Aggressive suicide

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Abstract

While suicide is often considered deviant, it may also be a kind of social control that expresses and handles moral grievances. The moralistic nature of suicide is especially clear in cases where suicide is used to bring harm against others—that is, cases in which suicide is a kind of interpersonal aggression. The current paper explores aggressive aspects of suicide in a variety of social contexts. Anthropological studies reveal that in many tribal and traditional societies killing oneself is a recognized means of punishing others, who will be subject to supernatural curses or sanctions administered by third parties. Examining a sample of suicide cases in the contemporary U.S., I find that aggressive suicide also occurs in the modern metropolitan world. The chief punitive mechanism in modern aggressive suicide is the infliction of psychological harm, such as guilt. Drawing on Donald Black's paradigm of pure sociology and my previous theoretical work on moralistic suicide, we can explain aggressive suicide with the relational structure of the conflicts in which it occurs. Available data reveal that aggressive suicide is most likely to occur among intimates, and that variation in relational distance predicts the nature and severity of suicide's consequences for the living.

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1. Introduction

Across societies and throughout history, suicide has been condemned as a sin, punished as a crime, pitied as a symptom, or derided as a senseless waste. But though it is often considered...
deviant, self-destruction may also be a technique of social control. From activists who burn themselves in protest to criminals who hang themselves in remorse, much suicidal behavior is a way of expressing grievances and securing redress. In other words, self-killing may be moralistic, belonging to the same sociological family as strikes, boycotts, imprisonment, execution, banishment, gossip, and vengeance (Baumgartner, 1984: 328–330; Black, 1998: 66, 82; Manning, 2012).

The social logic of moralistic suicide varies from case to case. Usually, however, it combines the characteristics of two elementary forms of social control: avoidance and aggression. First, suicide involves an extreme curtailment of interaction, permanently severing relations between the self-killer and his or her adversaries. In this way it resembles other forms of moralistic avoidance, such as divorcing an abusive spouse, ceasing to speak with an obnoxious acquaintance, or resigning from a corrupt organization (Koch, 1974: 75; Baumgartner, 1984: 328–330; Black, 1998: 82). Secondly, suicide may express hostility and inflict harm upon a wrongdoer. In this way it resembles other forms of moralistic aggression, such as berating an incompetent coworker, beating a disobedient child, or executing a convicted murderer.

Here I explore the aggressive aspect of suicide, particularly how self-killers use their death to strike back at those they regard as wrongdoers. The discussion below first addresses patterns of aggressive suicide described in tribal and traditional settings, and then turns to aggressive suicide in the United States. Previous research has given scant attention to moralistic or aggressive aspects of suicide in contemporary settings. To correct this shortcoming, I draw on data from coroners’ official investigations to describe aggressive aspects of suicide in an American city. Finally, I consider the social habitat in which aggressive suicide occurs. Following Donald Black’s strategy of pure sociology, and my previous theoretical work on moralistic suicide, I demonstrate how aggressive suicide can be explained by the nature of the relationship between the potential self-killer and his or her adversary.

2. Aggressive suicide in traditional societies

Most published information on aggressive aspects of suicide comes from ethnographic studies of tribal and traditional settings—societies that are simple in the sense of having small local populations, a low division of labor, and little diversity of culture at the local level. One of the earliest discussions of this topic is that of Jeffreys (1952), who coined the term “Samsonic suicide” to refer to suicide for the purpose of revenge. Focusing on African societies, Jeffreys described two major mechanisms by which individuals might use self-destruction to avenge themselves upon an enemy: 1) supernatural sanctions and 2) sanctions imposed by third parties. These same mechanisms have been described by a number of other researchers and appear to have a wide geographical distribution.

2.1. Supernatural sanctions

Suicide is a source of supernatural pollution in many societies, and in some it is said to unleash forces that punish the self-killer’s adversaries. For example, in colonial Tanganyika

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1The elementary forms of social control are classified and explained by Black (1998: Ch.5). They include aggression, avoidance, negotiation, settlement, and toleration.

2Here I focus on cases in which suicide itself is the primary means of inflicting punishment rather than a consequence of directly attacking others, as when a terrorist pilots an airplane into a building to kill its occupants.
“When a man has a grievance, and receives no redress, he will, as a final resort, go before the wrongdoer and say, ‘I shall commit suicide, and rise up as an evil spirit to torment you’” (Gouldsbury and Sheane, 1911, quoted in Jeffreys, 1952: 119). The same practice is found in traditional India, where members of the Brahman caste might use suicide to avenge an injury—for “it was generally believed that the ghost of such deceased would harass and prosecute the offender” (Thakur, 1963: 63). Similarly, among Taiwanese farmers “the ghost of a suicide is believed to be particularly powerful and absolutely determined to bring tragedy to the people responsible” (Wolf, 1972: 163).

