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# OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE AND SOCIAL MOBILITY OF SUICIDES IN NEW ZEALAND

AUSTIN L. PORTERFIELD AND JACK P. GIBBS

## ABSTRACT

In this analysis victims of suicide in New Zealand are ranked by class origin and class at death. The highest rank in occupational prestige attained by the father is taken as indicating the class of the victim's family of orientation; the victim's class is indicated by the prestige rank of his occupation at death. The data indicate that upper-class fathers produce more than their proportion of suicidal sons, that suicide rates are significantly higher among persons of high prestige, and that victims of suicide, born at whatever level, freely change position between generations on the prestige scale.

This analysis of the social circulation of suicides in New Zealand includes ranking of the victims by the prestige accorded to their occupations and a description of the route followed by victims from their position at birth to their position at death, with a consideration of its implication for suicidal behavior. Our foremost concern is with the dynamics of suicide, not static conditions surrounding the suicide at the time of his death, and we shall concentrate on his social situation from birth to death. A great deal of information has been secured on the social history of the 955 persons who committed suicide in New Zealand between 1946 and 1951.

The program of research by which we obtained this information was carried out by Jack P. Gibbs in Wellington, New Zealand.<sup>1</sup> Data on each case were gathered in several steps: (1) Suicides were identified by inspecting all coroner's reports on deaths in the dominion in the six-year period. (2) There was an attempt in each case to record all relevant testimony included in the coroner's report. (3) All demographic and social characteristics reported on death certificates were recorded. (4) The same step was repeated with birth certificates of victims born in New Zealand. (5) Finally, as part of a project supported by the National Science Foundation, the data were assembled and prepared for analysis at the Department of Sociology, University of Oregon. The data are such that the victims' pasts can be con-

<sup>1</sup>The data were gathered in 1951-52 with the support of a Fulbright grant and under the auspices of the New Zealand Education Foundation.

sidered from several points of view. We have selected the mobility of suicides as particularly worthy of consideration, since it is closely related to basic structural characteristics of societies and is a determinant of the fulfilment or frustration of social expectations.

The major problem of procedure is the establishment of a measure of prestige of occupational positions. This was needed in determining the distribution of suicides as reckoned by the difference between the prestige position of their families of orientation and their position as to occupational prestige at the time of death. We began with the traditional designation of classes as "lower," "middle," and "upper." These terms were applied first to the total male working population of New Zealand and then to males who had attained or passed the age of thirty-five years. In both cases our goal was to estimate the number of persons who belonged to upper, middle, or lower classes.<sup>2</sup>

The scores on the Congalton scale are based on the rank order assigned by four samples of 974 interviewees to thirty occupations, selected to represent all occupa-

<sup>2</sup>By the application of findings of A. A. Congalton's "Social Grading of Occupations in New Zealand" (*British Journal of Sociology*, IV [1953], 45-49) to the twenty-five occupational groups listed in the reports of the 1945 New Zealand census. The prestige scores are based on samples in Carterton, Feilding, and Wellington and on the responses of students in the Department of Psychology in Victoria University College. Census data are those compiled by the Census and Statistics Department (*Population Census, 1945: Industries and Occupations* [Wellington: Government Printer], IX, Table 6, 36-50).

tions, from the medical doctor to the road-sweeper. Congalton's scale is similar to the North-Hatt scale, the Hall-Jones scale, and the scores provided by the Taft scale.<sup>3</sup>

In the eyes of the interviewees the occupations in order of their prestige were: doctor, lawyer, company director, business manager, minister, public accountant, civil service head, works manager, farmer, primary-school teacher, jobbing master-builder, news reporter, commissioned policeman, commercial traveler, news agent or bookseller, fitter, routine clerk, insurance agent, carpenter, bricklayer, shop assistant, carrier, chef, tractor-driver, agricultural laborer, coal miner, railway porter, barman, wharf laborer, and road-sweeper.

