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Talking Suicide

Online Conversations about a Taboo Subject

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Abstract

The present article discusses intimate conversations about suicide that are pursued on the Internet. Computer-mediated communication has made it possible for participants to remain anonymous and, simultaneously, enter into a public space to share personal thoughts about a stigmatized and taboo subject. This has also created new and unique opportunities to study a type of communication that was previously very difficult to access. Most of the participants on the studied forum are teenagers or young adults who communicate based on a need to recognize themselves in others, and to receive acknowledgement for their thoughts, feelings and experiences, thereby gaining acceptance and understanding. However, there are also destructive elements in the form of an exchange of suicide methods and participants exhorting each other to go ahead with their suicide plans. Moreover, participants are able to practise suicide behaviour in a mediated, conversational form, thereby making the act seem less fearful. The participants are furthermore involved in constructing and re-constructing a counter-discourse in which established society's perceptions and values concerning suicide are questioned, as expressed in a critique against public institutions, mainly psychiatry.

Keywords: Internet, suicide, disclosures, anonymity, authenticity, counter-discourse

Introduction

There is a great deal of ambivalence as to whether online communication about suicide should be seen primarily as providing opportunities or as posing a serious threat (e.g., Alao 2006; D´Hulster & Van Heeringen 2006). Some researchers have commented on the emergence of pro-suicide websites on the Internet and the risks this may entail (Baume et al. 1997; Thompson 1999; Biddle et al. 2008; Recupero et al. 2008; Westerlund & Wasserman 2009; Hagihara et al. 2012). These sites recommend suicide as a solution to life's problems; they contain detailed descriptions of methods for achieving maximum effect, as well as suicide notes and pictures of people who have committed suicide (Westerlund 2012). Pro-suicide websites encourage and strengthen peer group pressure to fulfil suicide plans, glorifying those who have killed themselves, and a new form of suicide pact – "net suicide" – has been established (Lee 2003; Rajagopol 2004; Naito 2007). Ozawa-De Silva (2008; 2010) points to the role of sociality in Internet-based suicide pacts: By meeting, planning and carrying out suicide plans together, people can experience a sense of relationship and community. For those trying to establish suicide pacts on the Internet, dying together seems more comforting than dying alone. These developments have raised fears

about the Internet's detrimental influence on beliefs and behaviours linked to suicide. Some authors have claimed that the Internet has a stronger "Werther effect" – i.e., a greater potential to influence suicidal acts – than do other mediated forms of communication (Baume et al. 1997). Others point to a clearly "anti-psychiatric" attitude underlying the production of pro-suicide messages (Becker & Schmidt 2004).

Conversely, the Internet can be seen as a key resource and a powerful communication tool for understanding and providing support for potentially suicidal individuals (Wang et al. 2005; Gilat & Shahar 2007; Barak 2007; Kemp & Collings 2011; Westerlund et al. 2012), sometimes referred to as the "Papageno effect" (Niederkrotenthaler et al. 2010). It has been pointed out that the Internet can provide good and cost-effective opportunities for mental health promotion and suicide prevention, due to its availability and reach (Wang et al. 2005; Riper et al. 2010). The topic of mental health can be discussed openly, which may contribute to de-stigmatization and further mental health promotion. The possibility for users to remain anonymous has also been shown to increase people's willingness to communicate about problematic life circumstances (Westerlund 2010). Baker and Fortune (2008) argue that discussions in various studies and in the media have been too generalized, lacking in-depth knowledge about what Internet communication on suicide and self-harm really means for those involved. Based on in-depth interviews with people who regularly visited self-injury and suicide forums, the authors conclude that, for the participants, these forums provided a source of empathy, fellowship and a way of dealing with social and psychological problems.

Intimate conversations and disclosures regarding suicide occur on a large variety of Internet forums (Baker & Fortune 2008; Ruder et al. 2011). Computer-mediated communication has made it possible for participants to be both anonymous and, simultaneously, enter into a public space to discuss and share personal thoughts, feelings and experiences about a subject that is still stigmatized and taboo in most cultures and societies (Joiner 2005: 6). In other words, elements from these personal and intimate suicide communications have emigrated from the private sphere to the Internet, becoming, to some extent, public and mass mediated. This has also created new and unique opportunities to study a type of communication that was previously very difficult to access (Westerlund 2010).