Posthumous supernatural vengeance is likewise prominent among the Maroon tribes of Suriname and French Guiana. These peoples share a belief in vengeful spirits called kunu—“the spirit of a person or god who was wronged during his lifetime, which dedicates itself to tormenting eternally the matrilineal descendants and the close matrilineal kinsmen of the offender” (Price, 1973: 87). One way of initiating a kunu is self-destruction. For example, in one case among the Aluku, “a man of the Awara Bakka lineage… committed suicide two or three generations ago when he was unjustly accused of a crime by a man of the Dju lineage. Since then, [his spirit] has been exterminating the Dju lineage little by little” (Hurault, 1961: 345). Another man “committed suicide when accused of sorcery by the people of his lineage. Since then, his [spirit] has caused sickness and deaths in his own village” (Hurault, 1961). In Maroon societies, supernatural aggression lies behind most suicides, and threats of suicide are a common feature of disputes (Lenoir, 1973: 105; Price, 1975: 36; Bilby, 1990: 46).

2.2. Third-party sanctions

The second mechanism of vengeance occurs when suicide leads to “societal reprisals” against the victim’s adversary (Jeffreys, 1952: 120–121). A common pattern is for a member of Clan A to commit suicide in response to an offense by a member of Clan B, prompting other members of Clan A to hold the offender liable for the death, for which they may demand compensation or swear vengeance. Among the Lusi of Papua New Guinea, for example, battered wives sometimes commit suicide to mobilize their kinsmen against an abusive husband. These suicides involve specific behaviors that ensure they will be recognized as moralistic acts and produce the desired response: by dressing in her finest, killing herself in front of a witness, and sending a message to identify the cause of her death, “a suicidal woman can reasonably expect her kin and friends to consider her to have been a victim of homicide—to have been killed by shameful slander and abuse” (Counts, 1987: 196). The guilty party must then pay restitution or face vengeance. But payment is no guarantee against violence: one self-killer's father accepted compensation from her husband and then contracted a sorcerer to kill him anyway (Counts, 1987: 199). In another incident, a New Guinea Highlander named Ethel hanged herself after being beaten by her husband Raphael: “Raphael's kin paid a large compensation payment to Ethel's relatives. In spite of this, Ethel's kinsmen met Raphael's plane when he returned to the Highlands [from working in nearby New Britain] and hacked him to pieces with axes as he stepped off the airplane” (Counts, 1987: 199). Though rarely this extreme, similar patterns of third party sanctions are found throughout New Guinea (e.g., Johnson, 1981; Stewart and Strathern, 2003). They are found in other times and places as well.

3The term “Maroon” refers to several related groups, all of whom are the descendants of escaped African slaves and share similar patterns of social structure and culture. These groups include the Paramaka, the Aluku, the Ndyuka (or Djuka), and the Saramaka.
The Iroquois of North America, for example, considered suicide an act of vengeance and treated the victim's adversary “much in the same light as a murderer” (quoted in Fenton, 1986:449). And among the Aguaruna Jivaros of Peru, the family of a suicide victim will “attempt to exact compensation in goods or cash” from whoever drove their kinsmen to self-destruction; failing compensation, “they may assume a warlike posture” (Brown, 1986:321).

Aside from kin, other third parties may punish an offender on behalf of the suicide victim. Among the Cheyenne of the North American plains, self-destruction would mobilize the community as a whole to banish the victim’s adversary from the community (Hoebel, 1976:159). In other settings, it is the government that acts against the self-killer's enemies. Such was the case in China during the Qing dynasty, where the legal code specified that driving another to suicide was a criminal offense. The result, according to one missionary, was “that if you wish to be revenged on an enemy you have only to kill yourself to be sure of getting him into horrible trouble; for he falls into the hand of justice, and will certainly be tortured and ruined, if not deprived of life…” (quoted in Pérez, Jr., 2005:62). According to this and other contemporary observers, such vengeance by suicide was common (Pérez, Jr., 2005:62–63).

In sum, anthropological evidence indicates that self-killing is often a way of indirectly attacking others. From the agrarian villages of traditional Taiwan, China, and India to the tribal societies of New Guinea, Africa, and the Americas, people sometimes resort to suicide to revenge themselves upon those who have hurt them. But this seemingly exotic phenomenon is not limited to the intimate communities of pre-industrial societies. Though the details vary, many modern suicides still include elements of interpersonal aggression.

3. Aggressive suicide in modern society

Several scholars acknowledge that aggressive suicide occurs in industrial societies (see, e.g., Douglas, 1967; Maris, 1981). But thus far little research has focused on this type of behavior. In fact, most studies of suicide in the modern world are focused solely on suicide rates, comparing, for example, the rates of different cities or nations. Such studies tell us little about the nature of suicide acts and provide almost no information on moralistic and aggressive aspects of suicide. The result is that, despite being temporally, geographically, and socially closer to most researchers, the precise nature of modern suicide is in many ways more obscure than is suicide in simple tribes in distant times and places. To help fill this gap in our empirical knowledge I turn to the investigative files of a coroner’s office.

