Exploring the Behaviour of Suicide Attempt: Thematic Analysis of Memoirs

Prasanna Jadhav and Raosaheb Raut

University of Mumbai, Mumbai

Suicide is a global issue demanding urgent attention. Different ideation to action theories of suicide highlight different cognitive processes and experiences that lead to suicide attempt. The objectives of this study were to explore the thought processes and experiences leading to the behaviour of suicide attempt using the first hand narrations of suicide attempt survivors. Seven different memoirs written by seven different suicide attempt survivors were selected for analysis. The data was analysed using qualitative method of Thematic Analysis. The four core themes found in the ideation to action phase of suicide were overcoming fear; overcoming obstacles; focus on self-interest and energy. These findings can be beneficial in the development of suicide prevention strategies and also in developing intervention strategies for the survivors of suicide attempt. Counsellors and therapists can help clients identify and channelize such strengths for prevention of suicide attempt. Identification of strengths can also be important for suicide attempt survivors to overcome suicidal tendencies and to build a fulfilling life.

Keywords: Behaviour of Suicide Attempt; Memoirs; Thematic Analysis.

Suicide is a global public health issue. All ages, sexes, and regions of the world are affected by this issue. According to the global health estimates by WHO, suicide is one of the leading causes of death, accounting for more than 1in every 100 deaths worldwide in 2019. (WHO, 2021) The global age-standardized suicide rate was 9.0 per 100 000 population in the year 2019 (WHO, 2021). According to the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB), in 2019, suicide rate in south east Asia region was 10.2 per 1 lakh population (NCRB, 2019). Suicide rate in India in the year 2019 was 10.4 per 1 lakh population (NCRB, 2019). In 2019, Maharashtra witnessed 18,916 suicides, contributing highest percentage share of suicides (13.8 %) to total number of suicides in India (NCRB, 2019). In 2019, Maharashtra witnessed highest number of student suicides (NCRB, 2019). These records are indeed shocking and demand urgent attention to the phenomenon of suicide.

Suicide is a multidimensional phenomenon. There are many related terms each requiring a description in order to enable appropriate distinction between them. These terms make suicide more a process than a mere product. These terms are mentioned and described below.

Suicide ideation - It refers to any thoughts, images, beliefs, voices, or other cognitions reported by the individual about intentionally ending his or her own life (Crossby, 2007). This is the first stage in the process of suicide. Ideation can be mild or strong and can vary in intensity

Suicide attempt - Suicide attempt is a nonfatal, self-inflicted, potentially injurious behaviour with any intent to die as a result of the behaviour. A suicide attempt may or may not result in injury (Crossby, 2007). If the attempt is successful then it is referred to as completed suicide (or suicide)

Suicide - Death caused by self-inflicted injurious behaviour with any intent to die as a result of the behaviour (Crossby, 2007). There are multiple theories prescribed by many authors and researchers. These theories when studied can be broadly categorised into two types.

One set of theories attempt to describe factors which lead to suicide ideation. These theories do not make a distinction between suicide ideation and suicide attempt in theory.

So these theories only elaborate on factors leading to suicide ideation and assume that a further intensification in these experiences leads to suicide attempt. Few examples of such theories are emotion dysregulation theory (Neece, 2013), Shneidman's classic theory of psychache (Shneidman, 1993), Beck's cognitive behavioural framework of suicide (Wenzel, Brown, Beck, 2009).

Another set of theories of suicide often referred to as 'ideation to action theories' is central to this research study. These sets of theories describe the whole process beginning from factors leading to suicide ideation and also the factors which are mediators between suicide ideation and attempt. These theories claim that suicide ideation does not lead to suicide attempt unless the presence of multiple mediating factors (Klonsky, Saffer, Bryan, 2018). A few examples of such theories include interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005), the Three Step Theory (Klonsky, May, 2015), Integrated Motivational Volitional theory (O'Connor, 2011) and Fluid Vulnerability Theory (Rudd, 2006). These theories have come up with different variables which act as mediators between ideation and attempt like exposure to proactive events, genetic low sensitivity to pain, knowledge and expertise, impulsivity, access to lethal means etc. (Klonsky, Saffer, Bryan, 2018). Overall, the mediating variables described by different ideation to action theories of suicide highlight the important role of courage in the ideation to action phase of suicide. Research has also provided similar insights.

In one research, which was aimed to study association between suicidal symptoms and repeat suicidal behaviour through network analysis, found that courage to commit the action was one of the volitional (action-related) factors associated with suicide attempt and was strongly associated with repeated suicide attempt (de Beurs, van Borkulo, O'Connor, 2017). In one research, components of courage (volition, Risk and value of the goal) were found in the narratives of those who committed suicide (Pury, et.al. 2015). Both the studies cited above have provided evidence for the fact that courage plays an important role in the behaviour of suicide attempt.

