

Social Alienation and its Relationship to University Students' Representations of the Phenomenon of Suicide: A Field Study on a Sample of Students at Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef

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ABSTRACT

This study aimed to examine the relationship between social alienation and university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide among a sample of students at Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef. Adopting a descriptive-correlational method, the study was applied to a purposive sample of (100) male and female students, using a social alienation scale based on Seeman's five dimensions (powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, isolation, and self-estrangement) and a scale of representations of suicide. After verifying the psychometric properties of both instruments and processing the data using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), the study found a moderate level of social alienation among the sample and a statistically significant positive correlation between social alienation and representations of suicide. Statistically significant differences attributable to gender were also detected. The study concluded with recommendations to activate university psychological counseling services and to prevent suicidal behavior.

Keywords: *Social alienation; Social representations; Suicide phenomenon; University student; University of Chlef.*

Part One: Theoretical Framework

1. Research Problem

Contemporary society is experiencing rapid economic, social, and cultural transformations that have generated a sense of detachment from the self and society among broad segments of individuals—a phenomenon termed 'alienation' in social and psychological sciences. Since its inception, this concept has been linked to the crisis of modern human beings who have lost their sense of meaning and their ability to influence their surroundings. University students are among the social groups most vulnerable to this feeling, given the academic, psychological, and social pressures they experience during a crucial transitional stage of their lives.

Conversely, students form mental and social representations of the phenomena surrounding them, including the phenomenon of suicide. A social representation is not a passive reflection of reality,

but rather a symbolic construction produced by individuals to understand a subject and guide their behavior toward it. Consequently, the manner in which a university student represents the phenomenon of suicide may be influenced by the degree of social alienation they experience. This makes the study of the relationship between the two variables of significant scientific and preventative importance, particularly in light of the growing discourse on suicidal behaviors within university environments.

Based on the foregoing, the primary research question of this study can be formulated as follows:

Is there a statistically significant correlation between social alienation and university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide among a sample of students at Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef?

The following sub-questions branch from this primary research question:

- What is the level of social alienation among the members of the study sample?
- What is the nature of the sample members' representations of the phenomenon of suicide?
- Is there a relationship between the dimensions of social alienation and representations of suicide?
- Are there differences in social alienation attributable to the gender variable?

2. Study Hypotheses

Primary Hypothesis:

There is a statistically significant positive correlation between social alienation and university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide.

First Sub-Hypothesis:

There is a statistically significant correlation between each dimension of social alienation and representations of suicide.

Second Sub-Hypothesis:

There are statistically significant differences in the level of social alienation attributable to the gender variable.

3. Objectives and Significance of the Study

This study seeks to identify the level of social alienation among university students, reveal the nature of their representations of the phenomenon of suicide, and determine the relationship between the two variables. Its significance stems from the sensitivity of the topic and its direct link to the mental health of university students, the potential utilization of its findings in developing counseling and preventive programs within the university environment, as well as enriching the Algerian university library with an academic study that combines the concepts of alienation and social representations within a single empirical context.

4. Operational Definitions

Social Alienation: Operationally defined as the score obtained by the respondent on the Social Alienation Scale used in this study, which is constructed based on the five dimensions identified by Melvin Seeman: powerlessness, meaninglessness, normlessness, social isolation, and self-estrangement.

Representations of the Phenomenon of Suicide: Operationally defined as the score obtained by the respondent on the Representations Scale used in this study, which measures the student's knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions regarding the phenomenon of suicide, its underlying causes, and their personal stance toward it.

University Student: Every male or female student officially registered in one of the academic degree cycles (Bachelor's / Master's) at Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef during the academic year in which the field study was conducted.

5. Social Alienation: Concept and Theoretical Roots

In the Arabic language, the term alienation (Ighdirab) is derived from the linguistic root (Gh-R-B), which denotes distance, displacement, and separation. In European languages, it corresponds to the term 'alienation', derived from the Latin root 'alienare', meaning to transfer or surrender ownership. The concept transitioned from its philosophical and legal realms into social and psychological domains to denote a state of an individual's separation from their self, their society, and the product of their labor.

