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## DOES DURKHEIM'S THEORY HOLD ANY TRUTHS FOR MODERN DAY SELF-IMMOLATION? A REVIEW ON THE LITERATURE

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### Abstract

Durkheim categorized suicide into four types as “egoistic”, “anomic”, “fatalistic”, and “altruistic”. He further hypothesized that the last two types i.e. “fatalistic” and “altruistic” are assigned to the then traditional society. However, in the present article and through literature review I will discuss that in modern society and especially within some low and middle income countries, self-immolation on its first and second most prevalent patterns i.e. to protest at micro and macro levels, respectively could be considered as a social self-sacrifice phenomenon. Therefore, it may well categorize as the altruistic type of suicide based on Durkheim’s theory.

### Keywords

Self-immolation; macro level, micro level, self-sacrifice, altruistic suicide

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## ABSTRACT

*Durkheim categorized suicide into four types as “egoistic”, “anomic”, “fatalistic”, and “altruistic”. He further hypothesized that the last two types i.e. “fatalistic” and “altruistic” are assigned to the then traditional society. However, in the present article and through literature review I will discuss that in modern society and especially within some low and middle income countries, self-immolation on its first and second most prevalent patterns i.e. to protest at micro and macro levels, respectively could be considered as a social self-sacrifice phenomenon. Therefore, it may well categorize as the altruistic type of suicide based on Durkheim’s theory.*

## KEYWORDS

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

French sociologist Emile Durkheim in his book entitled “Suicide: A Study of Sociology” that was published in 1897 categorized suicide into four following types: “egoistic”, “anomic”, “fatalistic”, and “altruistic”. He further defined each type of suicide as follows: Egoistic suicide implies a suicide that occurs due to ‘lack of integration of person into society’. On the contrary, altruistic suicide implies a suicide that occurs due to ‘highly integration of person into society’. Furthermore, anomic suicide happens due to ‘lack of regulation of person by the society’ and again on the contrary, fatalistic suicide happen due to ‘overregulation of person by the society’ (Durkheim, 1952).

He further explained that the first two types i.e. “egoistic” and “anomic” were initially assigned to the then modern society whilst the last two types i.e. “fatalistic”, and “altruistic” to the then traditional society (Durkheim, 1952). However, during recent years it has been argued that it would be possible to apply the last two types of suicide to modern society as well (Johnson, 1979). Therefore, in the present article I would like to revisit Durkheim’s theory based on our current knowledge about self-immolation.

## 2. SELF-IMMOLATION AS A PARADIGM FOR ALTRUISTIC SUICIDE

Our current knowledge reveals that self-immolation as a fatal method of suicide (Rezaeian, 2013a) in modern society and especially within some low and middle income countries might apply mostly as the fourth types of Durkheim’s theory i.e. altruistic suicide. This type of suicide, as a social self-sacrifice phenomenon, is often culturally approved and happens in community in which a low value is considered for some of its members. Therefore, altruistic suicide is usually distinguished by four features: “an excessive societal integration”; “a support from public opinion”; “a positive emotionally”; and finally

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“it benefits society materially or culturally” (Stack, 2004). Now let us have a closer look at the prevalent types of self-immolation in our current world.

### 3. THE PREVALENT TYPES OF SELF-IMMOLATION IN OUR CURRENT WORLD

The first most prevalent type of self-immolation (Rezaeian, 2015a) occurs when people most often young married illiterate women self-olate in some low and middle income countries such as Bangladesh (Mashreky, Rahman, Svanström, et al. 2011), Sri Lanka (Laloe & Ganesan, 2002), India (Rezaeian, 2014a), Pakistan (Saaiq & Ashraf, 2014), Afghanistan (Rezaeian, 2015b), Iran (Ahmadi, Mohammadi, Stavrinou, et al. 2008), and the Kurdish Region of Iraq (Rezaeian, 2017a) etc. to protest against gender based violence and other unfair cultural and family situations (Rezaeian, 2010; Canetto, 2015). Interestingly enough these countries form a geographical belt of self-immolation in south Asia and the Middle East (Rezaeian, 2017; Rezaeian, 2017c; Saaiq, 2017). Evidence also suggests that up to 81% of these women are mentally healthy (Parvareh, Hajizadeh, Rezaei, et al. 2018).