3.1. The Coroner’s files

The material described below was collected from a coroner's office in a large metropolitan area in the southern United States. The coroner's office consists of a chief coroner and several deputy coroners who investigate all cases of violent or mysterious death and determine whether they are due to accident, homicide, suicide, or natural causes. To do so, they examine a variety of evidence collected by homicide detectives, the office of the medical examiner, and the deputy coroners themselves, including physical evidence at the scene of discovery, autopsy results, interviews with informants about the circumstances leading up to the death, and the contents of any notes that may have been left by the deceased prior to death (on the investigation of potential suicides see generally Atkinson, 1978; Timmermans, 2005). The deputy coroners summarize the facts of each case in an investigative report. These reports are stored in folders along with any relevant documents, such as copies of suicide notes, eyewitness
statements, or toxicology reports. The cases are then filed in chronological order. I obtained permission to study these files on the condition of maintaining confidentiality.4

My method of locating cases was to search through the files for cases classified as suicide, then to examine these cases for evidence that the suicide was a reaction to conflict, including any evidence of aggression on the part of the deceased. In total I consulted files covering about 15 years during which there were 1114 recorded suicides.5 From these files I recorded information on 287 cases stemming from conflict, about one-third of which displayed evidence of interpersonal aggression on the part of the self-killer.6 Such aggression appeared in two major forms: 1) verbal aggression and 2) confrontational suicide. The remainder of this section discusses and illustrates both of these behaviors.

3.2. Verbal aggression

Verbal aggression refers to statements on the part of the victim that express hostility or condemnation toward another party. Such expressions are aggressive in their own right, and also indicate that the suicide was at least partly an act of punitive social control. Indeed, many of these communications seem to maximize the impact the death might have upon others.

The main source of information on verbal aggression in this study is the written notes left by suicide victims.7 Although suicide notes were recorded in only 15 percent of cases, their frequency in this setting is comparable to that reported for other US cities (Holmes and Holmes, 2005:81; Sanger and Veach, 2008:354). The content of the notes is also similar to that reported by previous studies (e.g. Shneidman, 1973; Sanger and Veach, 2008; Fincham et al., 2011:Ch.5). Many are simply goodbyes or instructions regarding burial requests and financial details, providing little or no information about the reason for the suicide. Of those that address interpersonal issues, most are not aggressive, but rather express love, gratitude, and requests for forgiveness. Suicide usually inflicts harm on others, even if there is no evidence that the harm was intended, and some self-killers attempt to minimize such harm by explicitly exonerating others from blame. One study, for example, found that 17 percent of suicide notes had statements to this effect (Sanger and Veach, 2008:359).8 But some self-killers do the opposite and leave notes that convey criticism, insults, and blame toward others.

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4Therefore all personal names used below are pseudonyms.
5To assess variation in suicide over time, I sampled from two time periods: 1950—61 and 2003—09. Any differences between these two periods can be ignored for present purposes. Further details regarding data sources and sampling are available upon request.
6The current discussion does not include cases where the suicide was caused by some kind of conflict but the self-killer engaged in no overtly aggressive actions toward someone else. Also excluded are over two dozen cases of homicide-suicide.
7While suicide notes are the most common record of verbal aggression in the coroner's files, suicidal individuals may give voice to the same kind of statements before dying. But exact verbal statements appear in the files much more rarely than notes, perhaps because such statements are less likely to be reported to investigators. It is common, however, for those who kill themselves to have threatened suicide during an argument, or perhaps have a history of doing so. Though their exact words are not recorded in the files, the context of such threats leaves little doubt that their grievances against the other party had some role in the suicide and that the decedent was aware that the other party knew this.
8For example, a 26-year-old male wrote: “I hate myself for giving you this shame, but people will understand that none of it is your fault at this time” (Sanger and Veach, 2008:359). Many suicide victims also appear to underestimate the impact their demise will have: one American therapist reports that patients who go on to attempt suicide first engage in a process of justification in which they come to view the act as in the best interest of both themselves and their relatives (Heckler, 1994). Suicide notes may express similar ideas (Sanger and Veach, 2008).
The level of rancor varies across such communications. The least aggressive notes contain subtle criticism and implicit condemnation: grievances are expressed without overt hostility, openly moralistic language, or direct statements of blame. For example, a 47-year-old housewife who shot herself in the heart left a note to her husband reading: “I have tried so many times please remember how much I loved you. I wish you could have loved me as I did you” (Case #422). Though this woman did not explicitly condemn her husband many would understand her remarks as a complaint and perhaps as implicit blame. In another case, a wife who had been left by her husband wrote:

Dear Richard,

I never thought it would end this way but I guess its [sic] just as well the children have a father instead of a mother for I'm not strong enough to go on. I'm so scared I don't know what to do and don't know where to turn to. I love you and I love them but I know you don't want to live with me nor love me. I am very sorry. Forgive me… (Case #476).

Sometimes the victim explicitly identifies another's actions as a cause but also reminds the reader that the decision to die was ultimately his or her own. For example, one recently unemployed man killed himself and left a note revealing that he was in love with his female roommate and was upset that she did not share his feelings: “I love you. I know we will never be a couple and I do not wish to live another day without someone who loves me back… you were sent to me to be my angel and you have never stopped to hear me.” He even mentions having a brief urge to “kill you & take and replace your heart pills [with] anything that looked like the ones you are to take.” Yet a few lines later he states: “To whoever reads this, [my roommate] is NOT the one responsible for my actions, I James Riley chose my own destiny, and I James Riley choose death over living [with] the fact I will never be with the person I truly loved!” (Case #281).