There is no consensus definition of courage. In one of his articles, researcher Shelp has given a considerably comprehensive definition of courage. According to Shelp (1984), "courage is the disposition to voluntarily act, perhaps fearfully, in a dangerous circumstance, where the relevant risks are reasonably appraised, in an effort to obtain or preserve some perceived good for one self or others recognizing that the desired perceived good may not be realized" (p. 354). Courage can be described as entailing the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Pioneering researchers in the area of courage (e.g., Evans & White, 1981; Peterson & Seligman, 2004; Shelp, 1984; Szagun, 1992) have conceptualized courage in different ways. Courage is not limited to and characterized only for physical actions. Other common conceptualizations of courage are labeled as moral courage, psychological or vital courage etc. It is important to consider these different conceptualizations.

Physical Courage - Physical courage is often characterized as the overcoming of fear of death or physical harm in the face of risk (Lopez, O'Byrne, & Peterson, 2003; Putman, 1997).

Moral Courage - According to Putman (1997), moral courage as the absence of fear while defending deeply rooted morals despite the risk of social disapproval. Lopez et al. (2003) defined moral courage on similar lines. According to them, "authenticity and integrity may be the fulfilments most closely associated with the expression of personal views in the face of dissension and rejection" (p. 187).

Psychological or Vital Courage - Psychological or vital courage is thriving in the face of physical and mental illness (Lopez et al., 2003). It is emphasized that the relationships between the dimensions of courage are just as critical in determining the success or failure of the person recovering from alcoholism as they are for the military soldier. (Putman, 2001)

Many other forms of courage have also been proposed by many other researchers. Bauhn (2003) described courage of creativity and courage of conviction. Pury, Kowalski & Spearman (2007) also described general

courage and personal courage. Greitemeyer, Fischer, Kastenmüller & Frey (2006) also described civil courage. Overall, types of courage seem to emerge when courage is conceptualized based on a particular context.

Peterson and Seligman (2004) came up with an extensive classification of character strengths and virtues. In all twenty four character strengths were classified based on the six virtues. It is one of the very extensive classifications in psychology. According to this classification, courage is a virtue and four strengths of courage are bravery, perseverance, integrity and vitality.

Bravery – Bravery is doing what needs to be done In the face of fear. It is not fearlessness. It involves acknowledgement of fear and consideration of risk and taking action despite that fear.

Perseverance – Peterson & Seligman (2004) define perseverance as voluntary continuation of a goal-directed action in spite of obstacles, difficulties, or discouragement (p 229). The threat here is not fear but other obstacles which may include difficulty, frustration, boredom etc.

Integrity – Integrity as a strength is a broad term. Many terms like integrity, authenticity and honesty – which have slightly different meanings - come under the scope of this character strength. Honesty refers to factual truthfulness and interpersonal sincerity. Authenticity refers to emotional genuineness and also psychological depth. Integrity refers to moral probity and self-unity (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Integrity literally means wholeness. The determination aspect of this strength comes under the term of integrity. So in all, Integrity, authenticity, and honesty capture a character trait in which people are true to themselves, accurately representing—privately and publicly—their internal states, intentions, and commitments. (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Vitality - Vitality refers to feeling alive, being full of zest, and displaying enthusiasm for activities. Vitality is directly and interactively related to both psychological and somatic factors. Vitality can be best understood as a style that features in the display of other strengths but still it is a different strength as like other character strengths (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Overall, understanding different experiences that people have which play an important role in the behaviour of suicide attempt is important. The current research study aims to understand the thought processes and experiences leading to the behaviour of suicide attempt.

Method

Sample

Seven published memoirs of suicide attempt survivors were chosen as sample for the study (Greenwald, 2020; Hines, 2013; Miller, 2012; Roberts, 2018; Sexton, 2010; Williams, 2020; Wise, 2003). These memoirs were obtained in the eBook format. Memoir is a very rich source of data. It contains minute and very specific details about every aspect of a particular event. This research required very specific description of the cognitive and emotional experiences and processes leading to the behaviour of suicide attempt. In case of memoirs, the descriptions are made by experiencer himself and the reporting of these descriptions is absolutely voluntary and self motivated. Therefore the data obtained from memoirs is highly valid and to a great extent is free of external influences like interviewer bias, social desirability etc. Therefore memoirs were chosen as a source of data for this study. When choosing the memoirs for analysis, it was made sure that these memoirs have a considerably elaborate disruption of the suicide attempt. Thus, all the memoirs chosen for analysis contained a whole chapter dedicated to the description of the suicide attempt.

