

The Role of Reference Group in Suicide: A Sociological Study

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Abstract

Suicide is not a phenomenon in isolation. It is a reflection of society which has become deaf to the emotional calls of the people. According to WHO (World health organization) every year close to 8, 00, 000 people died due to suicide which is one person every 40 seconds.[1] Suicide is not an individual act, as it involves further aspects. This research paper aims to acknowledge the influence of reference group (family, friends, and communities) in the commitment of suicide. For this research study, mixed method research methodology was followed, questionnaire was passed to 60 respondents of age (18-30) years. The research found that reference groups have an important role in the causation of suicide or suicidal behavior which is based on factors such as age, gender, educational qualification, sociological view, social disorganization, retaliation, role and class etc. This paper further tested the classification of suicide given by Emile Durkheim based on integration and regulation in Society.

Key words: *Suicide, suicide in India, committed suicide, integration, regulation, reference group, sociological view, stereotype, social disorganization, gender and role.*

Introduction

Suicide is a consciously decided act for permanent physical disappearance from this world. Although this is a psychological phenomenon but the forces which compels people to commit suicide is certainly sociological. According to NCRB (National Crime Record Bureau) each year above 1,00,000 people commit suicide in India. A total of 1,39,123 suicides were reported in the country during 2019.[2] This is the third most significant reason of death in 15–19-year-olds. Each suicide is a catastrophe that impacts families, communities and friends.

Suicide - the ultimate rebellion of an individual against the choking society, is a very dangerous trend. Encyclopedia Britannica defines Suicide as “the act of voluntary and intentional self-destruction.” “Will’ and ‘Knowledge are two important features of the act of Suicide. Suicide involves the ‘Will’ of the person, which concurrences and to accept in willing destruction, and Knowledge’ that death is being preferred to life and that reason in person concerned is aware of and has acknowledged this is a fact and accepted it as indispensable and unavoidable.

Caven (1928) has defined suicide as the intentional taking of one’s life or the failure, when possible, to save one’s self when death threatens. Menninger (1938) defined ‘Suicide involves hate, guilt feelings and hopelessness in varying degrees. [3] On the basis of these definition of suicide it can be said that it is a self-effort for self-destruction but it is also a sociological phenomenon in the perception that there are different types of Suicide, methods are also different as the causes responsible for Suicide also exist outside the victim so the consequences are not only on him or her but also on the family and the society.

In studying individual and group behavior, and in the study of social mobility, both individual and group, “reference group theory” is of great help. Reference Group was introduced by Herbert Hyman in “Archives of Psychology” (1942). Robert King Merton an American Sociologist in the 20th century developed this concept into the theory as “reference group theory”. [4]

A reference group is a group to which an individual or another group is compared, used by sociologists in reference to any group that is used by an individual as a standard for evaluating themselves and their own behavior. More simply, as explained by Thompson and Hickey (2005), such groups are ones "that people refer to when evaluating their [own] qualities, circumstances, attitudes, values and behaviors."

To evaluate and determine the nature of a given individual or other group's characteristics and sociological attributes, reference groups are referred. It's the group with which the individual relates or aspires to relate him or herself psychologically. It becomes the individual's frame of reference and source for ordering his or her experiences, perceptions, cognition, and ideas of self. It is important for determining a person's self-identity, attitudes, and social ties.

French Sociologist and an Authority on Suicide, Emile Durkheim (1897) wrote a book Suicide: A Study in Sociology (French: Le Suicide: Etude de sociologie). This was the first methodological study of a social fact in the context of society. Durkheim concluded that suicide is a concrete social problem embedded in level of social integration; therefore, the differences in suicide are a function of social integration. Thus, the motive for suicide is primarily based in the collective conscience charter of social group. Indeed, recognizing that there isn't a single circumstance that explains suicide Durkheim identified four forms of suicide, which act as an index of the various states of social integration: 1) Egoism, 2) Anomie, 3) Fatalism, and 4) Altruism. Durkheim came to the conclusion that the degree to which individuals are integrated into a group could motivate these various forms of suicide or social action. [5]

- French Sociologist, Emile Durkheim (1897) defined “the term Suicide is applied to all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result.
- Committed suicide: The fatal act of self-injury undertaken with conscious self-destructive intent, howsoever vague and ambiguous, and so recorded in the police registers and records.

History of Suicides in India

Suicides have occurred since the beginning of recorded history, with attitudes towards it varying from condemnation to tolerance. In India, suicide acts have been referred to in ancient works in terms of ATMAGHATAKA' classifying the suicides.

In Indian context there are so many views in suicide. The Brahma-Purana says that an individual who enacts suicide should be treated as MAHAPATAKA or cardinal sins. Such persons should not be cremated nor should usual funeral rites be performed for them.

