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Durkheim, ethnography and suicide: researching young male suicide in the transnational London Alevi-Kurdish community

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Abstract

This study of the unusually high incidence of young male suicides in the transnational Alevi-Kurdish community in London, demonstrates the benefits of combining a Durkheimian structural approach with a qualitatively driven ethnographic methodology. Examination of the life experiences of those who committed suicide is located within the underlying social organization of the transnational community in which the suicides occurred, enabling us to explore unanticipated events that render certain groups more at risk of committing suicide. Interviews with significant others facilitated a deeper understanding of the personal life paths of those who committed suicide. The suicide cases followed a particular assimilation trajectory that gradually positioned them in a “rainbow underclass”, an anomic social position leading to suicide. Despite the sensitivity of the subject, participants appreciated the opportunity to discuss their experience frankly and contribute towards a better understanding of the underlying causes in a desperate attempt to prevent further suicides.

Keywords

Durkheim, suicide, ethnography, transnational migration, minority ethnic communities, Alevi Kurds

Introduction

This article combines Durkheim’s macro level approach to the study of suicide with an ethnographic methodology to provide a deeper insight into the incidence of suicide amongst young men in the London-based Alevi Kurd (subsequently AK) community. The term Alevism is contentious as its definition depends on the socio-political position of the definer¹. However, for the purposes of this research the term Alevi is used as an umbrella term to refer to a distinct religious/faith group predominantly residing in central Anatolia in Turkey in which context its boundaries are defined in contradistinction to Sunni Islam, the dominant religion in Turkey. Whilst some

Alevis have no objection to the profession that there is only one God and that Mohammed is his messenger (*shahada*), generally Alevis do not practice the other fundamental pillars of Islam: praying five times a day, (*namaz* in Turkish); fasting for thirty days during Ramadan (*salat*); the giving of an alms tax (*zakat*); and the pilgrimage to Mecca (*hajj*). Alevis have their own religious ceremonies, called *cem*, that take place in their place of worship called *cemevi* and led by a holy man (a *dede*) (Van Bruinessen, 1996). They also fast for twelve days (*muharrem orucu*) (Keles, 2014).

Alevi social identity is formed around a shared history of “persecuted exclusion” (Cetin, 2014). Their self-perception, as recognised in much of the literature, is rooted in the belief that they have, as a community, been excluded, oppressed and persecuted during both the Sunni Ottoman Empire and the modern Turkish Republic despite the claim that the latter was founded on secular principles. Especially from the sixteenth century onwards, Alevis were portrayed as “heretics who were intending to corrupt the religion of Islam” (Shaw in Kehl-Bodrogi, 2003: 55), a discourse constructed by the mainstream and official authorities to justify the pogroms against Alevis. These oppressive official practices forced Alevis to retreat into small, largely self-reliant communities in remote mountainous areas (Sokefeld, 2008; Goner, 2005). Their marginalisation, persecution and exclusion continued during the Republican era, during which time there occurred a number of massacres (Kocan and Oncu, 2004; Olson, 2000), as the Turkish state aimed to create a unique national identity posited upon Turkishness and Sunni Islam (Yegen, 2010, 2007; Karakas, 2007; Goner, 2005; Kocan and Oncu, 2004; Shankland, 2003; Van Bruinessen, 1997). As a result of these policies of not only “difference blindness” but also “difference repression” (Goner, 2005: 108), policies that had the aim of intensifying the process of assimilation, Alevis as well as other ethnic groups such as Kurds were not acknowledged as separate groups and became invisible in official statistics. Thus the size of the AK population in Turkey was hidden (Dundar, 2008; Erman and Goker, 2000).

In the absence of accurate statistics², there is general agreement amongst scholars that there are an estimated twenty million Alevis living in Turkey, constituting twenty per cent of Turkey’s population. While the majority of Alevis are ethnically Turkish, twenty per cent (about five million) of them are ethnically Kurdish, and as such, this

makes them a “twice minority”³. That is to say that AKs were subjected to a double discrimination, and sometimes persecution, for not only being Alevi but also Kurds (Shankland, 2003; McDowall, 2002). This was largely due to the fact that, especially with the rise of the Kurdish guerilla movement post 1980, AKs developed a sympathy and support for the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (*Partiya Karkerên Kurdistan*, hereafter PKK)⁴, especially in regions such as Dersim, Maras, Sivas, Malatya and Kayseri (from where the migration to the UK occurred) and, as a result, AKs came to be seen, in the eyes of both state officials and mainstream society, as allies of the Kurdish or PKK “terrorists” (Erman and Goker, 2000). It is predominantly this experience of persecution and exclusion that led to the chain migration of the AKs to the UK from the late 1980s to seek asylum and to become an established community in northeast London, although a small minority had been coming to the UK as migrant labour from the early 1980s. This socio-historical context is important in understanding the AK community in London and hence the incidence of suicide amongst its youth.

Since 2003, the AK community in London has experienced fifty reported suicides amongst its second-generation young men (Gunes, 2013; Galip 2013; Ahmed, 2008). As a new phenomenon these suicides have created a moral panic within the London Alevi community because its incidence was unknown amongst the pre-migration and post-migration first-generation AKs⁵. The novelty and continuing incidence of these suicides has rendered them a “public issue” in C Wright Mills’ terms (Mills, 1970) to be analyzed sociologically, and as I am both a member of this community as well as a sociologist, it triggered my interest and concern.

The subsequent research became a sociological examination of the suicides through consideration of the personal biographies of those who committed suicide, crucially placing them within the framework of the underlying social organization of the community in the context of transnational migration. Drawing on Durkheim’s theoretical postulate that suicide is a product of a lack of integration and regulation (specifically, anomie), the research looks at how the institutions that came to integrate and regulate the first-generation in Turkey and London ceased to function for the second generation⁶. This differs from Durkheim in using a qualitative ethnographic approach that records and analyses personal experiences and biographies in order to understand everyday lives and socio-cultural practices and their relationship to the

social organization of the community. The suicides are thus placed within the intersection of personal biographies, changing community structures, both national and transnational, and broader socio-historical transnational factors.

The ethnographic data was largely gathered between 2010 and 2012 mainly in London but with some background interviews in Turkey⁷ to capture the transnational dynamics. The ethnography drew upon informal interactions as a member of the community attending community events, funerals *etc.*, and qualitative interviews with the families, relatives and friends of those who committed suicide as well as with other first and second-generation AK migrants. I conducted over 40 interviews culminating in interviews with carefully selected intimate contacts of three attempted suicides and eight actual suicides⁸. Although participant observation and in-depth interviews are recognized as the two main means of data collection, ethnographers can also make use of information that emerges out of spontaneous and informal conversations while they are in the field (Palmer, 2010; Alexander, 2000; Brewer, 2000; Pryce, 1986). Apart from interviews, as both a researcher and an “insider”, opportunities often arose where I could gain information through casual conversations with community members during my visits to the community centres and attendance at funerals (especially those of the suicides). My research data comprised both the formal in-depth interviews and these opportunistic conversations (*cf.* Venkatesh, 2008, Alexander, 2000 and Pryce, 1986). The interviews were tape recorded but the casual conversations were not, out of respect and sensitivity and also because seeking consent would have damaged the flow of the conversation, however, I made extensive notes on these conversations immediately after I had left the scene and while the information was still fresh in my mind (*cf.* Palmer, 2010; Pryce, 1986). As Lee and Kleinman (2000) state, interviewing members of family, friends, local people, community members, and gathering local myths, legends, and gossip about suicides can be a valid way of making sense of the act, but for me these not only provided data about the suicides but also the degree and structure of the interviewees’ relationships with the institutions of the community and the experiences of its members before and after settlement in London. Through an ethnographic approach “the researcher can come to terms with the variety of economic, political, familial and interpersonal issues that might make for complex multi-sided grounds for suicidal action” (Lee and Kleinman, 2000: 237).