A. Philosophical and Sociological Roots

Karl Marx was among the earliest scholars to crystallize the concept of alienation in its social sense in his 'Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844', where he linked it directly to working conditions under the capitalist system; the worker becomes alienated from the product of his labor, from the act of production itself, from his species-being, and from other human beings. Conversely, sociologist Émile Durkheim introduced the concept of 'anomie' (normlessness) to signify the breakdown of social norms regulating individuals' behaviors and aspirations—a concept later expanded and refined by Robert K. Merton in his foundational theory on social structure and anomie.

Furthermore, Erich Fromm contributed significantly to transferring the concept into socio-psychoanalysis, considering alienation a structural characteristic of modern industrial society that transforms human beings into mere 'things' detached from their internal powers and intrinsic human qualities.

B. Seeman's Five Dimensions of Alienation

The analytical framework presented by Melvin Seeman in 1959 represents the most operational and influential paradigm in empirical studies of social alienation. He distinguished between five distinct meanings or dimensions, which can be summarized as follows:

- . **Powerlessness:** The individual's expectancy or feeling that they cannot control the outcomes or events occurring in their life.
- . **Meaninglessness:** The individual's lack of clarity regarding the standards and criteria necessary to understand surrounding social events and make decision-making choices.
- . **Normlessness:** The individual's belief that socially unapproved or illegitimate means have become necessary to achieve goals due to the weakening of societal moral standards.
- . **Social Isolation:** The individual's feeling of detachment and estrangement from the predominant goals, norms, and values of their society.

. **Self-Estrangement:** The individual's separation from themselves and lack of intrinsic fulfillment in their daily activities, viewing them merely as instrumental means to external ends.

6. Social Representations: Concept and Structure

The credit for crystallizing the concept of 'social representation' belongs to social psychologist Serge Moscovici in his pioneering 1961 thesis, where he defined it as a system of values, ideas, and shared practices that enable individuals to orient themselves within their social world and communicate within it. A social representation is not merely an individual mental image, but rather 'common sense' (sens commun) knowledge produced by society and shared among its members. Moscovici demonstrated that social representations are formed through two fundamental processes: objectification (which transforms abstract concepts into tangible, concrete images) and anchoring (which integrates the new object into the individual's pre-existing system of knowledge and values). Denise Jodelet later developed this approach, viewing representation as a specific form of social knowledge oriented toward practical application. From this perspective, a student's representations of the phenomenon of suicide are understood as a socio-cognitive construction deeply influenced by their psychological and social reality.

7. The Phenomenon of Suicide: Sociological Approach

Suicide is defined as any deliberate act committed by an individual with the intention of ending their own life. Émile Durkheim's foundational work, 'Le Suicide' (1897), established the sociological approach to suicide, demonstrating that suicide is a social phenomenon explained by overarching social factors rather than individual psychological traits. He linked suicidal behavior to the degrees of social integration and moral regulation within society, distinguishing between four primary types:

- . **Egoistic Suicide:** Results from the weak integration of the individual into social groups and a pervasive feeling of isolation; this is the type most closely related to the psychological state of alienation.
- . **Altruistic Suicide:** Results from an excessive integration of the individual into the group, to the extent of sacrificing their own life for the sake of the collective.
- . **Anomic Suicide:** Associated with the breakdown of social norms and moral regulation, occurring particularly during times of sudden socio-economic crises and rapid transformations.
- . **Fatalistic Suicide:** Arises from excessive social regulation and oppressive discipline that blocks all future horizons and personal autonomy for the individual.

8. The Relationship between Alienation, Representations, and Suicide

It is evident from the preceding review that a close theoretical correlation exists among the three concepts. The state of alienation—particularly the dimensions of social isolation and normlessness—closely corresponds to the existential conditions of Durkheim's 'egoistic' and 'anomic' suicide. On the other hand, an alienated individual tends to produce specific representations of surrounding phenomena, projecting their intense feelings of powerlessness and meaninglessness onto their perception of the phenomenon of suicide. Hence, this study proceeds from the hypothesis that an increased level of social alienation is accompanied by a transformation

in the university student's representations of suicide, a hypothesis that will be empirically tested in the following applied section.

Part Two: Applied (Field) Study

1. Study Methodology

The study adopted the descriptive-correlational method due to its alignment with the nature and objectives of the topic. This methodology enables the description of the levels of the two study variables and the exploration of the nature of the quantitative relationship between them, without researcher intervention in their natural occurrence.