Such notes are morally ambiguous, as the addition of the statement “don't blame yourself” to a description identifying another as the cause of the suicide provides a mixed signal. But other notes are much more openly and one-sidedly moralistic, expressing high levels of hostility, blame, or condemnation. For example, an abusive husband left the following note to his recently estranged wife:

9Some suicidal individuals leave notes in which the offense is mentioned only briefly in addition to other problems implicated in the decision to die, suggesting that the offensive conduct was not a major reason for the suicide. It may be that many victims are just tying up loose moral ends, using the occasion of their deaths to air grievances not previously stated or not previously taken seriously. In a similar vein, some also leave parting admonishments of a positive sort, imploring survivors to work hard, be honest, or keep out of trouble.

10It is even possible that some absolutions of this kind are meant to increase the impact of suicide by making the victim appear magnanimous rather than malicious. According to one deputy coroner, referring to a note of this kind left by a jilted boyfriend: “That's exactly what he wanted her to do. He wanted her to feel guilty for the rest of her life” (Author's Interview Notes). Similarly, notes sometimes contain statements of self-abasement that may be an attempt to arouse sympathy. One elderly man, whose complaints included being unloved by his younger wife, tells her “You should not dislike the people & things that want to like you” but also that: “You will be better off without me. You can go on with your young life and maybe find happiness.” And he implores her to not waste resources on his funeral: “This will be the last problem I will cause you, so make it short. Get me a cheap box and one night out and put me in the ground. Keep it simple. This won't last long and you are a free woman” (Case #175). Such behaviors closely resemble other forms of moralistic shaming, in which the aggrieved lowers himself or herself in order to express a grievance at another (Baumgartner, 1984). Among the Orokaiva of New Guinea, shaming might take the form of suicide, but can also be accomplished by destroying one's own property (Williams, 1930: 332–333).
Katie,

Maybe you are happy now. I thought about taking you [i.e., committing homicide-suicide] but I don’t think its worth while for I don’t believe God will let you live to [sic] long. For you no good as they come. Take care of [daughter] I don’t see how she could ever love you again. I can’t understand why you left for there sure wasn’t any one else if there was I wouldn't do this. Tell that doll I love her and to always be good. I wanted to talk to her but you made me so mad and I new [sic] I would cry. I have set here and cryed [sic] for an hour now. I hope you are happy. I don’t see how you can stand to live

… You should frame this where you can read it wonse [sic] and a while you no good bitch (Case #493).

In another case, a housewife who had argued with her husband (according to him, over his involvement with another woman) left a note addressed to her sons, imploring them to help sanction her husband with avoidance:

He has lied to me! Dishonest! Jealous! He needs to move back to his family! And you boys will be better off! Trust God! He is a phony! I thought love was enough it is not—But please do not let him near me bury me near my grandparents do not let him attend or sit [with] you (Case #111).

Such explicit appeals for action by third parties were rare: most moralistic notes were addressed directly to the adversary and seemed focused on instilling guilt and remorse. Thus one young man—who killed himself by driving his car off the road at a high rate of speed—told his former girlfriend that “every time you hear the word suicide or car wreck I hope it reminds you of me, every time you cut yourself from now on I hope it reminds you of my face” (Case #205). Another self-killer wrote:

If you are reading this something has happened, you should have took my calls. All we needed to do was talk. You have always had a problem dealing [with] things. Now how are you going to deal [with] this. You should have kept your legs closed… I don’t care if you hate me now [because] each time you see our children you will see me… What are you going to do? I hope you feel as bad as I have the past 4 weeks (Case #247).

The concern with inflicting guilt is not entirely unique to modern society. For example, among the Tikopia—a tribal people of Polynesia—suicide is often accompanied by harsh words “to make the survivors regretful” (Firth, 1967:128).

Verbal aggression was found in about 22 percent of the 287 conflict-related cases (or about 6 percent of all suicides in the area). About 13 percent displayed low levels of verbal aggression (implicit or ambiguous blame and condemnation), while 9 percent displayed high levels (overt hostility and explicit blame).11 The behavior is thus rare, but its existence shows how suicide and its consequences can still be a sanction levied against those who have offended the victim. Also rare, but even more dramatic, is suicide in the form of aggressive confrontation.