By applying the Congalton scale to the occupations listed in the census reports, we estimated the total number of male workers and the number of males thirty-five or more years old on each of the three levels of prestige represented by Class I (ranks 1-9 in Congalton's scale), Class II (ranks 10-19), and Class III (ranks 20-29). (These class designations are our own, not Congalton's. Estimating the number of workers in each class on the basis of the Congalton scale was a tedious process, the results of which can be no more than tentative. For one thing, the scale does not cover all occupations listed in the census. Its application to the twenty-five occupations was made on a comparative basis, depending upon the judgment of the observer as to what occupations are comparable to those on the scale. Hence, while the process is not fully replicable, other persons employing the same procedure would probably arrive at estimates very similar to those made in Table I.

<sup>3</sup> Cecil C. North and Paul K. Hatt, "Jobs and Occupations: A Popular Evaluation," *Opinion News*, IX (September 1, 1947) (cf. Logan Wilson and W. L. Kolb, *Sociological Analysis* [New York: Harcourt, Brace & Co., 1949], pp. 464-73); John Hall and D. C. Caradog Jones, "Social Grading of Occupations," *British Journal of Sociology*, I (1950), 31-35; and Ronald Taft, "The Social Grading of Occupations in Australia," *British Journal of Sociology*, IV (1953), 181-88.

#### OCCUPATIONAL PRESTIGE OF THE VICTIMS OF SUICIDE

The occupations of the 689 male suicides of all ages were located along the Congalton scale, except that 14 without occupations or whose occupations are unknown were classed in rank 31 and a few pensioners were placed in rank 30. Those who were retired were accorded the prestige scores of the vocations they had pursued, and it was assumed that they should be included in our aggregate estimates but excluded in tests which concerned only active workers.

If we inquire whether suicides are distributed according to occupational prestige in much the same way as are all male workers, we discover that they are not (Table 1). The differences between the number of suicides observed and the number expected, from the total working population in each class, are great:<sup>4</sup> Class I had more than its share, while Classes II and III had less.

#### VICTIMS THIRTY-FIVE OR MORE YEARS OLD

The application of the Congalton scale to the occupations listed in the census for males thirty-five years of age or older leads to the results presented in Table 2 in terms of the number of active workers in each class in the designated age group. Table 2 also indicates the number of suicides which occurred in each class as compared with the number that would correspond with its proportion of the 270,000 active workers in all classes.

The 348 victims who belonged to this age-group of active workers were not distributed by classes in the statistically expected proportions. The differences in the number of suicides observed and expected in Classes I and III remain significant at a high level of confidence.<sup>5</sup>

It is difficult to estimate the class distribution of the male population over thirty-five years old which is retired, sick, of "independent means," or unemployed; but the

<sup>4</sup> Chi square, 43.41; with two degrees of freedom,  $P < .001$ .

<sup>5</sup> Chi square, 14.88; with two degrees of freedom,  $P < .01$ .

relation of the distribution of income to various levels of prestige makes it possible to move tentatively from estimates of the former to estimates of the latter. Data on the former are available.<sup>6</sup> By assuming that the per capita income of males in these categories was probably not more than two-fifths of their per capita income during employment, we placed all non-workers in the

<sup>6</sup> Estimated on the basis of data in the New Zealand *Population Census, 1945: Incomes* (Wellington: Government Printer, 1952), X, Table 2, 6-7.

designated categories with incomes of more than £225 a year in Class I, those with incomes of £100-£225 in Class II, and all with incomes of less than £100 in Class III. It is not likely that this procedure leaves the upper class underrepresented or overestimates the population of the lower class. The comparison of the distribution by classes, thus determined, of 175 suicides among non-workers in these groups is given in Table 3.

As shown in Table 3, the upper class of older non-workers contained a larger pro-

TABLE 1  
DISTRIBUTION BY PRESTIGE GROUPS OF CLASSES OF THE MALE  
WORKING POPULATION AND OF MALE SUICIDES  
IN NEW ZEALAND

Class	No. of Workers	Percentage of All Workers	No. of Suicides	No. Ex- pected*
I.....	90,000	19.2	200	132
II.....	130,000	27.7	171	191
III.....	250,000	53.1	318†	366
Total.....	470,000	100.0	689	689

\* Based on the percentage of the population of each class as shown in the table.

