

A Sociological Study of Nihilism: A Case Study

Jahangir Jahangiri, PhD

Assistant Professor of Sociology,
Department of Sociology and Social Planning,
Faculty of Social Sciences, Shiraz University,
Eram Place, Shiraz, Fars, Iran
Code Postal: 7194685115
Email: jjahangiri@gmail.com

Rayehe Ghareh

M.A in Sociology,
Shiraz University, Shiraz, Iran
Email: rayehe.gh@gmail.com

Abstract

The present research aims at studying nihilistic thoughts among students of Shiraz University. The framework of the research is Crosby's theory about nihilism. The study is based on a quantitative approach and employs a survey method so as to collect the required data. Statistical population of the study is the whole Students of Shiraz University that according to the formal statistics consists of 20000 students. 400 students are selected by multistage sampling method. The results show that there is a significant relationship between the independent variables of gender, adherences to religious practices, fatalism, fear of failure, need for achievement and the dependent variable nihilism. Stepwise regression method used to predict the dependent variable. Ordinarily, five variables of fatalism, fear of failure, Adherences to religious practices, gender and need for achievement could predict 33% of dependent variable ($R^2=0.338$)

Key Words: *Nihilism, Sociology, University Students, Shiraz University, Iran*

Introduction

Undoubtedly, the most fundamental question that every human being faces with, is about the purpose of life. Not only modern human, but also pre-modern human beings have been encountered with this question. The intolerable journey from birth to death, and relentless onslaughts of hopelessness and despair, persuade every human to answer the question, as possible. Even though most people may have born, lived, and died, without being able to convince themselves about the reason of life, there are many who say they have found the truth. Whether the truth that they have found is a special religion or an idea, or what else, these people do believe that they know "why are they here?" and "what is the purpose of existence?" Meanwhile, some are drifting in faith and doubt, sometimes they know the truth, but sometimes they are despaired of finding it. The fate of those who weren't able to find the truth or couldn't find the purpose of life is similar to the fate

of Sisyphus, whom the gods had condemned him to ceaselessly rolling a rock to the top of a mountain, whence the stone would fall back of its own weight. They had thought with some reason that there is no more dreadful punishment than futile and hopeless labor (Camus, 1942).

By the time that a human fails to achieve the truth, but his thirst is not satisfied yet, a great emptiness prevails him. Also emptiness is a matter of all times, but it is such a different experience for modern human, that pre modern human beings haven't experienced it. This is because in pre-modern world the rate of changes was low, collective values and traditional beliefs dominated individuals and the knowledge was limited. By the beginning of the modern time, science and rationality nominated themselves as the legitimate successors of traditional values, which were faded in the west long times ago. While modern human beings were so hopeful that science would have be able to answer their unanswered questions, But not only science didn't answer these question, it also proposed so many other questions. Meanwhile the western human beings who have lost the motherly hands of religion and its traditional beliefs, and have grasped the modern world and its enchanting dreams, became disappointed and confused than ever, and experienced the emptiness of life bitterly. To forget this massive failure, the modern man, hid away in materialistic world and consumptionism. Today it seems that the modern emptiness is widespread all over the west. Atomization of individuals, lack of intimacy in relationships, invading of abstract systems to the lifeworld, generation gap, loss of traditional values, all of these are signs of modern nihilism.

After the failure of the ambitious aspirations of the modern world, some talk about coming of postmodern world, these days. The postmodern world is a world "waiting for Godot", or arrival of Übermensch (overman), to give meaning to this empty world or establish justice. Also in such a world still some people are religious, but emptiness and meaninglessness of life is the prominent character of it. Human beings in such a world look like a shipwrecked in a stormy sea, swinging and seeking for a piece of wrecked ship to grab, mostly grapple with anxiety, impatience, frustration and wandering. Perhaps the witnessed depression, mental illness and high rates of suicide in these communities are evidence of this claim. The world that, in the words of Nietzsche, "God is dead" can be a frightful one, it is because in such a world as Dostoyevsky puts it "everything is permitted".

Although the concept of nihilism is studied differently in philosophy, art (mostly in the form of absurdism), theology and other fields, it seems that this concept is neglected in sociology with the argument that this is something philosophical, or the matter of morality. At the first glance, nihilistic thoughts, may seem an individual problem, but as the classic sociologist Durkheim, have proved in his prominent study about suicide, even individualistic actions like suicide can be rooted in society. An overview of nihilistic thoughts in history of man, among philosophers, artists, or members of societies can endorse the importance of economic, cultural and social crises in establishment of nihilistic thoughts.

