

PREPARATIONS FOR VOLUNTARY DEATH

The Social Organisation of Suicidal Concerns

Oleg Vetlugin

Introduction

In one of his more recent articles - "Evidence for locally produced, naturally accountable phenomena of order..." (1988) - Harold Garfinkel employs the term 'plenum' to designate common-sense strategies for glossing over essential properties of radical phenomena constituting the main focus of ethnomethodological inquiry. But he also further maintains that "not only in the social science movement but everywhere authors have made use of plenums. Authors have designed plenums with which the tasks of recording, reading, writing, collecting, picturing, speaking about, remembering, marking, signing real world specifics were accompanied by provisions for worldly things left over and worldly things left out, real world matters that remained unremarked". These 'plenums' or provisions for covering real world matters are responsible for our prevalent forms of knowledge concerning various types of social activity, reassuring us that any explanation proposed for whatever field of social phenomena would be 'enough' - in the sense that the strength and cogency of the proposed explanatory hypothesis would not be held accountable before 'real world' vocabularies of doing. The basic assumption that things *somehow* occur in this world and that the analyst can dismiss the productive dimensions of these occurrences, for all practical purposes of research, remains intact. The tribulations of suicidal phenomena

in sociological (and other professional) fields of research is as good an example, as any, of the above outlined tendency.

Since Durkheim's initiation of suicide as a legitimate domain of sociological inquiry, there have been numerous theories concerning suicide's field of determinants (Halbwachs 1930; Henry & Short 1954; Gibbs & Martin 1964), its correlation to and relation with various other social phenomena (Sainsbury 1955; Pierce 1967; Breed 1963; Motto 1967), possible combinations of sociological and psychological factors of influence (Giddens 1966), etc. In all these theoretical endeavors, however rich and exemplary of the sociological original insight, we cannot find a serious token of attention (save common-sense musings) to the suicidal activity per se. The fact that suicidal practice was organized in some unknown ways, which permitted scientific inquiries into 'suicide' in the first place, was routinely presumed to be trivial and unworthy of thorough investigation. Nowhere¹ suicide was approached as a practical phenomenon - as a collection of things to *do* and orientation to take certain things into account, and elsewhere it was taken for granted that basically we know what suicide *is* by the mere hearing (knowing?) *who* the suicides were (Marilyn Monroe, Sylvia Plath, Kurt Cobain?). Though we may conceive of 'suicide' as many things and lend it various social and psychological

meanings , we tend to forget that suicide is also a practical activity - there are decisions to be made with regard to the entire spectrum of important issues; there are 'difficulties' to be avoided and 'dilemmas' to be resolved - we tend to forget that suicide must be *done* before any meaningful inquiry into its various aspects is to begin at all.

In the present work I will attempt to re-fill this sociological void with a preliminary investigation into the 'practicalities' of suicidal affairs. Throughout this work the basic practical tenets of suicidal activity will be problematized and our assumed common-knowledge of suicidal doings will be bracketed. But it must be stressed that by pursuing the practical aspects of suicidal phenomena in no way do I wish to minimize other important dimensions, such as the inner world of suicidees, the impact of suicide, the drama of suicide, etc. These dimensions deserve separate studies. My undertaking is simply indicative that aside from classical sociological concerns with the problematics of suicide (Durkheim and his followers) there are also *specific* concerns and problematics that are peculiar to suicidal activity as such. The following sections of this manuscript will attest whether such an indication was persuasively achieved.

Theoretical and Practical Concerns

In this chapter I will try to outline an analytical distinction that we usually consider as an irrelevant to our mundane proceedings , in the sense that whatever must be done, can normally be achieved, without it. However, this

ot apply within the context of this work. My focus on the practical concerns peculiar to the suicidal activity cannot be intelligibly articulated without first clarifying what practical concerns are, and how they significantly differ from other types of concerns. As I later discovered, I can proceed to the ethnographic, 'hard-core' part of this work if, the sort of concerns I will be discussing at lengths throughout this paper is contrasted with, at least , one *other* type of 'concerning'. For this purpose I have chosen theoretical species of concern , since they are, in my opinion, the most familiar kind for the prospective readers of this manuscript and the least problematically sounding to the 'unconcerned' ear.

