

Banning 'suicide' from the syllabus: We need a more sensitive pedagogic style without having recourse to bans.

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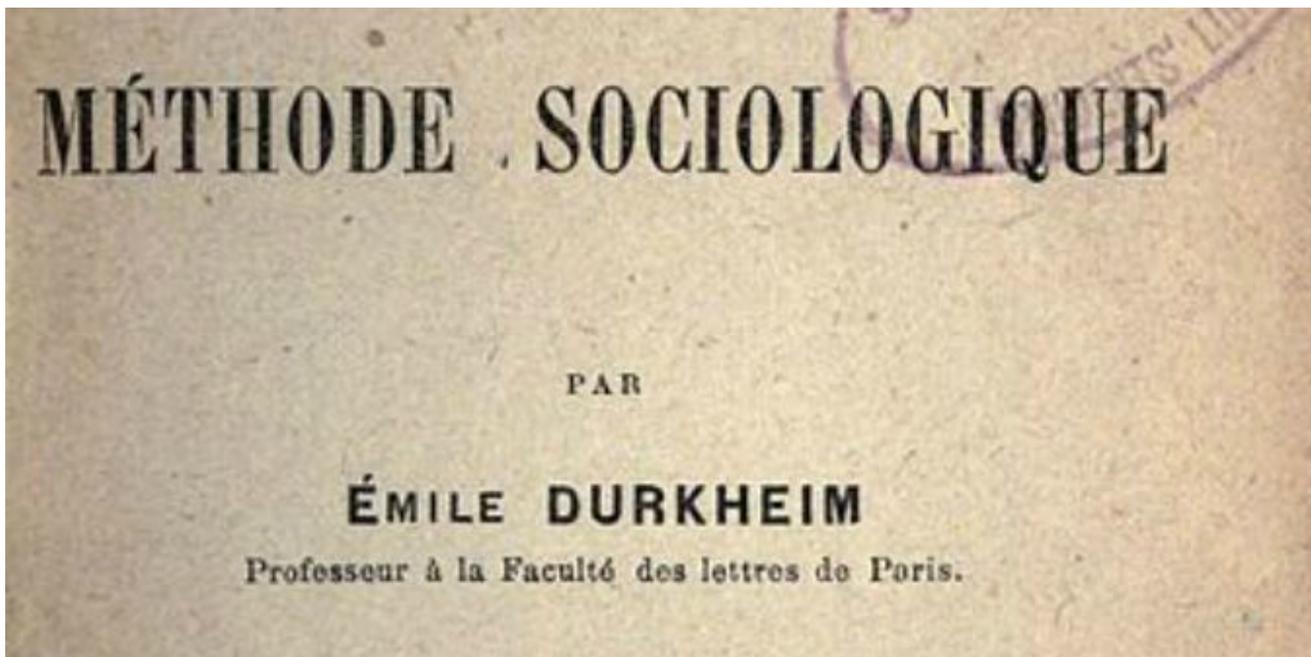
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AQA's decision to ban references of suicide from textbooks has been met with criticism from the sociology community. [Anaïs Duong-Pedica](#) argues it is naïve to assume that young people will never have encountered the idea of suicide prior to their A-levels. Refusing to engage with suicide in the classroom also marginalises students' own experiences of suicide. Rather, measures should be put in place with and for students to accommodate the teaching and learning of sensitive topics such as suicide.



About two months ago, The Guardian published an article on AQA's – the largest provider of academic qualifications in the UK and the largest exam board for sociology A-levels – decision to [drop suicide from its syllabus](#). As a result, references to suicide in textbooks will be removed and sociology students will no longer be examined on the topic. It is important to note that this mainly concerns Emile Durkheim's *Suicide*, published in 1897, which is considered a seminal sociological work and continues to be used by those working in the field of suicide studies.

Suicide is used in the sociology classroom to demonstrate the significance of sociological research and method to make sense of the world, revealing that suicide rates are indeed social facts. Durkheim's work on suicide, however, is rooted in quantitative modes of thinking and represents a partial, indirect and non-relational understanding of suicide as a social phenomenon. Durkheim demonstrates the need for sociological thinking and method and does so by reducing ('suicidal') individuals to numbers. Consequently, individual experiences of suicides are lost in the statistical mass. As geographers [Balayannis and Cook have argued](#), academic knowledge on suicide is based on an epistemological process of scaling 'wherein the affective, emotional, and material aspects of self-destruction are rendered irrelevant, or at worst, made invisible'.



