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## ***Suicide notes and their role in the suicide process***

*Poslovilna pisma in njihova vloga v samomorilnem procesu*

### **SHORT ABSTRACT**

A new method of approaching the psychological dimensions of the suicide process emerged about four decades ago: the study of suicide notes. Following the early euphoria regarding the results of this research, it became obvious that suicide notes are not a special window for full understanding of this phenomenon. The present article intends to use and contribute to the discourse based model for understanding the psychosocial and cultural dimensions of suicide. The re-interpretation of the meaning and function of suicide notes as part of the suicide process is of great importance for the understanding and recognition of suicide intent.

### **KEY WORDS**

suicide, suicide note, farewell letter, discourse, narratives

### **POVZETEK**

Proučevanje poslovilnih pisem samomorilcev, kot nova metoda se je razvila pred štirimi desetletji. Po začetnih pričakovanjih se je kar hitro pokazalo, da ti dokumenti ne ponujajo popolnih odgovorov za razumevanje samomorilnosti. Namen tega članka je prispevati k diskurzivno zasnovanemu modelu razumevanja socio-kulturnih in psiholoških aspektov samomorilnosti. Reinterpretacija pomena in funkcije poslovilnih pisem v poteku samomorilnega procesa predstavlja pomemben napredek v razumevanju in prepoznavanju samomorilnega namena.

### **KLJUČNE BESEDE**

samomor, poslovilno pismo, diskurz, narativa

## Introduction

The study of suicide notes as the last manifestations of the suicidal individuals' representations on their social world may significantly contribute to interpreting the process of suicide. Understanding the process is a key to planning and implementing effective measures of prevention. The first recommendation on suicide notes research was formulated in 1957 in *Clues to Suicide*: [...]Such notes, read in any quantity, strike the reader with richness of the material for clues to affect, conflicts, and motivations of the suicidal person. They strongly suggest the possibility of viewing them as projective devices [...] from which information may be inferred about the subject« (Shneidman and Farberow, 1957, p. 197).

Fifteen years later Shneidman (1973) made some important contributions that underline the importance of a strong cultural factor in the process of suicide where the individual has to adjust himself to the communicative »final common pathway«. During the last five decades suicide notes research has led to the publication of more than 80 articles, cited on Medline. On one side the author (Jacobs, 1967) offers classifications of suicide notes, while others present methods to discriminate between genuine suicide notes and simulated ones (Edelman and Renshaw, 1982). From the very beginning, authors employing various methods of content analysis try to identify or construct certain elements that reflect psychology-based suicidological theories.

For example, Leenaars (1985) invented the method of 50 »protocol sentences« to test Shneidman's formulations regarding suicide. In 1989 he stated that »suicide notes are an invaluable starting point for comprehending the suicidal act and for understanding the clues and patterns demonstrated by people who actually commit suicide« (Leenaars, 1989: 249).

However, even contemporary suicide note studies (O'Connor and Sheehy, 2000) overlooked the fact that suicide notes are the last discursive products of suicidal individuals, and as such, they are:

- the representations of a suicidal mind;
- the penultimate social acts of their authors;
- linguistic products serving some important discursive functions during the process;
- turning points in the reconstruction of the life history.

The context of these discursive products is the process of suicide. Therefore, the description of some theoretical concepts on suicide is relevant in interpreting the role and function of suicide notes.

## The suicide process

The pioneers of suicidology (Farberow and Shneidman, 1961; Ringel, 1969) described the basic phenomena of the suicide process. During the 1990's, Michel and Valach (1997) published the theory of goal directed action representing a developmen-

tal systems theory approach. These authors describe suicide as »a goal directed action, seen as an alternative to the original life carrier, which may relate to a relationship [...] or work [...] in critical times when a person's selfevaluation is negative« (Michel and Valach, 2001: 235).

Action theory operates with the concepts of goal, intention, plan, strategy, decision, evaluation, choice, success and failure as important elements of the suicide process (Michel and Valach, 1997). In their opinion, it is impossible to commit suicide without »working out« the necessary steps of the decision making and implementation process. In the mirror of their theory, the suicidal person is perceived as a relatively passive subject of the suicide process, as somebody »caught in the stream of a wild river«.