In exploring the benefits of combining Durkheim's structural approach with an ethnographic one, this article firstly outlines Durkheim's theory of suicide and how it generates a structural framework within which to assess the degree of integration of the AK community. Secondly, it looks at Douglas' alternative approach to suicide in terms of exploring individual accounts of why and how the young men committed suicide. Thirdly, it analyses the suicides within the intersection of personal biographies, changing community structures both national and transnational and broader socio-historical factors. The article concludes with reflections on what has been learnt from researching suicide using an ethnographic approach with regard to issues of sensitivity, distress and safety as well as the insider/ outsider status of the researcher.

Durkheim and the study of suicide

As an Alevi Kurd, my research was inspired by my awareness of a social phenomenon that was alarming the AK community in London, namely the high incidence of male youth suicide, something historically little known in that community or other London Turkish/Kurdish communities. My particular interest stemmed from the suicide of 11 young men (two of them known to me), occurring within the space of only two years between 2007 and 2009. These cases had attracted a great deal of media attention in the British and Turkish press (Ahmed, 2008 and Kalkan, 2008) and I was intrigued by the different explanations being offered. More specifically, I was driven by my intellectual conviction that there must be something sociologically significant about this phenomenon and was keen to use my sociological imagination to understand the underlying social elements that had produced these events that so stunned the London AK community.

The first issue that presents itself to anyone researching suicide is the fact that the key informants are not present. Data cannot be directly collected from those who have committed suicide. Traditionally, this has not been a problem as sociological research on suicide has **focused on** suicide rates through applying a quantitative methodology to its incidence with much of the research utilizing a Durkheimian approach to identify and compare patterns (Scourfield et al., 2010; Tzeng and Lipson, 2004; Stack 2000a, 2000b; Hassan, 1983; Atkinson, 1971)⁹. Durkheim in his seminal work *Suicide*

(1996[1897]) sets out to demonstrate how, what appears to be the very personal act of suicide and something that might be thought best explained in psychological terms, is in fact a social phenomenon. Suicide, or to be more precise the suicide rate, is a social fact requiring a sociological analysis for its understanding. Durkheim, as a social realist, also sets out to show how underlying social factors that cannot be identified by simply looking at their appearance, come to influence the behaviour of individuals such as suicide. Thus, his main goal was to show the influence of society over the individual and, more specifically, to demonstrate that suicide is a product of the way in which society is organized and the nature of the relationship between it and the individual.

For Durkheim society constrains individuals in two ways: firstly through integration by instilling a commitment to the values and social norms of the group to which they belong, and secondly by defining specific goals and the means to attain them and thus controlling what would otherwise be unlimited human desires and aspirations, that is regulation. According to Durkheim's theory, integration and regulation of an individual is shaped by various institutions or "societies" such as family, religion, political and economic societies, which in an "ideal society" are in a harmonious relationship with each others (Bearman, 1991). If not they would fail to fulfill their regulative and integrative roles, and this would lead to the emergence of a state of anomie that produces pathologies such as high suicide rates (Durkheim, 1996; Bearman, 1991). Related to this concept of social and moral order, integration and regulation, Durkheim develops four main social types of suicide: egoistic, altruistic, anomic and fatalistic. Egoistic and altruistic suicide occur when there is either under or over-integration of individuals, while anomic and fatalistic suicide occur when there is either under or over-regulation. Whilst appreciating Durkheim's theoretical distinction between integration and regulation and between anomic and egoistic suicide, for the purpose of this research the use of one of these terms is taken to encompass the use of its pair and there is no attempt to make a distinction between them in the analysis of the data¹⁰. It is beyond the scope of this paper to argue in detail for the theoretical and empirical justification for this position, however, a close examination of the ethnographic data from my research confirms that, while there are specific individual differences in the cases of suicide, typically the suicides share both anomic and egoistic characteristics,¹¹.

Douglas on suicide, social meaning and culture

The Durkheimian macro-level social structural or statistical approach, which explains variations in social suicide rates through the social organization of the respective communities (Durkheim, 1996), can be contrasted with an interpretive or “dynamical” approach¹² (Maxwell in Douglas, 1966: 249), which was put forward by Douglas (1967). Drawing on Weber’s concept of “meaningful social action”, this perspective starts from individual cases and the social meanings that people attribute to suicide by paying particular attention to the history of the individual cases, their actions and possible outcomes of available trajectories within a real social context. Douglas criticizes Durkheim for basing his explanation of suicide on official statistics, which for Douglas are unreliable because they are socially constructed and not simply an objective count of the number of suicides in society since suicide cases are generally defined and registered by coroners or other officials who give their own meanings to suicide (see also Atkinson, 1978). This is to say that the official statistics used by Durkheim might not have been an accurate representation of suicide among and between different societies because the social meanings attached to suicide differ from one society to another (Douglas, 1967: 153). Douglas is also sceptical about Durkheim’s basic argument that high suicide rates and social integration and regulation are directly interconnected. For Douglas, a socially well-integrated community might conceal deaths resulting from suicide because in such societies suicide is not usually a socially approved act and so, for example, relatives and friends might keep the cause and evidence of death by suicide hidden resulting in that death not becoming registered as suicide by officials. Instead, Douglas suggests that sociologists employ an interpretive methodology whereby real individual cases are located within the context in which suicide as a meaningful act takes place (Douglas, 1967: 264).

A dual approach: Durkheim and Ethnography

Given Douglas’ critique, on the surface it might appear that Durkheim’s theory of suicide and the use of an ethnographic approach in its study make strange bedfellows, however I consider them as complementary rather than conflicting perspectives. Douglas’ critique points beyond simply the question of the accuracy of official statistics and suggests that even if the statistics were reliable they would still in

themselves give only a partial picture. Furthermore, Durkheim's analyses were based on statistics from Western European societies that were relatively homogeneous in terms of religion and ethnicity (or at least were treated as such by Durkheim) with different dynamics compared to contemporary transnational ethnic communities and their relationship to the more culturally diverse societies with which they are in interaction. Therefore, my research combines Durkheim's typology of suicide and the underlying social forces, particularly integration and regulation or social cohesion that govern suicide rates, with Douglas' emphasis on the importance of the meaning of suicide within community and the dynamic relationship of the individual cases with their immediate social environment.