Let us consider, for instance, what theoretical concerns would be for anyone initiating research in suicidology (a field usually populated by social scientists and some scientifically-oriented representatives of the medical profession). They would consist of (ideal typically, of course): a) the *issue* of suicide itself - the emphasis, as you may see, is on the 'issue', not on the 'suicide'; b) its field of determinants - what features 'there in the world' can be held responsible for causing this phenomenon, for 'going together' with it, either as influence or as accompaniment, or at least (but not for sociology), for creating a suicide-conducive milieu or a potentially suicidal social context; c) the issue of prevention - what measures can be taken to minimize the possibility of suicidal occurrences in the future, after *something* new about suicidal

phenomena has been revealed in research. On the other hand, practical concerns of our typical suicidologist would consist of the following items: a) how to do research - what data can be trusted, what methods can be used; b) what to do next in the research terms in the case of facing some unexpected findings, or even in the case of the most 'uneventful', thoroughly predictable study; c) how to manufacture the actual report in such a way that final discoveries would be recognized as reportable and hearable for all practical scientific purposes.

If we shift our attention to the person considering suicidal decisions and try to repeat the same analytical exercise, the following picture may be drawn. For the suicider², both theoretical and practical concerns of suicidologists would be highly impractical ones, to say the least. Their theoretical concerns would probably be focused on: a) the sustainability of suicide as the right choice for their concrete existential crises; b) their ability to face the possibility of self-annihilation - at *this* very moment; c) their ability to imagine the "world after" without their presence in it. Practical concerns of suiciders in their basic form would resemble their suicidologists' counterpart (we may even venture to say that all practical concerns are structurally homologous)³: a) what information and methods can be trusted; b) what to do next in suicidal terms; c) how to manipulate the act of suicide in such a way that it would be recognized as *something else*, presumably less hurtful and damaging for those left behind.

If we turn now to my own case (I, myself, writing 'now' or 'then' on the practical concerns of *others*), we may arrive at a very peculiar constellation of the juxtaposed fields of concerns: theoretical concerns, in this case, would be the field of practical concerns itself, whereas the genuine practical concerns are exhibited throughout this study in 'all their glory'. However, this is, of course, not an ideal research situation. Another constellation (actually, the object of my constant envy) may be found in the work of those students of some or other phenomenal domain whose practical and theoretical concerns *coincide* in all important dimensions. One instance of such fortunate overlapping of the fields of concerns may be found in David Sudnow's book (1978) "Ways of the Hand", where his interest in jazz-piano music playing meets his interest in understanding jazz-piano playing as a practical phenomenon, for purposes other than mere playing.

Suicide as a Subject of Concern

There are numerous strategies for characterizing the various fields of social activity. We may adopt, for instance, a semiotic perspective and speak about the coding structures which are responsible for the successful interpretation by members of the recurrent arrays of messages emanating from the particular domain of action. In this work another descriptive design is proposed. I suggest to view every conceivable kind of activity through its

localization in its own peculiar field of practical concerns. This conception of descriptive analysis is not a novelty, neither in the humanistic disciplines in general, nor in sociology in particular. There are already works done which employ such approach in non-reflexive manner. A good example is Sudnow's "Ways of the Hand" (aforementioned)(1978), where rich characterization of the practical ways of handling and *concerning* about specific tasks involved in jazz-piano playing is accurately presented. Another instance is Bartes' "Lovers' discourse"(1978), where lovers' concerns (practical and otherwise) are carefully elaborated.

Practical concerns segment practical worlds into sets of actors, activities, events and settings which are meaningful to the subjects who entertain such concerns, yet irrelevant or unknown to outsiders (those, whose practical concerns are directed elsewhere). This 'segmentation' reinforces my contention, that every field of activity (viewed as a practical phenomenon) can be characterized by the ways this activity is concerned about. Suicidal activity can also be situated in its distinctive field of concerns. This paper will set out to provide an initial description of these field-bound concerns and their salient features.

Before we proceed further, some standardization of terminology, that will be used throughout this paper, is in order. In the works of Harvey Sacks we can encounter the notion of 'category-bound activities'(1967, 1974), which, with some relevant remodifications may be re-applied to our researching goals. Sacks believed that some

categories are 'category-bound' to or organized around a particular kind of activity. For example, category 'no one to turn to' is category-bound to the activity of helping. Similarly, in my work, I shall discuss concern-bound activities and initiate a preliminary attempt to characterize practical concerns which are concern-bound to the activity of 'suiciding'.