When it comes to understanding conversations about suicide, it is essential to distinguish between *suicidal behaviour as a language*, that is, the bodily and verbal expressions of suicidal behaviour, and our *language about suicidal behaviour* (Beskow 1999: 4). In the first case, suicidal behaviour itself can be seen as a social act that is communicated from one person to another, and can be interpreted as a text. At the second level, our language about suicidal behaviour comprises the social and linguistic discourse (or discourses) that determine the subject matter and boundaries of how suicide can be discussed, and related to, in a specific socio-cultural and temporal context. Although the focus of the present article is largely on the discursive context of the subject of suicide, the former level is also touched upon, as a significant part of what is communicated in suicide forums may be termed a kind of "alarming conversation" in which people express a desire to carry out suicidal acts (Forstorp 1999: 71).

As mentioned above, online conversations about suicide have made it possible to study a type of communication that has been very difficult to access. The questions that will be examined and discussed in the present article are:

- What reasons do participants explicitly and implicitly provide for their participation in conversations about suicide?
- What explanations, beliefs or discourses about suicide are constructed and re-constructed by the participants?
- Which experiences are communicated and shared in the conversations?
- How are boundaries established and maintained between the inside and the outside of the forum?

Method and Material

The study is based on a qualitative analysis of conversations about suicide on the Swedish chat forum *SUIGUI CHAT* (2008). The data collection process is comparable to what is referred to as "virtual ethnography", which often combines a range of methods in order to comprehend the values and practices of the studied group (Sundén 2002; Kanayama 2003; Dirksen et al. 2010; Farnsworth & Austrin 2010). Flick (2009: 272) suggests that the Internet can be studied as "[...] a form of milieu or culture in which people develop specific forms of communication or, sometimes, specific identities. Both suggest a transfer of ethnographic methods to Internet research". During a period of three months, from June to August 2008, I was frequently logged in and spent time on SUIGUI CHAT. To avoid interrupting the conversations, I did not post any messages myself. I chose to log in and reflectively "listen" to the different voices (i.e., "lurking"). The conversations were to a high degree formed and carried out on the participants' own terms, with little, if any, external interference, thus making these conversations an important alternative or complement to, for example, interview data. A series of conversations spread over 22 days during this period were then selected and the entries posted during a two-hour period on each day were collected for further analysis.[1] The number of participants who posted messages during the two-hour period of conversations varied from five to more than 20. The content was saved in PDF format, resulting in 138 pages of text.

In order to further interpret the qualitative meaning of the text-based posts, the whole material was read in depth repeatedly and sorted under different analytical themes (e.g., Bruhn Jensen 2002: 247). The quotations in the Results and Discussion sections should be seen as representative and illustrative examples of the themes found in the participants' posts on SUIGUI CHAT.

The analysis also uses key elements from Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Fairclough 1992; 1995, Fairclough & Wodak 1997). CDA expands on the thematic analysis through its more deliberate positioning of the mediated text in its socio-cultural context. This approach can be considered critical in the sense that analysis determines how texts construct discursive knowledge on what is right and wrong, true and untrue, natural and unnatural. The discursive analytical perspective indicates that two or more discourses in the same domain typically compete in providing explanations and meanings concerning a certain subject or phenomenon – in the present study the management of, and beliefs about, suicide.

At the time of data collection, SUIGUI CHAT was linked to the pro-suicide, or pro-choice, website *Svensk självmordsguide* (Swedish Suicide Guide) (2011). In May 2011,

the producer shut down the Swedish Suicide Guide until further notice, but SUIGUI CHAT was left open for participants.

Participants and Communication Form

Communication systems on the Internet structure interaction in different ways, which in turn affect the type of social relationships that develop between users (Lövheim 2002: 155). The medium's technical communicative structure creates special conversational styles relative to users' socio-cultural context. Particular linguistic styles, certain phrases and expressions, define participants' group identity, while at the same time staking out the boundaries against those who do not belong to the community (Donath 1999: 38).