In the ARTHASHASTRA, Kautilya prescribed extreme sanction for those who commit suicide. Manu the great Hindu law-giver, in Manusmriti says that no water is to be offered for the benefit of the souls of those who kill themselves.

Thus, we see that all DHARMSHASTRAS denounce suicide ardently and prescribe post-mortuary penalties. But as would appear from the following instances that suicides on religious grounds were permitted and there were people who committed suicide for their selfish motives despite religious structures.

In the PURANAS and SMRITIS though suicide were as a whole condemned, there were five exceptions to it:

- Sati where women burnt themselves on the funeral pyres of their husband.
- Suicide by drowning in the Ganga and Yamuna and self-cremation at the tirthas.
- People suffering from incurable diseases or who were too old to do their religious duties and terminated their lives voluntarily by drowning, starvation, self-cremation and so on.
- Ascetics wanting to commit suicide.
- Terminating one's life towards the end by MAHAPRASTHANA (Starting on a great journey) was a recognized form of exit from this world.

Sati and Jauhar

In as pointed out earlier, suicides under certain situations such as in practice of Sati, where a Hindu widow burnt herself on the funeral pyre of her husband were glorified. Another situation was JAUHAR wherein the Rajput royal women burnt themselves in a mass pyre lest they should fall into the hands of their enemy.

Actually, speaking this was also a form of mass suicide. The defeat of RanaSanga resulted in Jauhar of the females of Royal clan, when Sultan Alla-ud-Din attacked Jaisalmer, the Rajput princess embraced JAUHAR.

In the YAGYAVALKYA MITAKSARA 'She', who follows her husband in death dwells in heaven for as many years as there are hairs on the human body, "viz 3.5 crores of years".

Data Analysis & Interpretation

Theme 1: *General Information*

When we discuss suicide in sociological perspective, there is a significant role played by the "Reference Group". In this theme I took educational qualification and how it plays a role in suicide.

According to Table 1, the collected data were of 60 respondents, out of which (43%) of them belonged to the age group of 18-20 and (40%) belonged to the age group of 20-22, this showed that major reference group belongs to the age group of (18-26) and how they influence the suicidal behavior. In the Gender Category (38.3%) were Male, (60%) were Female and (1.6%) were others. This data showed the Frame of Mind of each gender regarding suicide. The Educational Qualification of respondents were of (21.6%) in Higher Secondary, (68.3%) in Under-Graduate and (10%) in post-graduate. This data shows how the qualification of the reference group affects the understanding of suicide.

Table 1: Role of Age, Gender and Educational Qualification in Understanding Suicide

Age	NoR	Gender	NoR	Educational Qualification	NoR
18-20	26	Male	23	Higher- Secondary	13
18-21	24				
18-22	4	Female	36	Under-Graduate	41
18-23	5				
18-24	0	Others	1	Post-Graduate	6

* NoR= Number of Respondents.

Theme 2: *Dealing Suicide*

In this theme I found out how reference group deals with the suicidal behavior of individuals, (70%) responded, they would approach the concerned individual, (11.7%) will inform the family and (18.3%) responded with the perception that they will go by alternate approach to understand their condition and aid them.

Respondents have observed that (26.7%) of society “Always stereotype”, while (65%) “Sometimes stereotype” suicide and the individual dealing with it.

Theme 3: *Suicide’s Sociological View*

As stated by Emile Durkhiem, Suicide isn’t only a psychological issue but sociological too. As per the data collected (91.7%) respondents considered Suicide a social issue to be dealt with. While Figure 1 “Suicide as a Problem”, shows that (13.3%) respondents considered it as social problem, (3.3%) as a psychological problem and (83.3%) as both.

