

SUICIDE AND ITS SOCIO-CULTURAL PRESENTATIONS IN LITERATURE AND MUSIC

Suicidul și reprezentările sale în literatură și muzică

Fekete, S. Osváth, P., Vörös, V., Fekete, J.
Dept of Psychiatry, Psychotherapy, University of Pécs

Rezumat: Scopul articolului de față este de a cerceta aspectele socio-culturale și penetrația socială a caracteristicilor suicidului și a rolului modelelor simbolice, mai ales din literatură, anumite genuri de muzică și opere clasice. Dovezi pentru cauzalitatea de tip model-efect și imitație contagioasă au fost raportate în descrierilor unor epidemii sau clustere suicidare din cele mai vechi timpuri până în secolul XX. În literatură și libretetele de operă, ba chiar și în muzica modernă (pop sau heavy-metal), ca și în alte forme de artă sunt reflectate credințele contemporane despre relațiile interpersonale, despre conflicte și valori morale, Fenomenul cultural, nu numai că reflectă atitudinile despre suicid, ci chiar modelează opinia publică, prin aceea că influențează percepția și semnificația actului de suicid. Amintirile personale și experiențele culturale, predispozițiile și necesitățile fiecăruia, pot modela percepția noastră asupra evenimentelor ce ne înconjoară, iar de aceea fiecare din noi tinde să se identifice cu personajele din narațiune și să devină actori în piesa care ne impresionează. După părerea noastră, aceste tipuri de procese trebuie studiate în continuare.

Cuvinte cheie: suicid, cultură, modelare

Abstract: The aim of this article is to search for the sociocultural aspects and social transmission of the characteristics concerning suicide and for the role of symbolical models and patterns in the culture especially in literature and in some music –popular music and operas. Evidence for the model-effect and contagion have been reported in accounts of epidemics or clusters of suicides from ancient times to the 20th century. Among susceptible individuals the mechanisms most often associated with them, are imitation/identification. Literature and opera, popular music cases (even pop music, or heavy metal) like any other art form, reflect contemporary beliefs about interpersonal relationships, conflicts and moral values. The cultural phenomenon not only mirrors the attitudes regarding suicide, but it shapes the public opinion, by influencing the perceptions and meanings of the suicidal act. Our personal and cultural histories, predispositions and needs influence what we perceive, and we tend to identify ourselves with the character in the plot and become actors in the play which has an effect on us. In our opinion, these types of processes have to be still studied.

Key words: suicide, culture, modelling

The aim of this article is to search for the sociocultural aspects and social transmission characteristics concerning suicide and for the role of symbolical models and patterns in the culture especially in literature and in some music –popular music and operas. The meaning of suicidal behaviour encompassing historically affective qualities is that the act symbolizes differences according to culture. In the modelling process of suicidal behaviour, the sociocultural, contextual and individual-psychological meanings of suicide are connected. Evidence for the model-effect and contagion have been reported in accounts of epidemics or clusters of suicides from ancient times to the 20th century. Among susceptible individuals the mechanisms most often associated with them, are imitation/ identification

Exploring the impact of culture, and its attitudes and values by studying the way suicide has been portrayed in a particular art form in different cultures. Literature and opera, popular music cases like any other art form, reflect contemporary beliefs about interpersonal relationships, conflicts and values. They not only mirror attitudes regarding suicide, but they shape public opinion by influencing the suicidal meaning and they act also as agents for social cultural changes. Suicide and other acts of self-destruction are common themes in dramatic literature today, as they have been over the centuries. It is worth noting that this approach has a distinct advantage over clinical studies of fatal suicides, where the subject of the research, the suicide itself, is no longer available for us. In case of a model-suicide, the mediating process between models and imitators and the psychic mechanism in modelling can be more understandable in these works than those in everyday life or in a clinical case.

The authors think, this study offers some insight into the use of suicide, for its effect on other people, the phenomenon of suicide clustering and the imitation identification mechanism characterizing suicide in world literature and opera. In order to obtain sources of data for this study, literary works and operas demonstrating the contagion of suicide and model effects were chosen from several cultures and several eras. Possible examples were selected from impressive works known world-wide from several areas, eras and cultures, from the Greeks, from the Bible throughout the Middle Ages and up to modern literary and operatic works.

