



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2016

123 Suicide Note Writers: Are Medicolegal and Forensic Psychiatric Items Linked?

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The goal of this presentation is to evaluate the correlation between medicolegal and forensic psychiatric aspects of suicide. Although numerous studies have been published on suicide, relatively few have systematically examined suicide notes as a source of data about these events from a multidisciplinary approach.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by underlining the role of suicidal reports as a valuable source to acquire important information about the state of mind of decedents in the time period prior to their deaths.

Some studies have found differences between suicide note writers and those who do not leave notes; it is therefore argued that information contained in suicide notes may not be generalizable to suicide decedents who do not leave notes. A retrospective study was conducted based on nearly two decades of external examination and crime scene inspection reports performed by the residents of the Institute of Legal Medicine of the University of Bari. A total of 249 suicide cases were reported between 1997 and 2015. In 48 cases (19.3%), one or more suicide notes were found during crime scene inspection or were reported by police officers assisting the residents during external examination. Suicide notes primarily consisted of handwritten letters (97.59%). In 39 cases, the suicide note writer was male, while in only nine cases were notes written by female decedents. These percentages were similar to those observed in the non-writers population (74.12% male, 25.87% female). The average age was 51.82 years in the note writers and 52.63 years of age in the non-writers.

The reviewed data showed a substantial difference in the methods used to commit suicide. The leading methods in suicide note writers were hanging (47.9%), gunshot wounds (18.75%), and falls from height (14.89%). In the non-writer population, falls from height were first (37.81%), followed by hanging (31.34%), and gunshot wounds (12.94%). The leading location where suicide was committed in both groups (58.33% of the writers group, 59.20% of the non-writers) was at home. A psychiatric condition, mostly depression, was reported for 22 of the 48 suicide victims who left notes (45.81%) and in the 46.76% of the population of non-writers. The suicide notes were analyzed based on content, according to scientific literature on the subject. In the group of suicide note writers with no diagnosed psychiatric condition, the leading content of the message was justification of the act (30.43%), followed by forgiveness (21.74%), farewell, instructions, and confirmation of the suicide (13.04% for each category, respectively). Anger was expressed in only one case of this subgroup, left by a father who accused his heirs of their behavior. This study reports a case of a 16-year-old boy who was bullied for being "feminine" and who hung himself, leaving two pages of handwritten instructions concerning his funeral.

In the subgroup of suicide note writers with a history of a psychiatric condition, the content of the messages was forgiveness (32.36%), justification (29.03%), and instructions (12.90%). In one case, the message, a series of numbers, was written on the hand of the decedent, a 42-year-old female with a diagnosis of bipolar disorder who was found hanging in the psychiatric ward. The analysis of the collected data showed percentages that were similar to those reported in previous studies.

The most significant data emerging from this research concerns the correlation between the suicidal method chosen in the note-writer group and in the non-writer group. It can be hypothesized that the note writing and the suicidal method are linked from a behavioral point-of-view: note writers tend to keep the suicide scene and the place where they leave the note close together, thereby avoiding suicidal methods that separate the decedent from the message. As a matter of fact, a suicide note was left in 7.69% of the railway suicides and in 8.43% of the falls from height. Furthermore, it has been observed that methods with a greater chance of suicidal plan failure are chosen by note writers: it can be speculated that note writers consider the possibility to exploit the failure of the method as a demonstrative act.

Suicide Note, Suicide Method, Multidisciplinary