The Concept of Nihilism and its History

The term nihilism is most frequently associated with certain nineteenth century Russian social and intellectual movements which opposed the Russian system of orthodoxy and autocracy in favor of positivism, science and enlightenment. The term *nihilism* first came into prominent use in Russia with the 1862 publication of Ivan Turgenev's novel *Fathers and Sons*. Early in the novel, Arkady, the young disciple of Bazarov (the novel's chief character), refers to his hero as a nihilist. Arkady's father inquiries into the meaning of this term, and the son explains that a "nihilist is a man who does not bow down before any authority, who does not take any principle on faith, whatever reverence that principle may be enshrined in." Later, Bazarov himself declares to Arkady's father and uncle, "We act by virtue of what we recognize as beneficial. ... At the present time, negation is the most beneficial of all and we deny...everything." Arkady's father then states, "You deny everything. ... But one must construct too, you know." Bazarov responds with

a scornful air, "That's not our business now. ... The ground wants clearing first" (Turgenev: 24, 56). It is not hard to understand how this statement of the nihilist outlook, which became widely known because of the influence of Turgenev's novel, came to be associated with programs of political revolution and terrorism in which negation or destruction for its own sake seemed to be the dominant aim. This is precisely the first sense of the term *nihilism* (Crosby, 1988:10).

In fact Russian nihilism, on the whole, was a movement of revolutionary repudiation whose positive doctrines were generally vague and disjointed. Its main thrust was a desire for political action, change, and revolution. Soon it became integrated into the struggles of anarchism, Jacobism, and Bolshevism. It is understandable, then, that Russian nihilism was immensely exciting and popular among young intellectuals, yet feared and despised by the older conservative elements in the country. For instance, Dostoyevsky's novels, especially *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot*, and *The Possessed* reflect a negative evaluation of those who had been infected by the rationalistic nihilism of the young revolutionary minded generation (Marmysz, 2003:18).

In the West one of its earliest uses is found in the writings of Franz von Baader (1765-1841) who used it to designate the separation of reason from religion, the "atheism" of the natural sciences of his day, and certain anti-intellectual tendencies of early nineteenth-century theology. It was above all Friedrich Nietzsche who in the latter part of the nineteenth century gave the word its contemporary meaning, designating by it the view that "there is no answer to the question: 'to what purpose'" (Kren, 1969:30). For Nietzsche, the term "nihilism" remains ambiguous. Though he divides the concept into a large number of sub-categories, two divisions are primary: Nihilism as a sign of increased power of the spirit: as active nihilism. And Nihilism as decline and recession of the power of the spirit: as passive nihilism. Active and passive nihilism, according to Nietzsche, form a dyad making it overly simplistic to claim that nihilism as a whole is a purely negative or destructive force. Nihilism is a process that lies at the very core of life, and can be observed in the continual struggle of human beings to advance and improve themselves and their culture. Since the struggle for progress is only intelligible against the backdrop of that which is less developed and worthy, spiritual and cultural growth presuppose a hierarchy of higher and lower levels of development. Nihilism is a symptom of the culmination of this growth, as well as of the ensuing decline that must inevitably follow. Nihilism occurs at that point in the history of an individual or a culture when "the highest values devalue themselves" (Marmysz, 2003:21)

In the twentieth century, it's the atheistic existentialist movement, popularized in France in the 1940s and 50s, that is responsible for the currency of existential nihilism in the popular consciousness. Jean-Paul Sartre's (1905-1980) defining preposition for the movement, "existence precedes essence," rules out any ground or foundation for establishing an essential self or a human nature. When we abandon illusions, life is revealed as nothing; and for the existentialists, nothingness is the source of not only absolute freedom but also existential horror and emotional anguish. Nothingness reveals each individual as an isolated being "thrown" into an alien and unresponsive universe, barred forever from knowing why yet required to invent meaning. It's a situation that's nothing short of *absurd*. Writing from the enlightened perspective of the absurd, Albert Camus (1913-1960) observed that Sisyphus' plight, condemned to eternal, useless struggle, was a superb metaphor for human existence (*The Myth of Sisyphus*, 1942) (Pratt, Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy).

