

## Chapter 1

### SUICIDE AND CULTURE: ISLAND VIEWS

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#### Introduction

This volume spans a range of perspectives on the problem of suicide and related mental health issues in the Pacific Islands. The approaches included here range from basic research to the work of the clinician treating suicidal patients or the community activist organizing prevention programs. However, all of these various approaches draw from a perspective which emphasizes the significance of local meanings, the ways people themselves perceive and deal with problems such as suicide. It is this perspective which is outlined briefly in this chapter.

I hope to suggest a view of suicide as a social event which is shaped in complex ways by culture, that is, by shared beliefs and practices which give meaning to social life. As many of the chapters in this volume make clear, suicide cross-culturally can only be understood through the lenses of the cultures where it occurs. However, I would like to turn this link between suicide and culture around and point out that suicide may provide an important vantage point from which to understand cultural worlds of emotion and social experience (see, for example, Black 1985). In other words, research on suicide may go beyond the explanation of a pattern of mortality to a concern with the cultural fabric of social life and some of the most critical points at which that fabric may be torn by conflict and change. If so, suicide research may produce insights which will also prove useful in understanding other social problems such as alcohol abuse, violence or mental disorder.

Increases in suicide are only one part of a broad change which is occurring in patterns of mortality and morbidity in the Pacific and the developing world generally. As small Pacific societies are swept up in the currents of modernization and development, changes in lifestyle associated with education, urbanization and wage labor are having systematic effects on the health and well-being of Pacific Islanders. The specter of infectious disease as the most serious threat to health is rapidly being replaced by lifestyle-related disorders such as diabetes, hypertension, malnutrition,

alcoholism and death or injury resulting from violence. As is well-recognized in behavioral medicine, effective responses to these types of problems must be appropriate to the social context in which they occur. Thus, attempts to deal with many of the maladies of social change should begin within the frame of reference or culture of the people affected. Otherwise they run the risk of being ineffective because they are disconnected from the meanings and values which people use to organize their lives and respond to problems stemming from culture contact and rapid change.

By taking a cross-cultural, comparative perspective, this volume shows that suicide in different societies is not a unitary phenomenon which can be understood as a simple act of a person killing him or herself. Since the time of Durkheim, suicide has been widely viewed as a symptom of societal disruption, of "anomie." It has thus taken its place alongside an array of social indicators as an index of social disintegration or personal malaise on a societal scale. The international literature is full of studies which have compared suicide rates of different nations or social groups, as if this was a more or less straightforward way of taking a society's pulse. I think we may learn more from the cross-cultural perspective by stepping back and asking just what is being compared in such studies.

One thing which can safely be said about suicide in all societies is that it is an event which does not pass unnoticed. Suicide inevitably evokes attempts at explanation which specify its meanings in terms of local beliefs and values. It is in this making sense of suicide, what Bohannan (1960) refers to as "folk explanation," that we may see cultural assumptions at work, cultural assumptions which function widely in the society but are frequently "invisible."

Among the types of cultural understanding which figure importantly in folk theories of suicide are concepts of emotion and social conflict. Despite the considerable amount of social and psychological research which has been done in the Pacific, we have only just begun to come to understand the culturally distinct ways in which Pacific Islanders themselves perceive, talk about and experience emotion (White and Kirkpatrick 1985). In the absence of such understanding, there is always the potential for misinterpreting suicide by applying Western psychological concepts. For example, the Western-trained clinician might be expected to look for, and possibly find, depression among suicidal clients (White and Marsella 1982). Suicide, then, is an important

example of the need for cultural translation to precede attempts at explanation or treatment.

Research on suicide in Truk being carried out by Rubinstein (1983, this volume) and Hezel (1984, this volume) provides examples of the way in which attempts to understand suicide have produced insight into the cultural patterning of emotion and interaction in the Trukese family. Although the chapters by Rubinstein and Hezel give a more detailed account of their own research, I would like to draw some general parallels and contrasts between the Trukese material and the case of Samoan suicide, as discussed by the Macphersons as well as Bowles and Oliver.

#### Trukese AMWUNUMWUN and Samoan MUSU

The epidemiology of suicide in Micronesia clearly illustrates the importance of social context in the recent rise of suicide rates there. The data compiled by Rubinstein and presented in his chapter show that this rise is a male adolescent phenomenon. These findings immediately raise the question: What is it about the social situation of young men between the ages of 15 and 25 which makes this population so much at risk in suicide? And, secondarily: What has changed during the course of a generation which has produced such a rapid increase?

