

Divorcing Suicidology, Ethically

Katrina Jaworski, University of South Australia

Having entered the conversation long after the initial responses to the then timely online release of the article by Scott Fitzpatrick, Claire Hooker and Ian Kerridge, I want to begin by thanking those who considered my work relevant to their own thinking about the future of the study of suicide.¹ It goes without saying that it is gratifying to see one's intellectual labors recognized especially on the topic of gender—a topic still considered by some as the province of feminist thinkers and thereby outside the mainstream thinking about suicide. While gratified, I am also surprised for in reality I am just a nerd, who, while refusing to be dislocated from the tangibility of suicide, spends a lot of time in front of the computer, thinking, reading and writing.

Critical Agency

If not in front of the computer, thinking and writing are always at the back of my mind, so to speak, while attending dinners, parties, conferences and so on. At the risk of sounding like I seriously need to get a life (pun intended), Jennifer White's,² Ian Marsh's,³ and Scott Kouri's⁴ acknowledgements and responses remind me, yet again, that my intellectual agency is not entirely my own. That is, I think, write and publish what I do, but my efforts depend on the generosity of others, and the multiple forms such generosity might take, which by the way needs to include critique. This means that others will interpret my work in ways which will move beyond the parameters of my intentions, intellectual capacities and imagination. In this sense, vulnerability is always at the scene of my arguments about suicide. This is a strength, and not a weakness, even though it takes a bit of an effort to exercise.

Ironically, critical suicidology has been in the making for some time. It has always existed in the margins, in the shadows, coming up to the surface for air, only to be treated as an interesting curiosity at best, or leaving some of us feeling demoralized, excluded and angry at worst, never having the proper space to voice our well-researched perspectives on suicide. Indeed, those speaking at the margins in the past constituted my entry point into suicidology. Specifically, right at the beginning of her doctoral studies, a twenty something Katrina came across an article written by none other than Michael Kral in which he pointed out, among other things, that lethality has been loosely attributed to, and confused with, methods, behaviors and descriptions of suicidal people.⁵

Kral's argument had little to do with gender, yet for lack of better expression, it hit the nail on the head in relation to the sort of epistemological conundrums I was having with the gendering of suicide.⁶ My other entry point was the work of Silvia Canetto⁷, a prominent psychologist in suicidology, whose extremely valuable work

¹ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015.

² White 2015.

³ Marsh 2015.

⁴ Kouri 2015.

⁵ Kral 1998, 223.

⁶ Kral 1998.

⁷ Canetto 1992-1993, 1995, 1997.

started dismantling deeply troubling gendered assumptions about suicide even if such dismantling could not offer me the tools to develop the arguments in *The Gender of Suicide*⁸ unlike philosophy and cultural studies.⁹ For me, this reminds me of a point Michel Foucault¹⁰ once made when he insisted that we look towards the current horizon of intelligibility to find out not only how knowledge might “work,” but also to trace the limits and cracks in its powerful operations.

Perhaps, then, it is not always a bad thing to exist on the margins, not only because margins, as White¹¹ discussed, contain hope and useful stutters, but also because interesting work tends to emerge from there. Of course this is all well and good on my paper, but in reality those of us who work in the academy are all too familiar with the demand to fit into a given discipline, producing work easily identifiable, measurable and publishable. For my part, I have always existed on the margins even though I have identified with certain fields, because it has always been really interesting to reside in some kind of interstice.

A Nomad’s Life

I have never tried publishing any of my work on suicide in a suicidology journal because I did not think I fitted in, and because I felt debates about suicide belonged to the larger sphere of the intellectual ecosystem. With the exception of one instance, I never submitted a paper to a proper suicidology conference. A number of pleasant but somewhat patronizing conversations lead me to believe that I was considered as someone interesting doing some interesting research on suicide somewhere over there in the corner of the world. In response, I resolved to work even harder because I was passionate, invested in being a scholar and cared deeply about suicide. And on an occasion or two, my sense of humor got the better of me and I would think: *the probability of me outliving them is relatively high at this point in time.*

Most of us working at the margins are, as Kouri¹² has described, nomad suicidologists. This is not exactly a choice in a voluntarist, masculinist and neo-liberal sense, but a position from which we, as misfits, can, need, and should speak and write about suicide.¹³ I take White’s¹⁴ point about being a suicidology misfit seriously because it demands not only that we work towards unsettling the settled ontology of suicide in suicidology, but also that we ourselves remain ontologically unsettled, especially if this means being politically and ethically committed to questioning the kinds of intelligibilities suicide confronts us with. This requires the practice of corporeal generosity towards each other, which, I think, has been exercised in this

⁸ Jaworski 2014.