Another due elucidation pertains to my position, according to which suicidal concerns are *socially organized*. This implied social organization can be glimpsed in the features toward which practical concerns of suiciders are normally oriented: 1) there must be *methods*, known and usable, and frequently they are not of individual origins(methodological domain of suicide is, of course, dependent on the general development of society, and especially its achievements in the productive and legal spheres); 2) suicide does not occur in a social vacuum, there are people all around, thus the final act must be *thoughtfully* placed among all those people linked to suiciders by various relational obligations; the suicidal act must be explained, passed on, embedded in, and produced with some degree of awareness that a self-killing always involves something more, in relational terms, than mere annihilation of the supposedly monadic self; 3) the final act must be *aligned* (like any other piece of activity) with the continuous flow of the surrounding social activity: timing schedules must be honored, interventional attitudes of others must be taken into account, suicidal resources must be gathered

carefully and without 'further notice'- in other words, managing and maneuvering the suicidal act within full-fledged social life is not a trivial enterprise.

If my argument that suicidal practical concerns are socially organized is correct, then we have some warrant to argue further that the articulation of a concern-bound activity, attempted in this work, amounts to the explication of the modern practical idiom of suicidal activity in the Western world, which in turn, promotes an understanding of our natural membership. The form of practical concern (in every conceivable field of activity) may possibly be the best indicator of 'natural membership' discussed by ethnomethodology.

The final issue requiring elucidation is my choice of the term 'suiciders' to designate a relevant agency in this work. First, it must be clear that my study refers to subjects who are already in the suicidal field of relevancies, leaving behind issue of their appearance there in the first place or changing it for other existential fields of relevance. Second, my use of terms such as 'suiciders' in this work (and 'aloners' in previous papers, Vetlugin 1996,1997) is sustainable for researching purposes, because I do not distinguish (in this work and elsewhere) between activity and *doing* of activity. Speaking about activity alone would imply that things *somehow* (in one way or another) are brought into existence, and it is precisely this 'somehow' which is the major subject of my inquiry (note, that in speaking about *some* spheres of activity, we tend to support my present orientation, for instance, in characterizing love-affairs, we frequently shift from the abstract

issues of love to the lovers' accomplishments, - for we feel that love is inconceivable without loving : without something that lovers *do*⁴).

Data and Methods

The site of this ethnographic work is alt.suicide.holiday (a.s.h.- hereafter),- the Internet's news-group which provides a secure place for an 'alternative' discourse on suicide. Self-induced death is perceived here (according to official guidelines⁵) as a 'genuine choice' and a 'real alternative'. The founders and veterans of a.s.h. encourage 'honest', 'unbiased', 'open' approaches to suicide-minded practical and general problematics. Though a great deal of talk here revolves around the issue of methods, people who participate in this group also freely exchange opinions on every possible topic related to suicide, such as 'notes', 'reasons to do it', 'readiness to go', and countless variations of moral issues related to 'leaving'. Of course, severe doubts may arise about validity and reliability of such a source of data. The first obvious question which may be posed is 'are they serious?'. Without testing the 'reality' of each and every message I was convinced, and hopefully the reader will be too, by the following arguments: a) I feel justified in approaching this data as 'serious' material (despite its nowhere-ness, anonymity and apparent virtuality), because as a student of suicidal activity, after over a year of regular 'hanging around', I was able to recognize in it the features of the real world or, in other words, because of

its accountable sustainability in the frame of distinctively suicidal affairs (Goffman, 1974); b) not only the researcher recognized this data- 'talk'- as genuine suicidal talk, but also participants of a.s.h. identified it as real. Only overall conspiracy could render this argument void.

For understandable reasons, the sociological eye was blind to the real field-work opportunities of real suicides. This work claims to move the ethnographic enterprise into the heart of suicidal matters - how suicidal praxis is organized and mediated via its practical concerns. Though variously formulated concerns are *all* that I have, it seems to me, that they provide a sufficient opening (if only keyhole) through which we can begin to appreciate this complex process that we usually gloss over so familiar word - suicide.

