

Reframing the Self and Agency in Suicide: A Composite Theoretical Approach

Katrina Jaworski and Ludek Broz

Abstract

How we understand agency in suicide is problematic. On the one hand, those who suicide must be recognised as authors of their own deaths, and thereby agentic. On the other hand, those who suicide are framed as lacking the will to take their own lives, with social and psychological ‘causes’ taking over their suicidal wilfulness. This schism is not only due to different interpretations of agency per se, but also interpretations of the self. In suicidology, this predicament is compounded by a view of the self as universal and singular, with the suicidal mind being framed by psychological anguish. To address this schism, in this chapter we use selected works of Judith Butler and Carl Jung. We also use ethnography from south Siberia to enhance our theoretical imagination. Following the ethnographic lead, we begin by considering a way through which the suicidal self can be framed as composite. We then offer a theoretical approach to understanding agency as relational. In so doing, we go back to the ethnographic data to illustrate how this framing might work. Our argument is that agency and self in suicide need to be reframed as relational, through which theorising suicide itself becomes composite.

Key Words: Suicide, agency, self, composite, ethnography, relational.

1. Framing: An Introduction

What does ‘reframing’ mean? We begin with this question not only because reframing is at the heart of our argument about suicide, but also because it is part of the discursive mechanics of our analytical labours. Erving Goffman can be credited with coining the term ‘frame’ in social sciences.¹ For Goffman, frame refers to the organisation of experience, and the context in which experience occurs and is interpreted. Judith Butler shares Goffman’s view in so far as she sees frame as something that ‘implicitly guides interpretation’.² Unlike Goffman, Butler argues that a frame can also be framed, or presented in a manner that contributes to how the organisation of experience is interpreted.³ In light of these approaches, our task is to reframe suicide as composite. To study suicide as a composite phenomenon, we deploy a composite methodology. By composite, we mean an approach that is made up of components of more than one kind bonded together analytically. In our case, this means combining facets of different theorists and data to see what such a combination can offer towards understanding suicide. This is important because how we understand suicide may potentially be limited by the very approaches we use to analyse it.

To develop our approach, we will focus specifically on the problem of agency in suicide. On the one hand, those who suicide are framed as agents of their deaths. On the other hand, those who suicide are framed as lacking the will to take their own lives, with sociological and psychological ‘causes’ taking over their suicidal wilfulness. Our issue with this schism, however, is not the problem of agency alone. The problem extends to the way suicidology understands the notion of the self, depicted as universal and singular, framing the mind as the source of suicide. To approach this problem, we combine forces by drawing on three unlikely allies: Judith Butler, Carl Jung and ethnographic data from south Siberia. We begin with an ethnographic lead from south Siberia and consider the way the suicidal self can be framed as composite. We then offer a theoretical approach to understanding agency in suicide as relational. In so doing, we go back to the ethnographic data to illustrate how this framing might work. Our argument is that agency and self in suicide need to be reframed as relational, thus demonstrating that theorising suicide ought to be composite.

2. Suicidal Self as Composite: An Ethnographic Lead from South Siberia

While they differ significantly, Shneidman’s and Durkheim’s seminal works on suicide presume the self is universal, unified and singular. Influential to this day, both authors assume the self to be a single unit, regardless of whether people endure mental anguish or excessive integration and regulation. Whereas Shneidman argues that ‘each suicidal drama occurs in the *mind* of a unique individual’,⁴ Durkheim sees suicide as social, ‘*resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*’.⁵ Their views make sense. Their theorising of suicide implies a Western understanding of a subject as a discrete individual entity. In this, we need to posit a discrete entity to assess the degree of suicidal risk. We need a singular self to measure the rate of suicide in a given society to help us understand why it occurs at a societal level. Yet even these classic authors were aware that suicidal behaviours, no matter how much they vary or resemble each other, occur in a given context. If context makes a difference, it is safe to assume the self will not be sealed hermeneutically. The self depends on something other than itself, an outside if you will, to work out its own meaning. Thus, the qualitative step of our approach is the conceptual movement from a discrete individual self ontologically separate from the context it dwells in, to the self that is mutually co-established in relation to contexts that could be seen as part of that very self even if seemingly external to it.

