Suicide Notes

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Detailed case reports of incidents of suicide and attempted suicide on the London Underground railway system between 1985 and 1989 were examined for the presence of suicide notes. The incidence of note-leaving was 15%. Notes provided little insight into the causes of suicide as subjectively perceived, or strategies for suicide prevention.

As unsolicited accounts of the concerns of individuals preparing to end their lives, suicide notes are potentially valuable sources of information about the psychological states of the suicidal. However, there have been few attempts to analyse these writings. In part this is probably due to the practical difficulties involved in obtaining a sample. Suicide notes are left by a minority of suicides and can usually only be obtained through close collaboration with coroners and others involved in the certification of deaths. These problems of data collection are sure to have constrained research in this area. Table 1 summarises the conclusions of previous studies with respect to the proportion of suicides who leave notes.

A description of a collection of suicide notes was published by de Boismont in 1856. Since then, there have been approximately 70 publications dealing with this subject, two-thirds of which have appeared since 1970. These studies have attempted to perform three distinct tasks.

(a) *Comparisons of genuine suicide notes with writings of the non-suicidal*. The classic study of this type was conducted by Shneidman & Farberow (1957a). These researchers collected 721 suicide notes left by men and women, 13 to 96 years of age, in Los Angeles county between 1944 and 1953. From this sample they selected 33 notes left by white, Protestant, American-born men aged 25 to 59 years. Simulated suicide notes were collected from 33 non-suicidal subjects matched for all these variables and occupation. This control group were asked to write the note they would write if they decided to take their own lives. The genuine and simulated notes were compared using Mowrer's Discomfort-Relief Quotient (Mowrer, 1953). This technique involves dividing the content of the notes into thought-units which are scored for their discomfort, relief, or neutral quality. The ratio of discomfort-units to discomfort-plus-relief-units is termed the Discomfort-Relief Quotient.

Another study of this genre compared suicide notes with simulated suicide notes and ordinary letters to relatives and friends using measures such as the average number of syllables per word and the noun-verb/adjective-adverb ratio (Osgood & Walker, 1959). Leenaars (1988) has continued the search for the distinguishing characteristics of the suicide notes in Shneidman & Farberow's sample. His protocol analysis is an attempt to investigate whether the information contained in these suicide notes validates theories of suicide in general.

Shortcomings of this kind of research are that it only reveals differences between suicide notes and ordinary letters on certain quantitative measures, and that the simulated suicide notes written by non-suicidal people differ slightly from the genuine article. In other words, laymen's conceptions about what suicide notes might be like are not very accurate. We learn little about the causes of suicide, the psychological state of the note-leaver, or the implications for prevention.

Table 1
Incidence of note leaving

% note leavers	Sample	Author(s)
15	721 suicides in Los Angeles 1944–1953	Shneidman & Farberow, 1957a
24	742 suicides in Philadelphia 1951–1955	Tuckman et al, 1959
15	881 suicides in Wales 1951–1955	Capstick, 1960
23	1418 suicides in Monroe County New York 1950–1972	Edland & Duncan, 1973
24	194 suicides in Philadelphia 1972	Beck et al, 1974
20	135 suicides in an Australian capital city 1972–1973	Chynoweth, 1977
20	82 probable railway suicides in the south of England 1979–1980	Symonds, 1985
42	104 female suicides in Stockholm 1982	Asgard, 1990
30	3127 suicides in West Berlin 1981–1985	Heim & Lester, 1990

Further, the archive which has been the basis for most of this research (the genuine and simulated notes contained in the appendix of Shneidman & Farberow, 1957b) is a very unrepresentative sample of suicide notes. It would be unwise to generalise from studies based on this sample to the experience of women, non-Protestants, adolescents, the elderly, or non-white Americans.

(b) *Comparisons of suicides who leave notes with those who do not.* The second issue has been whether note-leavers differ in any identifiable way from non-note-leavers. In a comprehensive study, Tuckman *et al* (1959) found no significant differences between the groups with respect to age, race, sex, employment, marital status, physical condition, and mental condition. Nor did the groups differ with respect to history of mental illness, history of previous attempts or threats, place of suicide, reported causes, or the nature of their medical care and supervision.

Beck *et al* (1974) compared note-leaving suicide attempters with non-note-leaving attempters on 57 demographic and medical history variables, and found only two significant differences (note-writers less often used drugs and had higher vocabulary scores). A similar analysis for completed suicides showed only one significant difference (more note-leavers had made a previous suicide attempt). Heim & Lester (1990) compared suicides who left notes with suicides who did not. They found that the elderly were more likely to leave notes than the young, and the widowed more than single or divorced persons. People committing suicide on a Monday were more likely to leave a note. Capstick (1960) discovered on the contrary that notes were left more often by young suicides.

The evidence suggests therefore that suicides who leave notes do not differ significantly from other suicides. The observed differences such as higher vocabulary scores and the excess of notes found on Mondays are of unclear significance.