In fact, in some of the patriarchal societies of these countries unfortunately a lower value is placed on women and therefore, under these circumstances a female self-immolates as an altruistic act based on the unfair situations at micro/family level. As Romm et al. argue with no public organizations for help the only way that these women can articulate their problems is through self-immolation dramatic gesture (Romm, Combs, & Klein, 2008). Rasool and Payton further suggest that due to a lack of other means of self-expression women select self-immolation as a powerful communicative sign within family conflicts (Rasool, & Payton, 2014).

The second most prevalent type of self-immolation occurs when people, most often males self-immolate as a protest to the unacceptable political, societal and economical situations (Rezaeian, 2015a). Evidence suggests that this type of self-burning mostly occurs in some low and middle income countries such as Vietnamese Buddhism monks (Laloe, 2004), South Korean activists (Ben Park, 2004), Chinese activists (Crosby, Rhee, & Holland, 1977) and most recently in the so-called Arab Spring Movement (Zarghami, 2011). Interestingly enough these countries are also located in parts of Asia and the Middle East.

In fact, in some of the totalitarian societies of these countries unfortunately a lower value is placed on religious believers or ordinary people and under these circumstances a person self-immolates as an altruistic suicide based on the unfair situations at macro/community level. Again as Romm et al. argue under such circumstances self-immolation is motivated by political, societal and economical reasons (Romm, Combs, & Klein, 2008).

Self-immolation therefore, in its first and second most prevalent patterns could be well considered as an altruistic type of suicide. Before closing this discussion however, it is necessary to consider two important points regarding self-immolation in our current world.

### 4. ADDRESSING TWO IMPORTANT POINTS REGARDING SELF-IMMOLATION IN OUR CURRENT WORLD

Firstly, it is crucial to realize that not any officially recorded self-immolations, especially among young married illiterate females, can be considered as an altruistic suicide. Evidence suggests that in some low and middle income patriarchal societies often a woman might be forced to burn herself due to the various reasons.

For example, in 2010 it has been estimated that 8391 Indian brides are forced to self-burn due to disputes over their dowry (Indian dowry deaths on the rise, 2015). Although such deaths might officially be recorded as self-immolation they should in fact be recorded as “murder-immolation” or “homicidal-immolation” (Rezaeian, 2014b) and therefore, are not examples for altruistic suicide.

Secondly, it is also essential to determine to what extent a self-immolation altruistic suicide is successful in changing an unfair situation. Existing evidence suggests that an altruistic self-immolation at macro/community level might occasionally receive vast media coverage especially during recent years and therefore, be successful in changing unacceptable situations (Zarghami, 2011).

However, altruistic self-immolation at micro/family level usually receives less media attention and therefore, is less successful to change the appalling situations (Rezaeian, 2013b). This might explain why self-immolation at macro/community level might be more considered as altruistic suicide (Singh, Santosh, Avasthi, et al. 1998; Leenaars, Ben Park, Collins, et al. 2010) than self-immolation at

micro/family level. Some researchers even believe that self-immolation at micro level should be considered as fatalistic suicide (Aliverdinia, & Pridemore, 2009).

Nonetheless, some of those women who self-immolated themselves clearly stated that they had chosen this method to show their protest against their horrendous family situations (Aliverdinia, & Pridemore, 2009). This clearly explains that self-immolation among females is very much as like as political motivated self-immolation. We should take into account this fact that a majority of these women are mentally healthy (Parvareh, Hajizadeh, Rezaei, et al. 2018) and self-immolate to show their protest in the hope of constructing a better family/society situation. This equivalent to altruistic suicide in which a person kills herself/himself for something she/he loves better than herself/himself (Stack, 2004).

## 5. CONCLUSIONS

Self-immolation in our modern society and especially within some low and middle income countries in some parts of Asia and the Middle East might apply mostly as the altruistic suicide. This is a social self-sacrifice phenomenon, which culturally approved and happens in community in which a low value is considered for some of its members. By self-immolation these members of societies articulate their protest against the unfair situation in a dramatic gesture in the hope of creating a better world for the next generations. It seems that by considering their rightful demands in advance we would be able to prevent most altruistic type of self-immolations (Rezaeian, 2014c).

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