Judging from the conversations on SUIGUI CHAT, most participants are teenagers and young adults in their twenties. The participants' nicknames indicate that there is a group of young people who frequently return to the site anonymously in order to disclose and discuss thoughts and feelings related to suicide, mental pain and vulnerability.

The production of texts on SUIGUI CHAT appears synchronously in real time; messages are transferred directly to the screens of one or more users simultaneously. This creates immediacy and spontaneity. Participants often respond in a number of posts over a short period of time. Stylistically, the conversations strive to reflect spoken language, underlined by frequent use of emotional markers ("emoticons") (Bolter 2003: 125-126).

Anonymity and Authenticity

Conversations on SUIGUI CHAT take place in what could be called an anonymized public space, that is, a community wherein one may communicate with others while largely remaining – if one wishes – anonymous. Somewhat paradoxically, it provides an opportunity to reveal things about oneself, without being revealed. This does not mean that anonymity must involve a reduction in the authenticity of people's communications. On SUIGUI CHAT, formal aspects linking a person to the physical world are de-identified (such as one's name and place of residence), while what the individual chooses to communicate seems to be, to a large extent, authentic, based on real situations, events and experiences (cf. Hardey 2002: 570). Being "real" – being a "real" person and "meaning" what ones says on forums like SUIGUI CHAT – does not necessarily mean that one reveals one's (full) identity. Most of the participants who communicate on the forum do so based on a need to recognize themselves in others, and to receive acknowledgement of their thoughts, feelings and experiences, thereby gaining acceptance and understanding (cf. Johansson 2010:151-155).

Questions concerning age, gender, and whether one has a job or is at school are very common on SUIGUI CHAT. These questions are answered without problem by most participants, enabling one to generally determine whom one is talking to. However, issues such as one's real name and home address are not popular: "I'd never say my real name here anyway..." (08/03/08).[2] Answering such questions would reveal too much about a participant's identity outside the virtual space, hindering disclosures of suicide-related thoughts and feelings: One wants to reveal – not be revealed.

Related to anonymity, authenticity and identity is the use of made-up names ("nicks"). The choice of name may be arbitrary, without any underlying meaning, but for many

visitors these signatures describe personal experiences, qualities and aspirations that participants would like to communicate to others on the forum. For example, the following are used: alone; dead man walking; dystopia; chaosgirl; LifeIsPain; Psychocase; wounded for life; Suicide Girl; TheBrokenOne; Wanna Die.

While these signatures conceal the participants' real names, they also point to key experiences that visitors on SUIGUI CHAT want to make available to others. In this connection, the use of a pseudonym appears *less* anonymous and *more* authentic than the use of one's "proper" name.

Disclosures and Responses

The initial text-based disclosures on SUIGUI CHAT nearly always constitute an important aspect of participants' self-presentation, such as their perceived pain, sorrow and anger, their future plans, or their lack of self-esteem. It seems that it is also taken for granted that they, as participants, "are allowed" to express these difficult matters on the forum, something that is not always self-evident in other conversational situations.

These initial disclosures often occur as statements about suicidal events:

> Lay on the tracks on Thursday. But someone came & found me & pulled me off: S (07/20/08).

> hi there [...] almost succeeded [...] hung myself, but the rope loosed (08/10/08).

These explicit statements about acts of attempted suicide point to core functions of disclosing: to share with you what I have done, thought and felt, in the hope of obtaining your acknowledgement and understanding; a hope that my actions, thoughts and emotions do not appear to be completely abnormal and strange (cf. Chapple & Ziebland 2011).

There are also examples of initial disclosures directed towards the future:

> I'm gonna die [...] soon (06/10/08).

> I'm going to do it [...] the question is not if but when (07/20/08).

> well ok, right now it's ok, but i am planning a suicide in case everything goes to hell again (08/07/08).

