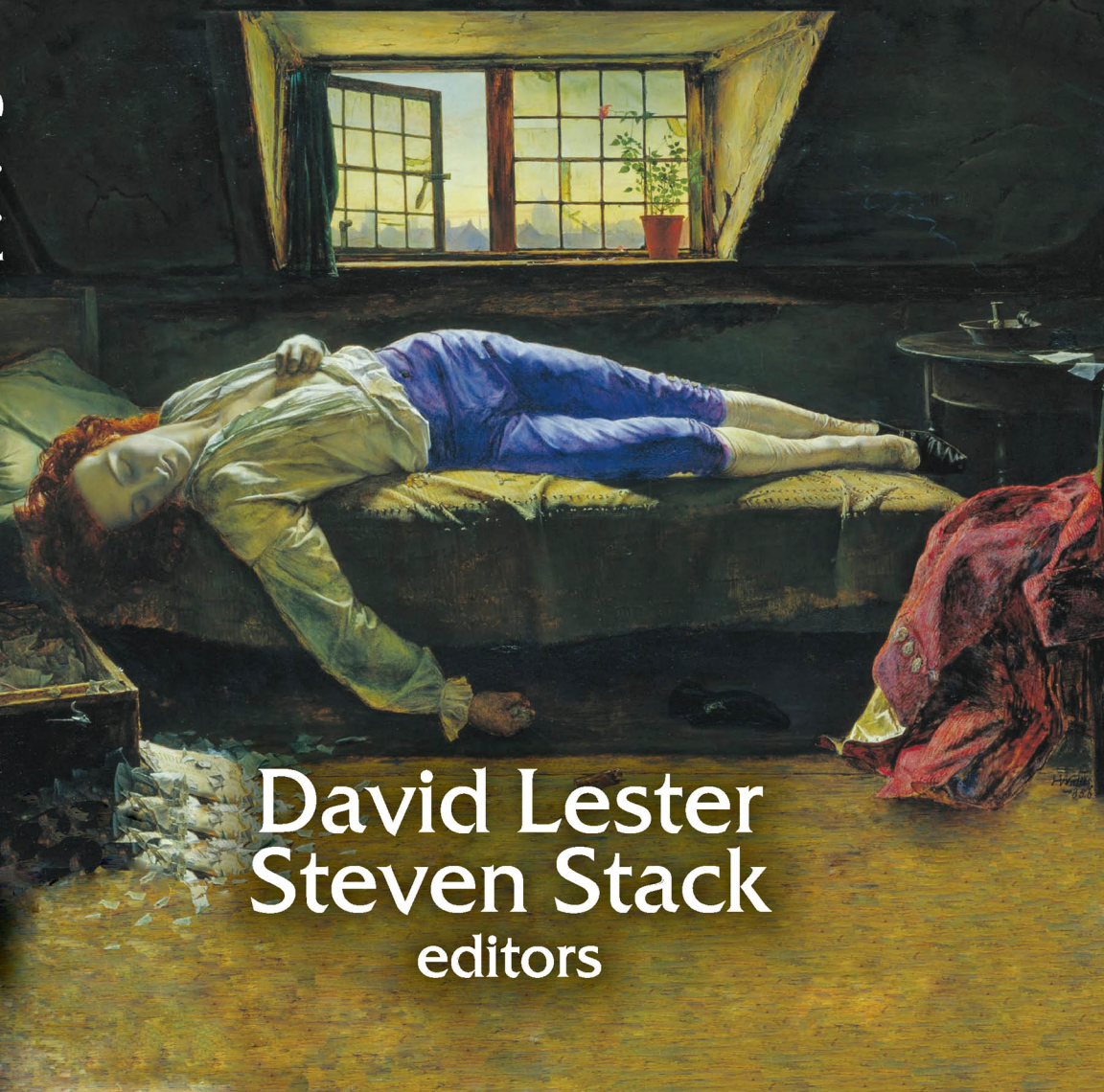


# Suicide as a Dramatic Performance



David Lester  
Steven Stack  
editors

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All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players;  
They have their exits and their entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts . . .

—William Shakespeare, *As You Like It*

# Introduction

*David Lester & Steven Stack*

Gertrude Stein once said, “A rose is a rose is a rose.” For many of those who study suicide, it might similarly be said, “A suicide is a suicide is a suicide.” We talk of the risk of suicide and the rate of suicide, implying that all suicides are the same. Of course, suicide is engaged in by different people—men and women, the young and the old, and psychiatrically disturbed and nondisturbed people. But the nature of their act is rarely examined.

Consider two suicidal acts. On November 25, 1970, in Tokyo, Japan, Yukio Mishima, aged forty-five and a successful Japanese novelist, decided to take his paramilitary force, invade an army base, and persuade the soldiers there to overthrow the Japanese government and restore the Emperor to absolute power. The soldiers refused to follow his commands. Mishima then committed seppuku. He took a knife and ripped his abdomen open, and then his loyal assistant decapitated him.

What a death! Mishima orchestrated his suicide, and the report of his suicide by the media captured worldwide attention. The setting of his suicide, the manner of his suicide, and the timing of it all added to the dramatic aspects of the act.

Consider the suicidal attack on the twin towers of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, by two planes led by Mohamed Atta. This act of martyrdom for an Islamic cause created images that haunt us still today. The planes hitting and damaging the towers, the response of those rushing to the towers, the collapse of the towers, and the scenes of people fleeing the scene—all of these images added to the impact that Atta and his team had hoped to create. However you might label or judge those involved in this attack, you cannot deny the drama created by their actions.

