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Suicide with a hostile intent

Samomor s sovražnim namenom

SHORT ABSTRACT

Suicide with a hostile intent has been described by anthropologists as a phenomenon which is characteristic of native communities in Oceania, South America and Africa. The authors will present the results of a transcultural suicide notes research which may confirm the presence of »meaningful« suicide in contemporary western societies. The research survey confirmed a significant presence of accusative statements written to third persons in the Slovene sample of suicide letters, although such statements were detectable in less than 10 % of notes, written in Hungary and USA.

KEY WORDS

Suicide with a hostile intent, Samsonic suicide, »meaningful suicide«, community, Slovenia, Hungary, suicide notes

POVZETEK

Z antropološkega vidika je samomor s sovražnim namenom fenomen, ki je značilen za domorodske skupnosti v Oceaniji, Južni Ameriki in Afriki. V prispevku so predstavljeni rezultati trans-kulturne raziskave poslovilnih pisem, ki potrjujejo prisotnost »pomenskega« samomora tudi v zahodni družbi. Raziskava je potrdila pomembno prisotnost obtožilnih izjav v slovenskem vzorcu samomorilnih pisem, katere so bile zaznane le v 10 % samomorilnih pisem, napisanih v madžarskem in angleškem jeziku.

KLJUČNE BESEDE

Samomor s sovražnim namenom, Samsonov samomor, »pomenski samomor«, skupnost, Slovenija, Madžarska, samomorilna pisma

Introduction

In 1952, Jeffreys coined the term, »Samsonic suicide« for suicides, where the suicidal individual destroys not only himself, but his enemies as well. The concept is metaphorically connected with the biblical person of Samson, and in particular the description of his death: »...and Samson called unto the Lord and said O Lord God, remember me, I pray Thee, and strengthen me, I pray Thee, only this once, O God, that I may be at once avenged of the Philistines for my two eyes. And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars upon which the house stood ... the one with his right hand and the other with his left. And Samson said, let me die with the Philistines. And he bowed himself with all his might: and the house fell upon the Lords, and upon all the people that were therein. So the dead which he slew at his death were more than they which he slew in his life.« (Judges 16:28 - 30, (The Holy Bible, King James version).

Jeffreys (1952) further argues that Samson's suicide, although it is an act of revenge does not strictly conform to the typical revenge suicide. It should not be mistaken for what is called institutionalized suicide. Here Jeffreys cites Kroeber, who describes institutionalized suicide as referring to the idea of cultural inclinations as to how and in which situations suicide could be an appropriate way out of the suffering.

There have been many interpretations of Samsonic suicide which correlate more to understanding the motives of suicide bombers and mass murderers, perpetrators of school and public shootings. That is the why the concept is now known by the more appropriate term, » suicide with a hostile intent« or » meaningful suicide«. These two terms are used by anthropologists, who describe specific suicide patterns in native communities all over the world. Counts (1987) collected a respectable number of references, describing self-killing as an act of anger and shame with the intent of injuring someone else. The anthropological data, collected from native communities, located in different continents show that the phenomenon of suicide with a hostile intent has a wide distribution from Africa, through South America to Micronesia and also Polynesia. This data describes similar, culturally determined rituals of self-killing.

Counts (1980, 1987) interpreted such suicides as culturally recognized behaviour that enables politically powerless persons to affect the behaviour of the more powerful members of their society, or at least allows them to revenge themselves on those who have made their lives intolerable. The acts of »meaningful suicide«, as Counts named the phenomenon, explicitly differ from the perception of suicide, as understood by psychology- and sociology-based scientific thinking.

Counts (1991) explains that anthropology attempts to portray the act of suicide as a culturally constructed act, performed in the context of a cultural system that alone contains meaning. Such socially constructed meanings are the result of actual interactions of community members either in the past or present times. Additionally, the way that individuals and the community understand the reason for a specific suicide contributes to the development of meaning construction process. Such meanings have been incorporated into the general social discourse about suicide.

The anthropological understanding of »meaningful suicide« depends on the particular suicide - related practice in native communities. The phenomenology of such suicides includes the presence of well defined social rules, which serve as criteria, necessary to recognize a suicide as meaningful suicide.

For the suicide to be considered as »meaningful« the suicidal person should:

1. communicate an intent of suicide
2. dress in their finest clothing
3. kill him/herself in front of other community members
4. communicate to the community the identity of the individual who is the cause of the suicide.