There can be multiple reasons why participants post statements like the above, e.g. to challenge, to joke or to provoke. But based on the assumption that the participants' communication is based to a relatively large extent on real situations and experiences, and on what is mentioned above about the probable functions of disclosing about suicide, I argue that statements like these are often rooted in an untenable situation, and that the intent to communicate provides an opportunity to free oneself from mental pain and self-hatred, which, at least temporarily, can provide relief and deflect future plans and acts of suicide (cf. Tegern et al. 2003: 26-27). As long as the dialogue proceeds, subjects are involved in a form of negotiation, both with themselves and with others, about where they are headed. The conversation, as it were, keeps future alternatives relatively open. However, when the dialogue is interrupted or cannot be established, there is a risk that acts of suicide will be carried out. The acts become replacements for the absence of dialogue (Fleischer 2000).

For a real dialogue to take place, a *response* must be elicited. These responses may be encouraging, comforting, advisory, admonishing or rejecting.

Often a text-based initial disclosure about attempted suicide is met with questions about the method used; why it was not "successful", how it felt afterwards, and whether the confessor plans to do it again. These conversations often lead to other participants revealing both previous acts of suicide and future plans to take their own life:

> (a) so how many times you tried to kill yourself then?
> (b) coupla times, cut my rists on the bus but there were some people who shouted for it to stop, screw them (07/20/08).

> (a) anyone else gonna suicide too?
> (b) been thinking about it [...] though my mind's not there right now
> (c) gonna drown myself in the lake bout 200 yards from the house (08/10/08).

Sometimes there is direct encouragement of other people's plans: In one and the same conversation, the following advice is offered to a participant who has declared his desire to die:

> (a) X, take the car and drive it right into a rock wall, quick and painless
> (b) lay yourself down in front of a train then
> (c) jump off a high building/bridge (08/13/08).

On the other hand, the responses that discourages other participants from proceeding with their suicide plans often show sympathy, and sometimes also provide alternative suggestions and solutions:

> I can't give you any tips on good ways of killing yourself, if you feel bad you should of course try and get help (06/10/08).

> So listen, don't fucking kill yourself [...] X: Life won't be one bit better for your survivors if you die. So stay alive, you too (08/10/08).

Explanations and Reasons for Suicide

The reasons given by the participants on SUIGUI CHAT for why they do not want to live are often social and psychological, with powerful feelings of inner pain and self-loathing:

> (a) why do we all want suicide?
> (b) bad situations
> [...]
> (c) self-hate
> [...]
> (b) where does the self-hate come from???
> [...]
> (c) don-now, X. I felt it since I was about 12, and it's just grown and gotten stronger ... (07/08/08).

Sometimes reasons are given in a more acute fashion:

> (a) violently ill shaking such terrible fucking panic
> (b) no shit...

(a) nah but what the hell can ya do?
(b) just feel so fuckin lonely
(a) yeah, like always
(b) sure, fuckin hell... can't handle any more of this shit, so fuckin meaningless all of it
(a) right bloody misery everything, think i'll soon get the hell outta here
(b) yeah.. i'm with you
(a) right, *** it
(b) how old r u?
(a) 24
(b) ain't that meant to be best time of ya life: P
(a) no kiddin? then i'm really fucked (07/10/08).

The reasons given by the participants for no longer wanting to live can be summarized as anxiety, powerlessness, loneliness, meaninglessness and misery. Loneliness in particular is singled out by many participants as a major cause of suicidal thoughts, plans and acts. This is often formulated in terms of being abandoned, not being seen or heard, and that no one cares. Suffering pain, grief, anxiety and self-loathing, but without being able to connect with another human being and being given the opportunity to share this burden, becomes overwhelmingly difficult for many people.

For many of the participants, conversations about the reasons for suicide are likely to function as a type of test to find justifications for their thoughts, plans and actions:

> I've lived with anxiety and depression for years now, and for me there's no other way out (07/20/08).

> if ya feel bad and have bad friends and don't wanna live, course it's obvious that ya gotta commit suicide (08/10/08).