This book is intended to view suicide from this dramatic perspective. We will examine to what extent suicidal acts (or at least some suicidal acts) can be viewed from a theatrical perspective. We will explore how suicides can choose the timing, setting, method, and other

circumstances of their suicide to heighten the impact on others and to frame their suicide in a way that they choose.

What happens in the hours, minutes, and second before a suicide? If others are present, what are the interactions? On January 29, 1977, Freddie Prinze, the television actor, shot himself in a room with his business manager present. On December 1, 2012, Jovan Belcher, a linebacker for the Kansas City Chiefs NFL team, shot himself in the parking lot of a football stadium after talking to his coach, Romeo Crennel. What is the nature of the interactions between the suicidal individual and the bystanders? And what role does this interaction have on the outcome?

Let us give an example from the study of murder. Only one study has looked at the interpersonal interactions between murderer and victim. Luckenbill (1977) analyzed the act of murder as a dynamic interchange between the murderer and the victim. In Stage 1, the victim does something that the offender defines as an offense to “face,” an insult, a refusal to comply, or a nonverbal gesture. In Stage 2, the offender interprets the victim’s action as personally offensive, often with the victim and bystanders providing information for this interpretation (in 60% of the incidents). In Stage 3, the offender makes a retaliatory move to restore face, such as a verbal or physical challenge (in 86% of the incidents) or an actual murderous act (in 14% of the incidents). In Stage 4, the victim responds either with noncompliance (41%) or an attack (30%). The bystanders (present in 70% of the incidents) may at this point encourage the attack (57%) or remain neutral (43%). In Stage 5, the victim is killed. In Stage 6, the offender may flee (58%), stay voluntarily (32%) or, in rare cases, be held at the scene by the bystanders (10%). This type of study has never been conducted on suicide carried out in the presence of others.

Those who die by suicide alone leave a suicide note. Does this suicide note provide insights into the mind of the suicides? Or it designed merely to present themselves to others in a particular way? There are other ways that the suicidal person can communicate to others, such as using Twitter and YouTube, or even live on television. Does the timing of the suicidal act have significance? Does the suicide choose daytime or nighttime? It has been claimed that there is a birthday effect in suicide, that many suicides kill themselves close to the time of their birthday. What does this signify?

What about the way suicides dress themselves? Are there common choices of clothing and does the choice of clothes have any psychological

meaning? The thirty-nine members of the Heaven's Gate cult, who died by suicide together on March 26, 1997, all clothed themselves identically and positioned themselves in their beds in the same way.

Suicides choose a location for their suicide. This is typically at home, but many die by suicide away from home. Very little is known about the characteristics of those who choose to die away from home. What factors, psychological, social, and cultural, influence this choice? Wasserman and Stack (2008) have written on the notion of *lethal locations* and noted that the choice of certain locations influences the chances of another person interrupting the suicidal act. People who rent a motel room for their suicidal act, for example, are less likely to have their suicide interrupted by someone who will try to prevent the suicide. All else being equal, people choosing to die by suicide alone in the wilderness (e.g., deep in the trail system of a national park) will be less likely to be interrupted than are persons choosing to die by suicide at home where significant others may try to stop them. Some locations almost insure death, while other locations may make a successful suicide less likely. In short, suicidal intent, a major concern to clinicians, varies with the chosen location for suicide. Locations vary in their lethality and implied suicidal intent just as the methods chosen for suicide (e.g., guns versus poison) vary in their lethality.

The issues we discuss may seem offensive to some of those concerned with preventing suicide. Focusing on the dramatic aspects of suicidal acts may seem tangential to the physical and mental pain of those dying by suicide. But, as we will see, these aspects of the act often give us clues into their mental state, clues that might be helpful in understanding and preventing other suicides. In the theater, the issues involved in staging a play are handled by the scenographer. Thus, this book might have been called *The Scenography of Suicide*, where the scenographers are none other than the suicides themselves.

The goal of this book is to explore the scenographic aspects of the suicidal act. It is hoped that the ideas and issues discussed here will provoke readers to think about suicidal acts in a new way and stimulate new and innovative research into suicide.

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# Ritual, Dramatic Performance, and Suicide: An Anthropological Perspective

*Joseph Rubenstein*

Most discussions of suicide correctly begin with Emile Durkheim's *Le Suicide* (1897). His four-fold sociological typology—egoistic/altruistic/anomic/fatalistic—has precipitated a rich conversation for more than a century, albeit with considerable criticism and emendation.

Anthropologists question the conservative “Western” bias informing Durkheim's types. Altruistic suicide, for example, certainly a “self-killing,” might be viewed more morally neutral and even positively outside the Durkheimian structure. It seems problematical to stigmatize the suicide bomber for identifying too much with his social world, and to call the Western soldier sacrificing his life to save others a “hero.” “Assisted suicide” is for some humane and not counter to Judeo-Christian ideology. Recontextualizing suicide is an on-going project. This chapter argues that many types of suicides might be better understood in the framework of ritual drama. This performative approach implies “agency” and a spectrum of control, interpreting suicide as a distinctly human act in a social and cultural context.

Suicide as dramatic performance addresses the more reductive causal explanations of suicide by sociology and biology. The anthropologist Turner (1969) asks us to look at the “process” and “premise” of ritual action and not the product which, in this case, is self-death.

The shift is subtle. Turner would not deny that an individual's inability to “master social surroundings” leads to tension and “social disunity.” Equally important, however, is the individual's *recognition*

of this conflict and the construction of a ritual performance, a “social drama” (Turner, 1974), in order to resolve it—either on his own terms, or with the help of a practitioner.

