Erminia Colucci
David Lester

Suicide and Culture 2.0

Understanding the Context

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About the Authors

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Dedication

In honor of all the people, from all corners of the world, who have shared their stories and views with us to contribute to our understanding of suicide and questioning of "truths"

In memory of Professor Anthony J. Marsella

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Contents

Foreword

Suicide is at one time always an individual and social act. While the physiological, social, psychiatric, and psychological aspects of suicide have received considerable attention, this is much less so the case for its cultural aspects. The authors of this book have excelled in presenting a cross-cultural analysis of suicidality that convincingly looks at the meanings and contexts of suicidal behavior. These have often been neglected in the extant literature on suicide. They advocate a move from epidemiology to the phenomenology of this phenomenon. Cultural factors, as the authors cogently state, affect both rates and meanings of suicide. Furthermore, they clearly differentiate between suicide and self-harm, both of which are impacted by culture.

The authors are to be lauded for the sheer volume of ethnographic examples discussed and the presentation of previously unpublished new data. Of importance, marginalized groups like the Roma have been included; their mental health attracted little academic attention previously. Colucci's own lucid research among youth in university students in Italy, India, and Australia can be used as a paradigm for future work in this area. Lester makes the important observation that suicide is often performative, and this has significant implications for prevention.

Cultural considerations are of more than academic interest in suicidology. They are essential for those planning preventive programs. We cannot simply impose our Western notions of suicide on all cultures but rather need to include emic definitions of this act. This book should be required reading for psychologists, psychiatrists, and policy makers involved in working with suicidal individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. *Suicide and culture: Understanding the context* is a significant contribution to the cross-cultural suicide literature and I would thoroughly recommend reading it.

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Preface

This book is about suicide and culture, a topic that has been generally neglected both in suicide research and in prevention efforts. Since Colucci and Lester's *Suicide and culture: Understanding the context* (2013), this book has remained the only one specifically on this topic that was written in the last few decades. It also differs greatly from the organization of other books that have appeared prior to the previous book, which typically contain chapters with titles such as "Suicide in Asia" and "Suicide in Sub-Saharan Africa" or suicide in particular countries.

The present book first examines some of the issues in the study of culture and suicide, with a particular focus on the context of suicide, which is discussed by each of the authors, in separate chapters. The first section ends with the perspective of suicide as a staged performance, as proposed by Lester in Chapter 3.

The research section then begins by presenting the results of a mixed methods cross-cultural study by Colucci on the meanings of suicide in three cultural contexts – Australian, Indian and Italian – followed by a critique in Chapter 5. Chapter 6 discusses the phenomenon of suicide among Roma and Irish Travelers. Chapter 7 reviews what is known about a culturally specific form of suicide – sati in India.

In Chapter 8, Colucci describes a community-based suicide prevention strategy she co-developed for different populations. Chapter 9 presents conclusions and suggestions for future meaningful investigations into the role of culture and context in suicidal behavior and its prevention.

Chapter 1
Sociocultural Context of Suicidal Behavior – Its Importance and Neglect

Erminia Colucci

No one who kills himself does so without reference to the prevailing normative standards, values and attitudes of the culture to which he belongs.
Boldt (1988)

Although prevention efforts have improved, suicide remains one of the leading causes of death worldwide (World Health Organization [WHO], 2021). Every year, more people die as a result of suicide than of HIV infection, malaria, or breast cancer, or even war and homicide. While suicidal behaviors are present in every country, there are dramatic variations. The epidemiological differences between countries in the rates of suicide have led to research on the factors that predispose people in these countries to an increased risk of suicide. Few of these studies have addressed culture or ethnicity as an important dimension that might impact an individual's decision to take their own life. This missing area in suicidology has been noted by many scholars for some time, including Hjelmeland and Knizek (2011), De Leo (2002), Eskin (1999), Kral (1998), Leenaars et al. (2003), Shiang (2000), Tortolero and Roberts (2001), and Trovato (1986). In particular, we still have little understanding of the variation of a key aspect of suicide, hypothesized by various authors as differing across cultures – namely, the meaning(s) of suicide (Boldt, 1988; Douglas, 1967; Farberow, 1975; Leenaars et al., 1997; Lester, 1997).

