



E66 Markers for Genuine and Fake Suicide Notes

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After attending this presentation, attendees will better understand the benefits and limitations of the most current research regarding distinguishing identifiers for genuine and fraudulent suicide notes.

This presentation will impact the forensic science community by illustrating the need to be aware of specific characteristics of suicide notes that suggest a staged scene.

If an estimated 20%-25% of suicidal people leave notes, the ability to accurately evaluate note authenticity during early investigative stages affects 8,000-10,000 cases each year in the United States.¹ Some notes were part of homicides staged as suicides and some ambiguous messages were erroneously accepted as suicide notes. Due to assumptions and errors, the percentage of fraudulent notes is unknown. Those not trained in note analysis tend to rely on cultural myths, which leads to improper decisions.² A standardized checklist for death investigators and first responders based on research concerning suicide notes used in staging can benefit the investigative community.

A survey of methods used for differentiating genuine from non-genuine suicide notes will be presented, including protocol statements from prior content analysis of suicide notes, computer software programs, and research on homicides staged as suicides.³⁻⁵ Collectively, these research areas provided constructs for developing the Suicide Note Authenticity Checklist (SNAC). Although the SNAC cannot prove that a suicide note is part of a staged scene, those notes that show a sufficient number of characteristics of known fake notes can alert investigators to the need for further investigation, such as expert note analysis. Case analysis will demonstrate the SNAC's utility in the field, and genuine notes will be compared against notes used in homicides staged to look like suicides.

The research items were genuine and non-genuine suicide notes, written by adults in the United States, 21 years and older, analyzed for specific language and behavior. "Genuine notes" are authenticated notes written by people who committed suicide. "Non-genuine notes" include those that were: (1) written by matched subjects in control groups; (2) computer generated as control or practice documents; or, (3) written by someone other than the decedent to stage a death as a suicide.

The SNAC is based on categories organized according to a frequency distribution ratio for items found in confirmed genuine and fraudulent notes, such as relationship status, emotional state, cognitive state, and personality issues. Within each category are differentiating elements for genuine versus fraudulent notes, which are useful in developing cues for authenticity. The SNAC was tested on a series of genuine notes, fraudulent notes, and control documents.

This presentation describes how the SNAC was developed, demonstrates how to use it, and makes suggestions for validation testing and for training, as well as for comparison with other populations, notably adolescents and those from other cultures.

Reference(s):

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