



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Discourse, Context & Media

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/dcm

Spaces for support: Discursive negotiations of supporter positions in online forum discussions about suicide

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 12 October 2017

Received in revised form 29 March 2018

Accepted 10 April 2018

Available online xxxxx

Keywords:

Suicide

Social support

Online support

Peer support

Discursive psychology

ABSTRACT

This article investigates self-organized peer-to-peer support in online forum discussions about suicide. It analyzes how the discursive strategies through which participants introduce themselves as supporters relate to the support they provide. The analysis shows that the strategies employed to construct supporter identities commonly draw on what has been described as ‘somatic individuality’ – by which the management of biological ‘risks’ are framed as individual responsibilities – and by negotiating tensions between different perspectives on suicide. These are; (a) a discourse focusing on psychiatric knowledge and psychopharmaceuticals (b) a discourse focusing on social context and personal relationships, and (c) a critical stance towards the established care system. Negotiations between these condition, and are also conditioned by, power relations in the forum. These dynamics regulate the ways in which participants can use an online forum in order to move away from crisis points by discursively attempting to enter a supporter position.

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1. Background and aim

Suicide constitutes a global public health problem (WHO, 2014). Following the increased importance of digital communication technologies, people are turning to the internet and social media for information and support in relation to experiences of suicidal thoughts and behaviours (Harris et al., 2014). In relation to the rising interest in the internet as a tool for providing treatment to a wide range of mental health issues (Cuijpers et al., 2008; Andersson et al., 2014), researchers have also started to investigate the relationship between internet use and suicide (Alao et al., 2006; Durkee et al., 2011), and the benefits of using digital media for suicide prevention (Robinson et al., 2016; Kryszynska and De Leo, 2007; Sher and Vilens, 2009). In general, this research shows that the internet and social media may be beneficial for suicide intervention and prevention. They help reaching out to individuals who are otherwise difficult to reach, and they create conditions for anonymous and non-judgemental sharing of experiences. Benefits are sometimes challenged by increased risks however, such as difficulties in assessing risks, as well as issues of privacy and confidentiality. While this contradiction marks a significant share of the literature about the role of digital media and suicide prevention, in Robinson et al.’s words it also describes:

the apparent disconnect between the ways in which [...] people use social media (i.e. primarily for peer-to-peer support) and

the ways in which professionals appear to use it (i.e. for the delivery of information and awareness raising).

[Robinson et al. (2016, 16)]

There is a consensus among researchers that more empirical research is needed about how individuals experiencing suicidal thoughts and behaviours engage themselves with providing social support to each other using social media. Although many patient-to-patient coping activities have been organised in relation to a wide range of mental health-related issues (Gowen et al., 2012; Naslund et al., 2014; Ziebland and Wyke, 2012) – and while observations suggest that social media promotes a predominantly beneficial exchange of experiences (Naslund et al., 2016, Shaw and Gant, 2002; Leung, 2006) – research into their benefits is limited, and there is much to learn about the ways in which they function (DeAndrea and Anthony, 2013; Kaplan et al., 2011). Regarding the topic of peer-to-peer support in relation to suicide, there are furthermore issues of particular concern. Indeed, some of the more significant risks thought to be facing people with suicidal thoughts online – such as ‘pro-suicide’ and ‘anti-medicine’ discourse – are associated primarily with ‘private senders’, i.e. non-professionals, and communication characterized by “dialogue, confessions and narratives” (Westerlund et al., 2012). The internet can be used for ‘practicing’ suicidal behaviours (Westerlund, 2013), and some social media contexts even encourage and excite individuals engaged in suicidal behaviours (Westerlund et al., 2015; Becker et al., 2004).

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<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dcm.2018.04.002>

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Still, while fraught with risks, social media can also create the means for individuals to share experiences and come into contact with others in similar situations more easily than the offline world does. Discussion forums in particular may provide a supportive context for people with suicidal thoughts, and communication processes through which their experiences gain validity, thus helping them to more positive states (Barak, 2007; Eichenberg, 2008; Kupferberg and Gilat, 2012; Gilat et al., 2012). Using discursive psychology, Horne and Wiggins (2009) have shown that online forums in part function as sites for testing and validating suicidal identities, and that the conditions for receiving support in part depend on the strategies users employ to frame themselves as authentically suicidal. Similarly, Wiggins et al. (2016) analyse the provision and acknowledgment of support in online suicide forums, and show how forum interaction can enable individuals to discursively move away from crisis points, without losing their authenticity. Wiggins, McQuade and Rasmussen therefore argue that a crucial feature of online support forums is that they provide users with the conditions for moving from a position of support-seeker, to that of a supporter:

the potential benefits of the forum, therefore, may not only be in supporting those who ask for help, but providing people with a space in which they can help others. Bearing in mind that most forum members refer to themselves as being suicidal, offering support to other forum members may also enable them to re-position themselves as strong enough to do so.