The first occasion on which researchers and Micronesians gathered to discuss questions such as these was a conference convened in Truk in 1981 by Francis Hezel under the auspices of the Micronesian Seminar. This meeting was attended by Trukese educators, youth workers, church leaders and researchers. Their discussions focused largely on the problem of interpretation by asking what, from the Trukese point of view, was happening in the events preceding many of the suicides (Hezel 1981). In the process of searching for patterns in the cases compiled by Rubinstein, this group produced an important breakthrough in understanding the social dynamics of Trukese suicide. The manner in which this new understanding was reached is also worth noting.

As those present sought to specify the sorts of incidents which precipitate suicide, it became apparent that conflict among family members is the major context for Trukese suicide. As participants began to speculate about feelings and motives common to many of the suicides, discussion turned to the sorts of emotions aroused in family quarrels which might lead to suicide. Anger seemed an important element, as it is in the U.S. and other European

cultures. Based on his knowledge of an important distinction in the Fais language (Western Carolines) between two distinct types of anger (song, a more general term for active anger directed toward others, and sig, a more inward feeling which signals an appeal to others), Rubinstein asked the Trukese participants if they could clarify the specific emotions implicated in Trukese suicide. A Trukese participant responded by introducing a Trukese term: amwunumwun.

Although amwunumwun is not an emotion term per se, it describes a pattern of social behavior which strongly implicates certain emotions. The Trukese at the conference saw that it was important to draw a distinction between "anger" (ssong) in general and the kind of anger, frustration or resentment felt towards higher status family members. Without this more specific social context, defined in terms of Trukese understandings of conflict in the family, it was at best misleading to talk about anger (especially about vengeful or vindictive anger) as a motive in Trukese suicide. By examining carefully the meanings of amwunumwun, it has been possible to identify much more precisely the sorts of social and emotional experience which figure in family conflict in general and youth suicide in particular.

Without attempting to capture all the subtleties of the notion of amwunumwun, let me quote briefly from a recent paper by Hezel (1984), who gives a more adequate account in his chapter for this volume. Hezel writes that:

Amwunumwun ...is a strategy of withdrawal or self-abasement used to show those one must both love and obey that one is hurt by them. The act of amwunumwun is intended not principally to inflict revenge—although it would be naive to maintain that there is nothing of this in the act—but to dramatize one's anger, frustration and sorrow in the hope that the present unhappy situation will soon be remedied. (1984: 14).

Amwunumwun, then, involves an entire cluster of understandings about conflict, emotion and conflict resolution, primarily in families. Because Trukese share these understandings as part of their culture, the kinds of behavior and emotions which are recognized as amwunumwun make up a kind of cultural code, a way of communicating in appropriate ways about troublesome feelings and events. Anyone who wished to communicate with Trukese about suicide would need to have both understanding and empathy for this cultural code.

The concept of amwunumwun is, of course, only a piece of the suicide puzzle. For example, it doesn't tell us about the sources of family conflict

or why this conflict primarily involves young men rather than young women. It only informs us about culturally appropriate ways of dealing with conflict when it arises. It also doesn't tell us why ordinary amwunumwun, which ends in the offended person being drawn back into the family group, sometimes leads to suicide.

However, more than any other single insight, the clarification of amwunumwun at the 1981 Truk conference served to focus subsequent interpretations of suicide. The concept crystallizes a number of Trukese understandings about feelings and behaviors associated with family conflict. It represents an entire scenario or sequence of events which follow from conflict between a young person and a parent or older sibling. In the typical scenario a child experiences some combination of sadness and resentment at having been unjustly wronged, but rather than expressing that resentment directly (which would be contrary to Trukese values of respect due older family members), the child withdraws from further interaction. This scenario may then precipitate a further sequence in which the offended person is approached by a family member who attempts to soothe him or her and repair the damaged relation. The entire amwunumwun sequence functions as a culturally recognized mode of conflict resolution, as a way for young people to make an appeal to parents or elder kin without violating norms of respect. Thus, the attempt to understand the social dynamics of suicide has led to a process of cultural translation concerned broadly with Trukese ways of dealing with problematic emotions and social conflict in general.

I raise this particular example because of parallels with cultural factors in suicide in Western Samoa. The occurrence of a quite similar epidemic increase of suicide in Western Samoa in the mid to late 1970s, peaking in 1981, is documented in the chapters by Bowles and the Macphersons. At about the same time that the Truk conference was convening, a Suicide Study Group was formed to look into the Samoan suicides (see Oliver chapter). They found that, as in Micronesia, the increase in suicides occurred primarily among young men. The data presented graphically by Bowles show that well over half of all suicides during the period of increase were committed by young men from 15 to 24 years old. This distinct social patterning of suicide in Western Samoa raises some of the same questions about the situation of young men which we have asked about Micronesians.

