DEVELOPING A DISCUSSION AWAY FROM BIOMEDICAL APPROACHES TO ONE EMBEDDED IN THE SOCIAL AND CULTURAL LIFE OF INDIVIDUALS

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Abstract. Understanding suicide has long been a subject of great interest across many disciplines since the late nineteenth century when Durkheim stressed the significance of collective cohesion as a factor related to individual behaviour. Over time this relationship has shifted more to the study of individual behaviour affected by a plethora of varying variables. Rosa & Tavares (2017) suggest a move away from an inter-individual biomedical approach discussion on suicide, to one that takes into account the context of the cultural and social life of individuals. A theoretical argument for this perspective centres on the significance of meaning making within the dialogical self theory, coupled with the significance of how suicide is represented –referring to social representation theory—within the social and cultural life of the individual. The ensuing model derived from this theoretical positioning suggests how the relationship between the Self and the sociocultural setting can serve as a base from which to pursue supportive programs in order to steer individuals away from the act of suicide. This commentary adds a further theoretical dimension to discuss how the role of identity in suicidal behaviour can also be developed by thinking of suicide as an act dialogically immersed in the sociocultural context, rather than solely as an individual identity position related to a particular sociocultural context.

Keywords: suicide, the dialogical self, social representations, identity construction

Suicide as a phenomenon remains an individual elusive human act yet at the same time is profoundly connected to the individual's world of Others. The paper by Rosa & Tavares (2017) suggests an innovative psychological perspective to the study of suicide by outlining a model that encompasses both the individual and the sociocultural relationship in this discussion. Their prerogative in following such a journey was based on their questioning and challenging of mainstream psychological research that has tended to concentrate on fixed inter-individual demographic differences within a biomedical model, disconnected from any cultural or social context. By exploring the possibilities of meaningful contextual and social experience in individuals, the authors discussed how dynamic social processes can be conceptualized to develop further understanding of suicidal behaviour. By exploring how the meaning of suicide might be

constructed across a range of these contexts, from both a subjective and intersubjective perspective, they anticipate developing a conceptual strategy to suggest alternative suicide prevention and intervention strategies. To that end, the paper is a useful contribution to the psychological discussion of suicide, both as a theoretical and conceptual development and as a way of effecting theory into the exploration of an empirical reality.

This commentary examines how the theoretical construction that underpins the semiotic-dialogical and sociocultural model can be unravelled to reveal the usefulness of such an approach and how this positioning might be developed further. First, the nature of suicide will be briefly alluded to. Second, a discussion of how the two theoretical trajectories, that of dialogical self theory (DST) and social representation theory (SRT) are interpreted by Rosa & Tavares (2017). Third, the concept of dialogism that encompasses both the theoretical trajectories is discussed and finally, the model resulting from the authors is discussed to demonstrate how such an approach can be a useful starting point for empirical work, the results of which can refine, enhance and develop the discussion further.

Suicide in Context

It can be argued that the relationship between the individual and the cultural context in which the representations of suicide are rooted is central to any discussion surrounding the phenomenon. Religious faith and beliefs are often referred to when discussing the acceptability or unacceptability of ending one's life, for example, commandments around killing and the subsequent shame brought to the family within Judeo-Christian belief systems. The tradition of *sati* in Sikh religious beliefs, where the wife of a deceased man committed suicide through burning at the time of his cremation endowing honour upon her family is now banned, but still remains in the representational field. Ideological beliefs around suicide, for example, the Western liberal ideology of euthanasia through individual choice when terminal illness can no longer be endured, is a more modern phenomenon. The mix of both religion and ideology can also be a factor in suicidal behaviour, for example, the practice of suicide bombing as an act of aggression to kill Others as well as themselves, in a state of perceived intractable conflict that bestows martyrdom to the individual within a framework of an afterlife existence. Finally, individual mental suffering resulting in suicide is one that is the most prominent in the literature that is discussed in terms of the biomedical model and inter-individual demographic approaches.