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11Female suicide victims were more likely than male victims to leave aggressive notes: 6 percent of males killing themselves over conflict used high levels of verbal aggression, versus 21 percent of females.
3.3. Confrontational suicide

Some aggrieved persons choose the location, manner, and timing of their death in such a way as to maximize the guilt, shame, or trauma that their death will inflict on another. One way of doing this is to ensure that the target of aggression will be the one to find the body. Some who kill themselves take steps to prevent such discoveries, such as leaving their homes and traveling elsewhere to commit the act or posting notes outside locked rooms warning loved ones not to enter. Others, however, engage in the opposite behavior, making it more likely that another will find their body, sometimes in the most disturbing fashion possible. This may involve killing oneself at another’s dwelling or place of work. For example, one young man was involved in a dispute with his girlfriend at his own residence. Later that evening he went to his girlfriend’s home (while she was elsewhere) and hanged himself from the roof of her front porch (Case #135). Similarly, while some who use particularly gory methods of dispatch—such as shooting themselves in the head with powerful firearms—go outside to prevent making a mess in shared living quarters, others, either thoughtless or hostile, do not. In one case, an aggrieved man took gruesome steps to expose his estranged wife to the physical evidence of his death:

The 45-year-old had escaped from a mental hospital and had been searching for his wife, whom he had previously threatened to kill. The wife, who was in hiding elsewhere, summoned police to their home. After their arrival the officers found him barricaded inside

… They heard a noise, and heard him yell… One of the decedent's sons accompanied them as they broke the window and forced entry. They found the decedent lying in the middle room of the house with a shotgun wound to the stomach. The home was covered in blood—it looked as if he had smeared it on everything with his hands. Officers thought that he touched everything his wife would use to remind her of his death (Case #441).

The most common way in which persons expose others to their deaths is by forcing them to witness it at close range in a pattern I call confrontational suicide. For example, one case description states that “the decedent had a verbal altercation with his live-in girlfriend, during which he produced a 9 mm handgun and shot himself in the head in front of her and her father” (Case #173). Another case involved a man who, according to his cohabiting girlfriend, was very jealous of her:

That morning they had an argument over her attending the funeral of her former father-in-law. Despite his objections she attended the funeral and then returned. Upon her return, they talked for about 30 minutes during which the decedent didn’t seem upset or angry. She then asked him what he wanted for dinner and he mumbled something she couldn't understand as he walked out the back door. She asked him what he had said and he

12Note that some cases of self-killers going out of the way to have others discover their bodies that do not display any signs of conflict or aggression. Rather, it appears that these persons only want their bodies found and buried in a timely manner, rather than being allowed to decompose before discovery. Thus those who live alone sometimes invite over an associate shortly before dispatching themselves.

13Many persons kill themselves in bathrooms, where blood is more easily cleaned off surfaces.
replied, “I’ll show you.” He took a gun from his pocket, chambered a round, and put it to his head. She yelled for him to stop but he pulled the trigger (Case #209).

Such confrontational suicides are rare: there were only 26 recorded cases, comprising about 12 percent of suicides stemming from conflict (or about 2 percent of all suicides). Some incidents are apparently impulsive, while in other cases aggrieved individuals go out of their way to make the offending party witness the violence. One man, whose wife had earlier argued with him for returning home at 4:00 a.m., “laid in bed for a while before rising to start a fire, fry an egg, and shave.” He then woke his wife from her sleep by shouting “look here, this is it!” just prior to shooting himself in the chest with a shotgun (Case #420). Others travel to the home or workplace of another party before killing themselves. For example, one 40-year-old man’s girlfriend “had broken up with him about a week prior because he was an alcoholic and he had threatened her and her family.” On the night of his death he was drinking with another man, during which time he repeatedly unloaded and reloaded a gun before declaring that “he was going over to his ex's house to kick the door in and blow his brains out in front of her” (Case #482).

Sometimes such confrontational suicides follow one last attempt on the part of the self-killer to have his or her demands met, with death being contingent on the response of the other party. Jilted lovers may travel, armed, to meet with their estranged partners, apparently planning to kill themselves (and/or their partners) if rebuffed. Such contingent killing also occurred in one case involving conflict between an individual and a state agency:

The decedent went to the social security office to meet a claims representative. He had filed for disability, but was turned down by the Baltimore office. He came to the local office and asked the representative to reconsider his claim, stating that he was unable to work and his wife had to work and to pay his medical bills. The representative advised him that he could take the information and turn it over to another branch to handle and that this branch would give him an appointment for an interview. The decedent asked how long it would be, and the representative said 2–3 months and the decedent said that this would be too long. The representative said he did not know what else he could do and the decedent said “I do”, pulled a pistol from his pants pocket, and shot himself in the head in front of the representative, 58 employees, and as many customers (Case #491).

Modern technology also allows for confrontation at a distance, as illustrated by the following case:

Per the decedent's wife, they’d been having domestic troubles for some time, and had been separated since Sunday following an argument in which she asked for a divorce… That day at 1:00 p.m. he called her at work and asked her if she could come home early so that he could talk to her. She said that she couldn't get off work early. He asked her if she had changed her mind about the divorce and she said no. He then fired a shot into the ceiling and asked her if she heard it. She said yes. He told her she'd better get home before the children got home, and then he fired another shot (Case #496).

Note that those who kill themselves in front of another party may also leave notes and make other statements expressing hostility and blame. In one case, for instance, a man who had just shot himself in front of his ex-girlfriend said, as he lay on the floor, “I am dying and it's your fault because you don't love me anymore” (Case #148).
4. Social control and social structure

Why does aggressive suicide occur? We may answer the question by noting that it occurs in response to an offense—to the definition of someone’s behavior as deviant. Aggressive suicide is in this sense caused by clashes of right and wrong—moral conflict (on the concept of conflict, see Black, 1998:xiii–xvii; on the causes of conflict see Black, 2011). But we still face the task of explaining why the conflict was handled in this way instead of another. Why did the deviance attract this particular response? Why wasn’t the grievance expressed with assault, homicide, or a call to the police?