Durkheim's claim that the level of integration and regulation of the individuals in the society to which they belong fundamentally determines suicide offers a theoretical orientation for my research. However, unlike Durkheim and his followers, I was not able to use quantitative methods for examining these relationships in my research for several reasons. Firstly, as explained above, there is no national data on Alevi communities, both in and outside Turkey, from which to identify and compare patterns. In fact no research had been done on suicide in AK communities, either in the UK or elsewhere. Therefore no statistical comparison based on suicide rates could be made between Alevis and any other communities. Secondly, the number of cases of suicides amongst the second-generation Alevi youth is relatively small making statistical comparison difficult, if not impossible, although their occurrence is nevertheless significant in the sense of suggesting an emergent pattern requiring further in-depth investigation of a qualitative nature as a public issue (Mills, 1970). Therefore, I decided to use ethnography as a methodological device, which draws on both.

Durkheim and Douglas.

Durkheim's (1996) proposition that suicide rates are a measure of the health of the social body that reflects problems in the social organization of a particular community provided a methodological justification to conduct a qualitatively oriented ethnographic study of the London AK community that sought not just to record and analyze how the respondents interpreted these suicides but to place them in the wider

social context, in particular the social organization of the AK community and the effect that migration has had on it.

Given that there was no existing research and data on suicide within this community, an open-ended, exploratory ethnographic method offered the best way to develop a sociological explanation based on an understanding of the social dynamics and personal experiences (Dickson-Swift et al., 2008) of those within the AK community and their relation to the wider society. The choice of ethnography as a methodological tool also reflects the success of recent ethnographies to explore the circumstances and social dynamics that predispose particular individuals to commit suicide (Fincham et al., 2011; Baudelot and Establet, 2008; Macdonald, 2007; Tzeng and Lipson, 2004; Leavey, 1999; Rubinstein, 1992; Hezel, 1989; Hassan, 1983, 1995). For example Rubinstein (1992) and Hezel (1989) employed mixed-methods for their ethnographic studies on youth suicide in Micronesia. Macdonald (2007, 2003) used an ethnographic approach to investigate youth suicide in Southern Philippines. Amongst these, the closest methodology to mine is conducted by Macdonald (2003) who provides a thick description of the social structure of the community and then examines the individual cases by drawing on the ethnographic data that he gathered from participant observation and depth interviews with the significant others.

These studies capture how people experience and perceive the integrative and regulatory nature, or lack thereof, of the communities in which they conduct their daily lives. Durkheim provided an understanding of the social forces that operate within a community but not how they work at the everyday level. This is precisely what an ethnographic approach achieves as it “is an approach to learning about the social and cultural life of communities, institutions [...] and builds on the perspectives of the people in the research setting” (LeCompte and Schensul, 1999: 1).

However, my ethnography differs from these previous studies because it is a qualitatively oriented ethnographic approach that draws predominantly on the first hand data gathered from the fieldwork. Scourfield et al (2010), in their “sociological autopsy” employed a qualitatively driven mixed method approach but they drew on the secondary data that was available in the individual suicide files, rather than collecting first hand data. The mixed methods used by Macdonald (2007); Rubinstein

(1992); Hezel (1989) were not appropriate for my research as these studies dealt with an indigenous local community while the community that I wished to study was an under-researched transnational migrant community that had only recently established itself in London. Lack of statistical data, existing sociological research and the transnational nature of the community called for an ethnographic approach in order to be able to firstly identify the structure of the community pre migration, secondly to highlight the changes that occurred in these structures in the process of migration, and thirdly to examine the impact of these changes on an individual level, through the experiences of the first and second generation AKs, which could help make sense of youth suicide within this community.

Research design and focus of the research

Having decided to use an exploratory ethnographic approach, the remaining issue was to define the focus of the research: what particular features of the AK community were to be investigated in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of its socio-economic, cultural and political structures that could be useful in placing the suicides in their context? At this point, I benefitted from Durkheim's approach, which focuses on the social structural context of suicide, whilst my insider status became a very useful resource as I already had some ideas about the social characteristics of the young men who had committed suicide. These concerned their lifestyles and experiences in relation to institutions such as education, the family and personal relationships, the labour market and social groups to which they belonged and helped me to draw up a preliminary framework for the ethnography. An understanding of suicide generated common themes such as integration and assimilation, regulation, the transformation of family structure, intergenerational conflicts, and identity and belonging that were associated with suicide in other communities (Aspinal, 2002; Leavey, 1999; Lee and Kleinman 2000; Hassan, 1995, 1983; Hezel, 1989; Gibbs and Martin, 1964). Furthermore, since the community under study was a migrant community, the importance of transnational practices and engagements, the contexts of departure and settlement patterns were identified as significant factors impacting on the integration and assimilation trajectories of migrants (Morawska, 2004). This was supported by the sociological literature on suicide and migration that suggested that concepts such as integration, regulation and community cohesion play a significant role in understanding suicide amongst ethnic migrants (Durkheim, 1996;

Baudelot and Establet, 2008; Rubinstein, 2002; Burr et al., 1999; Leavey, 1999; Hassan, 1995, 1983; Hezel, 1989). These were provisional themes that would change during the research process but without them the ethnographic focus would have been initially too broad (Jones and Watt, 2010; Brewer, 2000).

While these were identified as preliminary themes the nature of ethnographic research allowed these to change and develop as the research progressed (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007). This holistic approach allowed me to understand the social organization of the community, their socio-cultural practices and their meanings within their social and cultural settings (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Morawska, 2004; Atkinson, 1978; Douglas, 1967). In other words, this community study perspective allowed not only an understanding of the characteristics of the community but also the everyday lives of people and their relations with the institutions in order to gain an insight into the occurrence of suicide and how people make sense of it as well as the impact it has on the families (*cf.* Tzeng and Lipson, 2004 and Zhang et al., 2002).

Making sense of youth suicide in the AK community

As a first step, based on the social characteristics of the available suicide cases (young, single, second generation, male, school dropouts), I structured the research process into four main stages: the features of the AK community and the process of community building in London; the experiences of the first generation; the experiences of the second generation; and the suicides themselves. The aim of this preliminary structure was to enable the development of a detailed historical and contemporary understanding of the main features of the AK community in order to highlight the significance of the contextual factors that might have influenced the occurrence of suicide. This paralleled research conducted by authors such as Macdonald (2007), Tzeng and Lipson (2004), Zhang et al. (2002), Rubinstein (2002), Hezel (1989) and Hassan (1983) in other communities. And since suicidal behaviour is a product of the ways in which social and cultural systems are organized (Durkheim, 1996; Hassan, 1995, 1983; Rubinstein, 1992; Hezel, 1989; Douglas, 1967) it also permitted an examination of how the community was organized before migrating to the UK and how the community came to develop the social structures that were to influence the behaviour of first and second-generation Alevi migrants.