DST as a Theoretical Tool for Understanding the Act of Suicide

Rosa & Tavares (2017) suggest DST is central to exploring the relationship between the self and the sociocultural context of suicide in which the individual is embedded. As they suggest, central to the DST is the placing of the individual within a

multiple, social and contextual sphere through a relationship of diverse *I*-positions, each coloured by the prevailing cultural milieu (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2012). This perspective fits well as a theoretical tool for understanding how individuals can host a series of dialogical positions at any one time, where internal dialogue across a myriad of different selves allows a cross-fertilization of identities, that develop and operate according to a particular cultural or individual context. The dynamism of such an approach opens a forum of inner multi-perspectives, the exploration of which gives rise to the analysis and interpretation of an array of conflicting positions the individual may have at his or her disposal, in order to come to an identity position about a particular phenomenon related to a behavioural outcome, in this case, suicide. Of significance in this approach is the hierarchical nature of the dialogical self (DS), where a power structure gives rise to meta-meanings to manage a plethora of meanings. This is defined as a self organizing stabilizing system where macro level arguments act as promoter signs for the purpose of self-evaluation (Rosa & Tavares, 2017). Internal dialogue between *I*-positions plays a major role in their positioning, as meaning is constructed and reconstructed to adapt to prevailing contexts. The position of ''*I* as suicidal'' can thus be interpreted both as a semiotic negotiation within the DS, influenced by the external world through interpersonal and as an intergroup positioning, derived from social and cultural linguistic resources. As Rosa & Tavares (2017) argue, and exemplified by the work of Valsiner (2002), meaning making is not pre-existing but arises through the dynamic interplay of tensions generated by and between the prevailing patterns of multiple *I*-positions which give rise to an individual's sense of identity. It is argued that the resulting constructions and reconstructions continually fluctuate and organize positions into a power structured framework, where a coalition of voices can result in the silencing of some over others, in a continually evolving pattern (Hermans, 1996), related to and influenced by the sociocultural context in which the individual is rooted. Rosa & Tavares (2017) stress that "the influence of collective voices in identity should not be understood as deterministic" (p.), but arises from an individual's constructed and reconstructed positions that may agree or disagree with a dominant collective position, reflecting a sense of autonomy within the said individual.

This interpretation of DST in this exploration of suicide relies on the description of the construction of identities within the Self, mediated through a matrix of collective positioning, which accounts for a position as "*I* as suicidal." Yet suicide can also be described as an individual act when individuals carry out the means of their own self-destruction. At that moment in time he or she has arrived at a decision to follow a specific course of action, counter to the human instinct of preserving one's life. The DS position fades away at that moment in time, as an overriding motivation for annihilation occurs, suggesting that something over and above an identity position might also be at play. The act itself can be described as a process that is conceived by the individual as paramount and yet relates to a particular context, where a system of beliefs is

characterized by his or her perceptions of the world and a place from where he or she acts.

Constructions of identity as dialogically developed as suggested by DST, where a cross-fertilization of different selves results in a myriad of identities, demonstrate how suicidal behaviour might develop in a particular individual within a particular context and at a particular time. However, I argue that "*I* as suicidal" discussed as an identity position can alternatively be discussed as a state of being, as a dynamic process rather than an identity as an ontological entity. Identities can be described as concepts that relate to a position taken by a subject, for example, "*I* as a clinically depressed individual," "*I* as a terminally ill patient", "I as a resistance fighter," may give rise to reaching a state of being that relates to the suicidal context, but does not preclude it from any particular action based on the related identity position. Hermans and Hermans-Konopka (2012) discuss the Self as a socially constructed phenomenon where concepts, images and understanding are deeply determined by power relations rather than by self-contained individualized entities. The multiplicity of voices in the Self, rather than identities, where dialogues across internal positions play a role in positioning the individual (Hermans, 2002) is further enhanced by the extension of the Self where the collective voices, whether real or imagined, from friends, allies, strangers or enemies can become a transient addition to the positions in the Self-space (Hermans & Hermans-Konopka, 2012). Thus, to have a sense of Self is to be disposed to express oneself in particular ways and in particular contexts (Harré, 1998). Selves cannot be described as entities as such and can only perceive and act from one point of view at any given space and time.