Any moralistic behavior—aggressive or otherwise—presents a challenge to social science. One answer to this challenge is the general theory of social control developed by Black (1976, 1998). Black uses a strategy called pure sociology to explain social control with the social structure (or social geometry) of the behavior itself (Black, 1995, 2004b). Every instance of social control has a structure defined by the relative status of the parties, the degree of social distance between them, and who acts toward whom. Social control may have an upward or downward direction, depending on whether it responds to the deviance of a status superior (upward) or status inferior (downward). It may also cross shorter or longer social distances, as defined by the degree of intimacy, interdependence, and cultural similarity between the parties. And the distance and direction of social control—its social structure—determines what form it will take.

For instance, social control may take the form of a blood feud, with two groups engaging in a reciprocal exchange of revenge killings. Black (1998:75–78; 2004b) predicts, for example, that feuds are only likely to occur between groups that lack cross-cutting ties—individuals with close relationships to both sides of the conflict. Groups with many cross-cutting ties—those linked by a “tangled network” of relationships—are more likely to resolve their differences through extensive negotiations rather than violence (Black, 1998:85). Stratification also matters: the precise and even exchange of vengeance—a life for a life—is only likely between groups that are roughly equal in size and resources (Black, 1998:75–78; 2004b). When groups are highly unequal, any moralistic violence that occurs is likely to be unilateral—in extreme cases, the superior group completely exterminates a group of unresisting inferiors (Baumgartner, 1984; Senechal de la Roche, 1996; Campbell, 2009). Thus does social structure explain variation in social control—and suicide.

There are several structural conditions that make social control more likely to take the form of moralistic suicide, including aggressive suicide. Moralistic suicide varies with the inequality of the parties, their intimacy, their degree of interdependence, and their ability to attract support from third parties (Manning, 2012). We may thus specify a multidimensional structure in which conflict is more likely to be handled with self-destruction. The remainder of this discussion will focus on one important dimension of this social structure: relational distance, or intimacy.

5. The relational structure of aggressive suicide

Relational distance can be measured by “the scope, frequency, and length of interaction between people, the age of their relationship, and the nature and number of links between them in a social network” (Black, [1976] 2010:41). Relational distance is least, and intimacy greatest, between those who spend a great deal of time with one another, share many attachments and involvements, and are in an exclusive relationship without competing ties to others.14

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14Black (2011:21–22) conceives of relational distance as a “zero-sum game,” in which any increase in closeness between two parties reduces their closeness to all other parties, and vice versa. Thus the fewer ties one has, the closer each tie will be. Those who spend little time with anyone else are highly intimate with themselves.
Relational distance is greatest, and intimacy least, between those who lack any ties whatsoever, such as strangers from mutually alien networks.

Some forms of social control are more likely to occur in close relationships. One such form is therapy, a supportive and cooperative kind of social control that defines the deviant as a victim in need of treatment (Black, 1976:47). Blackian theory predicts that therapy is greater at higher levels of intimacy, and so offensive conduct by an intimate is more likely to be defined as a symptom of disorder rather than a crime or sin (Black, 1976:47; Horwitz, 1990:81–83; Black, 1995:835, n.7; see, e.g., Tucker, 1999). Other forms of social control flourish in more distant relationships. This is true of most species of moralistic violence, the extremes of which are more likely to be directed at distant acquaintances or total strangers. For example, Senechal de la Roche (1996, 1997) shows that community outsiders are much more susceptible to lynching than are community insiders—given the same offense, community members are less likely to kill those with whom they share strong ties. Similarly, the mass killings of terrorism and genocide usually cross the long gulf of relational distance separating different nationalities and ethnic groups (Black, 2004a; Campbell, 2009). But suicide differs from these other kinds of violence, and its structure differs as well: moralistic suicide varies inversely with relational distance (Manning, 2012; see also Manning, 2014). This pattern can be observed in the social distribution of aggressive suicide.

5.1. Relational distance in traditional societies

The available literature suggests that in traditional societies aggressive suicide is primarily found among intimates, such as spouses, lovers, or close kin. Among the Cheyenne, for instance, suicide to mobilize third parties is only used against family members such as parents and siblings (Hoebel, 1976). In rural Taiwan, posthumous vengeance is most often used by young women against their husbands and co-habiting in-laws (Wang, 1972; Wolf, 1975). Similarly, spousal abuse is also the most common reason for vengeful suicides in Papua New Guinea societies (Counts, 1980, 1987; Johnson, 1981). Among the Aguaruna of Peru, abused wives kill themselves not only to punish their husbands, but also their neglectful fathers and brothers (Brown, 1986). The vengeance spirits of the Maroons usually arise from “stormy” marriages and “lovers’ quarrels” (Price, 1973:88; Bilby, 1990:46). Spouses and nuclear family members are also the main targets of aggressive suicide among the Iroquois, who may kill themselves in response to abandonment or infidelity. The following case illustrates the typical pattern of suicide among Iroquois women:

Josephine and Sarah Snow of Allegany relate how their mother's mother was abandoned by her husband (their mother's father). Another woman took her husband away from her when their mother was a baby just walking at her side, and she became angry and ate the [poisonous] root... the attitude of both women is that their grandmother had revenged herself of her husband's adultery (Fenton, 1941:92–93).