Theoretical Framework of the Present Research

The present research aims at studying nihilistic thoughts among students of Shiraz University. The framework of the research is Crosby's theory about nihilism. In his book "The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism", initially, Crosby notes to the ambiguity inherent in the concept

of nihilism and writes: "Like so many words designating some kind of ism, the term nihilism is ambiguous and vague. This is not surprising, because it has been in use for some time by people of different persuasions in a wide variety of contexts. Some have not bothered to define it, assuming perhaps that its meaning was already apparent or that it would become clear in context not always safe assumptions. Others have defined the term quite narrowly; still others, very broadly. In addition, the word fairly crackles with evaluative significance and has often been used in prescriptive rather than purely descriptive ways" (Crosby, 1988:8). In the following, Crosby categorizes nihilism in the five main meaning:

1- Political Nihilism

This form of nihilism was associated with political struggles appeared in Russia at the 19th and early 20th, to struggle with despotic power of Tsars. The indication of this kind of nihilism was political dissatisfaction, low levels of social participation and intentional indifference to the future. Russian revolutionaries of the 1860s named themselves nihilist, to negate the traditional believes and the institutions which these believes and practices were rooted in them (ibid: 9-10).

2- Moral Nihilism

Crosby believes that moral nihilism can take at least three forms. The first is the rejection of all moral principles and the determination to live without morality. The second is the theory that moral judgments are purely individual and arbitrary and admit of no rational justification or criticism. The third is the view that the sole obligation of any individual is to himself. Therefore, he has no moral concerns for the effects of his actions on others, except to the extent that he perceives these effects to bear on his private interests. These three forms of moral nihilism can be termed as *amoralism*, *moral subjectivism*, and *egoism*, respectively (ibid: 11).

3- Epistemological Nihilism

Epistemological nihilism can be divided into two main forms. The first makes claims to truth entirely relative to particular individuals or groups, while the second holds semantic intelligibility to be entirely relative to self-contained, incommensurable conceptual schemes. Because this relativism to individuals, groups, or conceptual schemes is seen as bedrock and inevitable, it follows that the scope and power of reason is sharply restricted. Reason can operate only within systems of belief or meaning, each of which gives it a particular character; it has no power to address fundamental disagreements arising from the conflict of systems. This implies that no basis can be found for arguing the truth of one system as over any other system or for comparing the patterns of meaning of one system with those of another. It also implies that all such systems are themselves ultimately arbitrary in the sense of being beyond rational criticism or support. (ibid: 18)

4- Cosmic Nihilism

Cosmic nihilism asserts the meaninglessness of the cosmos, either in the absolute sense of denying it any intelligibility or knowable structure at all, or in the relative sense of denying that it gives any place or support to the kinds of valuative and existential meanings to which human beings aspire. Nietzsche's dictum, "There are no facts, everything is in flux, incomprehensible, elusive; what is relatively most enduring is our opinions" (1968:327), gives expression to the first kind of cosmic nihilism. Mauthner's position also comes down to something like cosmic nihilism in this first sense, because even if the world had an intelligible structure, it would be forever inaccessible to us due to

reasons that are already given. Illustrated here is a connection between epistemological and cosmic nihilism. A world that cannot in principle be known is for us a meaningless surd (ibid: 26-27)

5- Existential Nihilism

The existential nihilist judges human existence to be pointless and absurd. It leads nowhere and adds up to nothing. It is entirely gratuitous, in the sense that there is no justification for life, but also no reason not to live. Those who claim to find meaning in their lives are either dishonest or deluded. In either case, they fail to face up to the harsh reality of the human situation (ibid: 30).

Hypotheses

- 1- There is relationship between gender and nihilistic thoughts.
- 2- There is relationship between age and nihilistic thoughts.
- 3- There is relationship between education and nihilistic thoughts.
- 4- There is relationship between ethnicity and nihilistic thoughts.
- 5- There is relationship between marital status and nihilistic thoughts.
- 6- There is relationship between economic and social status and nihilistic thoughts.
- 7- There is relationship between adherences to religious practices and nihilistic thoughts.
- 8- There is relationship between fatalism and nihilistic thoughts.
- 9- There is relationship between fear of failure and nihilistic thoughts.
- 10- There is relationship between need for achievement and nihilistic thoughts.

Methodology

This study is based on a quantitative approach and employs a survey method so as to collect the required data. A constructed questionnaire has been utilized as an instrument in survey technique. The concept of nihilism is operationalized through the theory of Crosby and measured by items proposed in the questionnaire. To validate the questionnaire the Face validity method has been used and to test its reliability, the Cronbach's alpha test has been utilized. Statistical population of the study is the whole Students of Shiraz University that according to the formal statistics consists of 20000 students. 400 students are selected by multistage sampling method. The collected data were processed through SPSS and the data were analyzed on two levels. First by descriptive statistic using the frequency distribution of the variables and second by and Inferential Statistics using F-test and T-test. Also to test the hypotheses and show the correlation between the variables at interval scale, Pearson correlation coefficient is employed. So as to show the simultaneous relationship of several variables with the dependent variable and their analysis Stepwise regressions is used.