This last rule is the most important element for the correct completion of a suicide with a hostile intent. A suicide where these 4 elements are present can be interpreted by the kinship or friends of the deceased as a special kind of homicide. Following the act, recognized as a meaningful suicide, members of the kin plan and organize how to avenge the death, and obtain justice. Usually they ask the person recognized as the »perpetrator« to pay a large compensation. If the accused person refuses to pay the requested compensation, the kin may attack him or hire a sorcerer to kill him by hands or by magic. Most of the communities believe that if the kin do not avenge the death of their relative then they can expect to see the ghost of the deceased wandering around. It seems intriguing from the viewpoint of a westerner, that anthropological descriptions of meaningful suicide do not mention any attempts or efforts, to rescue the suicidal individual or to prevent the suicide act. One can perceive even an acquiescence with the suicide victim and a respect for the act of suicide. In this sense suicide with a hostile intent in a native community represents a complex social phenomenon, that includes juridical, psychological and spiritual elements (Jeffreys, 1952).

Returning to the statement of Jeffreys (1952), that the culture not only defines certain situations that call for a suicide but often also indicates the correct way to perform it, one can conclude that suicide is far more correlated with the culture than theories about suicide, oriented toward psychopathology and individual risk factors would like to admit. According to the conclusion of the author (Oravec, 2016) a suicidal individual is always impregnated by the suicide - related discourse of a certain culture. Suicide is then the result of a complex interaction between the individual and the culture, the past, the present and the future. The theatre of these interactions is the inter-subjective space, the »universe« of meaning production.

If culture is perceived as a semiotic category, a »reality caught in signs« as for example language, artistic products, rituals etc., then everything related to suicide is inevitably an element of this particular discourse which interacts with the potentially suicidal individual by imbuing them with culturally constructed meanings. An individual act of suicide is possible only if there is an interaction with such meanings, throughout the entire suicide process. The culture provides the rules, knowledge and even the »code of understanding« to all individuals. Therefore, according to the cultural understanding of suicide, suicide is an inter-subjective and a culturally determined process.

Introduction to the study

The observation that suicide with a hostile intent is present in different native communities around the world raises the question as to whether such a phenomenon is also present in western cultures. Following an initial introduction into the topic offered by Preti (2006), we started to observe the presence of this phenomenon all over the world. The aim of our study was to confirm or reject the presence of this complex, socio-cultural, emotional and cognitive phenomenon in different western societies.

Working in a small, regional prison as a part time clinical psychiatrist for many years, Oravec (2007) frequently witnessed the angry outbursts of inmates who were suffering from feelings of injustice. They would often warn the staff in an exaggerated manner: »I will harm myself and then you will suffer« or »I will cut myself and then you will be responsible«. In some cases, demonstrative acts of self-harm, mainly dermal cuts were performed in front of the guards in an attempt to generate feelings of responsibility and guilt in such persons of authority. In some cases, following the suicide of their partners, some survivors, appearing in psychiatric outpatient services report on inexplicably hostile reaction from the broader family of the deceased toward them. Even if the suicide completer did not leave a suicide note or express in some other way responsibility of a »third person« for their suicide, the family commonly automatically constructs a »post mortem« explanatory narrative, with the intention of naming the person that is responsible for the suicide. Samples of trans-cultural suicide notes research include some explicit cases where the suicidal person addresses and accuses a third person as a reason for suicide.

The large suicide notes research, mentioned above, included samples written in English, Slovene and Hungarian. language As it was still available for further research purposes, we designed a survey to evaluate the hypothesis on the supposed presence of the phenomenon of suicide with a hostile intent in western cultures. A secondary aim was to detect differences between the related contents of suicide notes, written in different languages.

The criteria for suicide with a hostile intent were determined as they appear in suicide notes:

1) The presence of an accusative expression:

» My darling,

May her guts rot in hell -- I loved her so much.«

2) Notes written explicitly or implicitly to third person - not to the accused person (the perpetrator).

»Dearest Jane

I'm doing this against Bill, not you!«

»My dearest! It's not your fault. It's the responsibility of my mother. »

(Translated from Slovene language)

3) Explicitly or implicitly naming the perpetrator

»My boss, Kenneth J., seduced me and made me pregnant. He refuses to help me.«

- 4) Additional / conditional criteria: condemnation, curse, call for revenge.
» Kill XY! I can't do it!« (Translated from Slovene language)
»I condemn all of you!« (Translated from Slovene language)

Results

In our survey we performed a transcultural suicide-notes analysis with the intention of detecting those notes that contain the elements which fulfill the criteria for suicide with a hostile intent. Two samples out of three, namely the Hungarian and the Slovene suicide notes originate from societies with a high suicide rate. The suicide notes written in English were collected in the USA, a country with a relatively low rate of suicide. At first sight it seemed plausible to expect some similarities between the results coming from the samples collected in societies with high rates of suicide.

