



Viewpoint

Escaping the Echo Chamber: The Night Night Method and the Role of Disruptive Research in Suicide Studies

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Recommended citation:

Cooley M, Moran Stritch J. Escaping the Echo Chamber: The Night Night Method and the Role of Disruptive Research in Suicide Studies. JGPOH 2024. DOI: DOI number by publisher, Website: by publisher.

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Abstract

Traditional approaches to suicide research often emphasise individual pathology, reinforcing conventional medical and religious narratives. Critical suicidology challenges these approaches, advocating for diverse voices and qualitative methodologies that consult and include first-person experiences. Transdisciplinary approaches can deconstruct habitual tendencies that lean toward clinical and statistical analyses, and in doing so highlight areas previously overlooked in academic literature. Research on suicide methods is often focused on the most common three to five methods globally, leaving clinicians, professionals and policymakers under prepared while at the same time ignoring first-person experiences. Night Night is one such method of suicide that, to our knowledge, has not yet been specifically highlighted in academic literature, underscoring the need for more innovative and progressive explorations of suicide.

Keywords: Suicide; Critical Suicidology; Suicide Methods; Discourse.

Conflict of interests: The authors report no conflicts of interest.

Financial disclosure: Not applicable.



Over 700,000 people die by suicide every year, making it one of the leading causes of death worldwide. Additionally, for every completed suicide there are 20 more attempted suicides (1). Although these figures are extremely alarming, suicide statistics are known to be underreported (2), and often misclassified (3), posing serious questions around the validity of suicide data internationally. Considering the extremely tumultuous and conflicted perceptions of suicide from social, cultural and research standpoints, it is unsurprising that underreporting and other inaccuracies within the data on suicide exist. Historically, the predominant attitudes towards suicide have posed the act as a sin (4), a crime (5), and ultimately the result of a psychiatric disorder (6).

These one-dimensional approaches to the issue often lead to one unifying conclusion – that suicide is an individual issue and one that should be attributed to a person’s problematic behaviour. The refusal to look beyond these assumptions has created a research and practice culture that is rife with tunnel vision and the echoing of conventional ideas (7). Society’s overreliance on the medicalization of suicide not only distorts current research findings (8), but also limits opportunities for the inclusion of diverse voices, nuanced approaches and ultimately the creation of new knowledge.

The field of critical suicidology, or critical suicide studies, developed in direct opposition to mainstream or traditional suicidology (9) and has unearthed interesting and invaluable critiques of conventional approaches to suicide. Scholars operating from a critical suicidology framework have not only highlighted the extreme scarcity of qualitative methodologies in suicide research (10), but also what qualitative approaches could achieve in terms of rethinking how we respond to individuals who may be thinking of ending their own lives (11).

One of the opportunities qualitative approaches can offer to suicide research is the inclusion of first-person accounts, narratives and discourse. Although caution is required in treading these waters, the extraction of meaningful and insightful data while protecting the anonymity of individuals is possible. One such avenue that can be useful in this space is the exploration of online websites, networks, forums and communities. In the era of digital connectivity, people can magnetize themselves to communities focused on almost any topic imaginable, even those focused on ending one’s life. Although unsettling for some, we argue that thorough examinations and articulate, transparent reporting on these communities could equip key stakeholders with decoded, contemporary insights into these often-concealed networks and their cryptic communications. Moreover, research of this nature could pinpoint current deficiencies in holistic care practices which could pave the way for novel strategies that genuinely prioritise individual narratives.

While the literature has indeed recognised pro-suicide websites (12), much of the academic research conducted in this space focuses on harmful material search result frequency (13), or harm versus benefits analyses surrounding the internet and suicide (14). Much less exists in terms of analysing the user-generated content from these online spaces and how such content



can inform and educate public health strategies, policy and practice. Opportunities for research in this area span from detecting gaps in care provision to monitoring the development of new and evolving terminology surrounding suicide globally. While dominant reports on suicide methods tend to discuss the top three suicide methods globally (poisoning, hanging and firearms) (1), there is more to the story.

The discussion of suicide methods and the potential for harm arising from those discussions are widely documented and arguably universally accepted across the literature with regard to suicide contagion (15), and the Werther effect (16). However dangerous and uncomfortable it may be to accept, suicide methods are currently being discussed in detail online and robust, disruptive research must be carried out to monitor and report on potential trends and insights.

Our research explores suicide methods through the use of discourse and thematic analysis techniques. In gathering and analysing 6 months' worth of data it was possible to identify over 100 different suicide methods currently being discussed in an online community, some of which do not appear in current literature. One such method, that to the best of our knowledge does not appear in the academic literature, is known within an online suicide community as the "Night Night" method. The Night Night method involves placing a sack or bag over the head while at the same time wrapping tape, cord or straps around the neck to not only secure the bag but to apply substantial pressure around the neck which, if left intact, could result in death by asphyxiation. The apparent reluctance to pursue explorations on evolving suicide methods and online terminology within suicide research is alarming in that it could be limiting the depth and scope of suicide prevention and intervention training currently being offered to relevant professionals.

One of the most universally endorsed approaches to preventing suicide or intervening in potential suicide situations involves limiting a person's access to their means of suicide (17). However, this approach may be inherently flawed if research continuously focuses only on traditional reports concentrating on the top three or four global suicide methods. Investigations must extend beyond broad categories and overgeneralizations, and avoid the temptation to lump together seemingly similar methods of suicide while also facing and embracing critical approaches and transdisciplinary partnerships that prioritise more balanced relationships between academia, policy and professional practice.

Avoiding the tendency to group suicide methods together allows researchers to deconstruct current limiting approaches within the field of suicide studies broadly. For example, recognizing Night Night as a distinct method of suicide, rather than solely a form of asphyxiation, creates space to explore current suicide discourse, particularly within online suicide focused communities. The term "Night Night" contrasts sharply with the clinical style of language typically used for suicide methods such as "hanging" or "overdose" and almost suggests comfort, alleviation or solace. This type of concealed terminology could also be described as sanitized, potentially disguising the severity of the act itself, highlighting a



potential link between euphemistic labelling (18) and suicide discourse online. Such explorations, however, are only possible when research moves beyond dominant structures and traditional paradigms.

Research that challenges the replication of conventional dialogues in this area could also reveal previously overlooked opportunities addressing the significant holes in the classification of suicide methods and the misclassification of deaths. An alternative approach to repeating the rhetoric around common suicide methods may lie in detecting and identifying new suicide methods before they become common. In order to do this, careful, ongoing, and supported evaluation and monitoring of pro-suicide websites is both warranted and necessary. Embracing critical suicidology opens the door to new, disruptive and person-centred explorations of suicide but it also offers a way out of the familiar yet intensely restrictive echo chamber that traditional suicide prevention research so often preserves.

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