Finally, it allowed for the exploration of whether the occurrence of suicide was an endemic (embedded feature of this community) or epidemic (a newly emerged phenomenon) problem in this community (Rubinstein, 2002).

Initial interviews and the LACCC

The first step of the research was to capture the traditional social, religious, cultural and political features of the AK communities before and after migration. This was crucial firstly for making sense of the state of “community cohesion”, which for Durkheim has a profound impact on suicide and, secondly, the past and present state of suicide within the community through the lived experiences of the Alevi people. I began the fieldwork by conducting six open-ended interviews with “key informants” such as the current chairman of the London Alevi Cultural Centre and Cemevi (LACCC) and the spiritual leader (*Dede*)¹³ of the Alevis to establish the current context of the Alevi community as recent settlers and to gain an insightful account of the relationships between Alevi beliefs, religious and cultural institutions, identity and suicide. From a Durkheimian perspective, the data from the LACCC as a religious, cultural and political institution would provide valuable data about the nature of the relationship that the Alevi youth in general, but also those who had committed suicide, had with this religious, cultural and political community (that is, the degree of integration). The interviews suggested that youth suicide was for this community an unfamiliar social problem, but one, which was increasingly seen as an epidemic. The participants offered various explanations for the possible “causes of suicide”, mainly based on hearsay and often linking it to drug dealing, gangs and girlfriends. The data also suggested that second-generation Alevis, compared to the first generation, had a very weak sense of belonging to the community associations, lacking knowledge about Alevi traditions and religious and cultural values (Jenkins and Cetin, 2014)¹⁴.

Alevis in Turkey

To understand further the experiences of the AK community before migration, and their attitude towards an understanding of suicide, it was essential at an early stage to clarify and gain information about any suicides among the Alevi youth in Turkey. To this end, I conducted informal interviews in Turkey with four elderly AKs in their villages, one village being the one in which myself and two of the suicide victims grew up. Much of this ethnographic data, while confirming the fact that youth suicide

was not historically a common occurrence within the Alevi community, was also useful in providing an overview of the social, cultural and historical context of pre-migration. In other words, the data from these interviews offered a framework for the contextualization of the social structure as well as social position of the AK community within the wider Turkish society. In particular, it enabled an understanding of how both the folk-memory of persecution and exclusion along with its contemporary reality (and crucially what it *meant* to be an Alevi), had created a tightly-knit community that in Durkheimian terms was closely integrated and regulated where suicide was a very rare occurrence.

The first generation Alevi Kurds in London

Having provided this orienting background to the AK community in terms of traditions, belief and its integrative/regulative function for the community pre-migration, I moved on to look at the experiences of eighteen first-generation migrants, who had, as mentioned above, settled in London as refugees, some of whom were in families and some of whom were single men. A particular focus of these interviews was the process of community building in relation to the context of departure, reasons for migration, their lives in the UK including their integration trajectories and expectations for the future. More specifically, I focused on the problems they had encountered in terms of identity, traditional family and kinship ties, and lifestyles as a result of the changes that occurred in the process of migration and settlement. Another aim was to find out about their perception of suicide and how it was used to explain the communal or structural changes, both “good and bad”, experienced in this process.

The ethnographic data gathered from the interviews contributed towards an understanding of the social structure and patterns of community networks and the inter-connectedness of cases and nodal points in the dynamics of migration, anomie and suicide. Along with the absence of suicide amongst the first generation AKs, several other themes emerged that provided a picture of the social structure and relationships that had maintained past community cohesion, characterized by the low suicide rates within the AK community both pre and post migration. One of them was the central importance for the first-generation AKs in London of the Turkish-speaking community centres. They helped build the community by not only sustaining but also

solidifying social, cultural and religious traditions and practices, around which their London lives and experience revolved. Furthermore, these interviews provided substantial data, which suggested that the first generation AKs followed a particular integration trajectory, which I have called “segregated integration” (Cetin, 2014). This was an integration into the ethnic community that provided conditions for the first generation migrants to have strong social, cultural, religious, political and economic transnational engagements with their community of origin. For example, when the AKs first arrived in London, they lived within the same neighbourhoods and found employment in the **local** textile sweatshops which, in Durkheimian terms, integrated them into the economic society and so helped them to define realistic or achievable goals given the available means, thus reducing the possibility of anomie (Durkheim, 1996; Merton, 1938). Furthermore, transnational engagements provided them with a strong sense of belonging to their community of origin as well as their new ethnic community in London, so reducing the risk of loneliness and disorientation that might lead to anomic suicide (Durkheim, 1996).

The ethnographic data also provided a sense of the first-generation AK’s perception of issues that connected their young people to the risk of suicide and, as such, were helpful in preparing and guiding the interviews with the second generation. As a characteristic of open-ended ethnographic research, however, whilst I was interviewing the first generation and analyzing the data, I realized that almost all members of the community, as well as the participants themselves, believed that the young boys who had committed suicide had had links with gangs that were established from their secondary school years¹⁵. This common-sense explanation was not the only one to emerge. Another was that the boys were killing themselves “for a girl” and blamed the behaviour of girlfriends for their suicides. This led me to pay special attention to the second-generation’s educational experiences and especially their membership of gangs as predisposing factors in the lives of the suicide cases. I also paid particular attention to the way they experienced their intimate relationships. But this was not to say that it meant accepting these common-sense explanations at face value as my approach allowed them to be contextualized within an understanding of the underlying social organization in which the young people were located.

The next step was to understand the life experiences of the second generation among whom a significant number had committed suicide, in other words, to understand how the social structures that had prevented the first generation from the risk of suicide had ceased to function for the second generation. As the existing literature (Van Gemert et al., 2008; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Hassan, 1995; Rumbaut, 1994) suggests, the children of migrants, compared to their parents, follow different integration and assimilation trajectories. One of these trajectories directs them towards an anomic state, a social position described as the “rainbow underclass” (Portes and Zhou, 1993: 82) with a high risk of suicide. For this reason I focused on themes such as the integration and assimilation trajectories, cross-generational conflicts, and the issues that these youths have to deal with in the sphere of the family, intimate relationships, education and work. It was very important to focus on these areas: firstly, because the relationships within such contexts determine the social position of the individuals and this in turn influences the level of suicide (Durkheim, 1996; Portes and Rumbaut, 2001; Hassan, 1995, 1983; Portes and Zhou, 1993; Halbwachs, 1978; Douglas, 1967; Gibbs and Martin, 1964) and secondly, since those who committed suicide were the ones who went through the above-mentioned stages, it was important to investigate the life experiences of the AK youth in relation to them from their own point of view. Thus the underlying processes that directed them towards particular trajectories and predisposed them to commit suicide could be better understood.

A mixed method approach was used to explore the experiences of the second generation and throughout the research the LACCC was my main point of access to them. At this time concerns were escalating about the continuing trend in youth suicide and reference was being increasingly made to mafia-type organizations that people called *çeteler* (gangs)¹⁶. I attended several youth workshops in different Turkish-speaking community centres where I conducted participant observations, listened to the debates about their problems and also conducted several focus-group interviews with the youth to familiarize myself with the issues these young people were facing.