All the ethical concerns were taken care of. The study required providing brief quotations of certain passages of these memoirs at relevant places as sample extracts of relevant themes. An informed consent was obtained from all the authors to use their memoirs for this study.

Procedure

After selecting memoirs, the process of analysis began. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the narrations in the memoirs. Thematic analysis helps to find patterns in the data analyzed. Moreover, a major advantage of thematic analysis is that it can be used with any type of epistemologicalstance.The six-step process proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006)

was considered for the analysis.This process comprises of six phases.In the first phase of familiarization the memoirs were read thoroughly and certain patterns were identified. In the second phase, initialcodes were generated by labelling certain patterns identified. In the third phase these codes were analysed thoroughly to search for the underlying themes. In the fourth phase the themes were reviewed. In the final phase the themes were given appropriate llabels after again reviewing the codes and content of the narrations.

Findings

After conducting Thematic Analysis on the data obtained from the memoirs, four themes related to courage were found in majority of the memoirs analyzed. The detailed description of these themes is provided below.

Theme 1 –Overcoming fear

Suicide attempt survivors in these memoirs reported feeling fearful. However, they also reported the willingness to face those fears. Suicide attempt survivors have reported feeling the fear of physical pain the method of suicide (cutting the vein) may cause and also reported fear of death. However, they also reported managing that fear and acting that way despite that fear. Following are some of the extracts

"I wanted to die. I could try it, but I was scared. I was scared to pierce my skin with such a sharp object. I was frightened of the pain it would cause. I looked at my fingernails and decided to start with them. I scratched my wrists until the skin was raw and jagged, but no blood came out. I tried harder, crying with every attempt."(Roberts, 2018, p. 3).

"Please don't think me a coward. If it was easy, I would've done it a long time ago. I have thought about it so much and stocked up on Xanax in case I ever found the courage. My worst nightmare is dying alone. Looks like I'm facing my worst nightmare." (Greenwald, 2020, p. 174)

Suicide attempt survivors have also written about their fear of failure of the suicide attempt and its possible consequences. However, this fear did not stop them from taking the action, as they managed their fear taking possible appropriate measures. Following are some of the sample extracts.

"My body tingled, as though a thin veil of silk had dragged over me. I must get this right. It must be perfect. Do not make a mistake tonight. A slow, methodical sigh escaped my lungs, and relieved the pressure of possible failure." (Miller, 2012, p.14).

"Rivalling as one of my most acute fears was the terror of waking up in restraints, confined to a psychiatric ward." (Wise, 2020, p.13).

Theme 2 –Overcoming obstacles

In these memoirs, suicide attempt survivors have reported willingness to keep working towards the goal of dying using same method despite past experiences of failure in executing that method or other perceived complications in the method. They made necessary alterations in their plans but continued with the same plans. Following extract is an example reflecting perseverance.

"All I knew was that I wanted to die. I had to die. The pills never worked, and I needed something that would. I was not going to give up though. I had to die. I drove to Wal-Mart and bought the one alcoholic beverage I could stomach, a couple of energy drinks, enough hydroxycut to stop my heart, and enough benadryl to put me to sleep forever. I thought if I combined that with the prescriptions I had at home, I would be set." (Roberts, 2018, p. 60)

"Because the chief problem with using pills was discovery, just the week before I had hunted out a location where no one would find me until I was long dead." (Sexton, 2010, p. 162)

Theme 3- Focusing on the self interest

In these memoirs, suicide attempt survivors reported congruence in their intention and action. They genuinely wished to end their life and they never had survival as a part of their equation when making a suicide attempt. There was no dilemma about the decision to end their life. Also this determination was firm enough to surpass the concern for others that these suicide attempt survivors reported feeling. Following are some of the extracts reflecting integrity.

"No one could've convinced me otherwise until almost two hundred Xanax pills couldn't take me down." (Greenwald, 2020, p. 171)

"After living the hell of over two decades of exhaustive contemplation, for the first time in my life I stood on the threshold of death with a firm resolve. I struggled with the obsessive cycle of concerns about impact on others. In the end, my inclination to prioritize feelings of others meant shit to me. All that mattered was to finish the job." (Wise, 2003, p. 14)

"Nathaniel, my older son, and Gabe, my younger, were asleep, their beds distant in another part of our silent California ranch. Because they knew all about their grandmother's suicide, I had accordingly made, from time to time, promises about my life. The thought of violating his trust was horrific and untenable Regret nevertheless did not stop me. I was ready, at last, to cheat on love. Ready to renege on assurances." (Sexton, 2010, p. 14 -15)

"I had definitely intended to die. And I'd almost made it."(Sexton, 2010, p. 163)

Theme 4 - Energy.