(c) *Typologies of suicide notes.* There have been several attempts to devise typologies of suicide notes. These have generally been psychodynamically inspired. To give some indication of the thrust of this work several of these classificatory schemes are summarised in Table 2. There will be no attempt in this paper to assign notes to any of the classifications in Table 2, or to develop a new typology, although of course whether these broad categories have been found appropriate for this sample will be discussed.

Method

The study sample comprised a series of suicides and suicide attempts on the London Underground (LU) railway system. Suicidal acts were defined as cases of persons found on

Table 2
Classifications of suicide notes

Study details	Categories
Shneidman & Farberow, 1957b; 619 notes	1. Wish to kill. 2. Wish to be killed. 3. Wish to die.
Tuckman *et al*, 1959; 165 notes	1. Positive affect. 2. Negative affect. 3. Neutral affect.
Jacobs, 1967; 112 notes	1. First form notes. 2. Sorry illness notes. 3. Not sorry illness notes. 4. Direct accusation notes. 5. Will and testament notes. 6. Notes of instruction.
Edland & Duncan, 1973; 330 notes	1. Death as retaliatory abandonment. 2. Death as retroflexed murder. 3. Death as reunion. 4. Death as rebirth. 5. Death as self-punishment. 6. Death as punishment for society. 7. Death as a justifiable solution.

the tracks in front of incoming LU trains, regardless of outcome. It was hypothesised that this definition would include all recorded suicides and suicide attempts with a minimum number of false positives (incidents that did not involve suicidal behaviour). It also excluded obvious accidents: passengers caught in the doors and dragged along the platform; passengers struck by the train while picking up luggage from the platform; passengers struck while looking over the platform edge at something on the track; passengers who ran to board the train and fell between the carriages. Such accidents are a feature of most busy subway systems.

This definition was designed to maximise reliability. It left little room for discretion on the part of the data collector. No attempt was made at the data-collection stage to attribute motives to persons involved in incidents. It was hypothesised that the vast majority of so-defined incidents would be deliberate.

The British Transport Police (BTP) maintain detailed files for all incidents of death and injury sustained on the London Underground railway system. The victim's age, sex, and if they were receiving psychiatric treatment are routinely recorded. These files also contain statements from three different groups: the train driver and guard; independent witnesses to the event; the victim's next of kin. Also included are police and LU internal incident reports. The former contain a brief summary of the inquest proceedings.

All available case files for incidents which occurred during the period 1985 to 1989 and which satisfied the operational definition were examined: 409 files were available, 253 for fatalities, and 156 for non-fatalities.

There is usually at least one witness to LU suicides. Cases of trains running over a body without the driver or a passenger noticing are extremely rare events. Thus by examining witness statements and the other documentary evidence contained in the BTP files it was possible to construct a detailed picture of each incident and to

ascertain which cases were accidents and which, on the balance of evidence, deliberate acts.

Only 7% of the cases examined could be ruled out as definite accidents on the basis of witness statements. The 'true accidents' tended to involve alcohol and occur late at night; most involved men. These cases were omitted from the analysis. The remainder (242 'probable suicides' and 138 'probable suicide attempts') were considered to be deliberate acts, regardless of the verdict returned at the coroner's inquest, and these files were scrutinised for the presence of a suicide note. In a minority of cases it was known that a note had been found, but a copy was unobtainable.

Results

Notes were found for 36 probable suicides (15%) and six probable attempted suicides (4%). Thirty-seven of these notes were available for inspection: in 24 (65%) cases the note was found on the person; in 10 (27%) it was found at their home, and in one case the note was left with a friend. In the remaining two cases, information concerning the location of the note was not available. Thirty-three victims left a single note, one left two notes, and in three cases three notes were found.

The mean age for male note-leavers was 38.9 years (s.d. = 19.3; range 16–77 years). For females the mean age was 46.9 (s.d. = 19.6; range 18–76 years). Just over half of all note-leavers were male. These age and sex distributions were similar to those of LU suicides in general (Farmer *et al*, 1991). Approximately one-third of both note-leavers and non-note-leavers were psychiatric patients at the time of the incident.

Notes ranged from a 17-word message scribbled on the back of a railway ticket, to an 800-word stream-of-consciousness-essay written over the course of an hour sitting on a bench in the railway station and ending with a description of the last few steps towards the railway line and the final preparations for the arrival of the train. The median length of notes was 120 words. All but two were handwritten.

The vast majority of notes were rational although the typical cognitive state of note-writers was of constriction – there were no perceived alternative courses of action. Notes described death as the only option, the only way out. The content of two notes was clearly delusional, the suicides in these cases being attempts to escape from alleged unbearable persecution. There was a single attempt at humour – a request that the body be used as animal food was part of a note written on the reverse of an organ donor card.