Michel and Valach (1997) assume that suicide is a much more complex phenomenon: the process as a »wild river« may seem chaotic and disordered but still obeys certain rules including individual, intersubjective and sociocultural dimensions of the meaning production process, ending up in a suicide act or in a life preserving »identity reconstruction«. An individual is actively engaged into the runoff of the suicide process by seeking, constructing or deconstructing meanings in the intersubjective space.

A particular suicide process starts when the coherence of psychosocial identity decreases due to some psychological, and/or sociocultural changes. In some cases, as a result of biological, developmental or early trauma related problems, the psychosocial identity of the individual is more fragile than in the average members of the population. Such individuals suffer because of negative self representations, feelings of incompetence or the inability to predict the behavior of others or their own future (Oravecz, R. and Moore, M., 2004b).

It seems important to stress once again, that such psychological alterations are connected to traumatic or stress induced experiences.

A citation from a suicide notes sample (A.s.h., Suicide Archive, web), written in English, reflects the consequences of negative representations and social frustrations of a suicidal individual. «[...] This selfimposed isolation, the rejection, the failures and frustrations overwhelm me [...]»

For such individuals, (even minor) changes in everyday life lead to painful emotions. According to their dissociated and unintegrated experiences they are unable to construct a desirable life carrier or carry out goal directed actions (Gergely, Fonagy and Target, 2001).

The consequences of a life carrier, burdened with several frustrations and the lack of positive representations regarding his/her own future, may cause a consequent feeling of despair. Such mental representations are reflected in statements, for example: « [...] am tired of failing [...] » or »[...] I can't go on living like this [...] « (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

In some other cases, identity becomes fragmented due to a major transition. In such cases feelings of social incompetence and meaning incoherence are amplified because of various types of losses (illness; changes in social status or employment, loss of a

significant other): »... I have tried to cope with the pressures but find that I just can't do it ...«(A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

If the individual experiences negative emotional rebound from such events, described as »unbearable mental pain« or »psychache« by Shneidman and Farberow (1957) and defined by Orbach (2003) as affective consequences of »... the extreme negative changes in the way the 'Self' was previously being experienced and in the way it functions« (Orbach, 2003: L:192 ), it has to take some adaptive (or maladaptive) steps to avoid the painful emotions accompanying these changes. Unbearable psychological pain is described here as the key moment in the development of the pre-suicidal process: »Suicide occurs when mental pain is deemed by the person to be unbearable« (Shneidman 1993, p. 51).

According to the available coping strategies of the individual, two subprocesses can be identified in the suicide process: adaptation, which allows the individual to restore the coherence of individual identity by using creative potentials or interpersonal support, and the process of selfdestruction leading towards death. At first glance, the process towards a bearable life and the wish to avoid »psychache« runs counter to the process leading to selfdestruction, but the situation is more complex than that (Orbach, 2003). Suicide notes and farewell letters often contain statements like these: »[...] I feel calm and at peace and grateful that I can go to sleep painlessly [...]«, or »[...] Though I am about to kick the bucket I am as happy as ever. I am tired of this life so am going over to see the other side [...]« (Ževart and Terček, 1969).

If individuals fail in their efforts to restore the coherence of their previous life history, the level of their emotional distress increases. »[...] I cannot continue any longer. The pain has become too unbearable. My problems are insoluble [...]« (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

According to both clinical and research experiences of the authors, the growing feelings of helplessness, »inner torture, perturbation, and surfeit of negative emotion« (Orbach, 2003: 193) contribute to the weakening of »life preserving« intentions and the dominance of death-oriented thinking: »[...] My mind -- always warped and twisted -- has reached the point where I can wait no longer -- I don't dare wait longer [...]«.