[Wiggins et al. (2016, 22)]

By investigating the discursive ‘spaces’ – from which people in, for example, discussion forums provide support to others – we can learn more about the possibilities online contexts create for individuals to leave positions marked by despair. One way of doing this is to look closer at the specific strategies people employ to construct themselves as providers of peer support in forum discussions about suicide. In this article, I accordingly investigate online suicide discussions as sites for negotiating and validating supporter positions, and I focus in particular on the ways in which participants in online suicide discussions introduce themselves as supporters discursively. More specifically, I am interested in the discursive practices through which forum participants construct their ‘subject position’ in terms of legitimate providers of support, and in order to legitimize the support they provide. In the analysis, I direct attention to how the subject positions of supporters are constructed discursively, first, in relation to recipients of support, and secondly, in relation to other supporters. I also discuss how the different ways of constructing supporter positions relate to different kinds of support.

2. Data and method

Since I was interested in finding a broad range of discursive strategies by which participants in online suicide discussions legitimize themselves as supporters for analysis I considered it beneficial to include discussions in which both people with experiences of discussing the topic of suicide in a forum context, as well as those not so experienced, in discussing the topic of suicide participated. I therefore also considered it beneficial to include discussions in forums in which a fairly large number of active, and also new, participants were likely to be present. Furthermore, I wanted also to include discussions in which outsiders and ‘trolls’ – i.e. participants not necessarily interested in providing support but nevertheless respond to those asking for help – also might be present in order to analyse how their behaviours were handled by supporters claiming legitimacy. For ethical reasons (see more on this topic below), I also preferred to collect data from a public forum. Data

for this analysis were therefore not collected from forums specifically devoted to the topic of suicidal thoughts and behaviours, but from two well-known public Swedish online discussion forums of general, and predominantly anonymous, character.

I selected the discussions included in the analysis by browsing subsections in the two forums focusing on issues relating to mental health (but not specifically suicide), looking for discussions started by persons claiming to be experiencing suicidal thoughts and explicitly asking for support or help from other participants in the forum. I included primarily longer discussions that generated more than just a few answers, in which several different participants contributed support, and that also contained communication between supporters and not exclusively posts directed to the person initiating the discussion (the topic starter, TS). The final selection included 12 discussions, containing somewhere between 30 and 50 posts each.

The analysis draws on discursive psychology (Potter and Wetherell, 1987; Edwards and Potter, 1992) and thus focuses on the ways in which psychological categories, such as identities and subjectivity, are constructed discursively in interaction between users in the analyzed discussions. The analysis furthermore employs the concepts ‘interpretative repertoires’ and ‘subject positions’ in particular. Subject position (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, 115) describes how particular spaces for subjectivity are created in discourse, and it is used here to investigate how the identity work of forum participants relates specifically to their roles as supporters in the forums. How do participants construct their self-image, their subjectivity? What kinds of characteristics and experiences are highlighted by users to frame themselves as legitimate supporters? The concept of interpretative repertoires is used here for identifying key themes in the forum discussions. What emerges as ‘common sense’ (Wetherell, 1998) among participants as they engage in legitimizing themselves as providers of support? How are such repertoires used by supporters in order to make sense of themselves as supporters on the one hand, and the support they provide on the other?

While online contexts provide very useful naturalistic data for critical discursive psychological research (Jowett, 2015), internet-based data also introduce a range of challenges for researchers (Convery and Cox, 2012). In forums such as the ones where data for this study were gathered, asking for and obtaining informed consent is often not an entirely straightforward process. This is because participants in selected discussions are sometimes no longer active in the forum and/or difficult to keep track of (Svenningsson, 2001), but also because asking for consent may impact on forum behaviours (Halvarsson and Lilliengren, 2003). The relationship between texts published online (the focus of this study) and human subjects furthermore also renders the issue of consent ambiguous (Markham and Buchanan, 2012). Although available publicly in open forums, the data analyzed here need to be presented with particular consideration taken to the issue of identification (Elgesem, 2015) as it concerns a highly sensitive topic. All quotes in this article have been modified (Markham, 2012) in relation to the original online entries. They were translated into English (by the author), and all references to specific discussion topics, user names, personal names, public institutions and geographical places were omitted. It should also be noted that the focus here is directed primarily to the content in the discussions aiming to provide social support to others, and none of the quotes in the article relate to content in which participants describe their own subjective experiences of suicidal thoughts at the time of writing.

3. “Do yourself a favour, go to therapy and try medication”

Turning now to the presentation of the analysis, I will start this by discussing how supporter legitimacy is established by

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