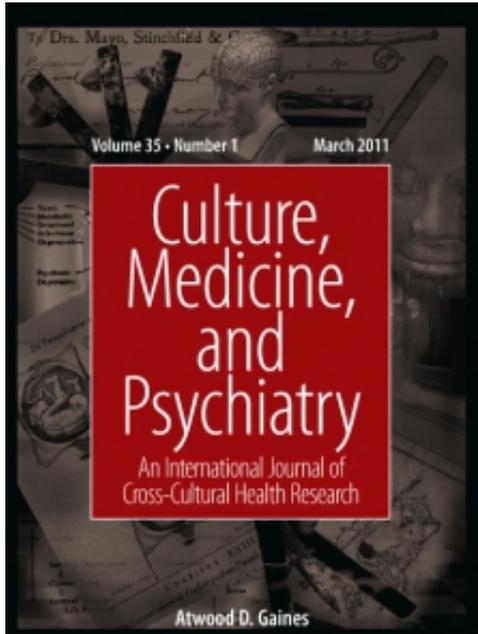http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600

Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide"

2012-06-18 08:51:47

By Aaron Seaman

The June issue of **Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry** is a special issue entitled, "Ethnographies of Suicide." As guest editors James Staples and Tom Widger write in their introduction:

> "This special issue—which has its genesis in a 2-day, international workshop3—comes at the end of a century of sporadic anthropological interest in suicidal behaviour, building on the groundwork established by scholars such as Malinowski (1949) and Bohannan (1960), but also going much further. Focusing on the act in its more 'everyday' occurrences while speaking to issues of 'protest' and 'escape' (that also have resonances for our understanding of 'suicide bombing' and euthanasia), it attempts to mark out a distinctive theoretical approach that draws from long-term ethnographic research (and related kinds of 'ethnographic seeing'—Wolcott 1999) conducted in diverse locations across the globe, including Mexico, Canada, England, South Africa, Palestine, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Singapore and Japan. By highlighting how the ethnographic method privileges a certain view of the subject, we aim to go beyond the sociological and psychological approaches that define the field of 'suicidology' to engage with suicide from our informants' own points of

view—and in so doing cast the problem in a new light and new terms." (185)

The articles which follow, including an afterword by Jean La Fontaine, include:

[Guest Editorial: Situating Suicide as an Anthropological Problem: Ethnographic Approaches to Understanding Self-Harm and Self-Inflicted Death](#)
James Staples and Tom Widger

> More than a century after Durkheim's sociological classic placed the subject of suicide as a concern at the heart of social science, ethnographic, cross-cultural analyses of what lie behind people's attempts to take their own lives remain few in number. But by highlighting how the ethnographic method privileges a certain view of suicidal behaviour, we can go beyond the limited sociological and psychological approaches that define the field of 'suicidology' in terms of social and psychological 'pathology' to engage with suicide from our informants' own points of view—and in so doing cast the problem in a new light and new terms. In particular, suicide can be understood as a kind of sociality, as a special kind of social relationship, through which people create meaning in their own lives. In this introductory essay we offer an overview of the papers that make up this special issue and map out the theoretical opportunities and challenges they present.

[Tales of Decline: Reading Social Pathology into Individual Suicide in South India](#)
Jocelyn Lim Chua

> In the south Indian state of Kerala, the nation's so-called suicide capital, suicide can often appear self-evident in meaning and motivation to casual onlookers and experts alike. Drawing on explanatory accounts, rumors, and speculative tales of suicide collected between 2004 and 2007, this article explores the ontological power of certain deaths to assert themselves as always-already known on the basis of perceived and reported demographic patterns of suicide. I demonstrate the ways suicides are commonly read, less through the distinct details of their individual case presentations than "up" to broader scales of social pathology. Shaped by the intertwined histories of public health intervention and state taxonomic knowledge in India, these "epidemic readings" of suicide enact a metonymy between

individual suffering and ideas of collective decline that pushes the suicide case to fit—and thus to stand for—aggregate trends at the level of populations. Focusing on how family navigated the generic meanings and motivations ascribed to the deaths of their loved ones, I argue that the ability of kin to resist, collude with, or strategically deploy epidemic readings in their search for truth and closure hinged significantly on their classed fluency in the social, legal, and bureaucratic discourses of suicide.