The Hungarian sample of suicide notes

The Hungarian sample represents a collection of suicide notes in one country in the course of one year and it contains 55 suicide notes. An independent assessor trained to recognize the elements of suicide with a hostile intent found ten notes (18%), containing hostile, accusative statements. Six of these suicide letters had been written to a third person and all of them contained implicit or explicit elements needed for the identification of the »perpetrator«. In four notes the nature of the offence leading to suicide was mentioned. Two suicide completers expressed a curse or condemnation and in one case a call for revenge. 10,9% of the Hungarian sample of suicide notes fulfill the criteria for suicide with a hostile intent. The remaining four notes were addressed to the person who was accused as responsible for the suicide. Such direct accusations of the supposed perpetrator presupposes the belief of the suicide completer in their illocutionary force to cause that person unbearable suffering.

The USA sample of suicide notes

The USA suicide notes sample retrieved from the Internet as a genuine suicide notes sample contained 47 notes. Surprisingly, the results of the survey were fairly similar to the Hungarian sample. Eleven notes (23%) contain accusative statements. Five of them (10%) were written to a third person. Four notes identified the name or person, causing the suicide and only three notes explained the nature of the painful and suicidogenic event or behaviour. Six notes were written to the presumed »perpetrator«.

The Slovene sample of suicide notes

The Slovene suicide notes sample contains 47 notes, randomly selected from a large national collection of suicide notes. Surprisingly, 29 suicide notes (61%) of the Slovene sample contained accusative, hostile elements. More than half of them (36%) were written to a third person. Thirteen notes contain information about the identity of the presumed »perpetrator« and ten notes mentioned the act or behaviour leading to suicide. In one case cursing was present and there was one call for revenge.

Twelve notes were written to the person considered by the suicidal individual as the cause of their suffering.

Discussion

At the end of the 19th century, Dürkheim (1997) used the statistical sociological method to explain the differences in the of suicide rates of different Swiss cantons. He found that the suicide rate was higher in Protestant communities than in Roman catholic ones. This is important because in his opinion, social cohesion represents an important protective element for people who accept rules and moral norms offered by the community. Protestantism at the time of Dürkheim offered much more space for individualization and realization of creative potentials than Roman catholicism. In the opinion of Dürkheim, liberalization of the collective norms and attitudes increased the risk of individual break - downs and suicides. For many Slovenes the Roman catholic religion and the Church still represents an important community-integrating element.

According to the data of Slovene Statistical Office (<https://www.stat.si/popis2002/gradivo/2-169.pdf>), the Roman catholic religion is practised by 51% of the population, with other religions less than 5%. It seems plausible to conclude, that even though the belief and value system of Catholic communities is conservative and unwieldy, being a the member of the community still offers some feelings of safety and protection. In such communities separation and individualism are not really socially accepted. Traditionally, the population in the countryside is not motivated for mobility and separation from the primary family. The next generation usually remains on the land of their fathers. Family cohesion is a highly preferred value. It seems, that the role of Catholic religion regarding suicide changed through the Slovene history, because Marusic found that Roman Catholic religion represents a remarkable risk factor of suicide in Slovene regions with high suicide rates. (Marusic 1998)

Large families are in some sense the extensions of the traditional, catholic system of values and morality. They are tightly connected, with regular reunions and meetings. The kin represents the core of reality construction and information transference to other members of the community. There are some interesting examples, for instance with suicide, divorce, violent crimes etc., where members of the kin will construct and spread an explanatory narrative even in the absence of reliable information.

In our opinion, kin in the Slovene still has power for reality construction, which may lead to exclusion of their members, accused of breaking the rules or moral norms. Widows and widowers, the close relatives of the one who committed suicide are often the victims of exclusion initiated by the broader family of such suicides. completers. In societies with a higher level of individualization and secularization, the influence of relatives and the local community is much weaker. In such communities, suicidal individuals would not expect any major reaction from the family or relatives and even if there is then, the relevance of such whispering is usually relatively low.

In societies with a higher level of individualization and secularization, the influence of kin and local community is much weaker. In such communities, suicidal individuals can't expect any vehement reaction of the family or the kin or even then, the relevance of such whispering is usually relatively low.