Long-term suffering from anxiety and depression and lacking close friends are regarded by these participants as valid reasons for suicide. A belief in being doomed to suffer is found in many posts, such as: "X, we do want to live, but circumstances force us to disappear from this fine Earth" (07/08/08).

These posts not only provide different reasons and causes, but also a kind of evaluation of them. Some motives are claimed to be less valid and acceptable than others. For instance, a suicidal act ought to be thought through:

> I don't think you should kill yourself, cause from what you say it doesn't sound so well thought out (08/13/08).

> hope you have a f u c k i n g good reason, otherwise I think life's worth more (07/30/08).

Interestingly, on numerous occasions the view that killing oneself is egotistical is expressed:

> An egoist is someone who wants to die and doesn't care about the outside world (08/10/08).

> But I don't think you should kill yourself, it's selfish and unnecessary (06/08/08).

This seems to generate ambivalence among some participants: "I can't stand it anymore, I can't live for other people, but at the same time I don't want to be selfish" (07/30/08). The idea that taking one's life is egoistic probably functions in a protective manner: *I refrain from carrying out acts of suicide because I do not want to hurt my family* (cf. Joiner 2005: 119). But, on the contrary, if one sees oneself as an outsider, the act is no longer negative: "I don't feel selfish taking my life... because nobody cares anyway" (07/30/08).

Insiders and Outsiders

Although SUIGUI CHAT is a relatively heterogeneous forum, it has formations of insiders and outsiders, usually starting with the "we" who share suicidal ideas and plans, and the "you" who have no understanding of this: "why are you here if you're not thinking about doing it...? Thought it was sort of the whole point of it..." (08/21/08). The right to post and to be on the forum belongs to those who have thoughts about 'it', namely killing oneself. Those who do not have such thoughts do not belong in the community and should be excluded (cf. Johansson 2010: 158-163). Avoiding being questioned when disclosing and discussing suicidal acts and plans is probably one of the main reasons for visiting a forum like SUIGUI CHAT, with its permissive attitude towards discussions about plans and methods for killing oneself. As one participant writes: "I'm not here to be helped to survive... I want help to die in a beautiful and painless way" (07/20/08).

The formation of insiders and outsiders on the forum is also evident in the frequent criticism and distrust of social institutions in general, and psychiatry in particular:

> The psychologists laughed at me (07/02/08).
>
> Psychologists are robots. Things they say, just a lot of stuff from books (06/19/08).
>
> Hope you and the rest of you don't have this LPT crap[3] (08/25/08).

In the first two quotes, "psychologists" as representatives of institutional society are opponents to the "we" who communicate on SUIGUI CHAT. The implication is: "you" cannot understand what "we" are, how "we" think and feel, or what "we" have gone through. Therefore, "you" cannot help "us". In the last quote, the unequal power relationship between "us" and "them" is also evident. Psychiatry is part of the social apparatus that can ultimately resort to coercive measures if individuals are considered threats to themselves, something that the participant had obviously experienced and perceived as a type of abuse. Participants turn inwards toward their own group, hoping to escape this degrading treatment, thus avoiding the "LPT crap". This experience of asymmetry in the relationship between the individual and psychiatric care is clear in the following conversation:

> (a) So, have you been admitted to psychiatric care anytime?
> (a) ?
> (b) no
> (a) ok... then it'll be difficult for you to understand... but when you wake up there, you don't feel like the others there ...
> (a) You do anything to get out of there
> (a) and I've lived with this problem since I was a kid, so I've learnt to fake it... psychologists and doctors aren't always so smart...

(b) nah, I know about it... I've also become quite an actor thanks to them (07/20/08).

Psychiatry is presented as an intimidating and autocratic institution, which, against one's will, attempts to subdue and control. As the weaker party, one must camouflage one's opposition: "act the part" and trick them, in order to escape punishment.

Conclusion

The present analysis shows that a large part of the disclosures on SUIGUI CHAT are based primarily on participants' own specific experiences in the physical, social world. The act of sharing these experiences appears to be the driving force for most participants who seek out this forum (cf. Hardey 2002; Johansson 2010). The ability to engage anonymously in the conversational community probably increases the willingness to disclose, while reducing the risk of self-censorship.