A performative approach suggests an understanding of suicide less guided by the more rigid sociological types mentioned above that miss, as Geertz (1957) writes, “the framework of beliefs, expressive symbols, and values in terms of which individuals define their world, express their feelings, and make their judgments.” (p. x)

Is it possible that “performing suicide” can lead to an authentic and dramatic “transcendence of life”? Or are the feelings so distorted, the judgment so impaired that the performance appears more “ritualistic” than ritual. The trappings of theatricality may be apparent, but the last act does not lead to a transformation. Rather, it leads to an incomplete ending. Rarely is anything resolved; rarely is anything left whole.

### The Structures of Suicidal Drama

#### *Suicidal Scripts*

Suicidal dramas, ancient or modern, sacred or secular, require “scripts.” Again, as Durkheim (1912/1961) argued, rituals perpetuate the social structures of society, and their rules show us how to comport ourselves. Thus, the suicidal script *mechanically* adheres to the conventions of society. But that takes us only so far and views scripts/rituals as endlessly circular celebrations of the fixed order. Durkheim’s text may be a blueprint, but the real work of building a performance remains.

It is in the *rehearsal* (long or short) that the suicidal actor comes to understand the goal of his performance—which is immortality—through the sacrifice of oneself and often of others. Many texts are, by now, well known and culture bound—the Japanese *kamikaze* pilot, the Buddhist self-immolator, the Muslim suicide bomber, the United States mass shooter, and the more frequent, less spectacular, quiet and isolated self-deaths.

The rehearsal or actor training is the “process” that precedes the acting out of the suicide. Playwright and director Grotowski’s (1968) “poor theater,” which derived from his study of traditional ritual dramas, understood that the actor gained self-awareness, clarity of character perhaps for the first time, in this liminal period (Ven Gennep, 1909/1960). This “betwixt and between,” well understood in anthropology, is as “real” and perhaps more real than the final action. Grotowski

wrote that the actor rehearsed to finally eliminate conflict, to feel whole. He felt that, if the actor were transparent enough, it would be akin to “self-sacrifice.” Suicide, then, is never *for* the other, but always *in relation to* the other.

### *Suicidal Messages*

Others are always involved in suicides. Messages are sent. Moore and Myerhoff (1977, p. x) write, “Clearly, in a complex specialized and differentiated society, rites often . . . are used to show a limited commonality, or even to create it.”

In choreographer Anna Halprin’s performances throughout the 1980s, beginning with *Search for Living Myths and Rituals Through Dance and Environment*<sup>1</sup> and concluding with *The Planetary Dance*,<sup>2</sup> there is a focused communicative message she hopes will spread beyond the event. She writes about the *Vortex Dance*, part of her *Circle the Earth* cycle (May 29–June 1, 1985 through 1994), “We join as a whole in the center of the space, to build a symbol of our collective strength.” (Halprin, 1995, p. 243).

Halprin’s performances moved from a mountain to the entire planet in an embodied message to join the world in peace. Whether it was successful or not is beside the point. Behind the ritual was a momentary belief (“a common pulse with a common purpose”) that by participating in the performance we could be transformed, renewed in our fundamental humanity. The medium was the message.

The suicidal drama, whether collectively enacted or individually performed, always has, as Moore and Myerhoff enumerate in the formal properties of ritual, a “social message.” Any aspect of behavior, they write, can be ritualized. Suicide requires ritual form to accomplish its meanings. It is the vessel from which we all drink to make sense of the act.

Suicide understood in this way draws us in so that we are forced to share the drama. Even the novel suicidal script eventually is repeated and becomes part of our collective memory, “tradition” if you will. “It was like a bad movie,” the audience says as SWAT teams arrive, TV cameras are deployed, and a kind of stage is cordoned off.

We cannot avert our eyes and, to use playwright and actor Artaud’s (1958) notion, truly this is a “theater of cruelty.” How close is it to Artaud when we watch the suicidal standoff? He writes of “cruel theater” that “wakes us up. Nerves and heart.” We experience “immediate violent action.” The message? Surrender to this act. Feel it.



### *Suicidal Properties*

Suicide as ritual drama is constructed of several formal properties. Definitions of ritual are legion, but, to stay with Moore and Myerhoff, the elements below allow us to see suicide's performative structure:

1. Repetition  
The "tradition"
2. Acting  
"Self-conscious" behavior, not spontaneous
3. "Special" behavior or stylization  
Symbols or actions used in novel or extraordinary ways
4. Order  
Acts in the drama, from beginning to end, including rehearsal
5. Evocative presentational style; staging  
We are made "attentive" either during or after

Goffman's *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (1959) is noted for its dramaturgical model of social life. The role playing of the suicide actor, again, reminds us that the individual committed to taking his own life does so in "relation" to an audience:

1. Performance  
In "performance" a social message is conveyed, to oneself and others, about the situation. Whether the actor is aware of it or not, "impression management" is occurring and the audience is attributing meaning.
2. Setting  
Scenery, props, and location are central to the performance.
3. Manner  
"Playing" the role. How consistent is the performance given with what we know about the actor? Inconsistent performances require a more complex reading of the script.
4. Front  
The "script" which is often predetermined for the actor.
5. Front Stage, Back Stage  
Front Stage: Role playing for an audience.  
Back Stage: "Who he truly is."

### **Suicide: Remedy or Poison?**

How, finally, to understand a suicide? Is it a remedy or a poison? Goffman reminds us that performance requires a kind of consensual agreement between the actor and the audience. We "suspend our disbelief" and allow the play to proceed. Suicide, however, in most cases,

is defined as a “poison,” and we are ready to intervene, to jump on stage to stop the performance—to *disbelieve*. It is almost never a “remedy,” but rather a tabooed action, explicit or implicit.