At this point, the parallel becomes even more intriguing. The data

compiled by the Suicide Study Group show that "...in 40 percent of all cases, the apparent triggering event was a scolding by the victim's parents..." (Oliver 1984: 59). So, in Western Samoa, as in Truk, it is frequently conflict between parents and children which precedes adolescent suicide. In his recent book attacking Margaret Mead, Derek Freeman lends further support to the view that parent-child conflict is a major context for youthful Samoan suicide. He reports 22 cases (16 male, 6 female) of suicide in Western Samoa from 1925 to 1967. "Fourteen of these twenty-two persons (64 percent) had committed suicide in a state of anger at having been scolded or punished by a parent or some other elder" (Freeman 1983: 220). Furthermore, Freeman points out the antiquity of this pattern, observed by someone who lived in Samoa between 1839 and 1879 and commented that Samoan suicide is "mostly caused by anger with family." (*ibid.*)

Thus, while Western Samoa suicides have increased in number, probably reflecting the pressures of change, they appear to follow established social patterns deeply rooted in Samoan culture. To the extent that many of the suicides take on a similar form, we might expect that certain basic, shared understandings about social conflict are at work. Here Derek Freeman and others, including the Macphersons in their chapter, offer an important clue by noting that many of the episodes of youthful suicide follow a pattern referred to with the Samoan term musu. According to Freeman, most of the 14 cases of suicide in his sample which resulted from parental punishment had "been musu toward a parent during the emotion crisis that immediately preceded their suicides" (1983: 221). He describes several cases which illustrate his point.

Like the notion of amwunumwun, musu represents a culturally defined way of feeling and acting in response to conflict with someone in authority, especially parents, toward whom one owes love and respect and should not express anger. Its primary meaning pertains to just that context which is implicated in the suicide data: relations between parents and children. In a recent paper on Samoan emotions, Eleanor Gerber has described the meaning of musu as follows:

According to Samoan values, it is very bad to express anger towards parents, and the performance of work and service for one's kin is considered a primary expression of love. Nevertheless, a certain amount of resistance is shown to the more onerous demands of authority. One possible label for this resistance is the term musu, which expresses a person's

reluctance to do what is required of him or her (Gerber 1985: 192).

Although it is always risky to draw parallels between such distinctly different types of society as Truk and Samoa, both musu and amwunumwun represent ways of dealing with anger or resentment in parental relations which require love and respect. Like amwunumwun, the notion of musu specifies a culturally appropriate way for children to demonstrate dissatisfaction vis-a-vis parents. It is a stereotypic form of withdrawal which signals displeasure with someone in a position of authority. Shared knowledge of musu and its social-emotional implications provides Samoans with a standard "script" for communicating about and, possibly, resolving conflict. Gerber (1985: 240) gives examples of the way in which labeling a child musu may lead a parent to lessen demands or criticism, thus keeping the level of conflict low. According to Freeman, Samoans themselves recognize that suicide is a potential outcome of extreme musu, which is another reason that the attribution of serious musu may evoke attempts at minimizing or resolving the conflict:

A person in this state...may become violent or even commit suicide; therefore, when an individual does become seriously musu he is usually left to his own devices until his dangerous mood has passed (Freeman 1983: 219).

Freeman's characterization of the usual responses to serious musu, which is affirmed by the Macphersons, indicates that the culture appears to formulate a known sequence of events typically leading to a minimization or resolution of the problem. As in the case of amwunumwun, the shared "script" provides the actors with a way of communicating and possibly of resolving the conflict. The existence of such cultural codes would seem to have clear implications for attempts at prevention: they would be most effective if carried out by those who have a thorough understanding of the culture in question; those who are able to perceive the subtle cues which signal social-psychological distress and anticipate the possible outcomes of conflict situations.

Of course, just understanding Samoan ways of responding to conflict in parent-child relations does not reveal the sources of that conflict, nor does it indicate why there would be a rapid increase in adolescent suicide. The Macphersons detail many of the structural sources of conflict, showing how musu is related to the demands of an authority structure which extends throughout traditional Samoan society (see also Freeman 1983). Along these lines, Dennis

Oliver (this volume) notes that the four villages with the highest rate of suicide also had a much higher ratio of chiefs, matai, to untitled persons than the national average.