In the imitation-identification process, many factors may mediate the emotional response to and cognitive appraisal of suicidal behaviour. Similarities and differences of the suicidal models and their imitators were studied with regard to sociodemographic variables (age, sex), methods and psychological variables (motives and consequences of suicide, emotional closeness to the model, attractivity-dependency). Social learning

theory is used in analysis of the data from vicarious experiences which may have a role in the depiction of suicides (Bandura, 1977) especially as they illustrate the processes of modelling and imitation in these literary works.

To understand the model effects from the point of their meaning, the subjective qualities of the suicidal act in the given context were investigated (Boldt, 1988) using the Baechler categories (Baechler, 1985, Smith, 1985). Baechler has described an elaborate typology of suicide on the basis of meanings (not motives) attached to them. According to this approach there are eleven types of suicide classified into four main groups. (Escapist suicide – to escape from an intolerable situation; aggressive suicide – to revenge, to punish or to force somebody by the act; oblation suicide – to sacrifice him/herself; and ludic suicides – a high risk behaviour, to challenge fate or God). To view suicidal behaviour as a purposeful, meaningful act designed to solve an existential problem of living gives us a very useful framework in understanding the suicidal person's personality, his private logic as well as the impact of the act and the mechanisms of modelling and social transmission.

In addition, the dynamic concepts of identification and projective identification are used to understand suicidal contagion. The concept of projective identification is useful in understanding the occurrence of modelling even when there are no attractive models, sociodemographic or other similarities. In such cases the follower who is characterized by a weak identity can project his best qualities on to the internalized representation of the model and thus identify himself with the other. This happens when the borders of the self are weak beforehand, as are found in borderline, narcissistic or psychotic people (Taiminen, 1992). Also, the interaction between the concepts can be illustrated in the analysis of the literary works.

Results and discussion

Authors mean, using the framework described above allows us to draw some general conclusions. Social learning theory is especially useful in understanding episodes of suicide clustering, suicide epidemics and in the occurrence of altruistic suicides. The latter ones are essentially facts of suicide that are determined and prescribed by a certain culture. Examples are found in the works of the following authors: Fukadzava (1982), Santa (1985) (in Japanese and Hungarian villages, the oldest people regularly committed suicide to relieve their poor families); Dostoyevsky (Foy et al, 1979) (the young girls' epidemics in "Brothers Karamazov"); Mussorgsky, Berlioz (suicide epidemics among the heretics and among the Trojan women; Harewood, 1976); Stevenson (1974) (suicides of gamblers in the suicide club) Thomas Mann (1955) (the great friend's suicides), in some Shakespearean dramas (1981) (Julius Caesar, Antonius and Cleopatra), and in the Japanese short stories of Mishima and Mori /see Table.1./

In our opinion, these descriptions, sociodemographic similarities and traditional methods of suicide are found, along with attractive personalities, providing models and charismatic examples personifying the notion. There are also similarities in the anticipated consequence and meanings concerning the successive suicides. Social learning theory also applies for many examples of Greek and Indian historic suicides. The clustering indicates that people are of similar sexes and ages, and that the motivations for the acts which are carried out in similar ways, imply similar meanings and consequences. (Consider Erigone's example and the Athenian women following her; the suicides of the sirens; the story of Ariadne-Phaedra-and Polycaste, the women of Messina from the Greek literature (Graves, 1960, Faber, 1970) as well as Krishna's and king Pastu's wives in the Mahabharata) (see Table.2).

Table 1.

FUKADZAVA - "*Pilgrimsong*" - the elderly above age 70 in the Japanese villages committed suicide as a rule in the same ritual, traditional way (by going to the mountain) to unburden their starving families. Rites, ceremonies and the "Narayama songs" are the cultural mediators in the suicidal modelling process.