To say it is against the law to commit suicide implies there is a punishment to be meted out for breaking the taboo. Apart from those who assist suicide, or the stigmatized friends and relatives unable to stop it, it is hard to imagine what further harm might be done to one who has successfully committed suicide.

Perhaps it would be better to conclude by asking about the role of the suicidal actor. What is the meaning of his performance, and what dangers are unleashed when the drama proceeds? We would rather it not proceed, for committing suicide “breaks the rules,” a remedy consigning us to “anomie,” *a nomos*, without order. For Durkheim, a poison.

But it is in the void that we find another possibility in the suicide performance. A performative model of suicide discovers an ambivalent structure in the void. Yes, the rules are broken in that short or long period when the pills take hold, the moment before the trigger is pulled, or in the protracted siege. Death resolves the indeterminacy. It is the remedy *and* the poison that, for the moment before the end, injects order into a slowly dissolving life.

### Notes

1. Jan. 31-May 2, 1981 Choreographed and Performed by: Anna Halprin and San Francisco Dance Workshop with people of the Bay Area
2. 1987 Choreography: Anna Halprin. Performers: People of the Bay Area and communities worldwide

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# Part 1

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## The Suicide Note



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# The Presentation of the Self in Suicide Notes<sup>1</sup>

*David Lester & Bijou Yang*

In taking any psychological test, there is always the possibility that, instead of responding truthfully, individuals wish to present a particular view of themselves. To detect this, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), for example, has subscales to detect presenting a healthy self (faking good) and presenting a pathological self (faking bad). Research has supported the ability of people to fake the image that they present to others. For example, Braginsky, Braginsky, and Ring (1969) demonstrated that schizophrenic inpatients could choose whether or not to report major symptoms (such as hallucinations) depending on the expected outcome (being placed on a locked ward versus being released). In a second study, Braginsky and Braginsky (1971) found that adolescents in a mental hospital could vary their mental age on intelligence tests by three years, again depending on the outcome (being placed in a pleasant versus unpleasant program at the institution).

Individuals present various images on a daily basis as a result of their different roles and corresponding functions they perform. We are used to switching from one image to another and choosing the image to fit the occasion, and there is no reason to doubt that this is true when we die. In modern times, the popularity of online social media sites such as Twitter and Facebook have allowed people to craft the narrative of their lives and present themselves to friends and family, and to the world, in a particular light. This fits a popular television message: "Image is everything." In contrast, some psychological tests ignore this behavior and assume that the individual's self-presentation is not faked. For example, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projective test, asks respondents to tell stories to pictures shown to them. The interpretation of their stories assumes that the stories will reveal accurate

information about the respondents' psychodynamics. The scoring does not take into account the possibility that the respondents' stories are affected by the desire of the respondents to present a particular image of themselves. A recent volume, in which suicidologists were asked to write 1,500 words about themselves (Pompili, 2010), resulted in a very diverse set of protocols. Some were very personal, revealing details of the writer's life, and others listed professional accomplishments. Some avoided personal information but were brief scholarly articles on a particular topic. Occasional chapters revealed strong emotions such as anger. These chapters illustrate the different ways writers present the self.

Suicide notes have been examined in the past in a way similar to TAT stories in that researchers assume that suicide notes reveal accurate information about the psychological states of those dying by suicide and the reasons for their suicide. As a result, researchers have not viewed suicide notes as a possible means by which the suicides consciously present a particular self-image. A broader way of stating this hypothesis is to propose that those writing suicide notes have a hidden agenda. The present chapter argues that suicide notes may often be a result of a decision (conscious or unconscious) to present the self in a particular way and may not, therefore, provide clues to the psychodynamics of the suicidal act.

In the following sections, five topics are covered: (1) examples of the hypothesis of the chapter using suicide bombers and kamikaze pilots; (2) an exploration of whether the suicidal act and the suicide note can be construed as a presentation of the self to other; (3) pseudocides (i.e., those who fake their own suicide); (4) an analysis of one suicide note in detail; and (5) an examination of the classification of suicide notes by Jacobs for its relevance for the present hypothesis. The final section draws some conclusions.

### **Crafted Self-Images by Suicide Bombers and Kamikaze Pilots**

A good example of the presentation of the self in suicide communications comes from videos recorded by suicide bombers prior to their departure to be released to the media after the suicide attack. Best (2010) analyzed the content of some of these videos and noted that they focus on the political nature of the act and that they cast the act as altruistically motivated. However, Best also noted that the videos show evidence of editing, and this editing is done by persons unknown (for example, by those who sent the suicide bomber on his or her mission

or by the media outlets that broadcast the video). Although the videos seem to be produced for the public, unedited versions may have contained messages for the suicide bomber's family and indications of the individual's state of mind. Most commentators on suicide bombers focus on the official motivation for the suicide bombing provided by the suicide bomber or the organization that planned the attack. There is reluctance by scholars to analyze the psychodynamic processes that led the individual to become a suicide bomber, as Lester, Yang and Lindsay (2004) have noted, and a reliance on what the individual says in the video as the truth rather than as an attempt by the suicide bomber to present himself in a particular manner.