Suffering, Frustration, and Anger: Class, Gender and History in Sri Lankan Suicide Stories
Tom Widger

This paper explores competing stories of suffering, frustration and anger that shape the performance and reception of suicidal behaviours in contemporary Sri Lanka. Drawing from the results of 21 months of ethnographic fieldwork, I show how suicidal acts fit within broader narratives of class and gender experience and expression that draw from contemporary and historical 'folk' and 'state' discourses. Debates over whether suffering, frustration and anger are legitimate socio-effective states to exhibit come to determine the kinds of claims and counter-claims that suicidal people on the one hand, and those charged with their treatment and management on the other, can make with regard to the efficacy of suicide as a means of social action. Through such debates—not only what it means to be suicidal in Sri Lanka but also what it means to be middle class or working class, male or female, etc. are made and remade anew.

Chol Understandings of Suicide and Human Agency
Grace Imberton

According to ethnographic material collected since 2003, the Chol Mayan indigenous people in southern Mexico have different causal explanations for suicide. It can be attributed to witchcraft that forces victims to take their lives against their own will, to excessive drinking, or to fate determined by God. However, it can also be conceived of as a conscious decision made by a person overwhelmed by daily problems. Drawing from the theoretical framework developed by Laura M. Ahearn, inspired by practice theory, the paper contends that these different explanations operate within two different logics or understandings of human agency. The first logic attributes responsibility to supernatural causes such as witchcraft or divine destiny, and reflects Chol

notions of personhood. The second logic accepts personal responsibility for suicide, and is related to processes of social change such as the introduction of wage labor, education and a market economy. The contemporary Chol resort to both logics to make sense of the human drama of suicide.

Suicidal Performances: Voicing Discontent in a Girls' Dormitory in Kabul
Julie Billaud

Female suicide in Afghanistan has generally been given economic and psychological explanations. More rarely has its social dimension been analysed. In this paper, I underline the communicative potential of Afghan women's suicide in the 'post-war/reconstruction' context. I highlight its ambiguous symbolic power and its anchorage in the subversive imaginary universe of women's poetic expression. I argue that while reproducing certain cultural ideas about women's inherent emotional fragility, women's suicide also challenges the honour system in powerful ways and opens possibilities for voicing discontent. I qualify female suicide as the 'art of the weak' (De Certeau 1980, 6), a covert form of protest, a performance—in the sense of Bauman (2004)—that builds upon traditional popular 'knowledge' about gender in order to manage the impression of an audience and make women's claims audible.

Behind the Statistics: The Ethnography of Suicide in Palestine
Nadia Dabbagh

As part of the first anthropological study on suicide in the modern Arab world, statistics gathered from the Ramallah region of the West Bank in Palestine painted an apparently remarkably similar picture to that found in Western countries such as the UK and France. More men than women completed suicide, more women than men attempted suicide. Men used more violent methods such as hanging and women softer methods such as medication overdose. Completed suicide was higher in the older age range, attempted suicide in the younger. However, ethnographic fieldwork and detailed examination of the case studies and suicide narratives gathered and analysed within the cultural, political and economic contexts illustrated more starkly the differences in suicidal practices between Palestinian West Bank society of the 1990s and other regions of the world. The central argument of the paper is that although statistics tell a very important story,

ethnography uncovers a multitude of stories 'behind the statistics', and thus helps us to make sense of both cultural context and subjective experience.

Postcolonial Suicide Among Inuit in Arctic Canada
Michael J. Kral

Indigenous youth suicide incidence is high globally, and mostly involves young males. However, the Inuit of Arctic Canada have a suicide rate that is among the highest in the world (and ten times that for the rest of Canada). The author suggests that suicide increase has emerged because of changes stemming in part from the Canadian government era in the Arctic in the 1950s and 1960s. The effects of government intervention dramatically affected kin relations, roles, and responsibilities, and affinal/romantic relationships. Suicide is embedded in these relationships. The author also discusses the polarization between psychiatric and indigenous/community methods of healing, demonstrating that government-based intervention approaches to mental health are not working well, and traditional cultural healing practices often take place outside of the mainstream clinics in these communities. The main questions of the paper are: Who should control suicide prevention? What is the best knowledge base for suicide prevention?