After a short description of my source of data and the opportunities it presents for a detailed investigation of the suicidal domain, we may now approach the analytical apparatus by means of which the practical concerns of this research (i.e. my own) were organized. For the presentational purposes, and for these alone, I arranged my corpus of data in the following way. There are two types of concerns⁶ that will be included in the present study (the most salient ones, according to my contention):

Hard-core methodological and executional concerns, - where either method or some feature of the actual execution seem problematic; 2) Concerns that express awareness about sensitive nature of our personal relationships - where methods that achieve such a mode of death which

make least damage to our personal entanglements are sought.

First type of concern will, in turn, be divided into relatively autonomous sub-fields - 'methods' and 'execution'. Each sub-field of concerns has its own distinctive texture of problematics which is irreducible to the problematics of another. For example, problems that prospective suicider may encounter in the sub-field of 'methods' are of an altogether different kind than those s/he can meet in the sub-field of 'execution'.

One additional comment, relevant to the epistemological priorities, is in order.

The basic assumption behind Asher's numerous attempts to defend their suicidal positions in so many words is a presumed knowledgeability of people who 'have been there/ done that' versus claimed epistemic authority of various professionals who write about suicide without having the slightest notion of 'how it feels' and 'what it takes':

"The only real experts on disability issues are people with disabilities. Which, of course, could be equally applied as - the only real experts on why people want to commit suicide are people who want to commit suicide."

If we take a lead from this assumption (as I do), then we may extend our current meaning of 'expertise' into intriguing directions. If we grant that people 'knowledgeably' and with 'good reasons' organize their various practical affairs (which may or may not become theoretical affairs for those 'suicidologically' concerned)

then an altogether different picture can emerge as a picture of 'what people do' and 'how they account for their doings'. If practical expertise is *already* exhibited in the ways members attend to their existentially urgent undertakings, and if 'other' kinds of expertise usually present themselves as guarantors of the former's intelligibility, then why not to dispense with the 'theoretical sojourners' and give way to members' 'know-how': how suiciders themselves confront their intended act in the practical attitude and the corresponding concerns.

Methods: Ways to Go and their Problematics

As we have seen in the introductory chapters, I approach the suicidal act not as an individual or social problem, but as a practical task (Stoddart 1974). One of the most arguable problems of this task is to find the right method. There are two senses that 'discovery' of method can assume for suiciders. The first, is the actual manufacturing, from what is 'at hand', of some suicidally-relevant devices. The second, is a more fundamental one, pertaining to the transformation of our regular structures of vision – or a re-vision of our routine ways of seeing. I will begin with the first, though it is usually the second that sets into motion the methodological search of prospective suiciders.

A famous, almost sacred document in the a.s.h circles⁷, the "Methods" file (hereafter MF), that can be best characterized as an attempt to organize suicidal methodology in systematic order, exhibits in a nutshell, as it were, regular problems of the suicidal 'ways to go'. MF divides all known suicidal

methods into neat collections, providing brief descriptions, and assessing them according to several standard criteria. These criteria are dosage, time, availability and certainty. Furthermore, each method is also supplemented with a 'note' containing additional valuable information and various other items worthy of attention. The most prominent subsets of methods, judging by the amount of descriptive attention they receive, are poisons(MF does not distinguish between injection, ingestion and inhalation), hanging, jumping off buildings and bridges, bullet, slitting wrists or other parts of the body, asphyxiation(suffocation), drowning, electrocution, jumping in front of trains, self-immolation, driving onto bridge support at 100 mph, getting someone 'to do the job'(especially police), scuba-diving, skydiving. While descriptions differ in their professed degree of accuracy and expertise, virtually all of them fail to be 'good' or 'adequate' descriptions for other, more profound reasons. First: they are quite uncertain about basic suicidal measures (speed, painlessness, effectiveness); for instance, the vast majority of methods is evaluated on time-dimension as 'minutes/hours', 'seconds or hours if you're unlucky', 'second to days', 'a week or so'. But even if the time-measures are quite satisfactory, such as 'pretty damn quick' or 'real quick', the information contained in the notes invariably makes its ambiguating job. Here are excerpts from some of them:

1. Note (from bullet-method)): "... Brain damage and other effects if you survive. Death either instantaneous or prolonged... Bullet can miss vital parts in skull, deflect of skulls."
2. Note (from drowning-method): "...However remember that you can be rescued from cold water drowning after several hours, because the cold slows down terminal brain damage..."
3. Note (from electrocution-method): "...people have survived massive high voltage , high current shocks, with nothing but 3-rd degree burns to show for it. Sometimes paralysis , limbs amputated etc."