According to the data, retrieved from the site of the Hungarian Statistical Office only 37% of Hungarians declare themselves as Roman Catholics. (http://www.ksh.hu/nep-szamlalas/tables_regional_00?lang=en) The Lutheran and Calvinist church has much higher influence than in Slovenia. During the communist regime the traditional village communities were destroyed. According to the project of industrialization, younger members of the rural communities moved to towns in their need to find jobs and better living conditions. By leaving the traditional community, and traditional way of life the relevance of the value- and belief system of the community decreased. With increased mobility, individualization and secularization the traditional force of kinship weakened and slowly disappeared.

The sample of suicide notes written in the English language was collected and published in the US, a country with a long tradition of secularisation and individualization, especially in large urban communities. The statistical data shows the protestant religion to be dominant (46,5% in 2014). The Roman Catholic religion is represented in 23,9%. <http://www.pewforum.org/2015/05/12/americas-changing-religious-landscape/> According to the century old postulates of Dürkheim, the protestant religion offers more personal freedom and less cohesion for communities and families.

Conclusion

Suicide notes offer a researcher a special window, unparalleled among socio-psychological phenomena, into the thoughts and emotions that encompass the deed. In its essence, 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 authorial 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 of such texts.

According to the theoretical suppositions of the authors, suicide notes are the last discursive products of suicidal individuals, and as such, they are

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

By reading and comparing Slovene, Hungarian and USA suicide notes, included in the sample, there are some obvious differences. The Hungarian and USA suicide notes contain far more expressions of positive emotions and representations toward others, generally the intended readers. It seems that many suicide notes 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.

In many cases, the rejection or even the expression of the responsibility of a significant other undoubtedly reflect the presence of a post mortem reality construction by some »powerful« family or community members. By rejecting the responsibility of a significant other, the suicidal individual presupposes and prevents the mechanism of scapegoating, victimization of the beloved. Alternatively, the suicidal individual might believe, that the expression of responsibility or even guilt of another person will ignite the process of revenge by exclusion, humiliation or punishment. One can understand the cognitive logic of »meaningful suicides« as a coping strategy of a powerless person, who is unable to resolve a subordinative relationship by »own hands«. To understand these mechanisms of » suicides with a hostile intent« in a western society it seems important to understand the power of family, kinship and community in contemporary society. The aim of the authors was not to make conclusions, which are general and applicable to the entire population of suicide completers in the societies, included within the study. The presented differences between the three suicide note samples may be stochastic, according to the differences in which the notes collected.

It seems plausible to conclude, that suicide with a hostile intent is not an exotic phenomenon, characteristic only of native communities, but a universal phenomenon of humanity. It will appear everywhere, where the rights of individuals may be supposedly violated. It appears to be more often present in communities with coherent structure, value and belief system, which are regulating the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion of the members. As in its original form, described by anthropologists, kinship has the crucial role even in contemporary societies to construct representations on a suicide event and to declare, who is the victim and perpetrator.

In traditional communities, a suicidal individual has to verbally communicate the name of the perpetrator, in contemporary societies suicide notes and electronic channels of communication may serve the same purpose. In this sense, suicide notes represent penultimate acts of suicidal individuals before dying. Such circumstances of writing suicide notes definitely contribute to the relevance of the content. The role of the victim and the perpetrator has been unalterably distributed. Revenge in contemporary societies will vary from humiliation and exclusion to verbal and physical violence.

Many individuals, supposedly recognized as »perpetrators« and transformed into victims of suicide with a hostile intent ask for psychiatric intervention, according to their suffering, caused by the reaction of the family of the deceased. Usually they are individuals, reacting with feelings of guilt, who are unable to distance themselves from representations that were constructed by the family and the community. They will describe cruel and coherent strategies of the family, which starts with ignorance at the funeral and lasts for long years. The victim of such treatment will be isolated, humiliated and thrown into deep depression by the family and relatives who permanently gossip around the incriminatory information.

If the revenge penetrates the defences of the individual, still vulnerable because the suicide of the beloved or otherwise significant person, they could incorporate feelings of responsibility and guilt for the rest of their lives.

The recognition of the phenomenon of suicide with a hostile intent in contemporary western societies seems to be extremely important for psychotherapists, working with survivors of suicide and suicide attempters as well as professionals dealing with the topic of public safety. Individuals exposed to violence of various sort without the perception of an exit from the situation may manifest high risk for extended suicide or even a terrorist attack. On the other hand, individuals, recognized as a cause of a suicide may develop several mental disorders or risk of suicide. Recognition of the possible outcomes mentioned above may decrease the danger of destructive and harmful manifestations of such individuals.

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