A similar problem arises with analyses of the letters sent home by Japanese kamikaze pilots from the Second World War. Orbell and Morikawa (2011) analyzed the themes in these letters, a meaningful project, and classified the themes into mentions of an honorable or beautiful death, expressions of familial love, and so on. But to consider these letters as insights into the psychodynamics of pilots is perhaps misguided. These letters were written in the presence of other members of the unit and superiors, with the awareness that they might be read by superiors. As a result, the letters are most likely to be presentations of the self rather than windows into the minds of the pilots. For example, in one of the most conforming populations in the world, where what others think of you is of paramount importance, no Japanese pilot wrote that he was doing this because he was too scared not to volunteer, according to Orbell and Morikawa. No pilot wrote home that he was experiencing panic or somatic symptoms of terror. No pilot said that he had had a lifetime history of depression and that going on a kamikaze mission was a way of committing suicide in a covert manner.

### **Suicide Notes as Public Statements**

As Etkind (1997) argued, suicide notes are meant to be public. They are written for others to read and sometimes to be published. Etkind noted that writing suicide notes became more common after newspapers in Europe started publishing them in the eighteenth century. MacDonald and Murphy (1990) observed that suicides, expecting their suicide notes to appear in the newspapers, saw that they had access to a mass audience, and suicides could craft their suicide note so as to achieve sympathy or revenge, or perhaps to project an image that others would remember. Etkind presented suicide notes from those



accused of misdeeds and noted that they often did not admit guilt, but rather presented themselves as victims of persecution. For example, Major Henry Hubert manufactured evidence to convict a Jewish officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, of treason, yet Hubert's suicide note in 1898 made no admission of guilt. Some suicide notes are written to advance a cause, perhaps arguing for assisted-suicide or for political reasons. Percy Bridgman, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, committed suicide in 1961 while suffering from cancer and wrote, "It isn't decent for society to make a man do this thing himself. Probably this is the last day I will be able to do it myself." Bridgman's note is often used by those advocating physician assisted-suicide. Jo Roman (1980) wrote a book, as well her suicide note, arguing for the establishment of places where people could go in order to commit suicide peacefully in pleasant surroundings. Craig Badialis and Joan Fox committed suicide after a Vietnam Peace Moratorium rally at Glassboro State College in New Jersey on October 16, 1969 (Asinof, 1971), and left notes that advocated peace (but which were suppressed by the local authorities). Etkind (1997, p. i) argued that, instead of being intensely personal documents, many suicide notes should be read as social acts.

Suicides can indeed be choreographed. Etkind described the 1944 suicide of Lupe Velez, a Hollywood actress known as the Mexican Spitfire. She was divorced from Tarzan's Johnny Weismuller and pregnant by a man who was unwilling to marry her. She ordered a Mexican feast; decorated her bedroom with satin sheets, flowers, candles, and a crucifix; and ingested seventy-five Seconals. Her note was addressed to the lover, blaming him for her death and that of their unborn child.

Some suicides occur in public, along with public statements intended to shape the image presented to others. Yukio Mishima committed seppuku in 1970 in front of a regiment of soldiers after urging them to rise up and restore the Emperor to his rightful, powerful place in Japan. Bud Dwyer, the state treasurer in Pennsylvania, was convicted in 1986 of taking a three hundred thousand-dollar kickback after awarding a state contract and faced a fine and a fifty-five-year prison sentence. On January 22, 1987, one day before sentencing, he shot himself in his office in front of newspapers and television reporters, proclaiming his innocence.

### **Pseudocides**

Some people fake their suicide, leaving a suicide note and then disappearing, moving elsewhere to start a new life. These instances include occasional notes left on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco for

which no one saw anyone jump off the bridge. Seiden and Tauber (1970) studied these notes and found that they differed from notes left by suicides. They tended to be longer, gave more realistic reasons for suicide (such as financial and legal problems), had less positive emotion, and made less mention of death and suicide than the genuine notes. Here is one short suicide note from a man who was a member of the board of San Francisco supervisors who turned up a year later selling bibles in Houston: "Loved ones: My nerves are shot. Please forgive me. Chris." (Etkind, 1997, p. 61)

### **An Illustration of the Thesis**

To illustrate the thesis of this chapter, here is a genuine suicide note from a man in his nineties who committed suicide.

A terrible fright! I woke up this morning at 9 o'clock and looked over to my spouse's bed, and she doesn't move. On closer inspection, she is dead. She had been ailing in the afternoon and stayed in bed, but had in the evening freshened herself up and enjoyed her supper. She was, on the contrary, for the most part buoyant following her stay in the hospital. I gave her the medication. She did cough a lot, but she finally calmed down. I lay down and then fell asleep. After I awoke, see above. What the cause of her decease is I cannot determine. I shall leave everything in the room the way it is. I myself am, at my age of 93, utterly unhappy and have no desire to continue living, above all as I have often been ill for years now. Why should I go on now? I wish to add that my spouse was just in the clinic and had just been released by [Dr. Y]. following a thorough examination. Our marriage has lasted since 1926 and might doubtless be termed good. My married son lives in [address]. He is a teacher, but very often ill, is not allowed to visit us. His grief! Instead, his wife helped out in our household while my spouse was undergoing surgical treatment (eye operation) and returned home when my spouse was released. As I said, I have no desire to continue living and am going to take my life with some medical drugs I collected years ago. I have not informed anyone of my spouse's death as my own will follow immediately. In deepest mourning, Karl.

At first reading, this note suggests an elderly, possibly frail man with not many years left to live, acting impulsively on discovering that his wife has died. His son is not well, and he may feel that he would be a burden to his son and daughter-in-law if they had to take care of him. The death of his wife means that he has lost a very important social tie. This elderly man, therefore, seems to fit neatly into Joiner's (2005) theory of suicide which proposes that perceived burdensomeness

and thwarted belonging are the two most important causal factors for suicide.