Though the Iroquois consider this kind of suicide a feminine behavior, men may also kill themselves for similar reasons and with much the same effect. And when scolded, punished, or treated unfairly by their parents, children too may turn to suicide for revenge (Fenton, 1941).

5.2. Relational distance in modern society

The aggressive suicides found in the metropolitan coroner's files obey almost exactly the same pattern as those in tribal societies: they are almost exclusively limited to spouses, lovers, and members of the nuclear family.
By far the most common targets for aggressive suicide were current or former intimate partners, usually a spouse or cohabiting boyfriend or girlfriend. In about 85 percent of cases involving verbal aggression, the target of blame, criticism, or other verbal hostility was an intimate partner. The pattern is even more extreme for confrontational suicide: 26 out of 27 cases involved someone killing himself or herself in front of a spouse or lover. These self-killers were often reacting to some reduction in closeness—what Black calls “underintimacy.” Underintimacy includes separation, divorce, and infidelity, all of which cause severe conflict between intimate partners (Black, 2011:43–54; see also Manning, 2015).

Most of the remaining aggressive cases involved grievances against kin. About 9 percent of aggressive suicide notes were directed at family members such as such as siblings, parents, children, step-parents, and step-children. Sometimes multiple relatives were named in the same note, as in the case of a 66 year-old retiree:

After her husband died, the decedent came to live with her daughter, son-in-law, and grandson at their home. She had been living there for four years. She had a history of conflict with her family: she had a habit of locking herself in her room when angry and had threatened suicide several times in the past. In her suicide note, she complained bitterly of her treatment within the house and accused her brother (who lives in another city) of turning her grandson against her (Case #464).

Much rarer than cases involving kin or intimate partners were those involving friends, acquaintances, or strangers. One man left a note condemning an associate who allegedly slighted him in a business deal; another (quoted above) identifies an attraction to his roommate as the cause of his death. Virtually no cases were directed at very distant individuals, such as strangers.15

One reason for the association of intimacy with suicide is that intimate relationships have higher rates of conflict. But while the frequency and nature of intimate conflict no doubt explains some of this association, it does not explain it all. This becomes clear when we compare suicide to other forms of social control such as homicide. Homicide, like suicide, is a severe and violent reaction to conflict, and it is often used to handle the same kinds of grievances, such as those arising from abandonment or infidelity. But while suicide increases with relational closeness, homicide decreases. Thus lovers and kin are opponents in over 90 percent of moralistic suicides, but these relationships are found in only about 25 percent of all homicides (see data cited in Cooney and Phillips, 2002:82–86). But not all homicides are social control: between 20 and 40 percent are primarily acts of predation, as when a victim is killed to facilitate robbery (Cooney and Phillips, 2002). Even discounting predatory homicides—which are more likely to involve strangers—no more than half of homicides occur between intimates. Conversely, distant adversaries are much more common in homicide cases. One study, for example, found that out of 569 homicide victims 11 percent were killed in domestic arguments, while 29 percent were killed in arguments of other kinds (Wilbanks, 1984:32). Of homicides occurring in Philadelphia between 1948 and 1952, 28 percent involved “close friends” and another 14 percent involved “acquaintances”—categories barely represented among aggressive suicides (Wolfgang, 1958:207). And of 508 homicide cases in Detroit in 1972, 48 percent involved “unrelated acquaintances” (Daly and Wilson, 1988:19). These facts indicate that distant adversaries are more likely to be punished with outward violence, while close

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15 Three aggressive suicides were directed at the Social Security Administration and other state agencies.
adversaries are more likely to be punished with inward violence (compare Henry and Short, 1954: 17, 108–116; see also Manning, 2014).

5.3. Variation in aggression

Note that closeness of the adversaries in the metropolitan cases is consistent with the morally ambiguous nature of many suicide notes, which reflect the morally ambiguous nature of intimate conflict. Black (1998:Ch.8) predicts that social control between strangers and cultural aliens is harsh and uncompromising, while between intimates right and wrong lose their clarity and social control becomes less punitive and one-sided. Thus blame is often diffuse and the expression of grievances is hesitant, qualified, and perhaps mixed with self-criticism. Closeness hampers moralistic aggression in general, even while encouraging any aggression that does occur to take on peculiar forms.

