

## Strain Theory and Suicide Ideation

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### ABSTRACT

The purpose of the current study is the inquiry of the relationships between socioeconomic status, parental control, feeling of relative deprivation and suicide ideation. A sample of 310 university students was required to fill up self-report questionnaires pertaining to the research variables. Results suggested that SES, parental control, relative deprivation and suicide ideation have significant correlations with each other. To test the theoretical model, path analysis using Beta coefficients was applied. Findings suggested that SES affects the suicide ideation via relative deprivation and parental control, but it does not have direct influence on suicide ideation. Results were elaborated with regard to the strain theories' propositions most notably Robert Agnew's General Strain Theory (GST).

**KEYWORDS:** suicide ideation, strain theory, SES, parental control, relative deprivation.

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### 1. INTRODUCTION

Suicide has been psychologically and sociologically investigated as it is a personality as well as structural related factor. Suicide is a factor that represents the social pressure and structural influence in micro-level or individual behavior (Durkheim, 1966). Previous studies on suicide have investigated different features of it like tendency to die, tendency to commit suicide, having suicidality, planning to commit suicide, and finally those suicide actions that lead to death. Having thought of, planning and committing suicide considered as dangerous features of it showing that there is little information about suicide in Iran; however, the existing incomplete and rudimentary information, the rate of suicide is so high (Malakouti, et al., 2009). The suicide by burn, as a very rare kind of committing suicide, has high prevalence in Iran in which four attempts out of total 11 daily suicide attempts in Iran were done by burn (Ahmadi & Ytterstad, 2007) demonstrating the suicide itself and the burning method of doing it is surprisingly high in this region. Kurdistan has one of the highest rates of suicide by Burn not only in Iran but also in the world (Groohi, Rossignol, Barrero, & Alaghebandan, 2006). In addition high rate of suicide attempts by burn was found in Fars province of Iran (Lari, Alaghebandan, Panjeshahin, & Joghataei, 2009). Generally speaking, studies found that from 1000 suicide actions 25-100 attempts lead to death (Moradi & Khademi, 2002).

It seems that the suicidality in developing countries like Iran is not due to the psychological problems but a result of socio-economical pressures. For instance, in general, the quality of life was pointed as one of the influential factors on suicidality (Sheikholeslami, Kani, & Ziaee, 2011). It should be noted that if the existence of the suicide within community becomes problematic, it would be so harmful for the mental health of the society in one hand and would bring severe societal consequence on the other. Unfortunately, the domestic studies have not given enough attention to the issue of suicidality especially among young population of Iran. The university students' community, however, is mostly prone for suicide due to their special lifestyle.

#### General Strain Theory

Robert Agnew (1992) proposed a theory known as General Strain Theory (GST) which it investigates the social pressure in micro level. While Merton (1968) tried to explain the differences of socioeconomic status' effect on crime, Agnew demonstrates that individuals with higher pressure and strain are more likely to commit crimes. Instead of emphasizing the macro level which refers to the structural inequality, Agnew takes the micro psycho-social factors into consideration (Moon, Blurton, & McCluskey 2008). From General Strain Theory, deviant behaviors are kind of adjustment strategies to strain resources and are responses to the anger (Broidy & Agnew, 1997).

Deviant behaviors are the direct result of negative and adverse emotions, anger, and frustration. There are two major sources of strain which have been applied in this study. First one is about the existence of stimulants which are negative for the individual, referring to the negative experiences that the person had faced them like child abuse, being victim of crime, or being paid no attention. Another source of strain is due to the gap between the expectation and what have been achieved, which occurred when individuals compare themselves with those of more successful (Agnew, 1992). It should be noted that strains are not necessarily objective. There is a distinction

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between subjective and objective strains (Agnew, 2001). Agnew (2001) defined the objective strain as a “dislike by most members of a given group” (p. 320). Conditions or multiple events including physical attack, financial problems, and being victim of deviant activities are considered as objective strains. The subjective strains include activities that are “disliked by people who are experiencing (or have experienced) them” (Agnew, 2001, p. 321). He discussed that individuals evaluate objective strain differently which their evaluation depends on many factors like personality traits, available social sources, or the living conditions. The strains either subjective (like relative deprivation) or objective (such as dictatorial behavior of parents) can end up with anger; and introjections of anger can propel the person toward committing behaviors like suicide and suicidality.