SANTA - "*Too many of us*"-a ritual withdrawal (to a cave) and a ritual suicide of the elderly, Hungarian village to unburden the poor families. Folk tales, songs, ceremonies are the sociocultural mediators

MUSSORGSKY - "*Khovanshchina*" - in Russia the old believers' self-immolation. The method, the motifs the anticipated consequences are the same; Dossifey (the chief priest, leader of the schismatics, Old Believers) - is a prominent model

BERLIOZ - "*Les Troyens*"- suicide epidemic of the Trojan women - following princess Cassandra - after the victory of the Greeks to avoid dishonour

DOSTOYEVSKY - "*The brothers Karamazov*" - a suicide epidemic of young girls in a village in Russia was stopped when the authorities intervened by dragging the naked corpse through the streets

SHAKESPEARE - "*Julius Caesar*"- Cassius, Titinius, Brutus committed suicide by the same method (stabbing) to avoid dishonour on the battlefield in Phillippi Portia, Brutus` wife, followed the example of her husband. "*Antonius and Cleopatra*" - Antonius, Eros, Cleopatra and her slave girls, Iris and Charmion killed themselves following Caesar`s victory Cimarosa also adapted this theme in opera

STEVENSON - "*The suicide club*" - suicides of members of the club after gambling

MANN, TH - "*The changed heads*" - two friend's suicides (they cut their heads). They love the same woman. The meanings of victim-suicide are common, the scene is Goddess Kali's church.

MISHIMA - "*Patriotism*" - Lieutenant Takeyama to avoid dishonour disembowelled himself with his sword, his wife witnessed his ceremonial act and then killed herself with a dagger. The author, Mishima also committed seppuku (hara-kiri) in 1970.

MORI - "*Decadence of the Abe house*" - vassals after Duke`s death committed suicide, traditionally, by the same method

Table 2.

GREEK MYTHS

"*Antigone*" and "*Oedipus Rex*". Suicide of Iocasta, Antigone, Haimon, Euridice by hanging and stabbing;(suicidal meanings-escape, ablativ). In the literature the deaths were described by Sophocles, Euripides, Aeschylus (Faber, 1970, Anouilh, 1949, Brecht, 1969). In opera - (Mendelsohn, Orff, Honegger, Leoncavallo, Mussorgsky, Stravinsky)

Chrysippus` and his stepmother`s, Hippodamia`s, suicide Appollodorus, (Graves, 1960)

(Common suicide meanings are shame and escape) *Ariadne - Phaedra - Polycaste*. Suicides of sisters by hanging after loss of love (the meanings of suicides are escape and revenge) Plutarch`s, Appollodorus, (Graves,1960; Faber,1970)

Erigone and the Athenian women hanged themselves (revenge, aggressive suicidal meanings. Homer, (Graves,1960) *Sirens* committed suicide after the competition with Orpheus and after the meeting with Odysseus. Homer, (meanings - self-punishment, escape)

Women of Messina committed suicide traditionally after husband`s death and suicide. Pausanias, (Graves,1960)

MAHABHARATA

King Pastu`s wives and the women following Krishna killed themselves, on act that was prescribed by the culture

KALEVALA

Kullervo and his sister kill themselves at the Same place, characterized by the same meaning - (escape, shame and self-punishment because of incestuous love)

In many works, - on the other hand - that provide detailed descriptions of suicides, the modelling upon each other seem to be connected more by tight psychological emotional links, or by the process of (projective) identification and by complicated subjective meanings than by the obvious sociocultural similarities. (See for example the story of Iocasta-Antigone-Haimon-Eurydice in the well-known Oedipus- Kreon dramas, and its literary and musical adaptations. The mother-daughter-fiancé-and his mother committed suicide, by different methods, having connected by very tight emotional links; the Chrysippus-Hippodamia story (Table 2) or suicides of Romeo and Juliet etc. illustrate the same). The psychological phenomena occur with special emphasis in both Russian and Scandinavian representations of suicide, namely those by Dostoyevsky, Tolstoy, Ibsen, Strindberg; and in the American novels written by Heller, Miller or Plath (Table 3).