In these memoirs, suicide attempt survivors report feeling excited and happy about finally being able to end their pain and finding resources to transform their thought into action. Following are some of the extracts reflecting vitality.

"Never having felt this way before, it was exhilarating to finally gather the nerve that I'd waited ten years for." (Greenwald, 2020, p. 170)

"My index finger palpated, looking for the best candidate. I studied the thoroughfares of my wrist carefully. Excitement shimmered inside me"(Sexton, 2010, p. 16).

Discussion

As can be seen in the result section, most of the memoirs of the suicide attempt survivors analyzed reflect some or the other forms of courage in the ideation to action phase of suicide. These findings are much similar to a couple of previous researches which have reported an important role of courage in the process of suicide. (de Beurs, van Borkulo, O'Connor, 2017; Pury, et.al., 2015). Given these results, it is very important to focus on this aspect of suicide when working with suicidal people.

The psychological form of bravery (the fear of failure of suicide attempt and it's further consequences) was also seen in the narrations of suicide attempt survivors. This is an interesting part because mostly, evolutionary fears of pain and death are considered obstacles to suicide attempt by the current ideation to action theories. (Klonsky, Saffer, Bryan, 2018). Also, from some extracts, what is notable is not only the fact that suicide attempt survivors were willing to work towards their goal in the face of fear and obstacles, but also the strategies that they used which enabled them to face those fears and obstacles. Some of the extracts under the theme of overcoming fear, also reflected use of strategies like deep breathing to manage fear of failure and graded exposure to manage fear of pain. Theme of overcoming obstacles reflects a solution oriented thought process of the suicide attempt survivors. A framework of case conceptualization which is inspired by the studies and concepts in positive psychology is termed as strength based case conceptualization (Allen, et.al, 2021; Rashid, 2015) which incorporates clients' previous positive experiences of handling and coping with problems. Such strategic approach by a suicidal person can provide important inputs in such kind of conceptualization. The theme of focusing on self interest also points out towards the fact that mere advise of not attempting suicide or the intervention of considering the impact it might have on the significant others might not be a very effective strategy in preventing suicide attempt because these individuals at that point are highly self centred and highly determined.

Implications for the practice of counselling and psychotherapy

This study makes notable contribution to the way suicide is conceptualized. These findings also have practical implications where such strengths can be incorporated In case formulations and then therapists/counsellors can work towards making suicidal clients realize these strengths and can employ strategies to channelize these strengths in a more desirable ways so that it can help clients not only to recover

from suicidal tendencies but also to use these strengths in their future fore a more constructive purpose. This approach can also be used to prevent suicide ideation from turning into suicide attempt, by analyzing the suicide plans for the presence of strengths of courage and providing clients an insight into these strengths. Thus, this approach focuses on prevention of as well as intervention for suicide. Another application of these results can be in the work of creating awareness about suicide and suicidal behaviour among the masses. Suicide attempt survivors are stereotypically considered weak. Suicide attempt is surrounded by a lot of negativity. Making people aware about the fact that suicide attempt though is not a desirable behaviour, is a result of misuse of certain strengths within an individual can be helpful to reduce the negative perception of suicide attempt survivors among the masses. This study highlights that people high on the character strengths of courage are at a high risk of attempting suicide. Therefore, training programmes focusing on development of these strengths also should be delivered with caution and should make participants aware of the drawback of these strengths.

Strengths and limitations of the study

The data on which analysis was conducted came from the memoirs of suicide attempt written by suicide attempt survivors themselves. Memoirs are a rich source of authentic data as these are written voluntarily by the individual himself. This data is not vulnerable to the effects social desirability bias and interviewer bias which is more likely in the interview method. However, such type of research does not allow consideration of non verbal cues of the suicide attempt survivors when narrating their experience. Such non verbal cues can provide key inputs and can help to understand the depth of these experiences. Another major limitation of this study is the fact that all the memoirs used in this study were written by suicide attempt survivors outside India. Therefore, this study does not contribute to the understanding the of suicide attempt across different cultures. Difference in the socio cultural context of eastern countries as compared to western countries may lead to some different findings in a research conducted on eastern population.

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Prasanna Jadhav, Teaching Assistant, Department of Applied Psychology, University of Mumbai, India. ORCID: 0000-0002-4082-8860. Email: prasanna91297@gmail.com. Email: raosahebraut@psychology.mu.ac.in

Raosaheb Raut, Assistant Professor, Department of Applied Psychology, University of Mumbai, India. ORCID: 0000-0002-4954-8953. Email: raosahebraut@psychology.mu.ac.in. (Correspondence Author)