Agnew states that individuals who respond to pressured and stressful situations with depression, despair, and disappointment might end up with inner-directed delinquency like drug usage as these individuals do not have strong motivation to revenge. This type of deviance is a different method of adjustment with strain that the key element to face it is to escape or manipulate these negative emotions (Drapela, 2000).

More importantly, all of strain sources do not lead to behavioral problems in the same way. Agnew believed that stressful and pressured events propel crime and deviance when they seem to be unfair, to be in high level, to have low social control, or come along with an incentive to engage in deviated adjustment (Slocum, Simpson, & Smith, 2005).

Annoying behavior of parents can be a source of pressure either subjectively or objectively which could lead to anger and one of the consequences would be the suicide. For instance, it has been shown that perception of parent’s neglect and rejection during childhood significantly predict the lifetime suicide attempts (Ehnavall, Parker, Hadzi-Pavlovic, & Malhi, 2008). In addition, it was found that the parent-child conflict will influence the children suicide (Kuhlberg, Peña, & Zayas, 2010).

### **Relative deprivation theory**

Relative deprivation has two components: emotional and cognitive. The cognitive aspect is about the comparison and perceiving the dissimilarities of individuals. The emotional aspect of relative deprivation, however, refers to the discontent following the negative-based comparison. Thus, one of the basic issues in relative deprivation theory is the subjective intergroup or intragroup comparison between the people’s lives (Roxane, Taylor, Perozzo, & Sadykova, 2009). The theory of relative deprivation is focused on the effects stemming from feeling of deprivation on behaviors, attitudes, and satisfaction. This theory emphasized that the economic deprivation is a relative matter and depends on the reference group of which the person is doing comparison with. The higher living standard the reference group has, regardless of the other factors like the objective conditions, the more feeling of deprivation the person would experience which this feeling has attitudinal and behavioral consequences for him/her as well (Bernburg, Thorlindsson, & Sigfusdottir, 2009; Stiles, Liu, & Kaplan, 2000). Moreover, it is determined that the relative deprivation has adverse psychological and behavioral consequences (Turley, 2002). Anomie theorists (Robert Merton, 1938; Robert Merton, 1968) in one hand and relative deprivation theorists (Blau & Blau, 1982; R. K. Merton & Rossi, 1968), on the other hand, have emphasized that the feeling of deprivation leads to anger and anomie/normlessness. Anger and anomie can mediate the relationship between relative deprivation and the deviance behavior (Bernburg, et al., 2009). Thus, the relative deprivation, to some extent, should be considered a mental pressure. For instance, it was found that the relative deprivation (Zhanga, Wiczorek, Conwell, & Tuc, 2011) and economical pressure (Stack & Wasserman, 2007) have influence on suicide of juveniles in China.

### **Socioeconomic status, relative deprivation, and parental control**

Socioeconomic status can have determinate role in parenting styles (M. Kohn, 1977; M. L. Kohn & Schooler, 1969). Lower socioeconomic status’ occupations tend to encourage the obedient to authority value and workers of such occupation transfer such condition and strategy to their family environment and expect their children to follow this strategy as well (M. Kohn, 1977). Therefore, the parents of such social class expect compliance from children and suppress any kind of transgression from their demands, and they are indeed using the authoritarian strategy in their parenting (Gecas & Seff, 1989; Heimer, 1997; M. Kohn, 1977). Some domestic studies also showed that the lower socioeconomic status would increase the probability of the perceived authoritarian parental control (Heydari, 1389/2010; Nasiri, 2009/1388).

On the other hand, relative deprivation is the result of the gap between expectations and what the person owns in reality. The objective properties of the person obtained out of his/her position in social structure and thus it is expected lower socioeconomic groups to have a bigger gap due to their limitation in accessibility for the means to achieve their aspirations and expectations. Therefore, regarding to the Merton (1968, 1938), it is possible to claim that socioeconomic status is related to relative deprivation which relative deprivation can lead to suicidality as well.