In Dostoevsky`s novel "Crime and punishment" (1966, p.518) Svidrigaylov sexually abuses a child who kills herself. Just prior to his own suicide, he dreams repeatedly of this 14-year-old girl who has drowned herself. In "The possessed" (1936, p.716) before his suicide, Stavrogin also is haunted powerfully by dreams of the little girl-suicide shaking her fist at him: "I saw Matryosha with feverish eyes. I see her that way every day...". Rosmer's words in Ibsen's triangle drama "Rosmersholm" (1977, p.232-3) about the suicidal wife, Beata are: "We talk about her every day... she has been still among us". Later the friend, Rebecca West, says

before her suicidal jump: "go after Beata, Rosmer". Eventually we can see in Rosmer's invited death the identification-motive and the sacrificial and self-punitive meanings of suicide.

Tolstoj (1964, p811) writes about Anna Karenina: "suddenly the knocked down man occurred to her mind that day when she met Vronsky at first and had already known what to do, she wanted to fall the first car down..." and "I punish him, I will be delivered from everything..." (the revenge-meaning and the connection of love and death motives in her suicide appear also in the analysis of Slochower,1975) .

Table 3.

DOSTOYEVSKY - "*The possessed*"

Matryosha and Stavrogin - Stavrogin raped the young girl, who committed suicide, Stavrogin dreamt day by day about her, immediately before his own suicide (suicide meanings - self-punishment, escape).

"*Crime and punishment*" - after the little girl's suicide ravished by Svidrigajlov, the suicidal girl's face returns in Svidrigajlov's dreams day after day. The common meanings of self-punishment and escape at the individual level can be same along with the mechanism of projective identification.

TOLSTOY - "*Anna Karenina*" - in the heroine's ' fantasy before her suicide - jump in front of the train - the man's memory appears (suicide? accident?) what she saw when she met Vronsky at the first time. Beside the meanings of revenge and escape the joining of experiences of love and death helps the appearance of the model.

IBSEN - "*Rosmersholm*" - Johannes' wife's and later Johannes' suicides by the same method, jump from high to the brawling. There are direct references in the text to the imitation of the model (The common meanings of action - sacrificial, self-punishment).

"*Hedda Gabler*" - Ejlert Lövborg's and later Hedda's suicides came the same way with Hedda's pistol, who inherited the gun from her father, who was an army officer. She shot herself in an elegant way against Ejlert Lövborg's shot in the stomach

STRINDBERG - "*Miss Julia*" - Jean's, Julia's father's and Julia's suicides. Aside from the difference of methods and motivations, there are similar meanings partly –aggression, escape. Inducement to commit suicide in the interpersonal mechanism of projective identification can be taken in the act in the series of suicides.

HELLER - "*Something happened*" - the father's and Virginia's suicides.

A MILLER - "*After the fall*" - Maggie's and Quentin's intermingling suicidal behaviours, attempts. Beside the common suicidal meanings of aggression and escape identification, projective identification is the mediating mechanism.

O'NEILL - "*My love, Electra*" - Christiane's, Orin's and Lavinia's identical, projective identical ("inducing" to commit suicide) model-following suicides with the meanings of revenge and aggressive suicide.

ANOUILH - "*Ardele*" - love suicidal pact, paired suicides with the common suicidal meaning of escape from unbearable situation.

It is either the description of fantasies associated with the model (as in the works by Tolstoy "Anna Karenina" and Plath "The Bell Jar"), or the recurrent presuicidal dreams which bear a great emotional intensity and refer to the model, (as in the novels by Dostoyevsky "The Possessed" (Stavrogin), "Crime and Punishment" (Svidrigajlov)) that act as transmitters. For the models and their imitators in these descriptions, the rules of social learning seem to be valid to a lesser extent. The relationships and the modelling processes are characterized and determined mainly by projective identifications, partly by its intrapsychic form; and partly by hidden subjective meanings (Taiminen, 1992)

Direct descriptions of suicidal imitations also appear in Mayakovski's poem (1968) commenting after Yesenin's suicide: "All the imitators were raving. Heaps of them point knives at themselves...". He writes about the subsequent intellectual suicide epidemics, and finds the same suicidal method, motifs and sociodemographic variables among the imitators (see the essay of Trotsky in 1930 about "The suicide of Mayakovski - To the memory of Yesenin").