However, recent advancements in suicide research have significantly broadened our understanding of the complex interplay between cultural factors and suicidal behavior. Since *Suicide and culture: Understanding the context* (Colucci & Lester, 2013), a growing body of literature has emphasized the need to consider cultural variations, socioeconomic factors, and minority stressors as pivotal elements in understanding and preventing suicide, while challenging the "biologization" or "psychiatrization" of suicide (e.g., Hjelmeland et al., 2019).

This chapter, partially based on Colucci (2006), opens with a discussion of how *culture* is a central but highly debated concept in suicidology. In spite of the difficulty in studying this construct, scholars have recognized the relevance of cul-

5. More specifically, (applied) suicide research is needed to understand and take into account the sociocultural and political contexts of suicidal behavior among populations at higher risk, such as refugees and Indigenous populations. People from refugee backgrounds, including those seeking asylum and internally displaced, while also having an array of protective factors for suicide, have also been observed as being at particularly higher risk of suicide. Of particular concern is that international agencies, such as Save the Children (see Colucci et al., 2022), have reported that within humanitarian contexts, children and young people are increasingly attempting to, or taking, their own lives. Such research, in addition to providing vital knowledge for appropriate suicide prevention strategies in these contexts, will also contribute to highlighting the underlying and overlooked connection between disproportionate prevalence of suicidal behavior within specific populations and the wider social, political, and economic conditions in which such populations are forced to live, as wonderfully explored in the book *Suicide and Social Justice* edited by Button and Marsh (2019).
   Similarly, more studies about what works in youth suicide prevention are needed because, as show in a recent systematic literature review and meta-analysis by Robinson et al. (2018), while in recent years the number of intervention studies in youth suicide prevention has doubled, only a few of these studies were conducted in LMICs or with populations known to be at increased suicide risk, such as those who have experienced forced migration and eradication of their cultural context and identity.
6. Finally, bringing together some of the points raised above, a call for more participatory and creative (arts-based and visual) research is made. While acknowledging that delving into the personal and lived experiences of suicide can be challenging (even more so in contexts where suicidal behavior is strongly stigmatized and/or illegal, particularly in LMICs), such research can provide deep insights into suicide and its prevention (Kabir et al., 2023). Creative, such as arts-based and visual, and participatory methodologies are ideal for such explorations.

Mic Eales, by carrying out both his undergraduate and PhD dissertations on arts and suicide has led the way (Figure 1 and Figure 2), not only in the use of creative methodologies such as those integrating visual arts as tools for research, but also regarding the essential place that participatory and first-hand approaches have for challenging the status quo of suicide research and its prevention (Eales & Colucci, 2017). I had the honor of collaborating with Mic to organize the *Inspired Lives* exhibition, which brought together other artists in Australia who also used their creative practices to explore and share their lived experiences of suicide (Middleton & Colucci, 2012). Some of his insights

Figure 1. Screenshot from the documentary *Different Voice, Different Perspective* (2017, Mic Eales). Reproduced with the artist's permission.

