



Psychiatry & Behavioral Science Section - 2016

I31 Means and Dynamics of Suicide in Human History

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After attending this presentation, attendees will understand the methods most commonly used to commit suicide, from both chronological and geographic-cultural perspectives.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by proposing an operational criterion for crime scene investigations in cases of undetermined cause of death or suspected suicide.

In view of the multi-ethnicity of modern societies, an investigative standard could also be proposed in which the professional figure, a person technically expert in discriminating between typical and atypical suicide, has become essential.¹ It is now important to contextualize the choice of the method of suicide and the environment in which it took place within the cultural setting, geographic region of origin and/or residence, and traditions of the victim.² To these elements, personal characteristics, any psychiatric pathologies involved, the type of work (if any) in which the subject was engaged, etc., must be added. According to a combined interpretation (the theories of aggressivity and behavioral psychology), suicides (people who kill themselves) are those who have reached the point of “convincing” their victim (themselves) to put an end to their psychic pain and thus to their life. They then elaborate this idea and plan to commit suicide. Ideation and planning may sometimes also be simultaneous.

This study examines the differences between methods of suicide in time and space, in order to understand the reasons for them, and why different methods, painful or otherwise, various techniques and motives, and possible geographic or cultural trends exist. This historical and analytical study encountered three basic problems: (1) worldwide, there are now nearly one million suicides per year; in general, no specific forensic death investigation is conducted, but rather a classic forensic death investigation, to reveal any positive signs of homicide; (2) true forensic work only began about a century ago and has only used scientific methods for a similar period (not always the case in every country in the world); and, (3) many countries do not supply official data on their annual numbers of suicides.^{3,4} This means that the exact dimensions of the phenomenon of suicide in the world are still underestimated. Although these limitations are clear-cut, they do not allow us to reach definite conclusions; however, it seems that the methods most frequently used over the centuries have been hanging, stabbing, and shooting.

In regard to dynamics (scene), *public* suicide, traditional in some ancient Far Eastern communities, has now taken on public forms in many other situations; they may be announced in public, filmed on social forums, or occur in public places.⁵ In more modern times, the suicide of mass murderers or serial killers, suicides in prison, mass suicides, suicide pacts, suicides within particular communities living with others (e.g., native Americans, Canadians, Australians, and Tasmanians), suicide by imitation, adolescent suicide, and homicide-suicide are all typical. Another important aspect of international reports of suicide is the fact that suicide by terrorists was a phenomenon already occurring in the 20th century.⁶

In conclusion, this study suggests the need for a deeper knowledge of suicide, so that particular attention can be paid to crime scene analysis in cases of undetermined cause of death and proper examinations made from the medicolegal, psycho-criminological, and anthropological viewpoints. This approach allows the formulation — according to criteria of high statistical probability — of a *positive* diagnosis of suicide in cases of undetermined cause of death or suspected homicide, based on the *logic of exclusion*. This may be an investigative criterion, although not necessarily the only one.



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Suicide, Forensic Death Investigation, Typical Suicide