Results of the Descriptive Data

According to the table.1 50.5% of respondents are male and 49.5% of them are female. The largest number of the respondents, with a frequency of 164 people (41.5%) is in the 24-26 age bracket and the largest number of them with a frequency of 256 (63.8%) are undergraduate student. The Fars ethnicity had the highest rate of frequency 286 (71.5%), 15% of respondent are Lur, 7.5% are Turk, 3.5% are Kurd and only 9 student (2.5%) are Arab. The largest number of the respondents, with a frequency of 349 (87.3%) are single. Socio-economic status of 45.8% of respondent is high, 33% mid and 21.2% low. Adherences to religious practices of 58.3% of students is high, 16.2% is average and 25.5% is low. 66.3% of students have reported themselves less fatalistic, 32% average and 1.8% much fatalistic. 62.5% of students afraid of failure a lot. 36.3% have reported an average level of fear and 1.3% have reported less fear. Also 47.5% of students have

reported their need for achievement a lot, 43.7% average and only 8.8% less. Most of students (62.8%) have reported their nihilistic thoughts low, 15% average and 22.2% high.

Table.1 frequency of variables

Variable	Frequency	%	Variable	Frequency	%
Gender			Socio-economic status		
Male	198	50.5	High	183	45.8
Female	202	49.5	Mid	132	33
Age			Low	85	21.2
18-20	48	12.2	Adherences to religious practices		
21-23	115	29.1	High	233	58.3
24-26	164	41.5	Average	65	16.2
More than 26	68	17.2	Low	102	25.5
Education			Fatalism		
Undergraduate	256	63.8	Much	7	1.8
Master	123	31	Average	128	32.0
Ph.D. Candidate	21	5.2	Less	265	66.3
Ethnicity			Fear of failure		
Fars	286	71.5	A lot	250	62.5
Lur	63	15	Average	145	36.3
Turk	30	7.5	Less	5	1.3
Kurd	12	3.5	Need For Achievement		
Arab	9	2.5	A lot	188	47.5
Marital Status			Average	173	43.7
Single	349	87.3	Less	35	8.8
Married	51	12.7	Nihilistic thoughts		
			High	89	22.2
			Average	60	15
			Low	151	62.8

Inferential Statistics

To test the relationship between dependent variable (nihilism) and independent variables, 3 different tests (T-Test, Anova-Test and Pearson-Test) based on type of variables are used. The results show that there is a significant relationship between the independent variables of gender, adherence to religious practices, fatalism, fear of failure, need for achievement and the dependent variable nihilism. These variables totally could explain $R^2=0.33$ of the changes of the dependent variable. According to table.2 there is a statistically meaningful mean difference between men and women toward nihilism. And based on mean difference test, mean of nihilistic thoughts of men (1.09) is more than women (0.922). This difference with confidence level of 0.00 is statistically meaningful. The Pearson test shows that there is a negative significance relationship between adherences to religious practices and nihilism (Pearson Correlation Coefficient= -0.354, confidence level=0.000). There is a positive relationship between fatalism and nihilism (Pearson Correlation Coefficient= 0.448, confidence level=0.000). Also the Pearson test shows that as individuals are in need of more achievement, they have less nihilistic thoughts.

Table.2 testing the relationship between dependent variable and independent variables

Variable	Test	Result
Gender	T-test	Accepted
Age	Pearson	Rejected
Education	Anova	Rejected
Ethnicity	Anova	Rejected
Marital Status	T-test	Rejected
Economic and social status	Anova	Rejected
Adherences to religious practices	Pearson	Accepted
Fatalism	Pearson	Accepted
Fear of failure	Pearson	Accepted
Need for Achievement	Pearson	Accepted

Regression Analysis

Table.3 shows the Stepwise regression of dependent variable and independent variables which their relation with dependent variable have been proved. According to the table.3 five variables have been entered in to the model. The first is the variable of fatalism, which have predicted 0.192 percent of nihilism, exclusively. In next step, fear of failure variable have been entered, so that by addition of this variable the model have predicted 0.257 percent of nihilism. These two variables, fatalism and fear of failure have positive relationship with nihilism, so as to an increase of the amount of nihilistic thoughts among respondents is increased. The third variable which have been entered the model is adherence to religious practices. By addition of this variable the model predict .304 percent of dependent variable. Gender and need for achievement are the next two variables which ordinarily have been entered to the model. In total, 5 variables of dependence on nihilism, fatalism, fear of failure, Adherences to religious practices, gender and need for achievement could predict 33% of dependent variable ($R^2=0.338$).