The Trukese and Samoan suicides described in this volume illustrate the role of culture in defining what suicide is all about. In both cases, epidemic increases in suicide have been situated in a particular segment of the population (young males), and have involved particular social relations (parent-child) and specific cultural routines for communicating about conflict in those relationships. Bowles offers the revealing insight that, in Western countries, these socially patterned aspects of suicide tend to be associated with attempted suicide, in contrast with completed suicides. Thus, we frequently think of attempted suicides as a plea for help in response to acute emotional upset, aimed at communicating with significant others. When suicide is seen in this way, the scope of efforts at explanation and prevention broadens out from the individual to include sets of significant relationships. It is especially obvious in Pacific societies that suicide is a social action which usually involves not just a single individual, but an entire family or community. The Micronesian and Samoan data indicate that it is the family group, and specifically the parent-child relation, that is the context for many of the recent suicides in those places. In order to underscore this point about the collective nature of suicide, I turn briefly to the Melanesian cases described in this volume in light of typical patterns described in other published works on suicide in Melanesian societies.

#### Women, Power and Suicide in Melanesia

In turning to Melanesia, it is necessary first to note the tremendous cultural diversity of a region which almost defies generalization. Just the four societies represented in this volume, two in Papua New Guinea and two in the Solomon Islands, will bear this out. So, without attempting to typify "Melanesian suicide," I would like to comment briefly on a number of themes that emerge in studies of suicide in Melanesia and that contrast with the Samoan and Trukese material.

Just as the Trukese and Samoan suicides are socially patterned, with adolescent males the group most at risk, several Melanesian societies also show a distinct social patterning of suicide, with young women (of marriageable age or recently married) most frequently attempting suicide. Among the societies

where this pattern has been documented are the Melpa (Strathern 1972), Kuma (Reay 1959), Maring (Healey 1979) and Gainj (Johnson 1981) of the New Guinea Highlands, and the Kaliai (Counts 1980) of New Britain. (But note that Poole's chapter, which describes a dramatic reversal of this pattern, indicates the range of diversity in the region.) In other Melanesian societies, where the male/female ratio of suicide is more balanced, there is a clear ideology of female suicide. Jorgensen (1983-84) notes that the Telefomin regard women as more likely to commit suicide, although available rates show just the opposite. In their chapter for this volume Watson-Gegeo and Gegeo find a similar situation among the Solomons Kwara'ae, as does David Akin for the Kwaio. In addition, the Kwaio and Kwara'ae ideologies of female suicide are reflected in mythology where only females are depicted as suicide victims. [Interestingly, Counts (1980: 340) also finds a reflection of the female suicide pattern in Kaliai legends.] However, Akin points out the important fact that Kwaio women probably in fact attempt suicide more often.

And, as in Micronesia and Samoa, we also find a critical relationship implicated in many of these Melanesian suicides. Where it is parent-child conflict which precedes the typical Samoan or Trukese suicide, it is marital conflict which appears to precipitate many of the Melanesian suicides. For unmarried women, this frequently involves problems encountered prior to marriage; whereas, for married women, the conflict is usually with the husband.

It is, however, important to realize that the focus on this particular dyadic relationship (husband and wife) by no means implies that the conflict is confined to two people. In fact, just the opposite is the case. It may be that this relationship plays a significant role in Melanesian suicides precisely because marriage in those societies is as much or more a relation between kin groups as between two persons. Thus, any action which severely disrupts or terminates that relationship is inevitably of concern to relatives of both husband and wife. For this reason, the Melanesian cases tend to have social repercussions which reverberate widely throughout the society.

In his discussion of female suicide in New Guinea, Healey (1979) makes the point that the classic European theories of suicide tend to see the act as final, focusing primarily on antecedents or motives rather than consequences. Along this same line, I would argue that an understanding of the social consequences of suicide may also be essential to understanding motives. The person who attempts suicide may do so on the basis of knowledge about how

others will respond. In other words, the cultural "script" for suicide extends beyond the suicide itself to those consequences or responses which are prescribed or expected in the culture.

A major theme in women's suicide described in the New Guinea societies cited above and in several prominent cases described by David Akin (this volume) is the use of suicide to achieve revenge (a type of suicide frequently termed "Samsonic" suicide, see Jeffreys 1952; Panoff 1977). In the typical scenario for one of these suicides, a woman is wronged in some way, perhaps by her husband, and finds no recourse through support from other relatives. If, for whatever reason, a woman sees herself to have few options available for chastising or punishing her offender, suicide may be a vehicle for gaining revenge. To the extent that this is so, the Melanesian pattern differs sharply from the typical Trukese scenario. Whereas anger directed at an offender and the desire for retribution may be key elements in the Melanesian cases, Trukese specifically deny any vindictiveness toward parents in youth suicide.