2. Study Population and Sample

The study population consisted of students enrolled at Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef. A purposive sample of (100) male and female students was selected from several faculties and academic levels. Table (1) illustrates the demographic characteristics of the sample members, which were also visually represented in the study's descriptive figures.

Table 1: Distribution of Study Sample Members According to Personal Variables (N = 100)

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	46	46.0%
	Female	54	54.0%
Age	18–20	37	37.0%
	21–23	36	36.0%
	24–26	20	20.0%
	27 and above	7	7.0%
Faculty	Humanities and Social Sciences	39	39.0%
	Economic Sciences	25	25.0%
	Law	22	22.0%
	Science and Technology	14	14.0%
Residence	Urban	58	58.0%
	Rural	42	42.0%
Total	-	100	100.0%

Note on Visual Distributions (Figures 1 & 2): As documented in the original study's graphical charts, females represented 54% of the sample compared to 46% males. Regarding academic levels, 1st Year students accounted for 21 individuals, 2nd Year for 18, 3rd Year for 26, Master 1 for 17, and Master 2 for 18 individuals.

3. Study Instruments

The study utilized a comprehensive questionnaire composed of three primary sections: a personal data section, the Social Alienation Scale (consisting of 25 items distributed equally across Seeman's five dimensions), and the Representations of the Phenomenon of Suicide Scale (consisting of 15 items). All measurement items were designed according to a five-point Likert

rating scale (Strongly Agree = 5, Agree = 4, Neutral = 3, Disagree = 2, Strongly Disagree = 1). The complete questionnaire is appended to this document.

4. Psychometric Properties of the Instrument

To verify the internal consistency and statistical reliability of the research measurement instrument, Cronbach's Alpha coefficient was calculated for each scale and for the instrument as a whole. The resulting values were high and statistically acceptable, as presented in Table (2), confirming that the measurement tool possesses a robust degree of internal reliability.

Table 2: Reliability Coefficients of the Study Instrument (Cronbach's Alpha)

Scale	Number of Items	Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient
Social Alienation Scale	25	0.951
Representations of Suicide Scale	15	0.929
Overall Instrument	40	0.945

5. Statistical Methods

The empirical data were processed and analyzed using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). To achieve the study's objectives and test its hypotheses, the following statistical techniques were employed: frequencies and percentages, arithmetic means and standard deviations, Cronbach's Alpha reliability coefficient, Pearson correlation coefficient, and the independent samples t-test.

6. Presentation and Discussion of Study Results

6.1. Level of Social Alienation and its Dimensions

To answer the first research question regarding the level of social alienation among university students, arithmetic means and standard deviations were calculated for each of the five dimensions and for the overall scale. Table (3) presents these descriptive statistics.

Table 3: Arithmetic Means and Standard Deviations for the Dimensions of Social Alienation

Dimension	Arithmetic Mean	Standard Deviation	Level
Powerlessness	3.32	0.90	Moderate
Meaninglessness	3.27	0.81	Moderate
Social Isolation	3.25	0.93	Moderate
Self-Estrangement	3.13	0.89	Moderate
Normlessness	3.12	0.78	Moderate
Overall Social Alienation	3.22	0.78	Moderate

It is evident from Table (3) that the overall level of social alienation among the student sample was moderate, with a total arithmetic mean of (3.22). The dimension of 'Powerlessness' ranked first with a mean of (3.32), followed by 'Meaninglessness' (3.27), and 'Social Isolation' (3.25). This pattern reflects a moderate feeling among university students of an inability to control their academic and social outcomes, accompanied by a sense of ambiguity regarding future norms and

personal fulfillment. As illustrated in the original study's graphical distribution (Figure 4), 53% of the sample fell into the moderate level of alienation, while 31% exhibited a high level, and only 16% showed a low level of alienation.

6.2. Testing the Primary Hypothesis

To test the primary research hypothesis, which states that there is a statistically significant positive correlation between social alienation and university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide, Pearson's correlation coefficient (r) was calculated between the total score of social alienation and the total score of representations of suicide. Table (4) summarizes these results.