Our theoretical approach in fact follows an ethnographic lead from south Siberia, where the second author, Ludek Broz, conducted fieldwork.⁶ This lead comes from the Ulagan region of the Altai Republic, Russian Federation. During the 1990s, the Russian Federation witnessed an increase in the mortality rate ‘unprecedented in a modern industrialised country in peacetime’,⁷ which was accounted for by ‘changes in mortality from vascular disease and violent deaths

(mainly suicides, homicides, unintentional poisoning, and traffic incidents) among young and middle aged adults'.⁸ The Altai Republic has one of the highest suicide rates in the Russian Federation, though it is slowly dropping; in 1998 it was 84.4 and in 2010 64.3 per 100,000.⁹

During his fieldwork, Broz witnessed a chain of events in a small village. A 20-year-old girl shot herself. She left a note asking for nice make-up for her body in the coffin. Her death followed the death of a young man with whom she had allegedly been in love. Then another young man, who upon getting released from jail, shot himself after a drunken fight with his friends. His death followed the death of a half-paralysed elderly woman. The interval between each death varied from 10 to 45 days. Shortly after the last death, a young woman, who was planning to marry her boyfriend, was encouraged by her local community to get married as soon as possible.

The chain of events came as a surprise. However, the locals did not see such a sequence of events as uncommon, as most people in the Ulagan region subscribe to the idea of the multiplicity of a person. Under the normal regime of perceivability, every visible human being is seen as an index of its hidden or invisible aspects. There are plenty of terms in Altaian that can be translated as soul, double, shadow, breathing and so on. Muiueva,¹⁰ Baskakov and IAimova¹¹ suggest that there are seven kinds of souls in the traditional Altaian worldview (*süne* and *tyn* were the most widely used in the small village). In this sense, those terms might be seen as stressing particular aspects of the invisible 'other'. On the one hand, the invisible alter ego is imagined as the non-detachable essence of life, often referred to as *tyn* (which also means 'breathing'). On the other hand, the invisible alter ego is imagined as detachable, referred to as *süne* or *jula* (which also means 'soul', an entity capable of leaving a person's body and be seen by others). Even though the invisibility of 'the other' is the basic premise in both expressions, this invisibility only makes sense when it is knowable and therefore attachable to other concepts and stories.

Strangely, the Altaian conception of the soul is akin to Carl Jung's interpretation of the ego. By this, we do not mean that the two are identical. Rather, there is a similarity in how both structure an approach to understanding personhood. It must be said that the self and the ego are not identical in Jung's work. The ego is similar to a complex, or a pattern of human experiences, rather than a single literal experience of the self. The self is that which embraces the conscious and unconscious.¹² In explaining the process of individuation, Jung argues that 'the ego can be no more than the centre of the field of consciousness'.¹³ For Jung, consciousness cannot exist 'without a subject, that is, an ego to which the contents are related'.¹⁴ This is precisely why consciousness needs an ego, or a goal, that enables one to feel and think consciously. Yet to understand what is consciousness we have to 'have the necessary premises for doing so'.¹⁵ 'Premises'

refers to both the psychological ability to interpret and the context on which interpretation relies.

Using Jung's work as a methodological tool to think through how ideas work, we are arguing that, while the Altaian sense of the self is singular, the singularity is also shared, as the content of the person is related to something other than itself. Our argument is that there is an ontological co-presence via various components (locally described as the soul-double) that make up the person. Hence, we are also arguing that personhood in the Altaian context is best understood as composite. This is probabilistic rather than mechanical. *Süne*, the detachable soul-double, can be described using an analogy of the quantum physics particle the electron. As depicted in chemistry and physics, electron orbits are maps of the probability of their occurrence. Or less theoretically, the ice hockey goalkeeper is very probably in the goal at any given time during a game. Yet it is possible that he is behind the goal, far in front of it, or is even off the pitch altogether in the last minutes of play. Equally, *süne* is likely to be co-present with the composite person it forms, yet it might also be wandering in more or less distant places or even be kidnapped and lost altogether. When a person dies, their physical death does not signify their death entirely as at least some soul-doubles are believed to have an afterlife – an afterlife that can easily become part of a chain of suicidal deaths. While this point needs to be unpacked later, we now want to focus on suicidal agency as relational by drawing on Katrina Jaworski's earlier work on suicide as performative.