On SUIGUI CHAT, participants are provided with an opportunity to talk about difficult experiences in a manner they feel is not possible in most other contexts. Participants need not be held accountable to institutional figures or regulations, but their discussions can be destructive in the sense that information about potent suicide methods is discussed and exchanged, and participants exhort each other to go ahead with their plans. What predominates is that the participants explain the reasons behind suicidal ideations, plans and acts in terms of inner pain, anxiety, grief, misery, self-loathing, depression, powerlessness, meaninglessness and, in particular, loneliness. Loneliness is often presented as the factor that serves as the tipping point. Notably, these definitions and explanations agree well with significant theoretical and empirical work on suicidality (e.g., Beck et al. 1990; Baumeister 1990; Shneidman 1993; Linehan 1993; Rudd et al. 2009). Joiner (2005: 136) points to the fact that, besides psychological states like "failed belongingness" and "perceived burdensomeness", committing suicide also requires the ability to enact lethal self-injury. Increased exposure to violent incidents and situations can cause the individual's instinctive fear of death to diminish or be completely lost. Such exposure does not always have to be purely physical in nature; it may also be achieved through mental rehearsal (Joiner 2005: 81). Conversations on forums like SUIGUI CHAT can thus be seen as "alarming conversations" (Forstorp 1999: 71), in the sense that participants practice suicide behaviour in a mediated, conversational form, thereby making the act seem less fearful and causing them to become more fearless in the face of performing the act.

At the same time, a comforting, supportive and understanding attitude can be found in many exchanges on SUIGUI CHAT. The opportunity to meet other people who have gone through similar experiences and who neither condemn nor lecture is perceived by many as positive; one shares the same unfortunate circumstances. In view of this ambiguity, it is important to take a balanced view and avoid focusing solely on the potential risks inherent in chat rooms such as these (cf. Baker & Fortune 2008).

The pro-suicide, or pro-choice, discourse that is constructed and re-constructed on SUIGUI CHAT is essentially based on the idea that suicide is an acceptable solution to life's problems, where no one but the individual involved may determine the form of the solution chosen. This also constitutes a counter-discourse in which established society's

perceptions and values are questioned. This counter-discourse is also expressed in the critique against public institutions, mainly psychiatry, which is seen as interfering and obstructive, thereby posing a threat to the individual's "natural" rights and freedoms. One could say that on forums like SUIGUI CHAT, psychiatry's very raison d'être is challenged. The relation between forum communities and psychiatric institutions should also be seen in hegemonic terms, where the dominant position held by "psychiatric care" within the suicide domain is highlighted, but never accepted.

Understanding why and how people communicate about suicide on forums like SUIGUI CHAT can be of importance when planning and implementing online suicide preventive strategies and resources. It would seem essential to acquire knowledge about and understanding of how these groups of vulnerable young people, some of them highly at risk for suicidal behaviour, communicate with and address each other on different Internet forums. It could also be of importance to gain insight into these participants' experiences of problematic life events, and into how they respond to contacts with psychiatric care and social services.

A limitation of the present study is that it only examines conversations about suicide on one forum on the Internet. On interactive Internet forums where discussions about suicide take place, different voices and different views may be heard on this problematic, taboo subject. Further studies with this focus can expand our understanding of this complex and challenging field.

Notes

1. The days selected for SUIGUI CHAT were: 06/02/08, 06/06/08, 06/08/08, 06/10/08, 06/13/09, 06/19/08, 06/24/08, 06/27/08, 07/02/08, 07/08/08, 07/10/08, 07/18/08, 07/20/08, 07/30/08, 08/03/08, 08/07/08, 08/10/08, 08/13/08, 08/16/08, 08/21/08, 08/25/08, 08/31/08
2. The quoted examples from SUIGUI have been translated from Swedish to English by the author. The aim was that the translation should be as close as possible to the participants' language usage.
3. LPT stands for "Lag om psykiatrisk tvångsvård" (*Law of Compulsory Psychiatric Treatment*).

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