But let us look at this note from a “presentation of the self” perspective. First, the note carefully lays out the facts and the man’s decision-making processes. He is presenting himself as calm and rational. He is not a crazy, elderly man with dementia. Second, he knows (or strongly suspects) that his son and daughter-in-law will read this note. How will they feel? His son may feel guilty, and perhaps his father wants him to! Although the son is ill, he has not visited his parents, nor have his parents visited him. He left taking care of his parents in an emergency to his wife. Has he telephoned or written regularly to them? How long ago is it since his parents were invited to visit and stay with him? Did he make his parents feel welcome if they did visit, or did he make them feel that they were an inconvenience?

The man’s suicide seems to be a sudden decision, but he and his wife may have talked about what they would do if one of them died. In one’s nineties, illnesses are common, and the day-to-day tasks of living quite difficult. Suicide may have been a well-thought-out plan.

Alternatively, could this be a murder-suicide or double suicide, with the suicide note intended to mislead the police? After all, the wife is in her nineties, and a natural death is very likely. Is the medical examiner going to conduct as thorough an investigation as he or she would if the couple were in their thirties or forties? Moreover, a double suicide is not a crime and, even if it is murder-suicide, the murderer is dead, and why upset the children any more than would a natural death followed by suicide?

Studies have found that the authorities sometimes show concern for the survivors. For example, Carpenter, et al. (2011) found that coroners in Queensland (Australia) were less likely to carry out a complete autopsy on a suicide if the family had concerns about the procedure or if the religion of the deceased had proscription against autopsies.

### **Jacobs’s Classification of Suicide Notes**

Since the circumstances leading to suicide are subject to a wide variation, it is plausible to assume that suicide notes may be determined by the desire to present the self in a particular way. According to Jacobs (1967) suicide notes can be classified into four types: (1) the person has a terminal illness, (2) the person accuses another of causing his or her death, (3) last will and testaments, and (4) first form notes. It is this last category that is relevant to the present hypothesis. By and large, in this

type of note, suicides try to reconcile the image of themselves as to-be-trusted people (who have been given the sacred trust of life) with the fact that they are about to break this trust through the act of suicide.

Jacobs summarized several components that might be found in first-form suicide notes:

- The person is faced with extremely distressing problems.
- He views this state of affairs as part of a long history of such distressing crises.
- He believes that death is the only solution to his problems.
- He has become increasingly socially isolated so that he cannot share his distress with others.
- He has overcome his internalized moral constraint that categorizes suicide as irrational or immoral.
- He has succeeded in this since his social isolation makes him feel less constrained by societal rules.
- He has constructed some verbal rationalization that enables him to view himself as a to-be-trusted person, in spite of his trust violation, by defining the problems as not of his own making or as open to no other solution.
- He has made some provision that his problems will not occur after death.

It is typically found that these notes beg forgiveness or request indulgence. They show that the problems that have led to this decision are not of his own making. These notes communicate the history of these problems, how they have grown beyond endurance, and the necessity of death. Finally, the writer includes that he is fully aware of what he is doing but knows that the reader will not understand his reasons. While Jacobs felt that this expressed the genuine thoughts, desires, and emotions of the suicide, the present hypothesis would view the suicide note as deliberately presenting the image of a rational and reasonable person making a sensible decision.

### Conclusions

Suicide notes may not simply reflect the motivations and psychological state of the person committing suicide, but rather they may be constructed so as to present an image to the person's significant others. In this case, the suicide is committing a psychosomatic fallacy, a term coined by Shneidman and Farberow (1957) to describe the situation where a person confuses the self as experienced by the self with the self as experienced by others. The suicide in this case is concerned with the reactions of others even though he or she will not be around

to witness these reactions. It is not possible to prove that a particular suicide note is the result of a desire to present the self in a particular manner. Likewise it is hard to prove that the note is *not* the result of a desire to present the self in a particular manner. We should use caution, therefore, when using suicide notes as a means of understanding the psychodynamics of the suicidal mind.

### Note

1. This chapter is based on Yang and Lester (2011).

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# Dramatic Suicide Notes

*David Lester*

We have seen in the previous chapter how people may construct their suicide notes in a way to present a particular image or even to transform their image. They often want to shape how others remember them. There are many other ways in which people leave memorials to themselves.

## **A Suicide Note on YouTube**

Amanda was a fifteen-year-old teenager who posted a video on YouTube in which she presented a sequence of flash cards to tell of her experience of being blackmailed and bullied. She had sent a picture of her breasts to a man she met online who then circulated it around the Internet. She uploaded the video to YouTube on September 2, 2012, and committed suicide on October 10, 2012. By October 13, her video had received 1.6 million views. It is difficult to remove a video from the Internet because others make copies and circulate them. Interestingly, when I asked my college's IT unit to download the video onto a flash drive, it took them over an hour to find out how to do it. Students at the college knew how to do it immediately, with the appropriate software already downloaded on their computers and smart phones.

When in eighth grade, Amanda sent the picture of her breasts to a man she met on video chat. He then blackmailed her by threatening to circulate it. He did so, and the police informed Amanda and her family about this. Amanda experienced anxiety and depression and had panic attacks. The family moved to a new home, and Amanda attended a new school, but Amanda began to use alcohol and drugs. A year later, the man created a Facebook page with Amanda's photo as the profile image and circulated it to her classmates. Amanda attempted suicide with bleach and was treated at an emergency department, after which abusive messages were posted by her classmates on her own Facebook

page. The family moved again, but Amanda began to engage in self-mutilation and again attempted suicide. Eventually she killed herself.