## METHODOLOGY

The sample of this research consisted of 330 students randomly chosen from Shahid Chamran University, Ahvaz, Iran. Twenty of them were deleted from scoring as they did not complete the questionnaire. 130 of students were male and 180 were female. The age range of the participants were 18-29 (M = 21.9 & Std. D = 2.38).

### Instruments

Four questionnaires were required from participants to fill up that includes socioeconomic status, relative deprivation, parental control, and suicidality.

*Subjective Socioeconomic Status (SES).* We measured SES from subjective aspect. Subjective SES scale (Nabavi, Hosseinzade, & Hosseini, 2009/1387) comprises of six items which should be answered based on their perception of their situation in social class. Examples of the items are "how do people evaluate your father's occupational status? What do you think?" and "If we divide people into five economical classes, in which class do you consider your family?" Alpha Cronbach of this scale is .81. This coefficient in Nabavi et al.'s study was .71.

*Perceived Parental Control Scale.* To assess this variable, a 10-item scale of Perceived Parental Control (Shek, 2006) was used. Some of the items are "my parent always wants to change my thoughts", "my parent thinks that his/her thoughts are more important than my thoughts", "my parent always wants to change me to fit their standards". The answers were in 5-point Likert-format ranging from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". Sum of the items' score is considered as indicator of parental control which higher score implying more restrictive and more control on individuals. For the reliability, alpha cronbach of .87 was obtained.

*Relative deprivation.* This construct was assessed by 7 items developed by Heydari (1989/2009). The items are in accord with the mindset of the adolescents evaluating the deprivation feeling of them through comparison with others. The items were designed using both negatively and positively-worded format and the response format was ranged from "completely agree" to "completely disagree". Some items of the scale are "When I compare my properties with others, I have deprivation feeling" and "When I compare my own condition with other peers, I feel happiness". The alpha Cronbach of this scale is 0.76.

*Suicidality.* Five items were designed to measure suicidality. These items arranged on 5-point likert format from "extremely high" to "never". These items are as follow: "Sometimes I think of suicide", "Occasionally, suicide cover my thought thoroughly", "I think suicide is the best way when someone reached a deadlock", "If I reach a stage of life that I could not do anything for my life, I commit suicide", and "once in a while I think of easiest way of committing suicide". Alpha coefficient for this scale was 0.88.

## RESULTS

Table1 showed descriptive statistics of research variables. According to Table 1, suicide ideation is not an intense problem in university students because that mean score of suicidality is 4.87 and maximum score of suicidality scale is 20. But mean scores of feeling of relative deprivation and parental control are high (Mean: 19.71 and 29.45 respectively, maximum total score: 35 and 50 respectively). Other descriptive statistic is shown in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of the research variables

	Relative deprivation	Suicidality	Parental Control	Subjective SES
Mean	19.71	4.87	29.45	14.38
Std. D.	5.72	5.00	10.10	4.07

Correlation among the research variables was shown in Table 2. According to Table 2, suicidality has significant correlation with all independent variables and correlation between all independent variables is also significant.

Table 2. Correlation between SES, parental control, relative deprivation, and suicidality

	Subjective SES	Relative deprivation	Parental Control	Suicidality
SES	-	-	-	-
Relative deprivation	-.36**	-	-	-
Parental Control	-.14*	.43**	-	-
Suicidality	-.19**	.31**	.22**	-

\*\* Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

\* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

For testing the theoretical model, path analysis was applied. Three equations were designed to do so. In first equation, feeling of relative deprivation was regressed on subjective class. Results suggested that

independent variable explain 12.6% of the variation of relative deprivation. The effect of subjective SES on relative deprivation was significant,  $B = -.50$ ,  $\beta = -.36$ ,  $t = -6.68$ ,  $p < .000$  (Table 3).