The authors of this article suppose that »life preserving« and »pro-suicide« elements of cognition may compete for dominance. The outcome of a particular suicide process depends on the construction of a coherent reality by rejecting the »life preserving elements« as well as positive emotions and accepts suicide as the only possible alternative for resolving the unbearable psychological pain. It seems that suicide depends on a complex discursive process, incorporating the elements of social, cultural, interpersonal and individual. By using a metaphor, the individual is immersed in the suicide related discourse offered by the culture and transferred by common language use. Fekete (2004) studied the Hungarian suicide epidemics following the suicide of prominent persons . He concluded that culture incorporates the particular suicide case into the general suicide-related discourse. During the 80's, the suicide rate of Hungary was the highest in the world. According to the anomy of the society and the lack of a positive future perspective, suicide, as a low threshold solution of problems impregnated the media, language use and even the metaphorical elements of everyday communications. The sensationa-

listic media presentation of some particular suicides of prominent persons, like the first Hungarian beauty queen, or a popular singer contributed to the development of suicide epidemics. Even more significant was the influence of Attila Jozsef, a popular poet, who ended his life in 1937, under the wheels of a train. The identification of suicidal individuals with him and his poetics was ever present. Some of these elements are present even in contemporary suicide notes.

In the opinion of the authors of the article, suicide may permeate and steep the language, by use of symbols and even by the modification of syntactic elements. For example, some languages like Slovene and Hungarian, both with a significant suicide rate, use double negations in their language. As it will be presented below, negation and negative linguistic elements are important elements of the suicide discourse. According to the definition of the culture, that it is the system of shared beliefs, values, customs, and behaviors, that the members of society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning, the suicide – related discourse contains many symbols where the culturally transferred meaning is the »sediment« of suicides committed by the members of the community or society during the past. The meanings of such symbols are dynamic, continually transforming and adapting according to new events, historical situations, changing myths and beliefs etc.

## **Discourse - related elements of the suicide process**

Suicide takes place in the context of the actual and the historical, in real, symbolic, and even fantasy level interactions between the individual and his/her sociocultural world. Suicide notes have an important role in defining or even transforming the relations between the suicidal individual and the elements of intersubjective space. They have the power to guide the suicidal individual to make the last step towards death or redirect the suicide process to a life preserving outcome. Discursive elements playing a major role in the process will be discussed below:

### **a) Harmonization with suicide-related meanings**

The content analysis of suicide notes and suicide related texts presented on the Internet has confirmed (Oravec, 2004b), that a firm decision to commit suicide is not sufficient in itself to complete the suicide act. »Harmonization« of the representational system of the suicidal individual with the discourse of suicide seems to be necessary to develop a coherent reality, including the elements of individual and cultural, past and present. On the one hand, members of a certain society, sharing the same language and culture can commit suicide only by accepting the values, rules and other culturally transferred elements.«Suicide with a hostile intent«, a specific ritual performed in some native communities (Counts 1980) well reflect the need to adapt the individual to the culture in an intent to commit a »proper« suicide.

On the other hand, the suicidal individual has to eliminate, tread out »life preserving« thinking, positive emotions, elements of a suitable future. »Harmonization« is an active process, which can happen through an immediate dialogue of two persons but sometimes the transformation of internal »thought systems« and contents happens through writing suicide notes, farewell letters, testaments, suicide related e-mails etc. The

final sequence of the suicide process serves the goal of minimizing the suicidal person's cognitive incoherence by integrating the suicide related thoughts, representations and emotions into the Self (Osváth, Fekete and Takahashi, 1998; Erdős, 2006).

A statement, discovered in a pre-suicidal communication on the Internet (A.s.h., Suicide Archive) clearly reflects the result of »harmonization« of internal thought system with suicide. »I feel justified in terminating a life which no longer holds any hope of having the essentials which make it worth living«. By »writing out« such statements, the suicidal person contributes to the developing coherence of the »inner« suicide related discourse. »You win, I can't take it any longer, I know you have been waiting for this to happen. I hope it makes you very happy, this is not an easy thing to do, but I've got to the point where there is nothing to live for, a little bit of kindness from you would have made everything so different, but all that ever interested you was the dollar«.