While my attendance at such events served as an orientation to the concerns of the second generation, it also enabled me to get to know the young people in order that

they would feel more comfortable talking to me about their more personal issues and experiences. These were very useful contacts as two of the young men that I met during these visits introduced me to those participants who knew suicide victims and had friends who were former and current gang members. At this stage, in-depth and semi-structured interviews were conducted with fourteen second-generation AK young men and women, aged between 16 and 35, who were born in the UK or had come to the UK at a very early age. The first set of interviews was with three second-generation young people who were relatively successful in the sense that they all were graduates and in paid work. The reason for these interviews with three “successful” youngsters was to understand how their experiences differed from those who had “failed”. More specifically the purpose of this was to explore the diversity of integration trajectories (Morawska, 2004: 1376) available for the second-generation migrants.

The next stage concentrated on gaining information about the experiences of those who had committed suicide. Given that the aim of this research was not to produce a psychological account at the individual level but to look at the social situation of those who committed suicide, an insight could be gained from the eleven interviews conducted with those who, whilst not having committed suicide themselves, nevertheless shared similar characteristics and, as with the earlier stages of research, there were several occasions where a “focus group” spontaneously emerged generating valuable data. This sample had the closest profile to the suicide victims and the majority of them knew or were related to at least to one of the suicides. As such, this was a purposive sample designed to elicit as much data as possible on the social context of the suicidal behaviour (*cf.* Tzeng and Lipson, 2004; Zhang et al., 2002). These interviews confirmed my initial sense that those who had committed suicide were also school dropouts and had had an irregular relationship to employment. My aim then was to comprehend the process by which they had failed at school and had ended up in a social position of the “rainbow underclass” (Portes and Zhou, 1993) in which some had committed suicide.

Emergent themes

Once again in this phase of the research unanticipated findings directed my attention towards the importance of gang formation during the early stages of secondary

schooling and the dramatic consequences for young men of getting involved with these gangs. The flexibility of ethnographic research was demonstrated forcefully through the constant repetition in the young men's interviews of the significance of gangs and how they were related to ethnic tension between AK and black youth in the area of London in which they lived. Whilst this had been previously mentioned by the chair of the LACCC and in interviews with the first-generation parents, it was not until the interviews with this group of second-generation youths, who shared the characteristics of those who had committed suicide, that the full significance of gangs as a predisposing factor towards suicide became a concrete theme of the research. Indeed the data gathered from the interviews with these four ex-gang members enabled me to recognize the significant events and relationships which underpinned the processes by which they had abandoned school and ended up in gangs and to explain the role that gangs played in the lives of AK youth and what relevance these gangs and gang culture had for suicide. Thus this approach accessed important aspects of the community that might otherwise have remained hidden and allowed the patterns behind the suicides to gradually emerge (Jones and Watt, 2010; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2007; Brewer, 2000).

The interview data also highlighted the sequence of the events, which underpinned the journey into the "rainbow underclass", a social position characterized by anomie and hence an increased risk of suicide. More specifically, earlier themes, such as the broken family, school, the ethnic community and the labour market were investigated further in the following stage of the research when I interviewed the parents and close friends of the eight suicide victims. In short the ethnographic data from this section suggested that the second generation who had committed suicide had low educational attainment, problematic relationships with their schools, families, peer groups and in their intimate relationships.

The suicides

Researching the actual suicides was the final stage of the research and the most challenging, both methodologically and emotionally for the researcher as well as the participants, intruding as it did on the personal lives and grief of those closely connected to the suicides (Tzeng and Lipson, 2004; Zhang et al., 2002; Dickson-Swift et al., 2008, 2007). This was the most difficult issue in the research as trying to

understand the context, processes and impacts of suicides for the community and significant others necessitated asking people to share their views and experiences. Indeed Fincham et al. (2011) avoided conducting interviews with family members and attempted suicide victims by using a “sociological autopsy” that drew on the information from secondary sources, such as coroner and police reports, based on the statements of significant others related to the suicide victims. However, it was not possible to follow their method in this instance due to the fact that such information was not available as only three of the suicide cases were recorded in the community centre’s files where they held their funerals¹⁷.

Instead I adopted a mixed method approach, collecting data on eight suicides, all of whom shared similar characteristics (see p.11). Additionally, as an insider, I made a special effort to attend the funeral ceremonies of those who had committed suicide, where I was able to listen to what people said and how they talked about the suicides. I also made use of secondary sources such as media reports and statements from the community centres about youth suicide (*cf.* Tzeng and Lipson’s (2004) who used an ethnographic approach to grasp the socio-cultural context of suicide in Taiwan.) At this stage it was important to understand the life trajectories of those who had committed suicide, as this would provide information about the process by which they had ended up in a social context that had made them prone to suicide. More specifically, it provided information on their adaptation trajectories into the rainbow underclass and their social relationships with their parents, school, peer groups, ethnic and mainstream society as well as their future expectations and means of achieving their defined goals. This was only possible by asking significant others as they were closest to those who had committed suicide.

For the eight cases of suicide, I conducted a total of seventeen in-depth interviews and several spontaneous focus-group discussions with family members, relatives and best friends who knew well the young men who had committed suicide. In most instances, when the key informants contacted a potential participant who was a close friend of a suicide, the participant brought along a couple of other friends who also knew the victims. These friends, once assured of confidentiality, were enthusiastic about having their own accounts heard not only in helping to understand the enigma of the suicides

but also to challenge the prevailing common-sense discourses that accused them of having a role.

The data from these interviews enabled me to go beyond the common-sense explanations of suicide and identify the significant underlying events and relationships that directed those who committed suicide towards the “rainbow underclass”, a social position in which they were prone to suicide. In particular, by asking the close friends who knew those who committed suicide well, I was able to develop a sociological understanding of the situation, an explanation that was largely opposed to, and challenged, much of the common-sense explanations for the suicides. As Zhang et al. (2002: 4) rightly argues, although parents and friends are the most appropriate source of information about suicides, the friends accounts might be more accurate because “parents might not be aware of such things as drugs use and interpersonal problems outside home”. This was certainly the case here as the friends revealed information that the parents were either reluctant to disclose or unaware of completely. Not that these common-sense explanations can be dismissed entirely as they pointed to relevant issues such as intergenerational conflict, education experiences, use of drugs and alcohol, and the social and intimate relationships of the victims as examined through the eyes of those who knew them well and participated in similar activities.

Apart from the testimonies of the significant others, I also conducted interviews with three AK young men who had attempted suicide. The main purpose of these interviews was to grasp an understanding, from the perspective of those who had attempted suicide, of the complex social relationships and processes that created the social context that made them prone to suicide. As Fincham et al. (2011) argue, individual cases provide us with valuable data enabling us to develop an insightful understanding of the social context in which suicide occurs. These cases also provide a detailed description of the social circumstances of the individual’s life that tells us something about their suicide (cf. Tzeng and Lipson, 2004). Thus by drilling down, so to speak, into actual cases we could illustrate the dynamic operation of the tensions created by the interactions of the social context and individual biography.