Amanda's suicide received worldwide attention in the media. On October 19, a vigil was held across Canada. A Facebook memorial page was created which has received millions of "likes," but abusive postings still occurred. Amanda's mother established a trust fund in Amanda's name to fight cyber-bullying. Guidelines from the Centers of Disease Control and from suicide prevention organizations state that sensationalizing and glorifying suicide makes it more likely that a suicide will generate more suicides in the community. However, sensationalizing and glorifying suicide is often the norm today.

What is also noteworthy is that Amanda uploaded the YouTube video five weeks prior to her suicide. The messages on the flash cards outlined her plight and stated that she had already made two prior suicide attempts. She provided, therefore, thirty-nine days in which people could have intervened. The American Association of Suicidology has recommended the use of ten warning signs for impending suicidal behavior, using the mnemonic IS PATH WARM: suicidal ideation, substance abuse, purposelessness, anxiety, trapped, hopelessness, worthlessness, anger, recklessness, and mood changes. Previous research by Gunn, Lester, and McSwain (2011) have shown that these signs are valid for predicting suicidal ideation and behavior. For the present chapter, I had two judges read Amanda's flash cards from her YouTube video, and they found eight or nine of these signs as present. Anger was missing, and the two judges did not agree on purposelessness.<sup>1</sup> It is clear, therefore, that Amanda would be judged to be at high risk for suicide by a suicide expert viewing her video. However, there is no indication that any of those who viewed the video attempted to intervene and prevent Amanda's suicide.<sup>2</sup> Here is what she wrote on the flashcards.

Hello

I've decided to tell you about my never ending story

In 7th grade I would go with friends on webcam

meet and talk to new people

then got called stunning, beautiful, perfect, etc . . .

then wanted me to flash . . .

so I did . . . 1 year later . . .

I got a msg on facebook

From him . . . don't know how he knew me . . .

It said . . . if you don't put on a show for me I will send ur boobs

he knew my adress, school, relatives, friends, family names  
Christmas break . . .  
Knock at my door at 4 AM  
It was the police . . . my photo was sent to everyone  
I then got really sick and got . . .  
Anxiety, major depression, and panic disorder  
I then moved and got into Drugs & Alcohol . . .  
My anxiety got worse . . . couldn't go out  
A year past and the guy came back with my new  
list of friends and school. But made a facebook page  
My boobs were his profile pic . . .  
Cried every night, lost all my friends and respect  
people had for me . . . again . . .  
Then nobody liked me  
name calling, judged . . .  
I can never get that photo back  
It's out there forever . . .  
I started cutting . . .  
I promised myself never again . . .  
Didn't have any friends and I sat at lunch alone  
So I moved schools again . . .  
Everything was better even though i still sat alone  
at lunch in the library everyday.  
After a month later I started talking to an old guy friend.  
We back and fourth texted and he started to say he . . .  
Liked me . . . led me on . . . he had a girlfriend . . .  
then he said come over my gf's on vacation  
so I did . . . huge mistake . . .  
He hooked up with me . . .  
I thought he liked me . . .  
1 week later I get a text get out of your school  
His girlfriend and 15 others came including hiself . . .  
The girl and 2 others just said look around nobody likes you  
In front of my new school (50) people  
A guy then yelled just punch her already  
So she did . . . she threw me to the ground a punched me several times  
Kids filmed it. I was all alone and left on the ground.  
I felt like a joke in this world . . . I thought nobody deserves this  
I was alone. I lied and said it was my fault and my idea  
I didn't want him getting hurt, I thought he really liked me.



but he just wanted the sex . . . someone yelled punch her already  
Teachers ran over but I just went and layed in a ditch and my dad  
found me.

I wanted to die so bad . . . when he brought me home I drank bleach . . .  
It killed me inside and I thought I was gonna actually die.

Ambulance came and brought me to the hospital and flushed me  
After I got home all I saw was on facebook—She deserved it, did you  
wash the mud out of your hair?—I hope shes dead  
nobody cared . . . I moved away to another city to my moms.

Another school . . . I didn't wanna press charges because I wanted  
to move on.

6 months has gone by . . . people are posting pics of bleach, clorex  
and ditches.

tagging me . . . I was doing a lot better too . . . They said . . .

She should try a different bleach, I hope she dies this time and isn't  
so stupid.

They said I hope she sees this and kills herself . . .

Why do i get this? I messed up but why follow me . . .

I left your guys city . . . Im constantly crying now . . .

Everyday I think why am i still here?

My anxiety is horrible now . . . never went out this summer

All from my past . . . lifes never getting better . . . cant go to school  
meet or be with people . . . constantly cutting. Im really depressed  
Im on anti deppresants now and counselling and a month ago this  
summer

I overdosed . . . in hospital for 2 days . . .

Im stuck . . . whats left of me now . . . nothing stops

I have nobody . . . I need someone :(

my name is Amanda Todd

[picture of wrist with cuts]

[stay strong]

### A Suicide Note on Twitter

Ashley, an eighteen-year-old, died by suicide<sup>3</sup> after sending 145 tweets in the twenty-four hours prior to her suicide. In these tweets, she alleged that she had been sexually abused from ages fourteen to seventeen by her father. After trying to bring the abuser to justice, she had received news that her alleged abuser would not be prosecuted. After Ashley's death, her mother said that Ashley felt that the investigation into her abuse had made her feel like a suspect rather than

the victim that she was. The investigating authorities were accused of being insensitive and for sending her back to the home where the alleged abuse took place because they claimed that they could not remove her. Child and Protective Services conducted a five-month investigation but were unable to confirm that the abuse had taken place (*CBS News*, November 15, 2011). The authorities, of course, denied any wrongdoing. However, after Ashley's suicide, they claimed that they would look further into her allegations. As of March 2012, no action had been taken.