† Fourteen persons with no occupation are included in this number.

TABLE 2  
CLASS DISTRIBUTION OF ACTIVE MALE WORKERS THIRTY-FIVE  
OR MORE YEARS OLD AND OF 348 MALE SUICIDES OF CORRE-  
SPONDING AGE WHO WERE ACTIVE WORKERS AT DEATH

Class	No. of Workers	Percentage of All Workers	No. of Suicides	No. Ex- pected*
I.....	73,000	27.0	124	94
II.....	74,000	27.4	94	95
III.....	123,000	45.6	130	159
Total.....	270,000	100.0	348	348

\* Based on the percentage of the population in each class as shown in the table.

TABLE 3  
CLASS DISTRIBUTION OF SUICIDES AMONG THE NON-WORKING  
MALE POPULATION ABOVE THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF AGE

Classes	No. of Non-workers	Percentage of All Non- workers	No. of Suicides	No. Ex- pected*
I.....	12,500	18.9	52	33
II.....	16,500	25.0	43	44
III.....	37,000	56.1	80	98
Total.....	66,000	100.0	175	175

\* Based on the percentage of the population in the class as shown in the table.

portion of suicides than was found in the classes below. It is unlikely that these class differences are the result of chance.<sup>7</sup>

#### VERTICAL MOBILITY

The vertical mobility of suicides in New Zealand tends to be downward—sometimes sharply so—yet suicides occur in great numbers among men who are on the way up.

In the whole of New Zealand there appears a small aggregate deficit in the ranks of prestige gained and lost among the 523 male suicides thirty-five or more years old, as compared with the highest rank attained by their fathers. The 523 men fell 477 ranks below their fathers—an average loss of less

ward from one class to another—32 up and 24 down. Ninety-three remained in the class of their fathers, among whom 50 registered no change. In this small sample the intergenerational patterns of mobility were similar to those described by Morris Janowitz in West Germany in 1955.<sup>9</sup>

The interclass patterns of mobility of persons who become suicides may be observed more specifically in Table 4. Of the 523 male victims thirty-five or more years old, 233 originated in upper-class families. Of these, 119 had moved downward, with the result that upper-class fathers provided their own class with two-thirds of its suicidal sons and fathered nearly two-fifths of those

TABLE 4  
CLASS AT DEATH AND CLASS OF ORIGIN OF 532 MALE VICTIMS OF SUICIDE  
THIRTY-FIVE OR MORE YEARS OF AGE

CLASS AT DEATH			CLASS OF ORIGIN					
Class	No.	Per Cent	I		II		III	
			No.	Per Cent*	No.	Per Cent*	No.	Per Cent*
I.....	176	33.7	119	67.6	17	9.7	40	22.7
II.....	137	26.2	54	39.4	36	26.3	47	34.3
III.....	210	40.1	60	28.6	35	16.7	115	54.7
Total.....	523†	100.0†	233	44.6	88	16.8	202	38.6

\* Based on the number in the corresponding row of column 1.

† Totals refer both to columns 1 and 2 and to the corresponding subtotals in row 4.

than one rank per suicide. In the four major New Zealand cities—Auckland, Wellington, Christchurch, and Dunedin—the aggregate deficit in prestige positions was 614—an average of less than 3.3 ranks per suicide.

We have no adequate data on the aggregate prestige gains and losses in the succession of generations in New Zealand, but we did obtain a 2 per cent sample, chosen at random, among registrations of deaths attributed to natural causes in 1948.<sup>8</sup> Of these, 149 were males thirty-five or more years old, only 56 of whom passed upward or down-

ward from one class to another—32 up and 24 down. Ninety-three remained in the class of their fathers, among whom 50 registered no change. In this small sample the intergenerational patterns of mobility were similar to those described by Morris Janowitz in West Germany in 1955.<sup>9</sup>

Middle-class families bred only one out of six of all suicides, and only a little more than one-fourth of those who died in this manner in the middle class. Lower-class families bred 87 sons who went up, to die, 40 of them in the upper class. In all, 104 suicides moved up from their fathers' to a higher class; 149 moved down.