Specific reasons for the suicidal act were relatively uncommon. In 21 (57%) notes there was no attempt to explain the reasons for this behaviour; there were no clues to suicide. Typically the notes contained statements which described general dissatisfaction with life, feelings of great weariness, and the desire for relief from unbearable tension. Note-writers had decided to relinquish the struggle to survive. What reasons were given fell into the following main categories: financial difficulties (mentioned in six notes); the end of a relationship, or other interpersonal problems (six notes); and illness (three notes).

Five note-writers stated that their intention was to jump in front of a train and in four cases a particular station

was mentioned. In one case this method was chosen after two attempted overdosages during the previous week. In another, the railway was chosen in order to make some sort of mark or statement. In the remaining cases the reasons for choosing this particular method were not divulged.

There were insufficient data to allow an analysis of the concerns of note-leavers by age and sex, although it appeared to be the case that the longest and most detailed notes were left by the younger people. These notes were occasionally dramatic accounts of the factors which led to the suicidal act. They portrayed suicide as a revolutionary act, a blow for freedom or individual liberty, or the inevitable outcome of ontological insecurity.

There was only one hostile note. This was a tirade by an adolescent male against his mother and sister. Typically notes were mundane, containing details of the victim's identity and listing contact addresses and telephone numbers together with lists of instructions concerning financial matters and burial. The overwhelming affect was sorrow and concern that those left behind would understand their actions and forgive them. They were moving pleas which attempted in advance to absolve others from any guilt they might feel. The decision to commit suicide was described as intensely personal and a matter of individual choice which could not have been prevented by others, and the emphasis was on trying to reduce the anguish and self-blame which note-writers felt would affect their next-of-kin.

Discussion

It is unlikely that the different incidence of note-leaving observed for suicides and failed suicides was due to differing levels of suicidal intent. In fact, it appears that survival after suicide attempts on urban passenger railways depends on structural aspects of the station-environment and is independent of the wish to die (Farmer *et al* 1991; O'Donnell & Farmer, 1992).

The greater proportion of notes recorded in fatal cases was probably due to the thorough police investigations required to collect evidence for the coroner's inquest. The victim's clothing is searched, and their next-of-kin are contacted and questioned. A visit is made to the victim's residence. If a suicide note has been left, it will usually be uncovered by these procedures.

By contrast, survivors are generally taken from the railway station to the nearest hospital. If they are uninjured they are occasionally discharged on the spot. More often they are detained for psychiatric assessment. If treatment of any kind is required they are admitted. If a suicide note is found among their possessions, the police may be notified. However, the police do not routinely search for such documents, nor do they visit and search the victim's home-address. The survivor has the opportunity to destroy the note if so desired. Thus, it is clear that in these cases there is far greater scope for under-detection. Due to the more complete data available for

suicides in this sample, the proportion of notes found for suicides (15%) is an appropriate overall incidence figure.

All of the estimates of the incidence of note-leaving shown in Table 1, with the exception of Symonds (1985), relate to deaths which have been officially certified as suicides. Due to the high standard of proof required in law for a verdict of suicide, it is clear that officially certified suicides are an underestimation of the true number of suicidal deaths. Further, the presence of a suicide note increases the likelihood of a suicide verdict. Lester (1988) gave the extreme example of an American coroner who would not return a suicide verdict unless there was evidence of a note: a note was the necessary and sufficient condition for a verdict of suicide. It is therefore likely that the incidence figures in Table 1 generally overestimate the proportion of suicides who leave a note.

This study, by contrast, concerned all suicidal acts on the London Underground, regardless of outcome or verdict returned by the cornoner's jury. If only LU deaths which resulted in verdicts of suicide were included, the finding would have been that in 22% of 'suicides' a note was left. This significant overestimation is a feature of almost every published report.

Given that notes are left by such a small minority of suicides, their relevance to our understanding of suicide in general must be questionable. Although note-leavers and non-note-leavers have not been shown to differ on a number of demographic and medical history variables (Tuckman et al, 1959; Beck et al, 1974) there are interesting variations in the proportions of suicide notes left by persons using different suicide methods.

Heim & Lester (1990) found that notes were left by 45.4% of suicides-by-medication and 39.9% of suicides-by-gas. The same was true for 9.6% of those who committed suicide on the Berlin public transport system and 13.5% who jumped to their deaths from a height. Tuckman et al (1959) found that the only significant difference between note-leavers and non-note-leavers was choice of method. More note-leavers used poison and firearms and fewer used hanging. There is no obvious explanation for these observations.

The suicide notes in this sample were usually terse and gave little insight into the note-writer's psychological state. Without detailed background information about the author, the notes were difficult to interpret and categorise. Few would have

fitted easily into existing classificatory schemes. They must be contextualised in order to be fully understood. The notes *per se* were mundane and gave little insight into the specific causes of suicide as subjectively interpreted, the reasons for choosing a particular method or new approaches to prevention.

Acknowledgements

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