The above quoted sentences from a suicide note show that in the mind of a suicidal individual there is a coherent mental representation on the necessity of suicide, without any doubt or ambivalence. This absence of ambivalence appears before someone commits suicide. The authors of this article believe, that without such a coherent mental representation, suicide is not even possible. Sometimes, elements of the suicide notes obviously serve the intention of reducing death anxiety. A statement, appropriate for the externalization of death anxiety may reduce it. On the other hand, communication of such contents may pique the interest of other members of the community to offer some reasonable contribution. »I think I am more frightened about what lies beyond, whether it is something even worse than what life is« (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

## **b) Pro-suicide and life saving messages**

A suicidal person faces numerous »pro-suicide«, »pro-choice« and »life-saving« messages during the process in which the response of social environment is embodied. »Pro choice« statements suggest that »you have the right to commit suicide and I will not hinder you«. On the contrary, »life preserving« statements, such as: »Please, don't do this. I care for you with all my heart and soul [...]« either suggest positive support and empathy or a conviction that life has an absolute value and suicide is not acceptable.

The most powerful ones are the »strong statements« suggesting, recommending or even ordering suicide as the solution to the problems of the individual. Some direct messages also act as »pro-suicide« or »pain producing« by evoking negative Self representations in the potentially suicidal individual. A statement, like »Put the barrel in your mouth. Do it in public it's good for everyone to see human brains splattered all over the place« may definitely increase the commitment toward death in a suicidal individual (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

Pro suicide statements like: »I've tried so hard to make our lives pleasant and lovable, but you didn't seem to care. You had great plans which didn't include me. You didn't respect me [...]« or »You can't hurt me further and anyone else. I was a 'toll' while you needed me or thought you did [...]« (A.s.h., Suicide Archive), can be made even by the suicidal individual, reflecting the self-related representations as perceived by them. To a certain extent, »pro-suicide« and »life-saving« statements are competitive within the suicide process, and their effect depends on the level of congruity with the intentions of

the suicidal individual.

Some discursive elements (statements, expressions, etc.) can be incorporated into the particular suicide discourse that is developing more and more, while others fit into the concept less and less. In this process »life oriented« statements become less relevant and coherent with the suicide oriented cognition of the suicidal individual. It seems that such persons even actively seek negative statements, negative emotional contents or a direct (external) confirmation of the thought that suicide is the only solution for them. This selectivity in the perception of communication is in line with Ringel's concept of dynamic distraction and the phenomenon of »ultimate constriction« described by Kelly (1963):

»Please, don't think I did this because of you. I'm fucked. But I do love you very much. I just can't cope.«

The special discourse of suicide notes allows the individual to address similar statements to the intended readers and use the discursive act as a source of further, often final harmonization of their cognition close to the end of the suicide process.

### **c) Ambivalence and cognitive ambiguity**

Emotional ambivalence and cognitive ambiguity - as major »obstacles« to the development of a coherent individual suicide discourse - may often serve as protective, potential »life saving« elements: »I think I am more frightened about what lies beyond, whether it is something even worse than what life is« (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

Although ambivalence is very characteristic of certain phases of the suicide process, it is not present in the final phase (Wedler, 1987). It seems that suicide takes place when the ambivalence and ambiguity is resolved through a discursive process which needs the active engagement of the suicidal individual: »I must have been born to suffer«, »I do not want to live anymore«, »The grass is greener on the outer side«(it is normally not 'outer' but 'other') (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

### **d) The role of negation**

According to Crystal (1991 L: 231), »Negation is a morphosyntactic operation in which a lexical item denies or inverts the meaning of another lexical item or construction.« The English language uses »not«, »-non« or »-un« elements, to express negation.

Kézdi (1995) the pioneer of discursive suicidology stressed the role of linguistic negation in constructing a discourse of suicide and identified it as an important marker in the suicide process. The rate of negation (in a linguistic sense) proved to be higher in suicide related texts than in a random control sample. Also Osváth, Fekete and Tiringner (1996) found that the number of various forms of negation is higher in a Hungarian suicide notes sample as compared to German and English samples. In cultures with a high suicide rate suicide related texts contain a greater number of words of negation (Oravec, 2001). Frequent use of negation is an inherent element of farewell letters written in both Slovene and Hungarian languages.