On the day of her death, Ashley told her friend who drove her to school that she was feeling ill. From 6:44 AM to 2:08 PM she sent 144 tweets. She had over five hundred followers, but it is not known whether any were monitoring her that day. During the sequence of tweets, there was a break of 139 minutes after 10:42 AM and another twenty-one-minute break after 1:47 PM. No one seems to have intervened in those periods and, again, it is not known whether anyone knew of what was transpiring. At 2:08 PM in her last tweet, Ashley said, "Take two. I hope I get this right."

Ashley came from a dysfunctional family. Ashley's mother had accused her own father of molesting her, and Ashley's grandmother had accused her father of molesting her. Ashley's mother married two men in 1998, one of whom sexually assaulted Ashley and was sent to prison for eleven years. Ashley's mother then met a married man who was separated, and she broke into his house with intent to murder his wife. She was sent to prison, and Ashley moved in with her father.

Other noteworthy events in Ashley's life were that she nearly drowned in a bucket of water at eleven months of age. Ashley had also been the victim of bullying in sixth grade because of her weight. She began to cut her wrists, and she developed an eating disorder. She turned to pills and marijuana to cope. After her mother's release from prison, Ashley was taken on outings with family members, including an uncle who was a registered sex offender and who was later arrested for abusing an eleven-year-old relative. According to Ashley's grandmother, Ashley had a nervous breakdown in 2009, after which her father obtained psychiatric treatment for her and transferred her to a charter school. There she made friends but continued to cut, and her eating disorder switched from anorexia to bulimia. She had a series of mini-romances and confessed to her friends that she had lost her virginity around age fourteen. She had a serious romance with a young boy who apparently found out that Ashley's father was sexually

abusing her. Malisow, a newspaper reporter, could not get this boy to talk to him, and so Malisow noted that this information has not been confirmed.<sup>4</sup> The boy ended the relationship. Ashley apparently told her friends that her father had caught her with drugs and blackmailed her into performing oral sex, but her friends were never sure how much of what Ashley told them was true.

At her new school, she made one good friend and apparently told this friend that her father would rent her out to his friends. Toward the end of her life, Ashley had reconnected with her boyfriend, but the relationship broke up again. She then received the news that no charges would be brought against her father. Ashley tried to obtain some counseling, but there was no insurance to pay for it. She had been looking forward to a part in the school production of *Hairspray*, but her poor grades meant that she probably would not be allowed to participate.

Gunn and Lester (2012) ran Ashley's Twitter postings through a computer program that analyzed words used in hourly intervals. There was a trend toward a decrease in the use of the pronoun "I" and a significant decrease in all references to the self over time. There was also a trend toward an increase in terms reflecting positive emotions. Although this may seem surprising, a similar trend was observed in two tape recordings made by a young man in the hours before he died by suicide (Lester, 2010).

On reading the posts, it becomes clear that Ashley attempted to write the posts using rhymes. For example: 10:21 AM "I went to the bathroom and locked the door;" 10:22 AM "I took apart a razor I had gotten from the store."

Here are her tweets.

Nov 6

10:50 PM: "I fuckked up my own suicide" yeah tell me about it . . .

Nov 7

6:44 AM: Staying home today. Can I reach 1000 tweets??? I'm thinking yes!

9:45 AM: just woke up

9:45 AM: Don't feel too well

9:45 AM: There is somebody in my dreams

9:46 AM: I want them gone

9:46 AM: How can we control our dreams?

9:46 AM: Hummm wish somebody would text me

9:47 AM: Kinda lonely right now

9:47 AM: There was so much more I wanted to do  
9:48 AM: Ahhh well time to move on  
9:48 AM: My thought process is too crazy  
9:48 AM: I totally think I'm bipolar  
9:49 AM: Or just crazy  
9:49 AM: Idk.  
9:49 AM: Humm I remember why we broke up  
9:50 AM: I shall do it again  
9:50 AM: Because this time I don't have a bf  
9:50 AM: And I really don't care anymore  
9:51 AM: I should get ready then  
9:51 AM: Should have gotten everything last night  
9:52 AM: Still just trying to raise my numbers  
9:52 AM: So I met this boy  
9:52 AM: He was very cute you see  
9:52 AM: Quite popular too  
9:53 AM: Me and this boy started talking  
9:53 AM: Then we talked a lil more  
9:53 AM: Then he let me in his front door  
9:54 AM: We walked up the stairs where everything was quite  
9:54 AM: And he whispered 'you look beautiful' into my ear  
9:55 AM: Shivers moved down my spine  
9:55 AM: And then he began to kiss my neck  
9:56 AM: I know you're thinking 'why did she go'  
9:57 AM: And all I can say is my father told me so  
9:57 AM: So he kissed me sweet and laid me down on his bed  
9:58 AM: I started to shake he said 'give me head'  
9:58 AM: I laughed at him and said 'I'm a vegetarian'  
9:59 AM: Then I wondered why I had really come to him.  
9:59 AM: See I've been in this situation before  
10:00 AM: When a boy I loved said he would leave if I didn't give it up  
10:00 AM: And I told my friends I had done it even though it wasn't true  
10:01 AM: Because he was telling everybody the same things too  
10:01 AM: But here is the honest truth  
10:01 AM: I never did it till I was sixteen  
10:02 AM: I did not know the boy  
10:02 AM: And I never got to know him  
10:02 AM: He was older stronger and high at the time  
10:03 AM: He probably will never admit I was a crime