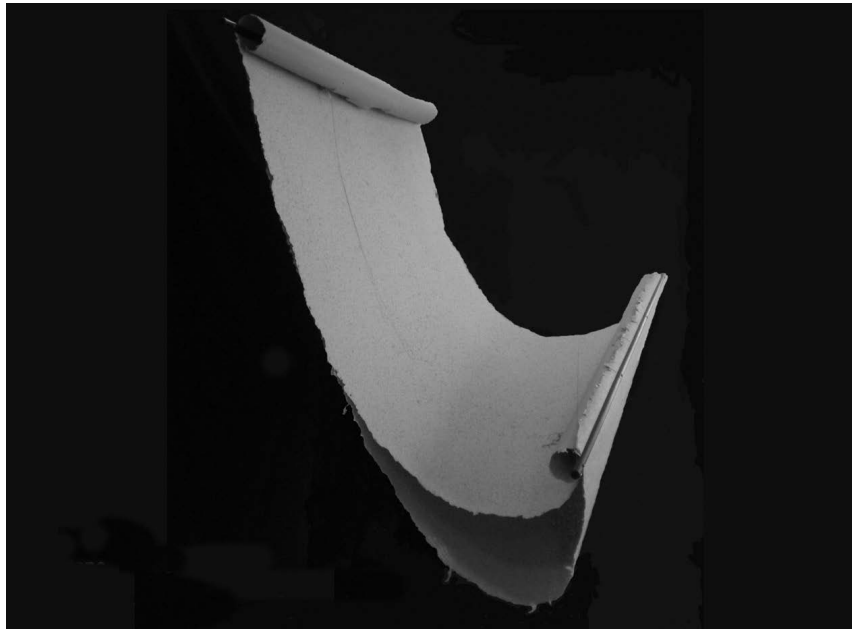

Figure 2. *Paper Shadows* (2010, Mic Eales), artwork shown in the Inspired Lives exhibition. Reproduced with the artist's permission. Curated by Amy Middleton and Erminia Colucci at The Dax Centre (October 11, 2012–January 11, 2013, Melbourne, Australia).

Chapter 2
Culture and Suicide

An Overview

David Lester

Culture provides a set of definitions, rules, and standards that are shared by members of a society. These rules and standards shape and determine the range of what is considered to be an appropriate behavior in a cultural setting. Culture influences the behavior of nationalities, ethnic groups, and subgroups within a nation.

The aim of this chapter is to present an overview of some of the topics and issues that are present in the interaction of suicide and culture. A major dichotomy here, of course, is based on the level of analysis. The interaction can be explored for the aggregate suicide rate of a culture and also for the individual suicide living in a particular society or culture. Let us first look at the interaction at the aggregate level.

Societal and Cultural Suicide Rates

It is an obvious fact that societal suicide rates differ widely over the nations of the world. As shown in Table 1, male suicide rates in 2019 ranged from 45.4/100,000 per year in Lithuania, to 3.3 in Honduras. For women the suicide rates ranged from 16.9 in South Korea, to 0.7 in Kuwait and Venezuela. Knowledge of worldwide trends in suicide are limited because many African, Middle Eastern, and Central and South American countries do not report their suicide rates to the World Health Organization, and those rates are estimated using algorithms.

For the nations shown in Table 1, the male suicide rate/100,000 population is higher than the female suicide rate. These differences in national suicide rates are large and generally stable over time. For example, in Table 2 the suicide rates/100,000 population for 16 nations in 1901, 1950, and 1990 are shown, and despite fluctuations, the rates are relatively stable.

Suicide rates also vary widely over the different geographic regions of a nation (e.g., between American states and Canadian provinces, suicide rates increase toward the west; Lester, 1985) and over the different social groups

Chapter 3
Suicide as a Staged Performance

David Lester

Shakespeare, in his play *As You Like It*, said that "all the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players." Nikolai Evreinov (1927), a Russian playwright and essayist, formalized this notion by arguing that we are theatrical beings and that everything that we do in our daily lives is a drama staged by ourselves, in his words a *monodrama*. If Evreinov was correct, and everything in life is theatrical, why should our dying be anything less? If suicidal behavior, in part, is staged, then the role of culture in this staging is clear.

On September 18, 2010, Mitchell Heisman, aged 35, dressed himself in a white tuxedo, white tie, white shoes, and white socks. He went to Harvard Yard, a green area on the Harvard University campus, and shot himself in the head with a silver revolver on the steps of the Memorial Church in front of a group of tourists. He left a 1,905-page suicide note online, with copies mailed to friends and family (Lester, 2015).

At 5:00 a.m. on August 15, 2013, Martin Manley aged 60, went to the parking lot of his local police station, called the officers inside, told them where he was and that he intended to shoot himself. He then shot himself. Manley had spent the last 18 months creating a website outlining his life and the reasons for his decision to die by suicide. He chose the setting for his death that he did, in order to spare his landlord and siblings from having to discover his body (Lester, 2014a).

Not every suicidal death is as dramatic as these two examples, but it can be argued that every suicidal person stages their suicidal action. They make choices as to whether to leave a note, what method of suicide to use, what to wear, where to die, and whether they want witnesses to their action. Many of these decisions have personal meaning, but there are also gender and cultural scripts that affect people's choices. It is well documented that many suicides have a history of previous nonfatal suicidal acts and, in the present context, these nonfatal acts can be viewed as rehearsals for their later fatal action.