3. Agency in Suicide as Relational

The exercise of agency in suicide is understood through the lens of intent. Unfortunately, quite often intent is confused with motive.¹⁶ This confusion is incorrect because intent is what a person wants, and motive is the reason for what the person wants.¹⁷ The act of suicide is expressed by intent, which means that intent rather than motive explain the act. Motives are causal explanations of suicidal behaviours. Intentions are teleological explanations of suicidal acts.¹⁸ In this way, intent and motive are distinct, even though the intelligibility of the act of suicide depends on them both. But what if intentions are intentions precisely because the individual is not the sole origin or author?

In her work on sex and gender, Butler argues that there is no doer behind deeds, as the doer and the deeds are constituted by the expressions themselves, rather than the doer being the origin of the expressions.¹⁹ Gender as performative is 'a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance' of sex as the original source of gender rather than being discursive like gender.²⁰ In later works, Butler reworks performativity as a reiterative and citational practice through which discourses of sex and gender produce the effects they name. Gender is repeated and ritualised through actions that precede, constrain, and exceed the doer, whether it is through particular bodily gestures, speaking, or being hailed by the bodies and actions of others.²¹

Suicide can be read as performative in that it can be seen as a ‘doing’. To take one’s own life, one has to perform a set of bodily acts, harnessed by the intention to die. Across the surfaces of the suicided body, suicide is produced and rendered visible by rituals that condition the deliberateness of the taking of one’s life. The taking of one’s life might consist of: a) thinking about suicide; b) imagining possible outcomes; c) writing a note; d) gaining access to specific means to do it; e) estimating what might be lethal, or perhaps what is a culturally and socially ‘appropriate’ method; f) planning the location of the act; g) performing the actual act, for example, pulling the trigger or swallowing the pills; and h) awaiting the loss of consciousness, providing no-one has intervened. In light of this, I am arguing that the intent to suicide is embodied through corporeal gestures that express the taking of one’s life.

Yet suicide as performative is not entirely individual. Coronial inquest findings, medical autopsy reports, and/or psychiatric assessments become part of interpreting whether the outcome is considered as suicide, and, in particular, whether the individual was deliberate in their intentions. If people can kill themselves, it is because there is prior knowledge of suicide, shaped by experts, individual histories, and popularised understandings.²² Thus, prior knowledge fosters individual interpretations. In this sense, suicide can be read discursively as a reiterative and citational practice, made possible through norms, meanings and assumptions identified within contexts and historical periods, through which something about the act can be hailed suicide.

In this sense, the exercise of agency in suicide has a layered history. What constitutes an act of suicide is dependent on something other than the individual, even though the act is individual. One can intentionally take one’s life precisely because such a taking is shaped by repetitive conditions and prior takings, re-articulated when the taking occurs. Butler suggests that we come into the world on the condition that the social world is there, which means that we cannot be ourselves without being preceded and exceeded by something other than ourselves.²³ To follow on, we cannot depart from this world, or at least try to, without something paving the way for our intentions to suicide. In this sense, it is possible to read agency as relational – as never being outside discourse – without undermining individual intentions to suicide. So how can this approach to suicide be used to explain the Altaian context?