Anomic disaffection and suicide

Set against the background of the previous interviews, the data from the significant others explains the gradual process (the result of an interplay between individual and structural factors) by which the eight suicides that were the subject of this research came to be in a situation where they were prone to suicide: the result of a marginalized social position that was characterized by lack of social integration and regulation (Durkheim, 1996), in this case a structural position defined, according to the segmented assimilation theory, as the rainbow underclass (Portes and Rumbaut, 2001). According to the data, these young men abandoned their education without obtaining any basic qualifications and became involved in gangs. The gangs were formed in part to imitate and contest the “hegemonic masculinity” (Connell, 2002) of black youth (between whom there was ethnic tension and competition) and so, by engaging in physical conflict with these black youth, sought to transform their “marginal masculinity” into a more “respected” one. However, as they grew older and as a result of parental pressure, tensions around their masculinity became manifest in sexual jealousy, the sense of being betrayed by their fellow gang members and subsequent loss of trust in them, and the absence of a meaningful future. The gang as a basis for their collective identity lost its validity. This in turn left them without a clear point of reference. Having no educational qualifications, coupled with a manner of behaviour that was developed during their gang membership, they lacked the conventional means of education and employment to re-integrate into the wider ethnic community and into the mainstream British society. The only remaining option for them was employment in their parents’ “shop” (typically an off-licence, fish and chips, café or kebab shop) where they worked irregularly and unwillingly, experiencing high levels of alienation. These failings and the conflict in other spheres of their life led them to an over-dependence on intimate relationships, which when they eventually broke down left them with no social bonds and no way to overcome their marginality and sense of failure, hence triggering suicide.

In sum the social system that regulated and integrated the first generation, lost its relevance for the second generation, particularly those who committed suicide. These findings that draws a map of both the personal trajectory of these young men and also of the anomic structural position in which they ended up only became possible through the ethnographic approach employed.

Sensitivity, distress and safety

In the process of collecting data, a set of methodological issues had to be considered. LeCompte and Schensul (1999) argue that ethnographic research requires a significant degree of trust, that is the building and maintenance of a rapport between the researcher and the participants (see also Venkatesh, 2008; Alexander, 2000) while Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) argue that interviewing people on such sensitive topics as suicide can be a stressful experience for them.

It was a difficult decision to undertake this part of the research with the anticipation of causing significant emotional distress to people closest to those who had committed suicide, whilst at the same time recognizing the need of the community centres and the AK community to try to make sense of this problem. Lee (1993: 4) argues that sensitive research is that “which potentially poses a substantial threat to those who are or have been involved in it” and to facilitate access to such populations it relies heavily on snowball sampling, a method I adopted for the following reasons. Firstly, I did not want to put pressure on those who might not want to relive the traumatic events associated with suicide by approaching them directly and asking them for an interview. This would have been awkward and I also wanted to avoid the embarrassment of being refused on the spot. Secondly, the second-generation friends of the victims had been stigmatized by the local press, the community centres, and parents as being a bad influence on those who had committed suicide. I assumed they would be reluctant to participate in research that placed importance on the views and experiences of the friends of the victims. This proved correct as in a couple of instances my requests to interview friends and relatives of the suicides were rejected, because “they did not want to be involved in that matter anymore”. Thirdly, and most importantly I knew little about the health of the parents and relatives given that I would be asking them to talk about such a personal tragedy, possibly for hours. Using snowball sampling gave me an opportunity to gather advance information about the potential participants and whether they would be willing and fit enough to be interviewed. Although, initially, I aimed to interview the family members and parents for every single case of suicide, three fathers who had initially agreed to talk to me were deliberately excluded because of their fragile physical and mental health. Consequently I was only able to interview parents of three victims.

The need to discuss the topic of gang membership raised the issue not only of sensitivity but also of safety. This was one of the considerations that I had to take into account in interviewing two people who were both ex-gang members (one attempted suicide while the other served some time in prison for his involvement in illegal gang activities). However, Dickson-Swift et al. (2008) and Hutchinson et al. (1994) suggest that the participants may benefit from being interviewed by being given a voice and a sense of being able to help others through sharing their experiences. The sense of helping others was one of the most important reasons given by the former gang members for taking part in my research. When I first contacted them via the key contacts, they were reluctant to become involved. However, after explaining to them the purpose and aim of the research they agreed to participate mainly because they wanted, in the words of one interviewee to “be helpful and my life experience to be an example for other Alevi children not to give up school and get involved in gangs”. After the interview the respondent also confided that the interview had helped him identify “where and how [he] made mistakes that cost him so many years”.

Hutchinson et al. (1994: 227) argue that research on sensitive topics may have some positive effects such as “catharsis, emotional release, sense of purpose, helping others, empowerment, healing, having a voice and being heard”. These were the benefits cited by the majority of the participants of this research but it was especially the case for those who were interviewed in relation to gangs and the suicides. For example, those friends who had been accused of being in some way responsible for the suicides said that they felt better after the interviews and focus groups conversations because they had had an opportunity to speak about “what actually the situation was” from their perspective and that they had had no part in their friend’s suicide. Another participant told me that he hoped that young people would read my research and learn a lesson from the life stories of the gang members and the suicides.¹⁸ The parents of the suicides also stated that their participation, although emotionally challenging, benefited them largely because the interviews allowed them to critically reflect on their relationships with their sons and to see whether what they did as parents felt right or wrong. For one mother it provided an opportunity to disclose things that she said she could not have shared with others.

Kerim¹⁹ was always in trouble with the police not only for his fights with the blacks but also criminal activities such as burglary. He was also taking drugs.

The autopsy report showed that he had four types of drugs before he hanged himself. We always denied these because we did not want people to see him and us as bad people. *Hatice*²⁰

This suggests that interviewing such vulnerable people, although very difficult, was also empowering as the participants were given an opportunity to reflect on the situation and a voice to explain it from their own perspective (*cf.* Dyregrov, 2004).

Durkheimian outsidersness and ethnographic insidersness

Whilst my close involvement with the AK community was beneficial in establishing trust with participants it could have posed a danger of losing critical distance and objectivity (Denscombe, 2010; May, 2001): being a member of the AK community, an insider, had the potential to be as much a disadvantage as a benefit. However, as Merton (1972) and Styles (1979) suggest, this position is based on the false assumption that identities (here being insider and outsider) are primordial, fixed and static. In fact, as Merton convincingly argues, “in structural terms we are all both insiders and outsiders” (Merton, 1972: 22) as a result of our class, age, gender, status and so on. Ergun and Erdemir (2009), Kusow (2003) and Song and Parker (1995), reflecting on their ethnographic field experiences, state that far from being a given and static, insidersness and outsidersness are a product of a dynamic interchangeable process dependent upon a set of social, cultural and political values within a social context (Kusow, 2003). This was my experience, where my insider position in the field was flexible rather than static and could not be taken for granted. As an insider, firstly I was aware of the youth suicides, had ideas about the historical incidence of suicide within the community, and was conversant with the emerging explanations people were giving for the “causes”. Secondly, my age, linguistic abilities (Turkish and Kurdish) and gender facilitated a good level of trust and acceptance especially with the first-generation AK males. Thirdly, I was seen to be doing “very important research” around a community issue and most importantly, that being myself an Alevi Kurd gave me access that might well have been impossible for an outsider.