Dramatic performances typically involve a script, rehearsals, wardrobe, venue, audience, and the actual performance. Although dramatic performances often have a written script and an audience and take place in a theater, these elements are not necessary. For example, dramatic performances can be improvised and, therefore, lack a script. Dramatic performances construct a meaning through the selection of actions and arrangements. Most dramatic

Chapter 4
Cultural Meanings of Suicide
A Cross-Cultural Study

Erminia Colucci

Overall, the suicide rates of nations tend to be stable over time and very different from one another, and these differences are largely maintained when people migrate to a new country (Colucci et al., 2018; Colucci et al., 2017; Voracek & Loibl, 2008). These observations raise the question of what impact culture and ethnicity have on people's suicidal behavior. While we have considerable knowledge about the prevalence of suicidal behavior and about risk factors (such as depression, anxiety, drug and alcohol dependence, and physical and sexual abuse), we still have little understanding of cultural influences on suicide. For instance, Eskin (1999) noted that "although the prevalence of youthful suicidal mortality varies widely, suicidological investigations have often failed to adopt a cross-cultural perspective. ... Further cross-cultural work is needed to unpack the effects of culture on a seemingly very personal act like suicide" (p. 188).

This is particularly true for youth suicide, and even more in relation to in-depth studies, as it emerged in my previous literature review (Colucci & Martin, 2007a; 2007b) and a recent review of qualitative studies in low- and middle-income countries (LMICs; Kabir et al., 2023). The review of 82 cross-cultural studies on youth suicide revealed the lack of both quantitative and qualitative cross-cultural studies on youth suicide. Most of the research, at that point, had been conducted in the US, mainly addressing differences among Blacks, Whites, and Hispanics, and few studies had explored ethnicity in depth. In almost all of the research, race and ethnicity were just two of many demographic variables analyzed and not the central focus of the study. A major limitation of the research was the categorization of people into one "racial" group, ignoring the fact that one race (e.g., Asians) may actually include many diverse ethnic groups (such as Chinese, Indians, and Vietnamese), and there was also a neglect of subcultures. Some studies found ethnicity not to be related to suicide risk, while others found it to be important. Thus, more studies are needed to clarify the impact of culture on suicide, as argued also by Borowsky et al. (2001), who have stated, "A better understanding of factors that predict and protect against suicidal behaviors among racial/ethnic groups of adolescents is needed to identify modifiable factors and develop culturally responsive prevention and intervention strategies" (p. 485).

suicide with students of the opposite sex, in each country at least two groups were organized as mixed gender, with a further group of women only and a group of men only.

In summary, four groups in Italy (35 students), five in India (41 students), and four in Australia (20 students) were organized for a total of 96 students and 24 group sessions. More details for the samples are reported in Table 9.

Table 9. Focus group samples for study described in this chapter

	Number	Mean age	Age range
Italy			
Men	15	20.3	19–23
Women	20	21.0	19–24
India			
Men	25	19.6	18–24
Women	16	21.3	19–24
Australia			
Men	8	20.3	18–23
Women	12	19.9	18–24

The Questionnaire

After an extensive literature search (see Colucci, 2006; Colucci & Martin, 2007a, 2007b), I was unable to find an instrument that suited my research questions, therefore I built a questionnaire titled "Exploring the Meaning of Suicide." This included questions about reasons for attempting and completing suicide, a suicide attitude questionnaire, questions about exposure to suicide and a history of suicidal ideation and behavior, case scenarios, a "Cultural Identification Battery," and some open-ended questions exploring suicide meanings and mental constructions and suggestions for youth suicide prevention.

To investigate the students' beliefs about the reasons for youth suicide attempts, participants were asked, "In your opinion, when a young person makes a suicide attempt, what are the reasons?" and were offered seven possible reasons to be scored on a 5-point Likert scale from the highest disagreement ("*no*") to the highest agreement ("*yes*"). The question about reasons for youth suicide was a ranking order task: Participants were provided with 14 categories of possible reasons for young people to kill themselves, which they had to rank from the most important (*Rank 1*) to the least important (*Rank 14)*.