Underneath the generalization that revenge is a common motive for female suicide in Melanesia, there are a wide range of specific cultural mechanisms by which a suicide may in fact harm the targeted offender. Most of these are based on the assumption that suicide is not an individual act, but in fact is the responsibility of others who may have angered or intensely shamed the suicide victim. In other words, Melanesian explanations of suicide frequently assign culpability to those seen as precipitating the act. Indeed, notions of culpability in suicide may go so far as to blur distinctions between suicide and homicide. Similar to homicide in many Melanesian societies, a suicide is symptomatic of a breakdown in relations between ancestral spirits and descendants, indicating that an entire group may be vulnerable to misfortune until proper relations with the ancestors are restored. A suicide represents a collective loss for relatives of the deceased and may place upon them an obligation to right the imbalance, either by seeking violent revenge or demanding compensation payment from those blamed for the death. Traditionally in many societies, a suicide victim's descent group would be justified in demanding compensation payment from the culpable party (who might in turn have to call in debts from his own descent group). In some parts of Melanesia, laws have been enacted which create legal penalties for the instigation of suicide. For example, Counts (1980: 347-48) mentions an anti-suicide bill passed by a local council in Vanuatu which established a fine to be assessed against anyone

who attempted suicide as well as against anyone who gave that person reason to attempt suicide.

Once a person is deemed culpable for a suicide, there are a variety of sanctions which may come into play. In addition to legal penalties and compensation payment, ridicule, gossip and supernatural retribution (either by the spirit of the deceased or other, ancestral spirits of her descent group) may all exert pressure against the responsible party. This latter sanction, the possibility of supernatural retribution, may be particularly onerous because it may affect an entire descent group. Akin's discussion of Kwaio beliefs illustrates the manner in which Melanesian suicide may be a matter of grave collective concern, with potentially serious consequences for many people in the society. It is no wonder that in such a society one finds traditional means for mobilizing entire communities in suicide prevention.

The existence of some or all of this array of sanctions in a particular Melanesian culture sets up certain known expectations about the consequences of suicide. Where it is shared knowledge that these sanctions may be applied against anyone who causes a suicide, the act of killing oneself becomes a culturally constituted mode of managing conflict. For a woman without the support of her own family, who might otherwise not be able to take a man to court or demand compensation payment, suicide may be the only way of accomplishing certain social ends, a last-resort source of power.

### Summary

Many writers have commented on this female pattern of suicide in Melanesia and noted its importance as a reflection of gender ideologies and the position of women in male-dominated social structures. Seen in this way, we may find some of the social reasons for the distinct differences between Melanesian suicides and suicide in Western Samoa and Truk. However, if we step back a bit further, it is possible to see certain general patterns at work throughout the Pacific.

First of all, in each of these regions, there are reasonably coherent explanations of suicide based in traditional patterns of culture, that is in basic understandings about emotion, conflict and conflict resolution. Whereas rates of suicide may change abruptly under the pressures and strains of modernization, the social events and emotions which precipitate suicide frequently follow a traditional "script" which specifies likely causes and

consequences of suicide. Trukese amwunumwun, Samoan musu, and Melanesian notions of power, culpability and compensation all illustrate various ways in which cultural concepts shape suicide as a meaningful social action. In different ways, all of these cultural conceptions are concerned with the dilemmas of anger and other intense emotions felt by persons in low status positions who have limited avenues for expressing those emotions and promoting moral claims.

I have tried in this brief introduction to outline some of the ways in which suicide in Pacific societies is thoroughly shaped by traditional cultural understandings and social practices. My purpose in doing so has been to look at the relation of suicide and culture from two sides. On the one hand, I have argued that there are important social and cultural insights to be gained from an attempt to understand suicide from Pacific perspectives. Secondly, and perhaps more relevant to the practical objectives of this volume, I have tried to show that a concern with cultural meaning is not separate from medical or public health concerns with suicide prevention. Other than the quick gains to be made from short term measures (such as restricting the availability of paraquat in Western Samoa), neither research nor prevention measures are likely to make much headway without an understanding of local conceptions which shape suicide attempts and responses to them. It is doubtful whether anyone who lacked a detailed knowledge of cultural interpretations of suicide would be able to deal effectively with the complexities of either suicide counseling or prevention.

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