4. Composite Agency in Suicide

Understanding personhood and connected notions of soul-doubles in the Altaian context requires us to introduce another term – *aldachy* – a word derived from the verb root *al-* ‘to take’. *Aldachy* is best translated as ‘snatcher’. In the classical ethnographic literature, *aldachy* is interpreted as an Altaian version of the spirit of death.²⁴ The term is used to describe roles. Broz’s informants often agreed that someone’s ill fate was caused by an encounter with the *aldachy*. The actual

identity of the entity was usually impossible to determine or agree on. Importantly, regardless of the actual entity, the mechanism of harm was usually clear. *Aldachy* snatches the *süne* of its victim and this loss causes long-term harm. One simply cannot live long without an important aspect of oneself. Death will inevitably follow unless *süne* is retrieved by a *kam* (shaman). The actual cause of death varies. Soul-double loss can lead to accidents, illness, murders, and suicides. Broz's informants recognised all those deaths as alike and labelled them as *jetker* (misfortune).

To come back to Broz's earlier account of four funerals and a wedding, it can be suggested that the soul-double plays the role of a patient (which signifies passivity and inaction), while the evil entity is an agent, stealer, kidnapper, and snatcher – the *aldachy* (which signifies action and agency). The chain made up of the three deaths invoked all members of the community as patients – as passive, inactive, and helpless. Their everyday life was determined by the need to conduct the funerals, influenced by the agency of an evil agent seen as the cause for the suicides. To be liberated from their roles as patients, the community embraced something non-customary and active: a wedding celebration shortly after the last funeral.

But how can we blend the fibres of the Altai context with the theorisation of agency in suicide as relational? Where the Altai context of agency refers to how people collectively exercise agency in the face of suicide, the earlier theorisation pays more attention to the material act of suicide. However, as Broz argues, the chain of events was a chain precisely because the community saw each death as linked – each material act corresponded to the one before because of the Altaian concept of the self as composite.²⁵ In this sense, agency is relational because who and what the Altaians understand themselves to be is preceded and exceeded by the other in themselves. It is possible to understand agency as layered, with each layer constituting a composite part if individual actions interpellate actions of others and vice versa. So, to explain our earlier claim, one cannot depart the world without something else paving the way for such a departure because a sense of self is part of a chain, with individual links forever connected to others in life and in death. For Altaians, suicide is no exception.

5. Theorising Suicide as Composite: A Conclusion

We have presented and bonded a number of components throughout our analysis. This, however, is only the beginning as a number of components need further unpacking. Our intention has not been to confuse contexts, to move between theories and ethnographic leads interchangeably. Our intention has also not been to use an ethnographic lead to support a theory, or to argue that the south Siberian context is somehow universal. Rather, our intention has been and still is to put different components side by side, knitting them together to see what happens to how we can think of the self and agency as relational. Epistemologically, such

‘knitting’ does not distinguish levels of analysis, with Western theory occupying some kind of a meta-level in contrast to the local-data level. We have reflexively combined the two to employ Altaian concepts of soul-double to develop analytical notions of personhood in suicide. ‘Knitting’ has the potential to employ local concepts to enrich trans-local theory without falling into the trap of universalising such concepts.

Our work highlights the need to address relationality in suicide. Relationality does not simply mean one thing is related to another. Instead, as Butler argues, ‘relationality sutures the rupture in the relation we seek to describe’.²⁶ Suicide can be conceived of as a rupture in how we understand life. The suture is constituted by how a given community will interpret suicide, made possible because both the self and agency are relational, composite. Yet to gain a fuller understanding of self and agency as relational, the act of theorising itself needs to be composite. If Butler is right, and the frame can be presented in a way that frames the interpretation of suicide, then we need to work out what happens to the scene of presentation alongside the content of the presentation. This might come across as a task belonging to philosophers who work with the plasticity of ideas. Yet it is also a task that belongs to those in suicidology, since ideas are always presupposed in practice. Ideas need to be routinely unpacked and repacked so that we can think and act without repeating the mistakes of the past, or pathologising and silencing narratives of suicide that refuse to fit in.

Notes

¹ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Boston: Northeastern University Press, 1974), 10-11.

² Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When is Life Grievable?* (London: Verso, 2009).