SUICIDAL PACTS

A suicide pact is an agreement between two or more people to kill themselves. These individuals form interdependent "encapsulated units" - when threatened with dissolution, the "unit" commits suicide". There are usually dominant and submissive members in clinical descriptions, consisting of antisocial and borderline

personality types. Marzuk (1999) describes homicide-suicides on the other pole of the double suicide spectrum (spousal, familicide, extra-familial), in which usually much more psycho-pathological/violent and less agreement/ identification issues are involved. The phenomenon of the suicide pact, which operates in a somewhat different way, can also be found in opera and literature. Examples are seen in Table 4, and include "Cosi Fan Tutte" by Mozart, a suicide attempt-pact; Bontemps short story "A summer tragedy"; Chikamatsu play "The love suicide"; Kawatata's "Sleeping Beauty" (see Weir, 1980); Bulgarian folk songs (Shipkovensky, 1975) and the drama of Anouilh "Ardele" (1949).

Many love-suicide pacts were found, while in everyday life suicide pacts typically were composed of married couples, aged 50-60, who are socially isolated, unemployed, medically ill.

Table 4.

MOZART - "*Cosi fan tutte*"- in the opera a suicidal pact is formed by Ferrando and Guglielmo. (A suicide attempt is made (same method-poison, and same motifs to seduce each other's fiancés, gaming-ludic suicides)

BONTEMPTS-"*A summer tragedy*" - A suicide pact of an old couple is presented in a short story (with the same method, same motifs, - life no longer holds meaning for them, they are ill, lonely, their children have died. Escape and oblativistic suicidal meanings)

CHIKAMATSU-"*The love suicides at Sonezaki*"- A Japanese play includes a love-suicide pact

KAWATATA - "*Sleeping Beauty*" a Japanese novel expresses the writer's wish to commit suicide with a little girl and thus escape old-age ugliness, (suicidal meanings aggressive, escape)

BULGARIAN FOLK SONGS (Shipkovensky) - Love-suicide pacts - the inseparability is emphasized

ANOUILH-"*Ardele ou la Marguerite*" - Love suicide-pact (suicidal meaning - escape from a desperate situation)

The suicidal pact, a manifestation of collective suicide (dyad, familial or societal) has often been differentiated from model suicides which employ imitative / identification mechanisms. However, our literary research points not only to the validity of the "common stressor" theory, but also to the common meanings, motivations, methods and the mutual mesh and identification in real suicide pacts that are described. In our opinion they represent strong arguments against the separation of the dominant partner role usually found in suicidal pact from the problem circles of modelling (Weir, 1980, Rosen, 1981). On the other hand, the murder-suicide appears to be a somewhat different entity.

Table 5 presents additionally operas that contain suicides in which the imitation - modelling processes play a role (Feggetter, 1980, Walley, 1971). It may be noted that suicide is a remarkably frequent operative cause of death, which, through its romantic and heroic presentation, heightens markedly its model-effects (e.g. a cluster-suicide in the Mussorgsky's "Khovanshchina"; and in the Berlioz's "Woman of Troy" initiated by Cassandra; or an identification with a suicidal model in the Puccini's "Miss Butterfly").

Viewing suicide from the perspective of its sociocultural history allows a more comprehensive understanding of this phenomenon (Tousignant and Mishara, 1981). Suicide is seen the "great refusal" to say yes to an existence that is a living death for the soul and spirit. It serves as a disturber of the world's "false sleep", an aim of the great artists in their depiction of characters who take their own life (Slochower, 1975).

Table 5.

SUICIDE IN OPERA

Harewood (1976) lists 306 operas in which there are 77 completed suicides and 12 attempted suicides Walley and Kalish (1971) in the 104 very frequently performed operas suicide occurred in 26 percent

SUICIDE MODELING IN OPERA

PUCCINI - "*Miss Butterfly*" - Cho-Cho-San's father's and Cho-Cho-San's suicides are committed with the same dagger, the same motivation. (Before her suicide miss Butterfly was reading her father's lines loudly written to his dagger: "Die with honesty if you could not live with that.")

MUSSORGSKY - "*Khovanshchina*" – Dosifey's, Marfa's, Andrej's and the Greek orthodox' voluntary stakes after each other. Common meanings are escape and common death undertaken with dignity.

BERLIOZ - "*Women of Troy*" – Cassandra - The women of Troy follow her suicidal behaviour with similar method and meaning after the Greeks' victory.