Many suicides are mobile to a very high degree. In the group above thirty-five years of age, 156 died after attaining an occupa-

<sup>7</sup> Chi square, 14.27; with two degrees of freedom,  $P < .01$ .

<sup>8</sup> The year 1948 was chosen as being near the middle of the whole period of study, 1946–51. The sample of 321 is almost exactly 2 per cent of the 15,812 deaths occurring in 1948. Of the 149 males in the sample above 35 years of age, 62.4 per cent were non-mobile, 21.5 per cent mobile upward, and 16.1 per cent mobile downward.

<sup>9</sup> Morris Janowitz, "Social Stratification and Mobility in West Germany," *American Journal of Sociology*, LXIV (1958), 6–24. Janowitz reports that, in 1955, persons on the middle school level were (*ibid.*, Table 9, p. 16) 58.7 per cent non-mobile, 22.1 per cent upwardly mobile, and 16.3 per cent downwardly mobile (cf. R. Bendix and S. M. Lipset [eds.] *Class, Status, and Power* [Glencoe, Ill.: Free Press, 1953], pp. 370–500).

tional prestige score 10 or more ranks above or below the highest attainment of their fathers. Of these, 90 moved downward and 66 upward. Here it should be observed that 60 moved down from the upper to the lower class, as compared with 18 who slipped to the middle class, and that 40 moved up from the lower to the upper class, as compared with 18 whose climb terminated in the middle class.

One may well ask whether tension in those who moved upward is not a factor in suicide, just as frustration in those who think of themselves as failures may be. If it is an influence among climbers, what are its sources?

There may be two sources of tension. The first relates to the lack of satisfying expectations and the threat of losing status; the second, to social mobility as tending to weaken social relationships.

Assuming that most fathers want their sons to exceed the parental attainments, that the sons would like to do so, and that society applauds them for doing it, those who fall far behind may suffer from a keen sense of failure. The frustration may be difficult to tolerate, particularly when a depressed status is accentuated by events which are perceived as catastrophes. On the other hand, the sons who have surpassed their fathers may feel greatly depressed by threats to their new status. As a consequence, the climbers may furnish a relatively high rate of suicides. Finally, it is suspected that both climbing and descending weaken social relationships and that weak social relationships are not conducive to a normal reaction to crisis.

#### MOBILITY AND CRISIS

In an effort to establish the frequency of crises preceding suicide among the climbers and the "sliders," as compared with those who maintained the status of their fathers, we matched, by age, each of 50 males who "stayed put" with (1) a man who fell 10 or more positions below his father on the Congalton scale and (2) a man who climbed at least 10 ranks above his father's highest attainment. We then examined the available

data on each case to determine whether some special crisis preceded the suicidal act.

Distinguishing the crisis cases is not easy, but every case included in that category involves suicide following shifts in social or medical situations which might be regarded as an added burden. If no new difficulty confronted the victim before the suicidal act, he was not included. If he had been isolated over a long period, as was often the case, but fell a victim to suicide without any apparent change in his situation, he was not included. If he had been long depressed and not subject to any new event which would be likely to increase his depression, he was not included. Said a physician:

This particular type of mental disease, "melancholia," is always accompanied by the urge to self-destruction, and the urge is independent of outside happenings or circumstances. The subsequent suicide is the result of the mental affliction, and not of an upset in their affairs.

Such cases we have not included. We regret that necessity precludes a description of individual cases here, and we recognize that the incompleteness of the case materials makes such an evaluation tentative at its best; but, for what it is worth, we concluded that 35 of the 50 climbers, 15 of those who "stayed put" on their father's level, and 26 of the sliders committed suicide after some precipitating event. For them the situation was a crisis. These differences are clearly significant only if our judgments are valid, but they lead us to make the comparisons which follow (Table 5).