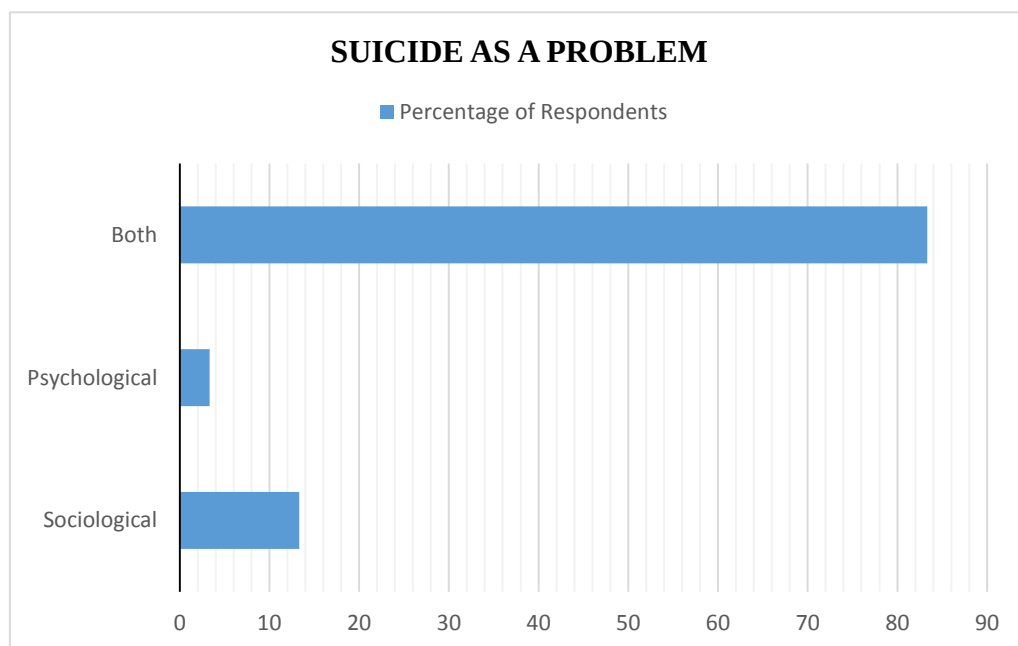


Fig - 1: Suicide as a Problem

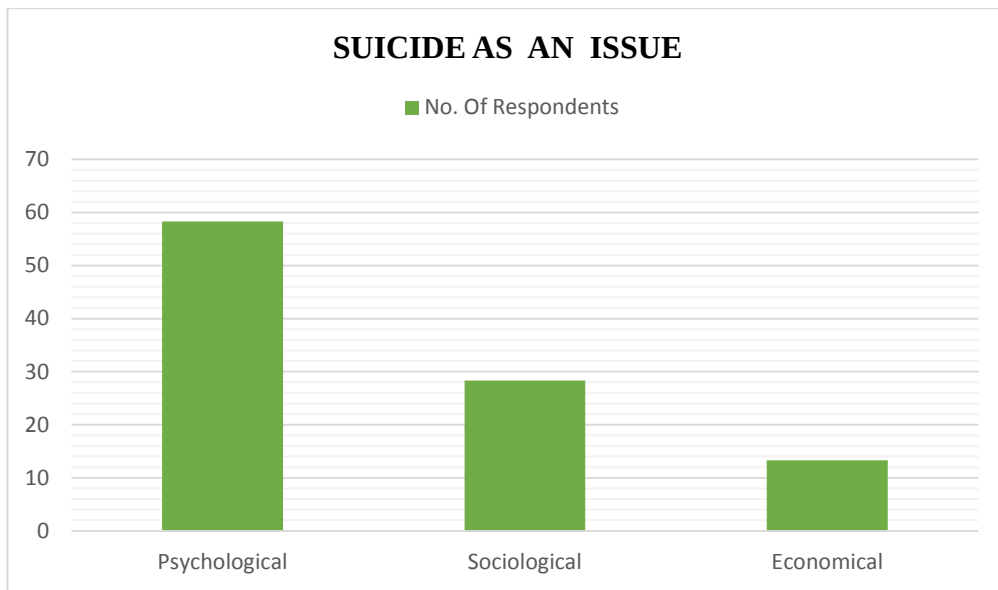


Fig - 2: Suicide as an Issue

With the formation of Fig - 2 “Suicide an Issue”, it is concluded that (58.3%) respondents considered it as a psychological issue, (28.3%) as sociological issue and (13.3%) as economical issue.

Theme 4: *Social Disorganization*

Society is a system. It is a network of social relationships. These relations exist between individual to individual. When there is harmony in these relations, society functions smoothly, but when this harmony breaks it creates a situation of Social Disorganization described by Emile Durkheim as “a state of disequilibrium and lack of social solidarity or consensus among the members of a society.

The data, collected concludes that (93.3%) respondents agree that Social Disorganization is a cause for commitment of Suicide.

Theme 5: *Durkheim’s Classification of Suicide*

Emile Durkheim gave a four-fold classification of Suicide, based on the intensity of Integration and Regulation in society. Integration refers to the degree of social relations that binds a person or a group to others, in a way that they fulfill moral demand. When Integration is Low, it is Egoistic Suicide and when high, it is Altruistic Suicide.

According to Table 2, the collected data proves that (88.3%) respondents agree with Egoistic Suicide but only (11.6%) agrees with Altruistic Suicide. Regulation refers to the normative or moral demands of the group that comes with the association with them. When Regulation is Low, it is Anomic Suicide and when high, it is Fatalistic Suicide.

Table - 2: Classification of Suicide Based on Durkhiem's Theory

Category	Integration	Regulation
	NoR	NoR
High	7	26
Low	53	34

*The data is based on the responses of 60 respondents.