Cover of the French edition of [The Rules of the Sociological Method](#) by Emile Durkheim (Public Domain)

It is within this context that I question the justification given by AQA qualifications manager, Rupert Sheard, who stated that the organisation had 'a duty of care to all those students taking our course to make sure the content isn't going to cause them undue distress'. The Guardian article does not mention any case of students who have voiced their concern about the course, nor who have felt 'distressed' about it. On the contrary, it cites two A-levels students who seem to disagree with the decision: 'I don't think it's worth stopping teaching something because of that,' and 'when you're hiding stuff from [students] in school, it's just going to make things difficult for them'. The only distressed individual in this news story seems to be a teacher, Maria, who admits feeling uncomfortable at the thought of teaching suicide to a class in which one of the students had previously attempted suicide: 'I felt really nervous. I was half hoping this student might be absent, so I could teach the topic without her there'. I was stunned when reading this passage as it raised a few questions for me: do sociology teachers really assume that what they teach is only conceptual? Had Maria not been aware of the fact that one of her students had attempted suicide, would she have felt less nervous about teaching suicide to her class?

This reminds me of Sara Ahmed's powerful piece entitled [Against Students \(2015\)](#) in which she discusses contemporary representations of students as threats to education and free speech. It is striking that even though AQA's justification centres around students' welfare, we are learning more about the teachers' emotions than we are learning about the students' experiences. I was stricken to read that in this case, the teacher solved her issue (Ahmed would call this 'strategy of dismissal') by making sure that she taught suicide focusing only on methodology, and not giving any opportunity for personal discussion. Here, avoiding personal discussion appears to be perceived as positive. Ignoring suicide in a sociology syllabus and refusing to engage with suicide from the perspective of the individual is not only dangerous but also violent. It marginalises individuals' experiences of suicide (whether personal or bereaved) by making it taboo and reinforcing the stigma of suicide. Thus, ignoring the topic of suicide in A-levels robs the students from an opportunity to discuss their cultural encounters with suicide, but also, perhaps, their personal experiences with suicide as well as the ways in which sociology engages with the topic and can provide tools to make sense of it.

I suspect that the teacher's unease with teaching suicide to students who potentially have attempted suicide could also be related with discomfort around teaching subjects about their own experiences and 'objectifying' them by making them the objects of research. However, it is naïve to assume that young people will never have encountered

the idea of suicide prior to their A-levels. Suicide is on TV, in films, in the news, in literature, in art, on the Internet... Suicide is not just a concept or an idea. Suicide is a lived experience whether by experiencing suicidal thought, attempting suicide, killing oneself or by experiencing the death of a relative or friend by suicide. In the sociology classroom, we teach real issues to individuals with histories. Our students aren't empty vessels that are waiting to be filled with our knowledge. We have to be open to the idea that some students will be more knowledgeable than us by the mere fact that they have experienced or experience what we teach them. It is the case for suicide just like it is the case for sexism, racism and many more sociological topics.



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Amongst the few reactions to AQA's decision was sociologist Frank Furedi's who argues that there is a growing '[medicalisation of the curriculum and the classroom](#)' that is notably characterised by the use of trigger-warnings. Furedi comments that this 'trend' is a 'menace haunting education'. I would strongly disagree with what I see as another good example of 'vigorous sweeping' (Ahmed 2015) that diverts the attention from the discussion on sensitivity and everydayness of sociology topics to a dismissal of what is perceived as being a result of the over-sensitivity of some students. Trigger-warnings are used in university and political spaces (online and offline) to warn people about the 'emotionally difficult content' of a material or discussion so that people can decide to stay in the room (offline) or the group (online) or alternatively, avoid the material or discussion altogether in full knowledge of its content.

Furedi seems to misunderstand the use of trigger-warnings, as he appears to believe that they are solely related to mental or emotional health (and I would encourage anyone who is not on board with trigger-warnings to read recent pieces on the topic such as [Sara Ahmed's \[2015\]](#) or [Lindy West's \[2015\]](#)). Whilst it is true that in some groups, the realness of some topics (sexual violence, racism, death, etc.) may be a threat to individuals' emotional well-being, trigger-warnings are used to warn people about the content of a material as well as the possible discussions that may arise from it. For example, if a sociology teacher was to use trigger-warnings in a class about suicide, they may trigger-warn discussions around suicide being a selfish act, or 'dumb' or 'lazy'. As popular perceptions of suicide, they are likely to arise in a classroom and cause distress to a 'suicidal' student or to a student whose relative has attempted or died by suicide. Another example would be in a class about sexual violence where a teacher might want to trigger-warn victim-blaming discussions. This allows for students who have had 'difficult experiences' to psychologically prepare themselves for a class or discuss their potential distress with the teacher in advance.

Unlike Furedi, I do not believe that these measures serve 'to diminish the experience of education'. On the contrary, they make it richer by allowing students and teachers to engage with the personal as well as the political and to acknowledge that the personal IS political and vice versa. I agree that 'whether the content of a particular text causes distress to students cannot be determined according to a pre-existing formula' (Furedi 2015), but I stress that whether a content is distressful or not should come from students – who should be encouraged to be critical about what they study – and should be followed by measures put in place with and for students to accommodate the teaching and learning of sensitive topics such as suicide.

Note: This article gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the Impact of Social Science blog, nor of the London School of Economics. Please review our [Comments Policy](#) if you have any concerns on posting a comment below.

About the Author

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