However, my identity as an insider was neither static nor complete but emerged in interaction with my other status as an outsider, that is, as a university graduate, a sociologist, a researcher and a university lecturer. Even though I shared a common ethnic, religious and cultural background, I was not seen as a complete insider by the

AKs who lived in Turkey because I was someone who had emigrated to London. Neither was I seen completely as an insider by the second-generation AKs, the former gang members, those who had attempted suicides, and the close friends and relatives of the suicide cases because of my age, being an academic and first generation status. There was also a tension, often a constructive one, between my insider and outsider status. On the one hand, in conducting interviews and group conversations with the second generation, my cultural background provided a common ground for communication but on the other, I was also reminded, implicitly and explicitly, that I was someone outside their circle who did not share their experiences of school, education, family and work. I also did not have a close personal connection with someone who had committed suicide and so in talking to the friends and family of those who had committed suicide I was in a very real sense an outsider.

Finally, it must be noted that although I was close to the community I also had an academic and personal existence outside of it and was often away from the field. In particular, I was teaching sociology at university and was in an environment that allowed for the reflection on the data outside of the situation in which it was collected. In particular, critical distance was enhanced by my combining a Durkheimian perspective along with an ethnographic approach that sought to place the common-sense accounts of the research participants within an understanding of the underlying social organization of the community in which the incidence of suicide could be contextualized. The on-going interaction between my more “outsider” theoretical position and the more “insider” ethnographic fieldwork, created a positive dynamic between the two and helped to sustain my grounded theory approach²¹ to the collection of data, its analysis, and the conclusions drawn from them.

Conclusion

Space precludes the detailed laying out of the findings and analysis of the research and so it has been possible only to outline the interplay between the individual and structural factors that provide the context for the suicides studied.²² By means of the ethnographic data collected, it was possible to come to an understanding of the lived experiences of the different generations of AKs and how these were related to the social organization of their respective communities. Set against the exploration of the

factors that had led to the development of a particular anomic social context, that came to characterize the second-generation AK youth in London, the data provided an understanding of the everyday lives of these young men and how they became located in a social position that made them prone to suicide. In other words, the ethnographic approach enabled me to identify the sequence of interconnected events related to schooling, family, personal relationships, gang culture and employment, which constituted a process by which a section of the AK youth ended up in a suicide prone social position, as members of the “rainbow underclass” (Portes and Zhou, 1993).

It is evident that the analysis draws heavily on a Durkheimian perspective on the relationship between suicide and the degree of integration into and regulation by the community (Durkheim, 1996; Fincham et al., 2011; Burr et al., 2009; Bearman, 1991; Taylor, 1988; Hassan, 1983; Halbwachs, 1978; Pope, 1976; Douglas, 1967; Gibbs and Martin, 1964; Cavan, 1965). But it also links this to the everyday life experiences of the AK through the use of an ethnographic study of that community, an approach used by many other researchers (Münster, 2012; Macdonald, 2007; Tzeng and Lipson, 2004; Hassan, 1995, 1983; Rubinstein, 2002; Hezel, 1989). Whilst keeping to the Durkheimian position that suicide is influenced predominantly by underlying social factors it recognizes that there is interplay between individual and structural factors although the emphasis remains on understanding the social organization of the community and what it says about the level of integration and regulation. In particular, it accounts for the anomic situation in which many of the young men born to the first-generation AKs found themselves, a situation in which they had become marginalized from both the AK community of their parents and the wider mainstream society.

The research combines the structuralist approach of Durkheim with an ethnography of the community that examines how the social forces associated with integration and regulation are experienced at the individual level. It confirms Durkheim’s theory that suicide is related to the social organization of society but also illuminates how the social and cultural practices give meaning to the sense of community and how these are related to both the historical and present social context. The ethnographic methodology used has allowed me to suggest ways in which structure provides the context for an understanding of agency, for example, in how for some young AKs

estrangement from their own and the wider community pushed them towards gang membership, and when that also failed to provide the functions of integration and regulation led to an increased likelihood of suicide.

In sum, while Durkheim's structural analysis helped me to draw up an initial framework to design my research questions and define the scope of the research, Douglas's methodological approach enabled me to locate the cases in the "real world" (Douglas, 1967: 264), that is, within the social context in which suicide occurs. Therefore, both Durkheim and Douglas can be seen as complementary in that they both provide useful theoretical and methodological frameworks for conducting ethnographic studies of suicide especially in the transnational ethno-religious communities, which experience unfamiliar forms of suicide.

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Notes

¹ For a detailed discussion of this issue see Erman and Goker (2000).

² The absence of Alevis in official Turkish statistics, despite being a considerably large population, is itself indicative of the denial and assimilation project of the Ottoman and Turkish Republic. For example on the official identity cards (*nufus cuzdani*) issued by the Registry Office of the Turkish State, and which must be carried by citizens at all times, all citizens are registered as "Islam", regardless of their diverse religious backgrounds, unless it is certified that they belong to a non-Muslim community. By doing this, the state aims to reaffirm the belief that Turkish national identity is based

on Turkishness and Sunni Islam while rejecting all other socio-religious and ethnic communities such as Alevis and Kurds (Bozarslan, 2003).

³ It is important to note that for the majority of Alevis their religious identity as an Alevi is above their ethnic and other identities. However, sociologically speaking, this is not a fixed or unchanging position as it depends on the socio-political context. For example, since the ideal citizen in Turkey is ethnically Turkish and religiously Sunni Muslim (Bozarslan, 2003), Alevi Turks, through their ethnic Turkishness, can associate themselves with the dominant identity; similarly so with Sunni Muslim Kurds through association with their religious identity. However, these options are not available for the Alevi Kurds (see Shankland, 2003; Gezik, 2012). This makes comparison with other Turkish immigrant communities in Europe difficult and why, for example, AK immigrants do not demonstrate the same patterns of acculturation and marginalisation, since religious and ethnic marginality for migrant groups significantly affects their transnational engagements, integration trajectories and experiences of community building within their new country of residence (Morawska, 2009, 2004; Portes and Bach, 1985).

⁴ Since 1984 the PKK has launched a guerrilla war against the armed forces of the state (see Gunes, 2013).

⁵ I did not conduct comparative research amongst other ethnic minorities in London, partly because of restrictions on time and resources but largely because young male suicide was a “public issues” for the AK community both in London and Turkey that deserved an in-depth sociological investigation in its own right.