The Collected data proves that (56.6%) respondents agree with Anomic Suicide and (43.3%) agrees with Fatalistic Suicide.

Theme 6: *Gender Role and Conditions*

Suicide is not only about the societal behavior but also how each gender has to play many roles in different sociological conditions, which differ from society to society.

Each Gender has to play different “Role”, a comprehensive pattern of behavior that is socially recognized, providing a means of identifying and placing an individual in a society. This puts pressure on the concerned gender which leads to the commitment of suicide as they have to play different roles according to their setup and have to fit into the societal definition and norms of that role. (85%) respondents believed it to be a cause of suicide.

As they have to play different roles, they also have to alter to different “Sociological Conditions”, a sociological process of training individuals in a society to respond in a manner generally approved by the society in general and peer groups within society. This is stronger than the process of socialization as it talks about the inheriting character and not norms, customs and ideologies. (86.6%) respondents believed it to be a causation of suicide.

Theme 7: *Suicide as Retaliation*

Suicide is perhaps the most personal action of an individual, yet many social factors play a significant role in the onset of suicidal behavior. Such is Retaliation, Cambridge Dictionary defines, Retaliation as the act of committing harmful action against a person or group in response to a grievance, be it real or perceived”.

Table - 3: Commitment of Suicide as a Pact and Revenge

Category	Suicidal Pact	Suicidal Revenge
	NoR	NoR
Agree	43	13
Disagree	17	47

*The data is based on the responses of 60 respondents.

According to Table 3, the collected data is based on two factors, One “Suicidal Pact” i.e. An understanding in which two or more persons commit or attempt suicide together at the same time and at the same place. There is definite pre-planning involved in this between the partners about how and where they would commit the act. (77%) respondents agree with it. Second

“Suicide as Revenge” i.e. An individual commits suicide in order to take Revenge against someone or society in general. (23%) respondents agree with it.

Theme 8: *Status and Regions*

As and when we discuss about any case of suicide, we discuss about the Social Class that individual ascribed to and from which area it belonged. Social Class refers to divisions in society based on economic and social status. According to Table 4, the collected data shows that (1.6%) respondents considered Elite Class, (6.6%) Middle Class and (16.6%) Labour class to be more prone to suicide, while (75%) considered class doesn't matter.

An Area, from where a person belongs, also play a significant part in instigating or compelling them to commit suicide. The collected data shows the result that (15%) belongs to Rural Area, (61.6%) belongs to Urban Area and (13.3%) belongs to industrial region are prone to commit suicide.

Table - 4: Role of Class and Area in Commitment of Suicide

Class		Area	
Category	No. of Respondents	Category	No. of Respondents
Elite Class	1	Rural Area	15
Middle Class	4	Urban Area	37
Labour Class	10	Industrial Region	8
Class Doesn't Matter	45	-	-

*The data is based on the responses of 60 respondents.

Theme 9: *Sanctioning Suicide*

In Hinduism, Suicide is spiritually un-acceptable. Generally, taking your own life is considered a violation of the code of AHIMSA and therefore equally sinful as murdering another. A person committing Suicide will not attain Salvation and is a sinner. (73.3%) respondents denied this concept.

Evil Practices like Sati and Jauhar have been a significant part of Hinduism and were glorified. (73.3%) of respondents agreed that it an “Culturally Sanctioned Suicide” and should be declared as Compelled Suicide.

Key Findings

- 70% of respondents will try to reach out to the individuals, who might commit suicide.
- About 65% of respondents observed that society “Sometime Stereotype” suicide and individuals dealing with it.
- 91.7% of respondents considered Suicide as a Social issue to be dealt with.
- From the collected data, Suicide is considered both a sociological and psychological problem.
- Psychological issues are more prominent issues which compels and instigate to commit suicide in comparison with sociological and economic issue.

- Social Disorganization is considered as a causation of suicide.
- As per the collected data, it is found that High-Integration is not considered as a cause of suicide.
- The data reflects that “Suicidal-Pact” is considered form of Suicide under Retaliation.
- The data shows, that every gender has so to play different “Role” according to their setup and their Sociological conditions also differs from society to society in which they have to alter, leads to suicide.
- According to the collected data, the class of person committing Suicide does not matter.
- People who belong to Rural district are more vulnerable to commit suicide.
- Data reflects that respondents do not agree with “Suicide as a sin” concept of Hinduism.
- As per the collected data, compelling individual for Sati Pratha & Jauhar are culturally sanctioned suicide.

Suggestions

- The Data suggests that it is important to understanding about suicide, which can help in the reduction of stereotyping.
- Suicide should be regarded as a sociological issue too as it plays a significant role in its causation.
- The Reference Group needs to be more aware of their behavior and the sociological conditions they create for each other.
- There is a vital need for ceasing evil practices in the name of culture and tradition.

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