, allow people to fall through the cracks.

5. Discussion

Through the above mechanism analysis and comparative cases, this study can find that the impact of industrialization on worker suicide is not single or linear, but the result of multiple factors such as working conditions, social integration level, economic fluctuations and institutional guarantees. In nineteenth-century Europe and modern-day China, a combination of intense workloads, insufficient welfare, and frayed social support networks contributed to rising suicide rates among workers [1,5]. The Japanese context further complicates this narrative. Despite material improvements, cultural and organizational pressures have driven individuals toward psychological breakdowns, at times culminating in suicide [6]. On the other hand, the Nordic model, which is backed by strong welfare systems and powerful unions, shows how social safeguards can lessen these stresses and keep suicide rates comparatively low [9]. Therefore, industrialization is not always bad. Only in the absence of robust institutional frameworks and unified communities can it turn into a destabilizing force. Both Durkheim's theories of social disintegration and Marx's theory of alienation under capitalism are supported by this duality [1,2]. Collectively, these viewpoints imply that worker suicide is a significant topic for sociological and policy discussion since it represents deeper systemic tensions in addition to personal distress. In other words, industrial development has reciprocal effects. Workers may become vulnerable, overworked, and isolated in the absence of safeguards. However, those risks can be significantly decreased with the correct policies, which include fair wages, shorter work hours, easy access to mental health care, and robust labor representation. A thorough safety net promotes resilience in the face of uncertainty in addition to bettering working conditions. There are significant policy ramifications to this. Humane labor practices must be given top priority by governments and employers. This entails limiting excessive working hours, developing community mental health facilities in both urban and rural areas, and guaranteeing strong social safeguards, such as retraining initiatives and healthcare. Civil society and labor unions should also be given more authority, not only as advocates but also as agents of group

solidarity. New issues emerge as economies move toward gig labor and digital platforms. The same dislocation Durkheim referred to as *anomie* may be experienced by delivery workers and freelancers, who frequently operate without contracts, insurance, or social connections. Proactive planning is necessary due to these trends. Forward-thinking policies that anticipate new social risks rather than merely responding to them can be shaped by combining insights from traditional labor sociology with the realities of platform work.

6. Conclusion

This paper reveals the multidimensional sociological mechanism of worker suicide in the process of industrialization through theoretical review and comparative case analysis. Studies have shown that the interaction of deteriorating working conditions, broken social relations, economic instability and lack of social security has made workers a high-risk group in the context of insufficient institutional support [4,6]. At the same time, the experience of Nordic welfare states shows that a sound security system and trade union support can effectively buffer the negative effects of industrialization [10]. Therefore, industrialization does not necessarily lead to an increase in worker suicide rates, and its consequences depend to a large extent on institutional arrangements and the level of social integration.

Focusing on the research questions, this paper points out: First, industrialization affects the risk of worker suicide through the interweaving of working conditions and social structure; second, the differences in suicide rates in different countries and institutional backgrounds are due to differences in security systems, cultural norms and workers' collective power. This analysis not only verifies Durkheim's insights on *anomie* and Marx's criticism of alienation [1,2], but also emphasizes the key role of the institutional environment in shaping workers' mental health. Although this paper mainly relies on literature and case analysis and lacks large-scale quantitative data, the cross-national and cross-historical framework it proposes provides a new perspective for subsequent research and also provides academic reference for improving the living conditions of workers and designing social policies.

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