According to the research outcomes of a transcultural suicide notes study (Oravec, 2003), linguistic expressions of negation are often connected with verdictive (Austin, 1962) statements. It seems that suicidal individuals require negation to construct self related statements. This is how the negation of self is manifested in language use: »I am not insane. My mind was never more clear.«, »This is no way to live.«, »You will say I am crazy and I can't go on this way just half living« (A.s.h., Suicide Archive).

### **e) Direct and indirect suicide expressions**

The statistical analysis of suicide related texts, for example suicide notes, crisis communication and internet related texts confirmed that negation (as procedural content) is more closely connected to suicide than direct or indirect expressions (as conceptual content) of suicide (Kézdi, 1995, Oravec, 1999, Osváth, Fekete and Tiringner 1996). The correlation analysis of the Internet related data (Oravec, 2004b) showed that there is a »strong tendency« toward a significant correlation between negation and direct and indirect suicide expressions, but not between direct and indirect suicide expressions. In concrete suicide notes and even in Internet related suicide texts, negation is frequent during the development of suicide related discourse, the impression making, presentation of the problem and seeking information and support. Later, during the suicide related discourse, linguistic elements, appropriate for negation are less frequent.

### **f) Reality deconstruction and reconstruction**

The process of suicide starts when the coherence of individual identity decreases to a level that representations about a bearable life in the future are unattainable. Fragmentary elements of social and self related representations still connect the »inner world« of the suicidal individual to social life. The course of the suicide process includes active deconstruction of preexisting reality representing a »pro-life« orientation and a process of alternative reality construction which contribute to the development of a reality system coherent with the pro-suicide orientation of the suicidal individual. As it appears from suicide note research (Oravec, 1999), persons intending to commit suicide sometimes have to destroy or »deconstruct« their reality to resolve the problem of emotional ambivalence and cognitive ambiguity. The process of reality deconstruction is a discourse related process employing performative acts (mostly verdictive statements) to implement or to consolidate the self representations coherent with self destruction. A statement like »my life has become a living hell, and is so unbearable« serves as an appropriate discursive tool to cut the existing positive representations which connect the suicidal individual to the rest of the world. Resolution of ambiguity and ambivalence - the construction of a »negative, pro-suicide oriented reality« - leads to a decrease in cognitive dissonance. The disappearance of positive future representations seems necessary to move the individual towards suicide as the only solution.

Positive relationship and attachment to others protect a person against self destructive processes. The suicidal person needs to »destroy« positive relationships and representations towards the self and others. Paradoxically, the act of disconnection sometimes appears as a pain reducing act by resolving the ambiguity and ambivalence of the suicidal individual but the deconstruction of pre-existing reality and the consequent lack of a positive representation of the future pushes the suffering person towards death (Oravec, 1999).



## Leave taking

Farewell letters are texts concentrated around the final statement and farewell. They are addressed to those for whom the author's absence will be significant. The author's absence at the moment of reading is a major constituent of such texts representing the ultimate element of a dialogical effort. The impossibility of any further interpersonal negotiation about the meaning influences both the structure and the content.

A content analysis of farewell letters (N=45) written by Slovene patriots sentenced to death and executed by the German occupation authorities during the Second World War was performed. (Oravec, 1998; Oravec and Erdős, 2006) Results showed that more than 90% of the texts contain genre-specific structural variables, as the »addressee« the »signature« and a »leave taking phrase« at the end of the text, for example: »Pray for me!«, »We will meet over the clouds«, »Sorry for causing so much pain«, »Preserve me in a good memory« (Ževart and Terček, 1969).

Content elements in the farewell letters were quite uniform. The most frequent emotions represented were feelings of guilt and love: »guilt« in the sense of causing suffering to the beloved and »love« as a positive feeling expressed towards the addressees.

