Precarious Lives: An Exploration of the Politics of Female Death by Suicide

Conference or Workshop Item

Precarious Lives: An exploration of the politics of female death by suicide

Sharon Mallon PhD
Lecturer in Mental Health
It started with the following book

Butler (2010) uses the term precarious lives to distinguish between lives which count as lives and deaths which count as deaths.
Fundamental politics of knowledge production

Who has power? Foucault rules. by Tania Smith

[Cartoon with characters and dialogue boxes:
- I have power
- I don't have power.
- I should have more power.
- dream on.]
Structural and academic politics of knowledge production in suicide research

What is being funded in suicide research?

What is being published in suicide research?

How is suicide research conducted?
Politics of Gender and Suicide: What is being funded?
Politics of Gender and Suicide in the literature.

• In the literature the issue of female suicide appears lost, with a few exceptions (Key authors, Canetto, Jaaworski, Lester).

• Female suicide is rarely discussed in isolation from male suicide, except when it is used to highlight particular issues among male suicide.

• There are many opening lines in which the problem of high male suicide rate is established by ‘othering’ lower female suicide rates (Alson, 2012; Cleary, 2012; Joiner, 2010).
Academic discourse of gender and methods of suicide

• High levels of help-seeking and suicide attempts among females prior to suicide are not problematised; instead, such statistics are used to highlight the low levels of help-seeking among men (Prior, 1999).

• The seriousness of male behaviour is highlighted by drawing attention to the ‘less violent’ and ‘less successful’ methods used by women (Hawton 2000, Joiner 2010, Schapira et al. 2001).
The ‘Cry for Help’ Discourse

- Women are more likely to attempt suicide
- Women are less likely to die by suicide
Academic discourse of gender and reasons for suicide

High levels of mental illness among female suicide cases have been used to highlight the social nature of male death by suicide (Hawton, 1992).

‘Crisis of Masculinity’: Social Science and Medicine devoted an entire issue to the analysis of men, masculinities and suicidal behaviour (Cannetto & Cleary, 2012).
Politics of Gender and Suicide: How was suicide research traditionally undertaken?

Often relies upon the Coroner’s verdict- But women are less likely to be given a suicide verdict (Madge and Harvey, 1999; Liebling, 1994)

Psychological autopsy is generally focused on assigning psychiatric diagnostic categories post death. But these are of limited utility when trying to prevent and understand suicide (Walker and Towl, 2016).

Standard approaches to suicide research fail to grasp the full complexity of suicide among women.
Public Discourse on suicide:

Characterised by heightened awareness of male vulnerability to suicide

Males are four times more likely to take their own life
Men are three times more likely than women to die by suicide. This Christmas, some children will miss out on something very special – a hug from dad. Give £4 to help answer one of the 198,000 calls we will receive over Christmas.

Give the best Christmas present ever
Help us keep a family together this Christmas

WWW.SAMARITANS.ORG
Not affiliated with Facebook

68 Likes  2 Comments  15 Shares
Men are more than 3 times more likely to die by suicide

Talk to us any time you like, in your own way — about whatever’s getting to you.

#mhw15

Samaritans
A registered charity.

Irish men are four times more likely to die by suicide

Charity Console reveal 62 per cent of text line messages come from males

Give the best
Help us keep a famil

WWW.SAMARITANS.
Not affiliated with Fa
Why is this a problem?

1,566 women killed themselves in 2015 in UK

• Rate is rising
  
  2013: 4.8  
  2014: 5.2  
  2015: 5.4  
  
  (suicides per 100,000 people)

• Suicide rates among young women are particularly concerning

  2006: 67 young women aged 20-24 died by suicide
  2015: 118 young women aged 20-24 died by suicide
  
  A rise of 76 %

Source: ONS Data
Beauvoir argues that throughout history women have been defined as the other sex, as an aberration from the ‘normal’ male sex.

“For a long time I have hesitated to write a book on woman. The subject is irritating, especially to women: and it is not new”.

Simone de Beauvoir
The Second Sex (1956)
Basic tenets of feminism is that women must define their experience....
The women were aged between 14 and 82 years, with an average age of 39 years.
The undescribed experiences of the female suicide: A crisis of femininity?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>&lt;25</th>
<th>25-44</th>
<th>45-64</th>
<th>&gt;65</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Bereavement</td>
<td>5 (30%)</td>
<td>10 (30%)</td>
<td>9 (45%)</td>
<td>2 (28%)</td>
<td>26 (34%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Incl. Bereavement by Suicide)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood</td>
<td>4 (24%)</td>
<td>16 (47%)</td>
<td>3 (15%)</td>
<td>2 (29%)</td>
<td>25 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexual Assault</td>
<td>4 (24%)</td>
<td>9 (27%)</td>
<td>7 (35%)</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>20 (26%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The described experience: Long history of mental illness, depression

The undescribed experience: sexual abuse

It came out that she had been sexually abused, which I knew nothing about when we got married…and I spoke to her family about it and her family said that this didn’t happen, it was supposed to be by another member of her family, and that she had made it up. So there was a lot of issues going on there. She probably, I would say, attempted suicide on six or seven occasions before it (the death) actually happened.

Husband
The described experience: Mental illness, menopause.

The undescribed experience: bereavement and loss

But there was that big a combination of events at that time. My wife was being bullied at work, her father had died, we had been broken into and burgled and she had lost her wedding ring and her mother’s wedding ring, she was going through the change of life. I had a whole catalogue of explanations for the doctors and none of them probably was the right one.

Husband
Why are female suicide rates highest in early 50s? Good Q @HarmlessUK conf today. Debt, children leaving, marriage under strain, job prospects, alcohol, phys illness or (said questioner) menopause?
Ireland has the highest suicide rate for women u19 in Eu. Why aren't we talking about this, there has to be a bigger conversation. #iaymh2017

5:07 am - 25 Sep 2017

78 Retweets  153 Likes

Pierce Kennedy  🇮🇪 @PierceKennedy · 27 Sep 2017

Replying to @MarinaDPolitis

You having a laugh Marina; the FACTS remain 80% of #suicides in ROI are MEN; it has been for DECADES..... 😞 #IAYMH2017

3 Comments  78 Retweets  153 Likes
Politics of Gender and Suicide: Discussion Points

Recent studies tend to be focused on lack of help-seeking among men.

Studies which look at failed help-seeking among women who die by suicide are rare/absent from the literature.

Sociological autopsy shows more scope for adding to our contextual understanding of female death by suicide.
It is clear that suicide among women is at least as distinct and complex as suicide among men. But it is not being warranted sufficient gender specific attention.

We need a new discourse of suicide among women, one which does not medicalise, trivialise, dismiss their experiences, or the circumstances in which their death takes place, in particular suicide attempts.
Abbreviated References:
ONS Suicide Statistics on Suicide 2015
Walker and Towl, 2016. Preventing self-injury and suicide in Women’s prisons
Contact details:
Sharon.mallon@open.ac.uk
twitter @sharonmallonphd