MOZART - "*All of them are doing this way*" - Ferrando's and Guglielmo's suicidal attempts with the same method and meaning, where the declared aim, on the basis of a bet is seduction of each other's girlfriend by means of manipulative suicide. (The game as suicidal meaning.)

GOUNOD - "*Romeo and Juliet*" - two suicides following closely one another with the meaning of mourning and escape (see also Blacher's, Sutermeister's opera settings about the same theme.)

DELIUS - "*Romeo's and Juliet's village*" - Sali's and Vreli's suicides with the same method and motivation

CIMAROSA - "*Antonius and Cleopatra*" - Antonius', Cleopatra's, Iras', Charmian's, Eros' suicides after one another with an attractive model. Their servants follow their examples, becoming one with them in death.

NIELSEN - "*Saul and David*" - Saul and his servant (with common meanings of escape and preservation of honesty, Saul is the prominent model; the context and the method are common.

MENDELSSOHN; HONEGGER; ORFF; - "*Antigone*" Jocasta, Antigone, Haimon, Euridice (see Table 1.)

Analysis of the phenomena and mechanisms of modelling in relation to suicide in the world literature and operas allow us some conclusions about suicide. The mechanism of identification appears to be the most important aspect of suicide contagion and clustering. Generally, the rules of social learning theory were found to be valid. The concepts and the typology of cultural meanings of Baechler (1977) are most useful in understanding of suicidal process.

The mechanism of identification in the suicidal drama could be correctly interpreted by studying the context of common cultural meanings and particular societal attitudes. The psychodynamic concept of projective identification was useful in our literary analysis to understand how and under what conditions the suicidal models influenced the individuals' decision to commit suicide. When similarities of people in the process of modelling were not present, the motivation and the subjective meaning of the act seemed to be similar.

Presentations of suicide and modelling usually emphasize on of two elements, either the cultural traditions and altruistic motivations, or the contextual and /or individual, psychological aspects. But in the process, they generally appear as an integrated whole, and may range from the real individual person to a symbolic one drawn from an idea or tradition.

Active reading or listening to the work makes it clear that the response is far more than a simple reaction to a stimulus, but it is more of an interaction. Our personal and cultural histories, predispositions and needs influence what we perceive, and we tend to identify ourselves with and become actors in the play which has an effect on us. These processes have to be still studied.

SUPPLEMENT - (POPULAR, HEAVY METAL MUSIC) - GLOOMY SUNDAY: DID THE "HUNGARIAN SUICIDE SONG" REALLY CREATE A SUICIDE EPIDEMIC? - STEVEN STACK, PH.D.; Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan; OMEGA, Vol. 56(4) 349-358, 2007-2008

„Sunday is gloomy, my hours are
slumberless. Dearest, the shadows I live
with are numberless. Little white flowers
will never awaken you, Not where the
black coach of sorrow has taken you.
Angels have no thought of ever returning
you. Would they be angry if I thought of
joining you?“.

Gloomy Sunday

Music, (self) destruction - Heavy metal

MEGADEATH	POISON
ANNIHILATOR	METALLICA
NUCLEAR ASSAULT	SLAYER
BLUE MURDER	SUICIDAL TENDENCIES

Texts:

"FOR EARTH TO HEAL THEN WE MUST DIE, NO ONE DESERVES IT MORE" MOTORHEAD'S - "MARCH OR DIE"

"THERE IS NOTHING MORE FOR ME, NEED THE END TO SET ME FREE"
METALLICA - "FADE TO BLACK"
"SUICIDE IS THE ONLY WAY OUT....SUICIDE IS SLOW WITH LIQUOR."
OSBORNE - "SUICIDE SOLUTION"
"I HATE MYSELF AND WANT TO DIE"
NIRVANA /COBAIN/ - "IN UTERO"

Comments - interviews about the music:

"A song may push them over the edge..."
"I have seen it happen to a friend"
"especially if it's a song by a band or singer they admire..."

Sues

McCollum vs Osborne "Suicide solution"..
Waller vs CBS /Osborne/ "Suicide solution"
Vance vs Judas Priest /CBS/ "Beyond the realms of death"

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