Table 4: Pearson Correlation Coefficient between Social Alienation and Representations of Suicide

Variables	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance Level	Statistical Decision
Social Alienation $\times$ Representations of Suicide	0.553	0.000	Significant at 0.01 level

The results demonstrate a statistically significant positive correlation at the (0.01) level between overall social alienation and university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide ($r = 0.553$, $p = 0.000$). This correlation is of moderate strength and indicates that as a student's degree of social alienation increases, their cognitive and social representations of suicide tend toward greater justification, empathy, or normalization as a reaction to severe distress. Consequently, the primary hypothesis is confirmed. This empirical finding aligns theoretically with Émile Durkheim's sociological paradigm, which posits that weakened social integration and moral regulation directly foster egoistic and anomic suicidal tendencies.

6.3. Testing the First Sub-Hypothesis

To verify the first sub-hypothesis regarding the specific relationship between each individual dimension of social alienation and representations of suicide, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. Table (5) displays the correlation matrix for each dimension.

Table 5: Correlation between Dimensions of Social Alienation and Representations of Suicide

Dimension of Alienation	Correlation Coefficient (r)	Significance Level	Decision
Social Isolation	0.535	0.000	Significant at 0.01
Self-Estrangement	0.525	0.000	Significant at 0.01
Meaninglessness	0.491	0.000	Significant at 0.01
Powerlessness	0.482	0.000	Significant at 0.01

Normlessness	0.481	0.000	Significant at 0.01
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The analysis indicates a statistically significant positive correlation at the (0.01) level between every individual dimension of social alienation and representations of suicide. Notably, 'Social Isolation' ($r = 0.535$) and 'Self-Estrangement' ($r = 0.525$) exhibited the strongest correlations with representations of suicide. This confirms the central role that interpersonal detachment and loss of personal authenticity play in shaping students' perceptions of suicidal behavior. Therefore, the first sub-hypothesis is fully confirmed.

6.4. Testing the Second Sub-Hypothesis

To examine whether statistically significant differences exist in the level of social alienation among university students based on gender, an independent samples t-test was conducted. Table (6) presents the statistical comparison between male and female students.

Table 6: T-Test Results for Differences in Social Alienation According to Gender

Gender	Sample Size (N)	Arithmetic Mean	t-value	Significance Level
Male	46	2.95	-3.315	0.001 (Significant)
Female	54	3.45	-	-

The statistical output reveals statistically significant differences at the (0.01) level in social alienation attributable to the gender variable ($t = -3.315$, $p = 0.001$), with the differences being in favor of female students. Female students recorded a higher arithmetic mean (3.45) compared to male students (2.95). Thus, the second sub-hypothesis is confirmed. This significant difference can be interpreted through the lens of sociocultural dynamics, wherein female students often experience heightened academic, familial, and societal pressures within the university transitional environment, increasing their susceptibility to feelings of powerlessness and emotional isolation.

7. General Discussion of Results

In general, the empirical findings of this study converge harmoniously with the theoretical framework from which it originated. The investigation confirmed the existence of a moderate level of social alienation among university students, alongside a statistically significant positive correlation between alienation and their cognitive-social representations of the phenomenon of suicide. This empirical outcome aligns with the Durkheimian sociological thesis concerning egoistic and anomic suicide, as well as Melvin Seeman's conceptualization, which places social isolation and self-estrangement at the very core of the alienation experience. Furthermore, the findings underscore the vital necessity of prioritizing the socio-psychological dimension of university students within institutional policies and counseling interventions.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The present study concluded that social alienation is significantly and positively correlated with university students' representations of the phenomenon of suicide. Among Seeman's five dimensions, social isolation and self-estrangement demonstrated the strongest association with

representations of suicide. Additionally, significant gender differences in social alienation were identified in favor of female students. In light of these empirical conclusions, the study puts forth the following recommendations:

1. Activating and strengthening listening cells and psychological counseling centers within university campuses, ensuring proactive support and specialized care for at-risk students experiencing severe emotional distress.
2. Organizing comprehensive social, cultural, and sports activities designed to promote active student integration, reduce interpersonal isolation, and foster a robust sense of belonging within the university community.
3. Integrating psychoeducational programs, mental health awareness campaigns, and suicide prevention initiatives into the standard university life curriculum.
4. Conducting further in-depth scientific research utilizing larger, nationally representative student samples and incorporating additional variables such as socioeconomic background, academic specialization, and family social support.