⁹ I should point out that my first degree was in psychology. Then came sociology, gender/cultural studies and finally continental philosophy all rolled in together in my doctoral studies. For quite some time, I thought my degree in psychology was a waste of time. Only later did I realise just how useful it can be to areas such as university teaching/pedagogy and to understanding the discourse of suicidology and its internal logic and ‘rules’.

¹⁰ Foucault 1997.

¹¹ White 2015.

¹² Kouri 2015.

¹³ By saying this, in no way am I implying that Kouri (2015) assumes the operation of masculinist agency in nomad suicidology. His development of becoming-woman in regards to my work is evidence of this.

¹⁴ White 2015.

collective.¹⁵ Without such generosity, be it in the shape of appreciating, critiquing or playing the devil's advocate, as Ludek Broz¹⁶ so succinctly did, we will not continue to build what what might very well be a post-suicidology future Marsh¹⁷ outlined.

Connecting to White's¹⁸ emphasis on being politically and ethically committed in our questioning the antecedents of suicide in suicidology, I take Kouri's¹⁹ point seriously about being a nomad. This is not because I have existed on the margins, nor is it because I am a migrant who has lived in Australia for over three decades. Being a nomad of any kind is a process constituted by different becomings, to borrow from Kouri's²⁰ languaging. Except that this process is not often obvious even when someone like me blends the intellectual and the personal together because I do not know how else to be in this world, and because suicide is too important to smother it in a deadening language. Instead, this process becomes more obvious between the lines of sentences, in voices projected by authors, in the dialogue between the text, reader and their own life histories, and on occasion, in spaces such as this one.

I was moved by Kouri's²¹ reading of my work, because beginning *The Gender of Suicide* with a confronting story about my father threatening to kill himself in front of me and my mother when I was a young child was literally putting my ethical commitments in practice. I did not *have* to do it, but I did it because much of what I write about suicide demands that I put myself on the line, and because very early in my life I was called upon by the complexity of suicide, only to responded to it decades later, willingly and unwillingly. However, responding was relatively safe because my father was dead by the time *The Gender of Suicide* was under contract with Ashgate. Obviously, my father did not die when I was a child. Instead, he died from a heart attack, alone, in his favorite garden plot, after weeks of being on yet another alcoholic binge. His death cannot be called suicide, and I still find it hard to make sense of his death despite the facts. Yet I cannot help but feel that in so many ways he died *slowly*, lost to himself within himself since his mid twenties, forever wanting to express something his words could not quite capture, caught between his alcoholic rage and violence, and times of sobriety.²²

Suicidology as Social Practice

Given what I have said thus far, in many ways I have been alluding to the role of ethics in critical suicidology—something which Fitzpatrick et al. discuss a number of times in their article.²³ I find their argument about suicidology as a social practice thoroughly compelling since I have seen the powerful discursive effects of such practice in my work on gender and suicide. More importantly, I too think that

¹⁵ Diprose 2002.

¹⁶ Broz 2015.

¹⁷ Marsh 2015.

¹⁸ White 2015.

¹⁹ Kouri 2015.

²⁰ Kouri 2015.

²¹ Kouri 2015.

²² I am not claiming here that my father's death was a suicide. However, Canetto's (1991) arguments about gender, alcoholism and suicide made sense to me long before my father was dead even though her article does not focus on the idea of a slow or gradual dying that comes with the kind of alcoholism my father lived with.

²³ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015.

questions about ethics in suicidology must remain firmly alongside questions of epistemology, ontology and politics. Otherwise it will not be possible to address the mistake the science of suicide has made to date: by trying to deliberately avoid past moral judgments about suicide vis-à-vis psychological medicine and social statistics,²⁴ suicidology only reinstated another kind of morality through its insistence on studying and responding to suicide in particular ways across its diverse network of knowledge and practice. Yet Fitzpatrick et al. points about ethics and morality will not take us far enough.²⁵

Recognizing the role of ethics and morality within epistemological claims suicidology makes is one thing, but what are we to make of ethics and morality in the first place? I am not posing this question to split hairs, or because, in my mind, the very ideas of morality and ethics remain taken for granted in what is an excellent article. Rather, I am posing this question because unless we work out what ethics and morality mean, morality, as Fitzpatrick et al. also insist, will persist in the epistemology of suicide and the material practices such epistemology shapes.²⁶