#### COMPARATIVE BEHAVIOR OF CLIMBERS AND SLIDERS

The climbers and sliders, as we have indicated, were confronted with a crisis in more instances than were the non-mobile males. The differences observed in Table 5 are statistically significant.<sup>10</sup>

The climbers were confronted with loss of economic status more often than were the sliders or the non-mobile group.

Both climbers and sliders were confronted with a disruption of close personal ties in

<sup>10</sup> Chi square (crisis-no crisis differences), 16.08; with two degrees of freedom,  $P < .001$ .

more instances than were the non-mobile, with the sliders slightly exceeding the climbers in this respect.<sup>11</sup> It is difficult to determine from the cases what relationship climbing or sliding bears to the strength of social relationships. Yet differences of status between father and son may be an index of decline in their relationships in ways in which the data we have presented do not show.

It is possible that the suicide has low tolerance for frustration, whatever else enters into his behavior. He may have no major problems, as viewed by others, but may suf-

grass; the cows are starving. The cow kicked over a bucket of milk this morning, and that was the end of everything!" But this man's annual income was probably more than £750, and the current outlook was not as bad as he pictured it. Other victims suffer from headaches or worry about a slight scab in the nose, but we have not considered a scab in the nostril as a crisis.

Low tolerance of frustration, as a possible factor in suicide, is not proposed as an individual trait, unrelated to the past of the person. More data are needed on the sociogenic factors involved in personality devel-

TABLE 5  
CRISIS AMONG SUICIDES IN THREE AGE-MATCHED GROUPS OF MALES  
ABOVE THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF AGE

GROUP	TOTAL NO. OF CASES	NATURE OF CRISIS		Career Crisis*	Disrupted Social Relationships†	Health Poor‡
		NO CRISIS	CRISIS			
Climbers§ . . . . .	50	35	15	17	11	7
Sliders§ . . . . .	50	26	24	8	13	5
Non-mobile . . . . .	50	15	35	6	3	6
Total . . . . .	150	76	74	31	27	18

\* E.g., business failure, fear of business failure, loss of job.

† E.g., death of spouse or of close relative; divorce.

‡ E.g., impending surgery; diagnosis of cancer.

§ Climbers and sliders are persons who moved at least 10 ranks above or below the prestige positions of their fathers.

fer attrition from small adversities. "Why did you shoot yourself?" the doctor asked one dying victim. He replied, "There is no

<sup>11</sup> Our data on the marital status of the victims, which we are analyzing in a related study, may indicate the importance of non-economic expectations. For example, the average man or woman expects to marry. On this basis, if we predict a higher rate of suicide among single than among married males twenty-five to thirty-four or thirty-five or more, years old, our data sustain the prediction with a high level of confidence. The prediction holds for females twenty-five to thirty-four years old but is not sustained significantly among females above thirty-five years of age. Or, if we predict a higher rate of suicide among widows and widowers than among the married in the age range of thirty-five to sixty-four years, when bereavement is less expected than it is above the age of sixty-five, our data significantly support the prediction for both males and females below that age; but above it there are no significant differences for either sex. Comparisons are based on marital status data in *Population Census, 1945: Ages and Marital Status* (Wellington: Census Statistics Department, 1949), IV, Table 20, 40.

opment in order to understand human differentials in the tolerance of disappointments such as suicides suffer.

Nothing short of longitudinal case studies, which take account of the processes of the family conditioning of children who later, as adults, develop suicidal tendencies will give us an understanding of some of the conditions to be considered in an adequate analysis of suicidal acts. Such longitudinal studies would make it possible to observe class differences in psychogenic conditioning which could play a part in producing variations in the ability to tolerate frustration. Do upper-class children have a lower tolerance of frustration than those in the lower class? In the United States? In New Zealand? We do not know. Our data give us no answer to this question.

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