Table.3 The elements of dependent variables for predicting nihilism

Model	Entered variable	R	R Square	Adjusted R square	Std. Error of the Estimate	B	Beta	T	Sig.
1	Fatalism	.440 ^a	.194	.192	.43164	.050	.327	7.497	.000
2	Fear of failure	.511 ^b	.261	.257	.41384	.050	.216	4.982	.000
3	Adherences to religious practices	.556 ^c	.309	.304	.40058	-.026	-.191	-4.248	.000
4	Gender	.569 ^d	.323	.316	.39705	.121	-.126	-2.952	.003
5	Need For Achievement	.582 ^e	.338	.330	.39317	.018	.125	2.944	.003

Results

By accepting the fact that nihilism is one of remarkable characteristics of present world, this question is raised that what are the sociological aspects of this phenomenon. Or what sociology can tell us about nihilism. It seems that sociologists have not studied the nihilism phenomenon systematically, yet. But still some points can be figured out about nihilism from some exceptional studies (e.g. Bowers 1985, Woolfolk 1990, Eden 1983). The first is that, offering a comprehensive definition about nihilism that be applicable at all times and places, is almost impossible. Borg (1988), in his study named "The Problem of Nihilism: A Sociological Approach"- one of exceptions in sociological study of nihilism- after studying the concept of nihilism discovers that there is no common property that causes people or society as a whole to be called nihilistic. Therefore, nihilism is not an existing thing, but is a label. In explanation of this deduction, Borg writes: "Since the concept of nihilism was first used in the context of the process of modernization in the time of the French revolution, some major figures from the French sociological tradition who have an articulate opinion on it-for or against-are selected for a case study: pre-revolutionary writers, Montesquieu, Voltaire and Rousseau" (1988:1). The second is that, whether in Russia or in French or other societies, nihilistic thoughts have always been under influences of the societies' situations. The second point, obviously, endorses the significance of the social forces on nihilistic thoughts. So the fact that sociology haven't consider nihilism as a sociological phenomenon, is a weakness.

The approach applied in this study was a sociological approach toward nihilism. The results showed that there is a relationship between nihilistic thoughts and gender, Adherence to religious practices, fatalism, need for achievement and fear of failure. In fact, in statistical population of this study men have much nihilistic thoughts than women. As fatalistic thoughts are increased, the nihilistic thoughts is increased too. It means that whereas individuals presume their fate predetermined, they don't attempt to change the situation. Also as fear of failure is increased, nihilistic thoughts is increased too. Religious peoples have less nihilistic thoughts and as the need for achievement is increased, nihilistic thoughts is decreased. In total, 5 variables of dependence on nihilism, fatalism, fear of failure, Adherences to religious practices, gender and need for achievement could predict 33% of dependent variable ($R^2=0.338$).

References

- Borg, Meerten Ter, 1988. The Problem of Nihilism: A Sociological Approach, Sociological Analysis, Vol. 49, No. 1 (spring, 1988), pp. 1-16.
- Bower, C. A., 1985. Culture against Itself: Nihilism as an Element in Recent Educational Thought. American Journal of Education Vol. 93, No. 4, pp. 465-490
- Camus, Albert. 1942. The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, Justin O'Brien (Trans.). New York: Alfred A. Knopf, a Borzoi Book, 1955.
- Crosby, Donald A. (1988). The Specter of the Absurd: Sources and Criticisms of Modern Nihilism. New York: SUNY Press.
- Eden, Robert. 1983. Political Leadership and Nihilism: A Study of Weber and Nietzsche. Tampa: University of South Florida Press.
- Hibbs Thomas S., (1999). Shows About Nothing: Nihilism in Popular Culture .Baylor University Press, 2011.
- Kren, George M. 1969. Aspects of Contemporary Nihilism. The Journal of Value Inquiry, Volume 3, Issue 1, pp. 30-42.

- Marmysz, John. 2003. *Laughing at Nothing: Humors as a Response to Nihilism*, Albany: State University of new York press.
- Pratt, Alan, 2001. Nihilism. *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. Embry-Riddle University.
- Shayegan, Dariush. 1378 (2000). *Asia Face to the West*. Tehran: Amir Kabir Press [Persian].
- Turgenev, Ivan S, 1862. *Fathers and Sons*, Constance Garnett (Trans.). New York: Boni and Liveright, Modern Library Edition.
- Woolfolk, Alan, 1990. Toward a Theory of Nihilism. *Sociological Analysis*, Vol. 51, No. 1 (spring, 1990), pp. 105-107.