Constructions of identity positions, as discussed by Tavrares and Rosa (2017), suggest a structural approach with a dialogical interplay across them to make sense of a perceived reality under consideration. Stocks of knowledge can be suggested as being socially created through action processes where personal beings are real enough, the source of which is socially sustained and collectively imposed as a cluster of theories and beliefs (Harré, 1983). These clusters and beliefs can be seen as being transmitted through three aspects of human psychology, namely, consciousness, agency and identity, which combine to view humans as cultural artefacts defined by the character of their beliefs. Thus *I*-positions can be a useful resource to explore how individuals might perceive these characters of their beliefs. However, the use of structural elements to conceptually interpret theoretical arguments can perhaps lead to a discussion that contains reified entities which hold the possibility of inhibiting alternative approaches. By stressing the concept of identities within DST as a structural concept, rather than one of process, a gap between the Self as a positioning being and one embedded with the Other to define the Self, can be problematic when designing a model to incorporate these theoretical ideas. We can talk of an identity structure as a type of category, for example, ''*I* am a Christian, a woman and a mother.'' But I might add a more

descriptive entity to that – ''*I* am a lapsed Christian,'' ''*I* am a fulfilled woman'' (on a good day) and so on, adding layers to this basic category. Furthermore, there are more dynamic aspects that one might attune to, for example, a constructed set of Christian beliefs that have led to a possible preferred positioning of the recognition and acceptance of the Other and at the same time might be discounted under certain contexts, for example, feeling threatened as a mother to protect one's children or being stigmatized, either personally or institutionally.

The interweaving of the dialogical relationship across the "different selves" whether they be identity constructions embedded in sociocultural life as suggested by DST, or clusters of theories and beliefs following Harré (1983), complements the interrelated self/sociocultural approach to the understanding of suicide, as Rosa & Tavares (2017) eloquently suggest. But is this enough? The addition of SRT into the author's account adds a further layer of theoretical enquiry that encompasses both the Self and the sociocultural world.

SRT as a Theoretical Tool for Understanding the Act of Suicide

Rosa & Tavares (2017) interpret SRT as the "dynamic relationship between individual cognition and knowledge shared by other groups" (p. 90) that both constructs knowledge systems and guides behaviour. Social representations of suicide are thus communicated throughout the contextual landscape to both illuminate and develop a particular notion of an object, and so be discussed through the cultural landscape to illuminate a particular explanation, for example, how the act of suicide is perceived and understood, dependent on the knowledge system of any given social group. Thus social representations of suicide as interpreted by the authors, act as semiotic mediating tools (Valsiner, 2003) that can guide constructions of meaning that exist both within the individual and act as communication across social groups, linking them both within a sociocultural and historical context (Valsiner, 2007). The choice of SRT as party to the discussion of suicide is suggested as "the confluence of individual and social elements conveyed by SRT makes it adequate for guiding the investigation of the cultural meaning of suicide" (Rosa & Tavares, 2017, p. 92). And although they suggest the dialogical appeal of the construction of meaning between individual *I*-positions located in the internal and external domains of the self-system, further clarification of this relationship would add to the discussion. Moreover, SRT represents a dialogical theoretical trajectory based on the importance of the Other in regard to the Self in any dyadic relationship. As Marková (2003) argued, this can be understood in terms of the *ego-alter* (or as Self/Other) and the object in question, in this case, that of suicide. This dialogical relationship introduces the *ego-alter* or Self/Other where "other's worlds become part of our conscious and all aspects of culture fill our own life and orientate our existence towards others" (Marková, 2003, p. 256). This relationship in essence remains a dialogical one as each subject cannot be separated from the relationship with

the Other, as they each act on the perceptions of the Other's positioning. In the case of suicide, the relationship between the Self of the individual as "*I* as suicidal" and the social life in which the individual is embedded, cannot be easily separated or categorized, as they are entwined with each other, and any explanation of one would require an explanation of the other. The state of "being suicidal" as a relational process linked to a constructed identity and permeating from social representations related to a specific time, place and social context, opens a discussion as to how these concepts might be interpreted, as to what might trigger the individual act of self-destruction. This is not necessarily a causal exploration but one that reflects an understanding of the array of different processes intertwined across this dialogical matrix.

Social representations are both a product and process which illuminate a consensus of a reality under observation, where the former suggests a structure as a particular version of an event, or part of a knowledge system that informs ideas and beliefs, and the latter, as a mechanism that underlies the development, processing and organization of such a structure.

