



Aggressive suicide

Jason Manning*

Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, United States

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Abstract

While suicide is often considered deviant, it may also be a kind of social control that expresses and handles moral grievances. The moralistic nature of suicide is especially clear in cases where suicide is used to bring harm against others—that is, cases in which suicide is a kind of interpersonal aggression. The current paper explores aggressive aspects of suicide in a variety of social contexts. Anthropological studies reveal that in many tribal and traditional societies killing oneself is a recognized means of punishing others, who will be subject to supernatural curses or sanctions administered by third parties. Examining a sample of suicide cases in the contemporary U.S., I find that aggressive suicide also occurs in the modern metropolitan world. The chief punitive mechanism in modern aggressive suicide is the infliction of psychological harm, such as guilt. Drawing on Donald Black's paradigm of pure sociology and my previous theoretical work on moralistic suicide, we can explain aggressive suicide with the relational structure of the conflicts in which it occurs. Available data reveal that aggressive suicide is most likely to occur among intimates, and that variation in relational distance predicts the nature and severity of suicide's consequences for the living.

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1. Introduction

Across societies and throughout history, suicide has been condemned as a sin, punished as a crime, pitied as a symptom, or derided as a senseless waste. But though it is often considered

* Department of Sociology and Anthropology, West Virginia University, 316 Knapp Hall, P.O. Box 6326, Morgantown, WV 26506-6326, United States. Tel.: +1 304 293 8237; fax: +1 304 293 5994.

E-mail address: jason.manning@mail.wvu.edu

deviant, self-destruction may also be a technique of social control. From activists who burn themselves in protest to criminals who hang themselves in remorse, much suicidal behavior is a way of expressing grievances and securing redress. In other words, self-killing may be moralistic, belonging to the same sociological family as strikes, boycotts, imprisonment, execution, banishment, gossip, and vengeance (Baumgartner, 1984: 328–330; Black, 1998: 66, 82; Manning, 2012).

The social logic of moralistic suicide varies from case to case. Usually, however, it combines the characteristics of two elementary forms of social control: avoidance and aggression.¹ First, suicide involves an extreme curtailment of interaction, permanently severing relations between the self-killer and his or her adversaries. In this way it resembles other forms of moralistic avoidance, such as divorcing an abusive spouse, ceasing to speak with an obnoxious acquaintance, or resigning from a corrupt organization (Koch, 1974: 75; Baumgartner, 1984: 328–330; Black, 1998: 82). Secondly, suicide may express hostility and inflict harm upon a wrongdoer. In this way it resembles other forms of moralistic aggression, such as berating an incompetent coworker, beating a disobedient child, or executing a convicted murderer.

Here I explore the aggressive aspect of suicide, particularly how self-killers use their death to strike back at those they regard as wrongdoers.² The discussion below first addresses patterns of aggressive suicide described in tribal and traditional settings, and then turns to aggressive suicide in the United States. Previous research has given scant attention to moralistic or aggressive aspects of suicide in contemporary settings. To correct this shortcoming, I draw on data from coroners' official investigations to describe aggressive aspects of suicide in an American city. Finally, I consider the social habitat in which aggressive suicide occurs. Following Donald Black's strategy of pure sociology, and my previous theoretical work on moralistic suicide, I demonstrate how aggressive suicide can be explained by the nature of the relationship between the potential self-killer and his or her adversary.

2. Aggressive suicide in traditional societies

Most published information on aggressive aspects of suicide comes from ethnographic studies of tribal and traditional settings—societies that are simple in the sense of having small local populations, a low division of labor, and little diversity of culture at the local level. One of the earliest discussions of this topic is that of Jeffreys (1952), who coined the term “Samsonic suicide” to refer to suicide for the purpose of revenge. Focusing on African societies, Jeffreys described two major mechanisms by which individuals might use self-destruction to avenge themselves upon an enemy: 1) supernatural sanctions and 2) sanctions imposed by third parties. These same mechanisms have been described by a number of other researchers and appear to have a wide geographical distribution.

2.1. Supernatural sanctions

Suicide is a source of supernatural pollution in many societies, and in some it is said to unleash forces that punish the self-killer's adversaries. For example, in colonial Tanganyika

¹The elementary forms of social control are classified and explained by Black (1998:Ch.5). They include aggression, avoidance, negotiation, settlement, and toleration.

²Here I focus on cases in which suicide itself is the primary means of inflicting punishment rather than a consequence of directly attacking others, as when a terrorist pilots an airplane into a building to kill its occupants.

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