The greatest variety of answers between groups and across cultures concerned feelings. In Italy, the most consistent answers across groups were that a young person, before trying to take their life, feels despair, loneliness, confusion, fear, pain and suffering, and sadness. In India, these feelings were loneliness, disappointment, irritation and anger, hopelessness, worthlessness and meaninglessness (of life and themselves), shame, sadness, and depression. Australian participants believed that suicidal youth might be sad and depressed, but that they might also feel happy, relieved (from their problems), and at peace (because everything will be over soon). Other feelings mentioned across groups were anger, fear and anxiety, feelings of control and power, pain, and emotional pain.

Basically, across cultures, participants thought that suicidal people feel sad and depressed (although some participants, especially in Australia, suggested opposite feelings such as happiness). Feelings of loneliness and hopelessness and despair were suggested more often by Italians and Indians. Fear and anxiety was suggested more often by Italians and Australians compared with Indians. Anger was mentioned more often by Australians and Indians, and the latter was the only group to believe that suicidal youth feel shame. Figure 5, Figure 6, and Figure 7 summarize the key themes that emerged in the three countries.

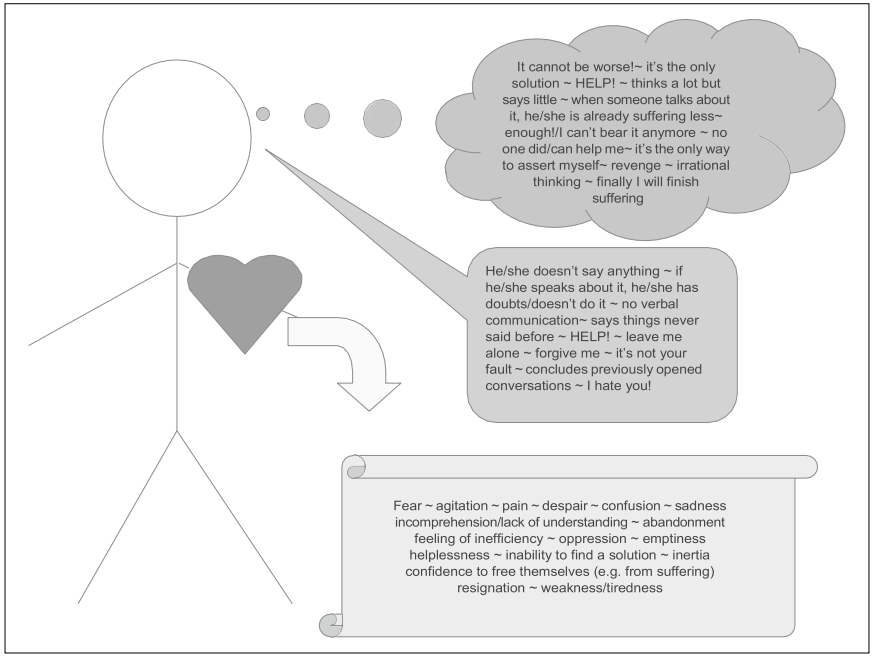

Figure 5. Beliefs among Italians about what the thoughts and feelings of a suicidal youth could be.

Chapter 5
Cross-Cultural Research on Suicidality

An Example and a Critique

David Lester

The study of culture and suicide requires more than a discussion of the role of culture in suicidal behavior. It requires empirical research. There are many methodological issues that arise in cross-cultural research. What is interesting in most discussions of these issues is that there is frequent criticism and very little guidance as to how the research should be conducted. This essay will review a few of the theoretical and methodological issues and then examine research conducted by the author on suicidality in the US and in Kuwait.

Theoretical Issues

Integrating Cultural Factors With Biological and Psychological Factors

Ratner and Hui (2003) noted that studies of cultural factors often fall short. They not only fail to take into account biological (and we might add psychological and social) factors, but also they fail to provide a coherent, integrated, systematic model of the role that each factor plays. Ratner and Hui noted that researchers typically favor one set of factors over the others. Although criticizing some authors for this bias, they do not provide an example of what should be done.

There are some simple examples possible here. For example, culture may influence diet, which may influence physiological processes such as neurotransmitter levels in the central nervous system. Mawson and Jacobs (1978) noted that the synthesis of serotonin requires the precursor amino acid L-tryptophan. Corn has low levels of L-tryptophan, and so individuals in cultures with high levels of corn consumption may have lower levels of serotonin, thereby making them more prone to behaviors such as depression and aggression to-