⁶ As an operational definition, the term second generation refers to the children of the AKs who were born in the UK or brought to the UK before their adolescence.

⁷ The ethnographic data was collected for my Ph.D. thesis entitled *Anomic Disaffection: A Sociological Study of Youth Suicide within the Alevi Kurdish Community in London*, which was funded by and submitted to the University of Essex Sociology Department. The degree was awarded in May 2014.

⁸ This selection involved identifying, approaching and asking members of the AK community to participate in my research. I paid particular attention to their closeness to the suicides in order to gain as much information as possible about the social relations and life trajectories of those who committed suicide. Since this was a sensitive topic that involved health and safety issues, I had to consider the health condition of the potential participants as well.

⁹ An examination of research on suicide by Hjelmeland and Knizek (2011) point out that only three per cent of the articles on suicide published in the three international suicide research journals in 2005 to 2007 use some form of qualitative research. The authors argue for a qualitative oriented mixed method approach to researching suicide in order to gain a better understanding of risk factors that surround suicidal behaviour.

¹⁰ For a similar approach to this distinction see Burr J A et al (1999); Johnson B D (1965) and Pope (1976). Pope (1976), one of the proponents of this position, argues that “given Durkheim’s basic theoretical perspective, to be integrated into a group is to be subjected to the moral authority of its rules. Structural integration and normative regulation simply represent different conceptualisations of the same social reality” (Pope, 1976: 34). Indeed Durkheim himself wrote that egoism and anomie “have a peculiar affinity for one another... We know that they are usually merely two different aspects of one social state; thus it is not surprising that they be found in the same individual.” (Durkheim, 1996: 288)

¹¹ In fact the suicides might be more accurately characterised as “ego-anomic”, a term used by Durkheim to refer to a “mixture of agitation and apathy of action and revery” (Durkheim, 1996: 293). However, this is not to dismiss or revise the theoretical distinction put forward by Durkheim: indeed researchers into suicide in other societies show the empirical relevance of making it (see, for example, Leavey, 1999; Halbwaack, 1978).

¹² For a detailed discussion of the respective perspective see Douglas (1966).

¹³ The LACCC was established in 1993 by the first generation Alevi migrants/refugees. With over 3,000 members it is one of the most active and popular community centres catering for the needs of Alevis in London. Beside being the only religious centre to provide funeral services for the Turkish and Kurdish Alevis in London, it functions as a cultural and political society. Although there are several community centres that cater for Turkish/Kurdish migrants in London, the LACCC is one of the leading centres and has done much work around issues of the second-generation Alevi youth. For example, the management organised several panels (all of which I attended and on two occasions was myself a panellist) to discuss issues such as suicide and gang memberships. The centre also organised marches to protest against violent (Kurdish/Turkish) gangs and to stop them recruiting young members from AK children in schools (see for example: <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-11325134>). Nevertheless, as an insider, a member of the AK community, I was not solely reliant on the LACCC or the spiritual leaders as the only “gatekeepers” into the community.

¹⁴ In 2010, my colleague Dr Celia Jenkins and I were approached by the LACCC to help address the “negative identity” of Alevi youth, which was seen as one of the primary “causes” of youth suicide. What emerged from discussions with the young people was their sense of isolation, particularly at school, where no one knew or understood their religion. They identified as “sort-of Muslim” to classmates but did not follow the same religious practices of prayer or fasting, and were subjected to bullying or ridicule for their beliefs. Working together with the LACCC and a primary school in London, which accommodated over ninety Alevi children, we introduced Alevism into the RE curriculum in order to help them develop a “positive” sense of cultural and religious identity and belonging to both their ethno-religious community and wider British society through education. The project received a positive response and has been highly successful. In 2012 we were invited by a group of Alevi pupils and the LACCC to introduce Alevism in a secondary school in London. This project has won the British Education Research Association (BERA) Prize for Joint Collaboration between Universities and Schools (see: <https://www.bera.ac.uk/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/Insights-9-Alevi-community-for-web.pdf>).

¹⁵ One of the most commonly held beliefs surrounding youth suicide was that they were killed, or forced to hang themselves, by the gangs to which they belonged for various reasons such as trying to steal money or drugs from the gang.

¹⁶ I am aware that the term “gang” is sociologically a contentious term but here reflects its use by the interviewees and also the wider public.

¹⁷ The LACCC is the only community centre that provides funeral services for the Alevis in London.

¹⁸ I have given talks to several Turkish/Kurdish community centres and interviews to the local and national Turkish/Kurdish newspapers. I highlighted the importance of the underlying structural dynamics rather than explanations that focused on the actions of individuals.

¹⁹ All names were changed for the purpose of anonymity and confidentiality.

²⁰ Hatice is the mother of Kerim (born in 1980), who committed suicide in 2003 at the age of 23. She migrated to the UK from her village bringing her four children to join her husband in 1990. She worked in the textile industry with her husband as a sewing machinist working from their home for a few years. She is still living with her husband and three children. After her son’s death she has been suffered from several mental and physical health issues.

²¹ As Hammersley (1989) argues, ethnographic field research involves a process of analytic induction where the concepts, theories, and methods develop in the process of research; hence they cannot be clearly defined in advance. It was this methodological principle that applies to the current research. It was initially formulated on the basis of a loose research design in order to identify and investigate themes as they emerged during the research process. This process corresponds to the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser and Strauss (1968) where there is an interaction between research data and key theoretical arguments uncovered from the literature with each being developed in relation to the other as the research unfolds.

²² To give one example: there is a complex interrelation between family interaction, dropping out of school, gang membership and the social context of transnational migration. The first-generation AKs in London had little knowledge of British society and often spoke little or no English and came to rely on their children, who were attending school, to act as translators and interpreters in their relations with UK authorities (whether to do with settlement, housing, legal or medical issues). This in some cases led to a role reversal whereby children gained power over their parents. It also meant that the demands put on the children led them to neglect their school studies. The children could cover up their poor performance at school whilst their parents still had expectations of them gaining a good education. The resulting intergenerational conflict could be seen as resulting in a classic example of Merton's situation of anomie (Merton, 1938). There existed a mismatch between the parents' and children's expectations. The children sought material goals but rejected the legitimate means expected by the parents of either finding work in the ethnic labour market (which meant relatively poor pay and long working hours) or higher paid jobs that required educational qualifications but which the children did not have. Instead the gangs provided an alternative means for both material success (although it did not come without its dangers and costs) and also a group with whom they could identify (especially as these gangs were premised initially on an opposition to "black" gangs).

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Dr Umit Cetin is a Lecturer in Sociology at the University of Westminster. He received his PhD from the University of Essex in 2014 on the subject of suicide amongst young Alevi-Kurds in London. Since 2010, together with Dr Celia Jenkins, he has undertaken research around education and Alevi identity of second generation Alevis in London. This project won the British Education Research Association Prize in 2014. He is currently researching migration and settlement patterns of Alevi Kurds in London and is also a partner in an Erasmus funded, international research project, examining the match/mismatch between the employment students find after graduation and their qualifications.