Oravec (1999) performed a comparative analysis of (N=50) contemporary suicide notes, written in the Slovene language to test whether they follow the same content and structure as the farewell letters of the second world war patriots. Suicide notes written by suicide completers had a less coherent structure and they were less uniform in their content. In 32% of them no addressee was mentioned. Leave taking phrase was present in 58% and signature only in 54%. Further comparison of Slovene suicide notes (N=58) with samples of Hungarian (N=54) and English suicide notes (N=52) (Oravec, 2002) showed no significant differences in the presence of structural elements. The survey confirmed that less than half of all the suicide notes written in the three different languages were structured like farewell letters.

The discursive expression of leave taking may serve as the symbolic act of preventing the »disappearance« of the suicidal individual. The description of instructions, regarding funeral ceremonies frequently present in suicide notes may reflect two different intentions of the suicidal individual:

- To be buried avoiding funeral ceremonies and further remembrance (cremation, offering the body to medical institution etc.);
- To order unusual, pompous funeral ceremonies, even making a list of people, who have to attend the funeral (ordering music, decoration etc.).

These instructions reflect the self representations of the author of the given suicide note, which may vary from a sharp rejection of existence to a need for compassion addressed to the social environment or even a wish to survive in the collective memory of the family or community. Farewell letters contain a significant »amount« of positive emotions and representations toward others, generally the intended readers. Similarities between the farewell letters of the patriots and suicide completers suggest that farewell letters (of any kind) serve as spiritual connectors between the authors and the intended

readers in the moment of final farewell. Such texts ultimately harmonize the relationship between the survivors and the persons who will be dead at the moment when the letter is read. The intention of the authors (independently from the reason of dying) is to leave behind a positive relationship with the beloved. Such an ultimate message may help the suicidal individual to survive through the spiritual connection with family and community members. Harmonization of the relationship with family and community members may reduce death anxiety (Oravec and Erdős, 2006). Some suicidal persons use this way of »resolving« the relationship with concerned others to eliminate the last »obstacle« before committing suicide.

Suicide notes that are not structured as farewell letters often contain negative emotions and even hostile intent towards the intended readers. Sometimes, the same person writes both kinds of suicide notes, usually to different intended readers (Oravec, R., 2003). According to these findings it may be concluded that the »style« of suicide notes depends more on the relationship between the suicidal individual and the intended reader and on the role of the note in the process of suicide than on neurobiological aspects of the suicidal mind (Oravec, R. and Moore, M., 2004b).

## Conclusion

The sentence: »Even though I hate the life I live with such a passion, to pull the trigger seems so difficult«, which was written by a suicide completer clearly reflects the horror which follows a person along the suicide process. The discursive suicidological approach has developed new perspectives on the process leading to self destruction. The analysis of the narrative elements retrieved from suicide related texts lead to the conclusion that the suicide process requires an active, intrapsychic and interpersonal engagement in constructing new meanings and representations which allow the particular individual to take his or her life.

Suicide is even after a hundred years of intensive research activity still a complex phenomenon, difficult to understand and even more difficult to prevent, especially in the settings of psychiatry and psychotherapy. The intention of the authors with this presentation of the discursive aspects of suicide was to offer a model to psychotherapists and other clinicians, involved in the treatment and prevention of particular suicide cases, based on cultural-anthropological, linguistic and psychological elements.

If therapists and other clinicians accept the relevance of interpersonal influence on the development of the suicide process and suicide related cognition, the possibility of their life-saving interactions increase and the possibility of wrong interventions, serving the goal of harmonization of the individual cognition with suicide, decrease. On the other hand, the chronological development of the suicide process, expressing in some impressive elements may increase the suicide-related awareness of the therapist.

## Comments

A.s.h., *Suicide Archive*, web: <http://archive.ashspace.org/ash.xanthia.com/> (20/6/2014)

\*According to a legal verdict, some contents of the A.s.h. website, including the »memory site« and the archives of the A.s.h. community, are not accessible at the time of publication of the article.

The suicide notes of Slovene patriots, executed during the second world war, were collected and published by Ževart M. and Terček S. Some fragments of suicide notes, quoted in the article, were translated from the Slovene suicide notes sample, which was received from the Ministry of Internal Affairs in 1998 and 1999.

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