Table 3. Standard multiple regression analyses between Subjective SES (as predictor variables) and relative deprivation (as dependent variable)

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Constant	26.90	1.12		24.05***
Subjective SES	-.50	.07	-.36	-6.68***

$R^2 = .12$ , \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

In second equation, parental control was regressed on subjective SES. Results suggested that independent variable explains 2 % of the variation of parental control. The effect of SES on parental control was significant,  $B = -.34$ ,  $\beta = -.13$ ,  $t = -2.43$ ,  $p < .05$  (Table 4).

Table 4. Standard multiple regression analyses between Subjective SES (as predictor variables) and Parental Control (as dependent variable)

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	t
Constant	34.354	2.096		16.391***
Parental control	-.341	.140	-.14	-2.431*

$R^2 = .02$  \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

In third equation, as shown in Table 5, suicidality was regressed on subjective SES, parental control and relative deprivation. Independent variables explain 11% of the variation of suicidality. Only the effect of parental control  $B = .06$ ,  $\beta = .12$ ,  $t = 1.90$ ,  $p < .05$  and relative deprivation  $B = .19$ ,  $\beta = .21$ ,  $t = 3.32$ ,  $p < .01$  was significant.

Table 5. Standard multiple regression analyses between subjective SES, parental control, and relative deprivation (as predictor variables) and suicidality (as dependent variable)

Variable	B	SE	$\beta$	T
Constant	.244	1.756		.14
Subjective SES	-.124	.072	-.101	-1.74
Parental Co.	.057	.030	.125	1.90*
Relative Deprivation.	.189	.057	.214	3.32**

$R^2 = .11$  \* =  $p < .05$ , \*\* =  $p < .01$ , \*\*\* =  $p < .001$

Thus, it seems that SES influence suicidality indirectly via relative deprivation and parental control effects on suicidality implying full mediation effect of relative deprivation and parental control for SES relation with suicidality. Figure 1 shows suggested model with Beta coefficient of the paths.

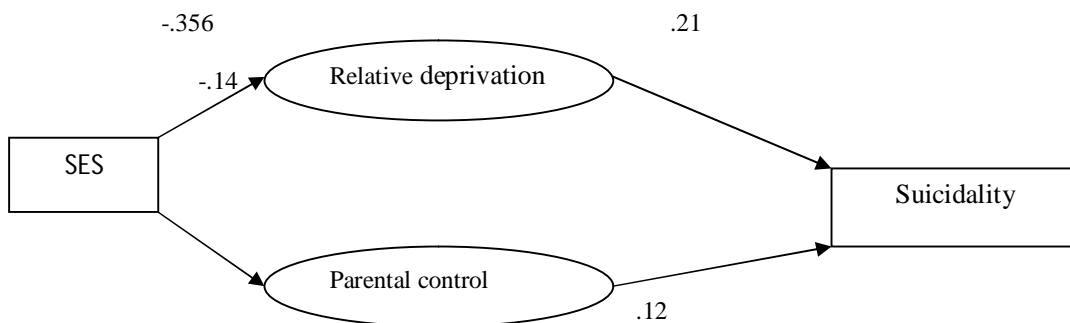


Figure 1. The result of path analysis with the Beta coefficients

## DISCUSSION

As mentioned earlier, unfortunately, the issue of suicide in Iranian society has been looked as a psychological problem rather than a sociological one while every psychic issue originates in societal condition as well. In other words, the mental outputs of individuals can be considered as a representation of social structure in individual level. As was found in the present study, some of the social groups, lower social classes, are more susceptible of committing suicide due to their psychological and socio-economical pressure they have undergone. The present study is the first domestic research looking to the issue of suicide from sociological point of view by applying Robert Agnew strain theory in structural context based on Merton and Kohn's works. Findings confirmed that this issue should be considered a social fact in order to achieve more effective solution for it.

Based on the results of the current study, strain theory can be used for explaining suicide phenomenon. Sources of strain such as relative deprivation and parental authoritarian control can lead to suicide ideation in university students. As a result, it is logical to conclude, suicide ideation can be interpreted as introjected anger; when there is no opportunity for projecting the anger, it leads to self destructive behaviors such as suicide and suicidality. On the other hand, findings illustrate that strain theory can be tested in the structural context as socioeconomic status is an indicator of structural pressure which the result confirms Kohn and Merton theory.

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