Thus, I want to extend some of the points the three authors have made by suggesting that critical suicidology, and post-suicidology in particular, need to divorce ethics from morality in very conscious ways. By saying this, I do not mean that judgments about what is good or bad should be dispensed with. We need such judgments especially when a suicide prevention initiative is not working for those it targets. Rather, I am in favor of Foucault's insistence that ethics, among other things, are about how we do what we do for ourselves to know who and what we are.²⁷ In this sense, the focus becomes on the ethical character of suicide and what suicidology makes of it, rather than whether suicide is ethically correct. We, the living, are part of this focus, because how we act and respond to suicide of others shapes knowledge about suicide.

Ethics, in a Foucauldian sense, challenges the stiffness of morality, which more often than not overpowers the necessary fluidity or generative power of ethical action needed in suicide prevention.²⁸ At the same time, this kind of distinction between morality and ethics might not transpire suddenly in the kind of realities faced by those confronted with suicide. Nevertheless, I am arguing that such a distinction needs to happen if we are to put a stop to the outrageous diminishing of the agency of those who suicided, or tried to yet lived on.²⁹ Of course much more than theoretical

²⁴ The claim of social statistics remaining outside moral judgments does not add up. Thanks to the power of numbers, Durkheim (1951) consistently made moral judgments about suicide in *Suicide*, especially in regards to gender (Jaworski, 2014).

²⁵ Fitzpatrick et al. (2015) may not have been able to expand upon their points on ethics and morality because there is so much anyone can do in one article. This, however, does not mean that the things should be left as they are.

²⁶ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015.

²⁷ Foucault 1985, 1986.

²⁸ I want to thank one of my fellow thinkers and writers, Daniel G. Scott, for his comments and suggestions about this point in particular.

²⁹ As I write this, I am a Visiting Fellow at the Institute for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Studies, University of Arizona, Tucson, Arizona, U.S. A few days ago, a 24-year-old trans man with Asperger Syndrome, Kayden Clarke, was shot by the police after a suicide call was issued from his home. As Amy Walker (2016) reported, Kayden was routinely misgendered as female by the media and the police despite openly living as a trans man (he became known through the videos about his struggle with Asperger Syndrome and his transition). As I understand it right now, his intelligibility

unpacking must take place, as Fitzpatrick's et al.³⁰ reply to Widger³¹ describes in relation to mental illness. But we have to start somewhere, as I have more recently with Daniel G. Scott in the context of suicide and poetry, because otherwise we risk reproducing the mistakes of the past.³²

At the risk of sounding contradictory, I admit that I am not satisfied with the explanation I just offered. Perhaps this is because I am still in the middle of working out the puzzle, or the argument, always ready to be my own devil's advocate (they tend to be available at a moment's notice). It is also because there is value in thinking of *good* practice in critical suicidology, especially if this means honestly listening, as White described in relation to Laura Delano's approach.³³ If this is the case, then there has to be more to this divorce between morality and ethics I am calling for. This more, I think, needs to be constituted by wonder and generosity.

Recently, I read a thought provoking book titled, *Wonder and Generosity: The Role in Ethics and Politics*, written by an Australian philosopher, Marguerite La Caze.³⁴ It is impossible to unpack the complexity of this book here given that La Caze draws on Descartes, Kant, Simone de Beauvoir, Hannah Arendt, Luce Irigaray and Jacques Derrida to develop her position about the role of wonder and generosity in ethics and politics as means of overcoming the pressing realities of oppression, injustice, evil and abuse.³⁵ So for now I will say that La Caze argues that wonder, based on accepting others' differences, and generosity, based on self-respect and mutual-respect, need to be part of the practice of ethics and politics.³⁶ This is because wonder and generosity "provide us with a way to think about how to respond to both difference and similarity and their relation."³⁷ This is not some fanciful intellectual or academic exercise. Rather, it requires conscious commitment and effort especially if it means responding to otherness, "to what is unfamiliar, and a way of finding the unfamiliar in the familiar."³⁸ This could not be more important to the study of suicide.

Even though we know so much about suicide thanks to the intellectual and professional vitality of suicidology, something about suicide always remains out of reach, somehow unfathomable amidst the countless explanations of why someone ended their own life.³⁹ In this sense, responding to the unfamiliar in the familiar is crucial because it might mean knowing something important to the person struggling the most. Thus, the divorce between morality and ethics is likely to be complicated and protracted, but it has to start with us, the misfits, the critical suicidologists.

and agency were disavowed, and the kinds of ethics I am advocating were very much part of this disavowal, this epistemic violence with a real life violent and tragic end.