Their sociocultural nature addresses the relationship between Self and social life that has demonstrated its usefulness in the theoretical discussion of suicide. Not only can these modalities of knowledge be explored, but also the functions derived from them that shape action, communication and the creation of social realities can be inferred (Moscovici, 2000). At the same time, social representations swirl within the community inform and construct our identities (Howarth, 2011) within a particular contextual and cultural framework. The relationship between the Self and society is central to SRT where an external stimulus is understood by the individual to warrant a certain kind of response, according to the way that the social representation represents a meaningful entity in that particular context (Wagner, 1993). What appears to stand between the discussion of DST and SRT by Rosa & Tavares (2017) is the emphasis on the perceived prime influence of the theoretical base trajectory, that is, of the individual as a subjective being in DST and the social being through an intersubjective relationship in SRT. I argue that both trajectories can be considered to be dialogical processes and both contain forms of content and process within their theoretical explanation that assumes the significance of the relationship between Self and Other. However, it is the discussion around the Self/Other relationship at the core of both and how this is discussed that is of interest.

Whilst DST acknowledges the Self as a dynamic and dialogical system where the Other acts as a way of colouring this Self-system and so affects knowledge and behavioural outcomes, SRT places the Other as central to the Self at every psychological turn. Attempting to divide this relationship into two separate, although interconnected components, becomes a challenge. Entity as a structure can then take over from a process based discussion, leading to further compartmentalizing of the Self that may ignore the very aspects of Other that may hold the key to further understanding

suicide as a phenomenon. Devising a model that can describe a process can then become locked into accepting theoretical constructs as entities with inbuilt assumptions which may not take into account this embedded dialogical Self/Other relationship.

The Semiotic-Dialogical and Sociocultural Model of Suicide

The model proposed by Rosa & Tavares (2017) focuses on the interweaving of both DST and SRT as a theoretical base where both constructions of identity across dialogical *I*-positions where ''*I* as suicidal'' results from a semiotic negotiation within the social and contextual representational sociocultural field. The authors suggested that ''*I* as suicidal'' might be triggered by a life event that affected the individual self-system leading to uncertainty and a need to restructure the Self through internal dialogues for stability to counteract the rising anxiety of provoking further the unresolved status. The social representations of suicide, as perceived by that individual, might then be positioned to lead to either a silencing of, or giving voice to, the constructed identity of ''*I* as suicidal,'' that is, whether the individual will contemplate and carry through the act of suicide or not.

There is an assumption that this model refers to suicide as a personal act of despair, rather than one exemplified earlier as being temporally predetermined. However, all suicides would follow a pattern of restructuring following uncertainty but over different time frames; even during a process of despair, the Other in the Self will remain dialogically present. The Other will be integrated into both Type 1 and Type 2 arguments as suggested by the authors, first, as desires and emotions shaped by social regulation and societal habits and second, as self-referential meanings constructed during interaction with Others. The desire to integrate the subjective and intersubjective dimensions is one that is alluded to, yet all behaviour can be described as having an intersubjective base from which to act even though it is the individual who carries out that act. Durkheim's (1897) classic study of suicide demonstrated this relationship between the Self and society, categorizing the act of suicide into processes of egoism, altruism and anomie. Of significance in his theoretical idea was the balance between the individual and collective experience in behavioural outcomes. Individuals could be protected, or not, from suicide through processes of which they may be quite unaware, for example, through social institutions in the form of cultural rituals, rather than through themselves providing social cohesion, demonstrating the Self/Other link.

The design of the model by Rosa & Tavares (2017), taking two theoretical trajectories, that of DST and SRT at its base, where the Self/Other relationship and a semiotic-dialogical and sociocultural account of suicide can illuminate the processes that can remain hidden from view when exploring the understanding of motivations of suicide, is a fruitful one and open to further discussion. Empirical work can further elucidate and develop this theoretical positioning. Choosing a methodology with which to continue refining the model by empirical research will be an interesting exercise. For

example, researching individuals' perceptions when in the position of "*I* as suicidal," as mediated through trained staff from charities such as the Samaritans, could provide a foundation from which to start an empirical exploration of this dialogical relationship. By connecting two theoretical paradigms that of DST and SRT, Rosa & Tavares (2017) have exemplified how each trajectory can be complemented through the discussion of dialogism to further not only our understanding of suicide, but also many other socio-individual acts, where the relationship between the individual and society is key to our understanding.

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