



Exploring suicide
potential and the
actualising
tendency: A
qualitative study of
suicide notes.

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How did I come to this research?

- Proposition Four: ‘The organism has one basic tendency and striving –to actualise, maintain and enhance the experiencing organism’ (Rogers, 1951, p. 487).
- ‘There are, of course, examples of people who cannot escape from self-destructive behaviours, which often mean they cannot become clients or benefit from counselling. Sometimes, sadly for those people, dying is the alternative to actualising’ (Simanowitz & Pearce, 2003, p. 52).

Aims and objectives.

- To explore whether suicide can ever be viewed as an expression of the AT.
- To gain an understanding of how this could affect counsellor's way of working in relation to ethics and application of theory.
- I completed a narrative analysis on a sample of suicide notes to gain understanding of the reasons people had chosen to take their life.

Background to the research – current policy agenda.

- There are approximately 4,500 suicides in the UK per year (Dept for Health, 2019).
- In October 2018, the UK Government appointed its first ever Suicide Prevention Minister (Dept for Health, 2019).
- The current UK policy on suicide focuses on reduction and prevention (Reeves, 2010).
- Reducing access to means of suicide, reducing rates of selfharm as a key indicator to suicide, tailoring approaches to improve mental health in specific groups (Dept for Health, 2019).

Background to the research - practice

The BACP Ethical Framework (2018) highlights the principles of autonomy and non-maleficence.

The Mental Capacity Act (2005) states that individuals have the right to make choices about their own life if they are deemed to have the capacity to do so.

‘Anti person-centred’ Rogers & Murphy (2017) to defer to external authorities such as government or organisation policy.

Exploring the AT

- ‘We can say that there is in every organism, at whatever level, an underlying flow of movement toward constructive fulfilment of its inherent possibilities’ (Rogers, 1980, p. 117).
- The AT is selective and alongside its directionality it is also constructive stating ‘it does not actualise its potentiality for self-destruction, nor its ability to bear pain’ (Rogers, 1963, p. 6).
- Only in circumstances that are perverse or unusual is the potential for these aspects actualised (Rogers, 1963).

Methodology and Method

- Qualitative approach –allowing the researcher to explore the frame of reference of another in a sensitive and accurate way (Mearns & McLeod, 1984).
- Narrative approach with the analytic strategy of stanza analysis (Gee, 1991).
- By using stanza analysis the impact and emotional meaning of the text is more readily available (McLeod, 2011).
- 31 notes were analysed from two texts (Scheidman & Farberow, 1957, Etkind, 1997).
- Following stanza analysis, predominate narratives within the data were identified.

Findings

Predominate narratives:	Can't live with...	Can't live without...	The other	No other
Subordinate narratives:	Feeling 'not good enough'	My place	Best for others (financially)	This is the only way out
	The fear of (potential) shame/guilt/regret	This relationship/this love	Best for everyone (emotionally)	
	Fear of consequences of illness		This is what you wanted/It's your fault	
	Failure			
	The physical pain any longer			
	The emotional situation any longer			

Findings – excerpts from notes

- Can't live with...
 - 'I have never been much good, I have only hurt everyone'
 - 'I've thought this over a million times and this seems to be the only way I can settle all the trouble I have caused you and others'
- Can't live without...
 - 'Mary, I love Betty and I can't stand being without her'
 - 'Dearest Mary – I just can't go on without Tim, John and you'
- The other.
 - 'I knew that if I went to a doctor I would lose my job I think this is best for all concerned'
 - 'I know you will find someone better for you and the boys'
- No other.
 - 'I'm sorry honey, but please believe me this is the only way out for me'

Developing additional propositions of the AT.

- 1. The chosen action is self-directed. (Rogers, 1959)
- 2. Within the individual's perceptual field the action can be viewed as constructive.
 - A) The action maintains or enhances the organism (up to the point of death if appropriate). (Rogers, 1951, Brodley, 1999 & Merry, 2008).
 - B) The action may have a positive overall evolutionary impact. (Rogers, 1980)
 - C) The action could be viewed as problem solving in nature. (Brodley, 1999).
- 3. Any action which actualises the potential to bear pain or act self-destructively is under perverse or unusual conditions. (Rogers, 1963)
- 4. Receiving the core conditions in therapy or otherwise would not have affected the individual's action. (Rogers, 1980).

McGarry (2018)

Conclusion

There were notes that when analysed against the additional propositions of the AT, indicated that the act of suicide was potentially an expression of the AT.

Dear Mary,

You have been the best wife a man could want and I still love you after fifteen years. Don't think too badly of me for taking this way out but I can't take much more pain and sickness also I may get to much pain or so weak that I can't go this easy way.

With all my love forever –

Bill

Implications for practice

The challenge of striking the 'right' balance in terms of ethics, legality, your chosen way of working, the wishes of the client and your own personal position.

- Use of supervision (Reeves, 2015)
 - Exploration of the 'judgement' of whether a client's behaviour is 'constructive' or 'destructive'.
 - Exploration of the ethical and legal factors of working with risk
- Counsellor's personal position (Reeves & Mintz, 2001).
- The counsellor's feeling of competence (Reeves & Mintz, 2001).
- Potential consequences of risk assessments (Reeves, 2018, Large et al, 2016).

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