



QUALITI RESEARCH FINDINGS

A qualitative sociological autopsy of gendered suicide

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The research project

The research team read 100 suicide case files from a UK coroner's office which covered a medium-sized city, an adjacent rural area and an industrial town. The sample was of the first one hundred suicide verdicts encountered from 2002 onwards. These covered a

three-year period and the age and gender profile of the sample were broadly similar to the picture for England and Wales as a whole. The suicide files contained very diverse data, including forms filled out by the coroner; police statements from witnesses to the death, family members, friends and partners; forensic pathology reports; medical let-

ters and reports; suicide notes, mobile phone records, photographs; letters to the coroner and newspaper clippings. This is a novel method for suicide research which integrates qualitative and quantitative data within what we term a 'sociological autopsy study'.

Research findings

A) Gender and suicide across the life course

In considering the problem of suicide, governments and mass media in the UK have tended to emphasise the particular vulnerability of young men. The first page of the *National Suicide Prevention Strategy for England*, for example, notes that 'the majority of suicides now occur in young adult males'. Although considerably more men than women kill themselves, the claim that *young* men account for the majority of suicides does not stand up to scrutiny. We can perhaps make sense of this inflation, at least within the mainstream media, because rising rates of suicide in young men across the Western world (until around the turn of the millennium, since when the rates have been falling) have generally been interpreted as supporting the dominant narrative of gender crisis – men not knowing how to fit in to a changing world in the aftermath of second-wave feminism.

Our analysis here draws on official statistics as well as our own research results. We would argue that the relative vulnerability of 'young' men to suicide is often exaggerated and that insufficient attention is paid to the diverse social circumstances of suicidal men and women across the life course. Quantitative analysis of the 100 cases reveals patterns of suicide that can be seen to map on to conventional features of a socially structured life course, with young people in crisis, mid-life gendered patterns of work and family and older people in

physical decline. We can make sense of these patterns in terms of the idea of the 'social bond' and how this changes across the life course. The social bond is made up of attachment (the emotional connection that individuals feel towards others, including sensitivity to their opinions, feelings and expectations); commitment (the accumulated investment that people have in relationships, activities and objects, which is, in effect, their stake in conformity); involvement (participation in legitimate activities and the extent to which individuals are tied to appointments, deadlines, hours and plans); and belief (the extent to which people feel they should obey the rules of society). As well as variation in the significance of the social bond across the life course, qualitative analysis of the suicide cases suggests that men and women may have very different kinds of reactions to problems with the social bond.

B) Suicide in the context of relationship breakdown

Relationship breakdown emerged as an important theme for our analysis. There are insights to be noted about the wider cultural context of associations between suicide and failed relationships, the construction of accounts of these suicides by witness and the apparent motives of the suicidal individuals where their suicides seem to have been triggered by relationship breakdown.

Relationship breakdown seems to emerge as a common sense justification for suicide and interestingly this appears to be especially the case for men. This might be seen to challenge historical stereotypes of gendered suicide. We can see from the files that in situ theorising by police officers who present at suicide scenes often includes mention of failed relationships, whether or not this proves to be relevant in the evidence provided by other witnesses. When visiting a coroner's office (not our main site) we were

told by the coroner's secretary that the suicides in her district were 'all young boys who've split up with their girlfriends'. Although there is plenty of evidence in the files of relationship breakdown being a significant factor in suicides (it is present in 55 of the 100 cases), there are also some silences. There are cases, for example, where partners deny any tensions but other witnesses such as friends of the deceased make it clear that relationship difficulties were cited by the deceased as amongst the principal triggers for the suicide. There is also a general lack of mention of domestic violence, although we might speculate on the basis of wider research on this issue that it would have been a feature of several of these cases.

It is also important to move beyond a narrow focus on how the evidence in a suicide case file is constructed, as we consistently argue for this project. There is undoubtedly in these files some compelling evidence that relationship breakdown is in fact cited by many suicidal people and those who knew them well as the most important trigger for their suicide, and this needs to be taken seriously. Our thematic analysis found relationship breakdown to be the main trigger for the suicide in 34 of the 100 cases. Thirty of these cases were men, and relationship breakdown therefore features as main trigger for the suicide at twice the rate for men as for women in our sample (the ratio of men to women in our sample is around 4:1). From our qualitative analysis, we have categorised the relationship breakdown suicides as apparently being primarily motivated by either murder/attempted murder, punishment, over-dependence, sexual jealousy and separation from children. There is evidence of both continuity and change in gender relations here with familiar traditional narratives as well as newer ones.

C) Identities in suicide case files

Whereas the themes A and B above relate either wholly or partially to objective evidence about people who kill themselves, theme C is exclusively about how the evidence is put together and what it means; especially to the living. Our orientation to the topic here is to see a coroner's inquiry into the causes and circumstances of a sudden or unexplained death as creating a space in which social identities are scrutinized, redefined and challenged. This process also involves, we suggest, the acquisition of new identities beyond the life course, in three different ways.

Firstly, through their death, the deceased can also acquire new identities, such as the official new label of someone who had killed him or herself or the private one of someone who was unable to cope. Secondly, the identities of the deceased are not any less tangled up or confusing than those of the living. In the suicide files, different identities of the deceased jostle with each other, for instance as patients, parents, spouses, and as individual men or women, as they try to present themselves through patient files, witness statements and suicide notes. Finally, the identities assigned to the deceased simultaneously tell us about the concerns of the living. However, in the absence of the body, the question of how authentic the identities of the deceased are gains new significance. It is the combination of an absent body and multiple and contested identities that opens the space for the debates surrounding a death by suicide to continue long after the inquest has closed.

Relevant papers written by the research team

Langer, S., Scourfield, J. and Fincham, B. (2008) Documenting the quick and the dead: a study of suicide files in a coro-

ner's office. *Sociological Review*, 56 (2).

Scourfield, J. (2005) Suicidal masculinities. *Sociological Research On-line*, 10 (2) <http://www.socresonline.org.uk/10/2/scourfield.html>

Scourfield, J., Shiner, M., Fincham, B. and Langer, S. (2008) Gender and suicide across the life course: integrating qualitative and quantitative data. Paper

presented to the British Sociological Association annual conference at the University of Warwick, March 30th (available from the authors on request).