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Annexe: Questionnaire

Hassiba Ben Bouali University of Chlef | Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Dear Student,

You have before you a questionnaire aimed at studying the relationship between social alienation and representations of the phenomenon of suicide. Please read the statements carefully and place an (X) in the box that best corresponds to your personal opinion. Please be assured that your responses are strictly confidential and will be utilized solely for scientific research purposes. Thank you very much for your cooperation.

Section One: Personal Data

• Gender: [☐] Male [☐] Female

- Age: ☐ 18–20 ☐ 21–23 ☐ 24–26 ☐ 27 and above
- Academic Level: ☐ 1st Year ☐ 2nd Year ☐ 3rd Year ☐ Master 1 ☐ Master 2
- Faculty: ☐ Humanities & Social Sciences ☐ Economic Sciences ☐ Law ☐ Science & Technology
- Place of Residence: ☐ Urban ☐ Rural
- Response Scale: (5) Strongly Agree | (4) Agree | (3) Neutral | (2) Disagree | (1) Strongly Disagree

Section Two: Social Alienation Scale

Below are 25 statements representing Seeman's five dimensions of social alienation. Please indicate your level of agreement with each statement.

No.	Statement Text (Social Alienation Dimensions)	5	4	3	2	1
1	I feel that I cannot influence decisions regarding my academic future. <i>[Powerlessness]</i>					
2	I see that what happens in my life is beyond my control.					
3	I believe that my personal effort does not change anything about my reality.					
4	I feel helpless in the face of the problems I encounter at the university.					
5	I feel that social circumstances are stronger than my ability to confront them.					
6	I find it difficult to determine what is truly important in my life. <i>[Meaninglessness]</i>					
7	I feel that my university studies lack a clear purpose.					
8	I do not understand much of what is happening around me in society.					
9	I feel that life lacks a meaning worth striving for.					
10	I feel lost when thinking about my future.					
11	I believe that success today sometimes requires bypassing values and ethics. <i>[Normlessness]</i>					
12	I see that social rules have lost their value in people's eyes.					
13	I feel that legitimate means are no longer sufficient to achieve goals.					
14	I notice that honesty and integrity are not rewarded in our society.					

15	I feel that the standards and principles I was raised on are no longer valid.					
16	I feel like a stranger even among my university peers. <i>[Social Isolation]</i>					
17	I prefer to isolate myself from others most of the time.					
18	I feel that no one truly understands me.					
19	I feel that I do not belong to the social environment in which I live.					
20	I lack social relationships in which I feel peace of mind and reassurance.					
21	I do many things without feeling that they express who I am. <i>[Self-Estrangement]</i>					
22	I feel that I am living a life that is not truly mine.					
23	I feel that I have lost the sense of my personal worth.					
24	I find myself acting as others want, not as I want.					
25	I feel disconnected from my true feelings and emotions.					

Section Three: Representations of the Phenomenon of Suicide Scale

Below are 15 statements regarding knowledge, attitudes, and perceptions of suicide. Please indicate your level of agreement.

No.	Statement Text (Representations of Suicide)	5	4	3	2	1
1	I believe that suicide might be a solution for someone enduring severe pressure.					
2	I view a person who commits suicide as a weak individual who deserves blame.					
3	I understand the motives of someone who considers ending their life.					
4	I believe that suicide is a social phenomenon rather than a purely individual one.					
5	I see social isolation as a major cause of suicide.					
6	I believe that losing the meaning of life drives individuals toward suicide.					
7	I view society as partially responsible for suicide cases.					

8	I feel more sympathy than condemnation toward someone who commits suicide.					
9	I believe that discussing suicide is a taboo in our society.					
10	I see that weak religious commitment increases the risk of suicide.					
11	I believe that unemployment and academic failure are among the most important causes of suicide.					
12	I see that the availability of psychological support reduces suicidal ideation.					
13	I believe that social media influences the spread of the phenomenon.					
14	I view suicide as preventable if appropriate assistance is provided.					
15	I believe that thoughts of suicide could be experienced by anyone in a moment of despair.					