Not surprisingly, then, the most violent sanctions imposed by suicide—such as blood vengeance by the victim's kin—arise from a particular combination of closeness and distance: intimate conflicts that also implicate distant groups. In tribal settings where aggressive suicide is prevalent, most individuals are enmeshed in solidary kinship groups—tightly-knit clans or lineages whose members reside together and interact in almost every domain of life, from production to worship to defense. The most common locus of aggressive suicide in these societies is the marital relationship, a close tie that links two otherwise distant groups.16 The respective families of each spouse, alien and mutually suspicious, are quick to demand justice in the case of suicide, whether this involves compensation, physical violence, or supernatural attacks.17 The structure of many tribal marriages is like a loaded gun, and self-destruction is one way of pulling the trigger.18

Marital relationships in modern society generally lack this structural danger: social life is atomized and kin are often scattered, so that many marriages are essentially private relationships between autonomous individuals. In fact, modern spouses are in many ways closer than those in tribal societies, sharing more aspects of their lives and living together at a distance from kin who might otherwise compete for their time, attention, and loyalty. The harshest sanctions inflicted by suicide in such a relationship are psychological—focused on altering the internal state of the adversary. Thus the aggressive aspects of modern suicide are aimed at directly inflicting guilt or trauma upon those left behind. These sanctions are similar in logic to therapeutic social control, in that both express a concern with an individual's internal state and emotional well-being. But whereas therapy seeks to restore normality to disturbed individuals, psychological aggression seeks to create disturbances in those who are normal. It is a punitive inversion of therapy that is more likely and more severe in extremely close relationships. Relational closeness fosters not only therapy, but also anti-therapy.

16Since relational distance is zero-sum members of highly intimate groups are correspondingly more distant from everyone outside their group (Black, 2011:21–22, 150–151).

17The tendency of solidary groups to aggressively and violently pursue grievances has received much attention in the sociology of conflict and social control. The phenomenon can be explained, at least in part, by Black's (1998:Ch.7) theory that intimacy breeds partisanship (for applications and extensions, see Senechal de la Roche, 1997, 2001; Cooney, 1998; Campbell, 2009).

18Ghostly vengeance behaves in a similar fashion: while suicide of supernatural aggression is greatest among intimates, the potential for destruction is greatest when the conflict involves separate families. Thus the Maroons believe that the avenging kunu spirits only operate between two different lineages, and that moralistic suicide within the lineage produces a lesser curse which is “devoid of the inexorable and definitive character of the kunu” (Hurault, 1961:345).
6. Conclusion

Social scientists often consider suicide to be an act of aggression against the self. Thus “hydraulic” or “stream” theories seek to explain why aggression, once generated (by, say, frustration over a loss of economic standing) is channeled inward toward the self or outward toward others (Henry and Short, 1954; Unnithan et al., 1994). But suicide is not merely aggression redirected away from an external target: the act of self-killing can still be interpersonal, and inward violence may actually be outward aggression. From the tribes of New Guinea to the modern American city, self-destruction can cause tremendous hardship for those left behind, and some self-killers not only count on these hardships, but attempt to maximize them.

Though moralistic behaviors are not necessarily aggressive, aggression is usually moralistic: a way of expressing grievances and punishing offensive conduct. It is social control, and as such it can be explained with the structural properties of the conflicts in which it occurs. One of these structural properties is the relational distance between the adversaries—whether they are spouses and close kin, mere acquaintances, or total strangers. Across various societies—including modern America—the targets of aggressive suicide are almost always relationally close, suggesting that intimate grievances are more likely to be handled with this behavior than with others.

But suicide, including its aggressive varieties, is not the only form of social control encouraged by intimacy. Close deviance is more likely than distant deviance to be handled therapeutically—treated as an illness in need of a cure (Horwitz, 1990:81–83; Black, 1995:835, n.7; Tucker, 1999). It is also more likely to be tolerated—to be excused and ignored altogether (Black, 1998:88–89). There is thus variation even within intimate conflicts. We can explain some of this variation by accounting for other dimensions of the conflict structure, such as the relative status of the adversaries, or their relationships with third parties (see, e.g., Baumgartner, 1992). But for the development and testing of theory to proceed, we also require more fine-grained analysis of the structure of intimate conflicts. High-intimacy conflicts are, like the high-energy particles of physics, difficult to observe. Intimate conflicts repel third parties—outsiders are less likely to know their details, and the more intimate the relationship, the more privatized they become (Black, 1995:835; 1998:134–135; see also Cooney, 2003). But determined sociologists may still be able to view these conflicts in more detail. Currently, studies using questionnaires such as the Conflict Tactics Scale provide insights into the frequency of verbal aggression, physical violence, and negotiation among intimates, but little information on the nature and structure of particular conflicts (Straus, 1979; Straus et al., 1996). Researchers might fill this gap by cultivating close ties with disputants (or their survivors), using methods such as in-depth interviews to slowly and carefully gather whatever information the participants are willing to reveal. Researchers might also recruit and train lay observers to record cases of intimate conflict that occur within their own social networks. These informants could serve a bridging function between distant academic professionals and the intimate conflicts they wish to study, conveying details that would not be directly visible to an outsider, yet with a degree of detachment not possible for the disputants themselves. Or perhaps an innovative scientists will hit upon some other solution altogether. In any case, just as particle physicists develop ways to observe their elusive subject, so too might sociologists find a way to magnify the microstructure of social control.
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