³ *Ibid.*, 8-9.

⁴ Edwin S. Shneidman, *The Suicidal Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), 5 (emphasis original).

⁵ Emile Durkheim, *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*, trans. John A. Spaulding and George Simpson (New York: The Free Press, 1951), 44 (emphasis original).

⁶ Ludek Broz and Rane Willerslev, ‘When Good Luck is Bad Fortune: Between too Little and too Much Hunting Success in Siberia’, in *Social Analysis - The International Journal of Social and Cultural Practice* 56 (2012); Ludek Broz, ‘Substance, Conduct and History: ‘Altaian-ness’ in the 21 Century’, in *Sibirica: Journal of Siberian Studies* 8 (2009); Ludek Broz, ‘Pastoral Perspectivism: A View from Altai’, in *Inner Asia* 9 (2007).

⁷ Tamara Men, et al., ‘Russian Mortality Trends for 1991-2001: Analysis by Cause and Region’, in *British Medical Journal* 327 (2003): 6.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*

- ¹⁰ V.A. Muiteva, *Traditsionnaia Religiozno-Mifologicheskaia Kartina Mira Altaitsev* (Gorno-Altaiisk: Gorno-Altaiiskii Institut Gumanitarnykh Issledovani, 2004), 123-4.
- ¹¹ N.A. Baskakov and N.A. IAimova, *Shamanskie Misterii Gornogo Altaia* (Gorno-Altaiisk: Gorno-Altaiiskii Institut Gumanitarnykh Issledovani, 1993), 8-20.
- ¹² Carl G. Jung. *The Essential Jung: Selected Writings* (London: Fontana Press, 1983), 229.
- ¹³ *Ibid.*, 213.
- ¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 219.
- ¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.
- ¹⁶ Karl Andriessen, 'On 'Intention' in the Definition of Suicide', in *Suicide & Life-Threatening Behavior* 36 (2006): 535.
- ¹⁷ Heidi Hjelmeland and Birthe L. Knizek, 'Conceptual Confusion About Intentions and Motives of Nonfatal Suicidal Behavior: A Discussion of Terms Employed in the Literature of Suicidology', in *Archives of Suicide Research* 5 (1999): 276.
- ¹⁸ Hjelmeland and Knizek, 'Nonfatal Suicidal Behavior', 278.
- ¹⁹ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London: Routledge, 1990), 25.
- ²⁰ Butler, *Gender Trouble*, 33.
- ²¹ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter: On the Discursive Limits of 'Sex'* (London: Routledge, 1993), 2, 227; Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 12, 25, 33.
- ²² Katrina Jaworski, 'The Gender-ing of Suicide', in *Australian Feminist Studies*, 25: 63 (2010): 50.
- ²³ Judith Butler, *Undoing Gender* (London: Routledge, 2004), 32.
- ²⁴ Andrey V. Anokhin. *Materialy po Shamanstvu u Altaitsev, sobrannye vo vremia puteshestvii po Altaiu v 1910-1912 gg. po porucheniiu Russkogo Komiteta dlia izucheniia Srednei i Vostochnoi Azii* (Gorno-Altaiisk: Ak Chechek, 1994), 20-21.
- ²⁵ Ludek Broz, 'The Spirit of Explanation: Invisible Causes of Visible Disasters in the Altai Republic (PhD diss., University of Cambridge, 2008).
- ²⁶ Butler, *Undoing Gender*, 19.

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Katrina Jaworski is a Lecturer in cultural studies at the University of South Australia, and a Visiting Research Fellow at the University of Adelaide. Her primary research interests include suicide in particular, and death and dying more broadly, as well as gender, bodies, health, violent extremism and older men's backyard sheds.

Ludek Broz is a Researcher at The Institute of Ethnology at the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic and the Department of General Anthropology, Charles University in Prague. His geographical areas of interest are Siberia, Inner Asia and the Altai Republic in particular. His theoretical interests include the interface between science studies and the anthropology of religion, suicide studies, contemporary kinship theory and home cooking.