³⁰ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015.

³¹ Widger 2015.

³² Jaworski and Scott 2016.

³³ White 2015.

³⁴ La Caze 2013.

³⁵ La Caze 2013.

³⁶ La Caze 2013.

³⁷ La Caze 2013, 11.

³⁸ La Caze 2013, 1.

³⁹ Jaworski and Scott 2016.

Divorces aside, I want to return to another important point made by Fitzpatrick et al., namely, the issue of framing. Framing is not something the authors discuss directly.⁴⁰ Yet I could not help but notice that something about framing was at stake when, drawing on Langford (1989), the authors argued that in “providing unity and identity to a practice, it [suicidology] also provides justification for certain ways of ‘seeing’ and ‘doing’ which are necessary to the realization of these aims.”⁴¹ I realize the point the authors made was about justification, which is influenced by morality. At the same time, “seeing” and “doing” are important enough because the authors return to them when discussing methodological issues in suicidology.⁴²

Framing Experience

Without assuming that seeing and doing are synonyms, my suggestion is that both direct our attention to framing. Framing, as I understand it, is not a matter of how experience is organized or made sense, as Goffman once argued.⁴³ Framing is also about the very conditions that frame the very frames used to make sense of a given phenomenon.⁴⁴ This is important because how we organize representations of experiences enables some interpretations to flourish at the expense of extinguishing others. This could not be more relevant to suicide because suicidology’s epistemic conservatism is not only self-perpetuating but also because it *frames out* particular ways of knowing suicide and their interpretations and understandings including by those who research suicide. In this sense, framing is epistemological, ontological, ethical and political.

Yet framing is not a matter of exclusion. Rather, it is about creating the very conditions of possibility which help us recognize the otherness of suicide in the first place. Here, I am thinking of how often we are informed about the signs of suicide and how to look for them. While understanding and looking for signs should not be dispensed with, it is still possible to “see” suicide without “seeing” it. Namely, someone might be suicidal but we would not know if it stared us in the face because perception let alone experience of a phenomenon are not uncomplicated givens.⁴⁵ Rather than throwing our hands in the air with frustration, concluding that there is nothing we can do, framing, I think, reminds us that we might have to rewire the discursive mechanics of our ways of understanding and interpreting suicide. This rewiring needs us, the living, to question ourselves in our efforts to understand suicidal trauma and loss our language is yet to capture especially in the way we strive for at this point in time. This, as Marsh rightfully reminded us, will require us to recast our attention to the kinds of truths power invokes and sustains about suicide.⁴⁶

In ending my response, I am reminded of what Jacques Derrida once said in the final interview before his death in 2004: “You don’t just go and do anything with language; it pre-exists us and it survives us. When you introduce something into language, you

⁴⁰ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015.

⁴¹ Fitzpatrick et al. 2015, 305.

⁴² Fitzpatrick et al. 2015, 311.

⁴³ Goffman 1974.

⁴⁴ Butler 2009.

⁴⁵ In making this point, I am influenced by Agamben’s (1999) argument about the experience of experience in *The Remnants of Auschwitz*.

⁴⁶ Marsh 2010, 2015.

have to do it in a refined manner, by respecting through disrespect its secret law. That's what might be called unfaithful fidelity."⁴⁷ I understand Derrida's wise words in a number of ways, one of which is this: if you are going to do anything properly with something as powerful and encompassing as language, you have to know the rules precisely so that you can break them properly. Grafting this onto what one day might be post-suicidological suicidology, I suspect we will still have conversations with suicidology just like post-structuralism has with structuralism. To think otherwise is naïve and foolish. However, if we, as misfits, continue to work at breaking the rules of suicidology properly, then, to borrow from Kral's apt expression, the revolving door of sameness in suicidology might just shatter even if most of us in the present might not be around to see the full effects of such shattering.⁴⁸

In this regard, I look forward to practicing Derrida's unfaithful fidelity at the *Suicidology's Cultural Turn, and Beyond* conference, set to take place 19-20 March, 2016 in Prague, Czech Republic, organized by Ludek Broz (The Institute of Ethnology, The Czech Academy of Sciences) and Michael Kral (School of Social Work, Wayne State University).

Contact details: Katrina.Jaworski@unisa.edu.au

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⁴⁷ Derrida 2007, 36.

⁴⁸ Kral 2015.

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