Gendered Endings: Narratives of Male and Female Suicides in the South African Lowveld
Isak Niehaus

Durkheim's classical theory of suicide rates being a negative index of social solidarity downplays the salience of gendered concerns in suicide. But gendered inequalities have had a negative impact: worldwide significantly more men than women perpetrate fatal suicides. Drawing on narratives of 52 fatal suicides in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, this article suggests that Bourdieu's concepts of 'symbolic violence' and 'masculine domination' provide a more appropriate framework for understanding this paradox. I show that the thwarting of investments in dominant masculine positions have been the major precursor to suicides by men. Men tended to take their own lives as a means of escape. By contrast, women perpetrated suicide to protest against the miserable consequences of being dominated by men. However, contra the assumption of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus', the narrators of suicide stories did reflect critically upon gender

constructs.

Mad, Bad or Heroic?: Gender, Identity and Accountability in Lay Portrayals of Suicide in Late Twentieth-Century England
Christabel Owens and Helen Lambert

Suicide research has relied heavily on the psychological autopsy method, which uses interviews with the bereaved to ascertain the mental health status of the deceased prior to death. The resulting data are typically interpreted within a clinical diagnostic framework, which reinforces psychiatric assumptions concerning the ubiquity of mental illness amongst those who take their own lives. The ways in which informants reconstruct the past and the meanings they attach to events preceding the suicide are rarely examined. This paper uses qualitative methods to analyse the narratives given by bereaved people in an English psychological autopsy study, in order to understand how they made sense of a family member's suicide. Some clear differences between the portrayal of male and female suicides emerged. The paper discusses the gendering of agency and accountability in relation to the differential medicalisation of male and female distress in the UK, and suggests that a preoccupation with mental illness in suicide research may have obscured other culturally normative understandings of self-accomplished death.

Ritual Vicissitudes: The Uncertainties of Singaporean Suicide Rites
Ruth E. Toulson

In this article, I examine how Singaporean Chinese families and funeral professionals work together to ritually manage the meaning and consequences of a death by suicide. While the now dated literature on Chinese mortuary practice emphasizes the formality and rigidity of death rituals, during fieldwork I noted many moments of confusion within ritual, moments of innovation, when relatives broke away from the already uncertain ritual script, and moments of deceit, when relatives conspired with funeral directors to hide the reason for a death. Through an examination of three funerals for suicide victims, including two cases in which the fact that the death was a suicide was hidden, I suggest that a focus on moments of confusion and of innovation paradoxically better captures the dynamism and efficacy of Chinese funeral rituals: here indeterminacy is indispensable to ritual form.

Suicide and the Afterlife: Popular Religion and the Standardisation of 'Culture' in Japan
Mary Picone

For an overwhelming majority of commentators, including many anthropologists, 'Japanese culture' is still associated with a positive view of suicide. Western-language writings have contributed by feedback loop to perpetuate this stereotype. Besides the local 'samurai ethic', Japanese Buddhism is also said not to prohibit taking one's life. However, the most popular examples of heroic self-sacrifice, from the Edo period to WWII, are fraught with covert contradictions. From ancient times to the present religious practitioners of all sorts have maintained that suicide creates unhappy, resentful spirits who harm the living. This article discusses many examples of a diverse series of narratives, from spirit medium's séances to drama to contemporary films, in which the anguished spirits of suicides are allowed to express themselves directly. After the figures rose alarmingly in the late 1990s various religious organisations have attempted to fight the stigma suffered by bereaved family members and have introduced new interpretations and new rituals.

Explaining Suicide: An Afterword
Jean La Fontaine

AMA citation
Seaman A. Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide". *Somatosphere*. 2012. Available at: http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600. Accessed June 18, 2012.

APA citation
Seaman, Aaron. (2012). *Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide"*. Retrieved June 18, 2012, from Somatosphere Web site: http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600

Chicago citation
Seaman, Aaron. 2012. Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide". Somatosphere. http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600 (accessed June 18, 2012).

Harvard citation
Seaman, A 2012, *Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide"*, Somatosphere. Retrieved June 18, 2012, from <http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600>

MLA citation

Seaman, Aaron. "Special Issue: Culture, Medicine and Psychiatry, "Ethnographies of Suicide"." 18 Jun. 2012. <u>Somatosphere</u>. Accessed 18 Jun. 2012.<http://somatosphere.net/?p=3600>