Second: according to MF's prescriptions, some sizable portion of the methods (especially drugs) can be applicable only under certain, very specific circumstances and with the help of other situationally-sensitive auxiliary devices:

4. Note(from drug-methods): "... use bag and bond. Alcohol as well as antihistamine on an empty stomach. This is not effective in itself but mixing it with other drugs or alcohol makes the other drug more certain."
5. Note(from drug-methods): "People can become tolerant to this drug and it will be no longer effective."

Third: directives as to where to obtain some 'sound methods'(or what sources can be trusted) are often stated in the negative form, or transform the suicidal undertaking into a very complicated one (on top of its other complications):

6. Note (from nerve-toxins methods): "... Don't trust military [supplies] such

as nerve-toxins: they might not be as certain ..., as a current military thinking is that one grievously wounded man is worth many dead ones in decreasing the enemy fighting capacity. That means that modern nerve-gasses well might leave you paralyzed for life, but still living."

7. Note (from helium-method): "Pick up yellow pages , look under 'P' for party suppliers , ring up some party shops and ask how to obtain helium for filling balloons. Most shops will apologize and say 'sorry, we don't supply it, try the party-shop on such and such road'..."

These and other dimensions of methodological uncertainties comprise together a more general feature which we may call "methods' dependability"(Button & Sharrock 1998) and which is invariably addressed in each and every suicidal discussion (pertaining to 'how to' issues) in a.s.h . Though a particular method may be quite dependable in some respects, it usually fails to be so with regard to other relevant ones. The following discussion may serve as an illustration:

On suicide methods: quick painless, reliable

Choose two.

I pick Painless and Reliable . If it doesn't hurt I don't especially care how long it takes. OTOH, I wouldn't mind the pain if it was quick enough... or if it is not reliable, I guess I want it quick, so I can do it over and over , till I get it right, but it applies only if it is painless, cause it would be hard to repeat even a quick painful method. It takes a lot of

pondering to plan exit.

I guess you just have to choose "Reliable". I mean just "Quick" and "Painless" is not enough, that must be like holding your breath for three seconds.⁸

Suiciders' awareness of the dependability problem re-surfaces not only on the general level of concern (as in the above excerpt), but also in every concrete methodological search. Listed below are some examples of such methodologically-bound concerns that are situationally re-specified.

1. Jumping off bridges method: "Today, in suitably dismal weather, I went to the local suspension bridge to have a look. I stopped above the first support tower and looked down. It is a long drop and there is nice large concrete base on which to land. Survival is something that bothers me a great deal, but I suspect any injury sustained would be massive. Clambering over the railing will take some work. I must remember not to wear a skirt. Traffic was very heavy. Anyone with cell-phone will probably get emergency services to the bridge in a few minutes. That means that jumping has to be done quickly once over railing... I didn't jump today. Could have, but all I could think of was the possible pain after hitting the ground and vertigo. It is such a violent death. I am a wimp because I want to die quickly and painlessly. Preferably while unconscious."

2. Bullet-method: I'm sitting alone here at 2 am reading a.s.h , thinking about what should I do . I've planned suicide since 1995. I discovered that I couldn't cut my wrists , and couldn't run my car into a tree, so I decided a gun would be

the best...Please, don't use a shotgun. I worked in operating rooms and every year we had to try to put a new peoples faces back on. You'll shoot your whole face off and live to see the results. Please don't use a shotgun. Never, never, never.

If you forgive the morbidity of my reply , could you please elaborate on what possibly could have gone wrong in these attempts? I realize that you obviously weren't present during the acts, but perhaps you could offer some speculation based on the appearance of the wounds or interaction with the patients? More specifically , I am wondering if one may draw conclusions based on how the firearm was being held (i.e. was it placed against the temple, therefore inviting an unfortunate last second slip), or placed in the mouth with too large an angle of inclination.

3. Carbon-monoxide method: Just wandering what the real possibilities of carbon monoxide poisoning from a car in an enclosed garage are?

If you have a catalytic converter – you won't die. You will, on the other hand, get permanent brain damage. It's a real possibility . You just fall asleep. Pretty painless. But these days it is "cold" in the garage. This is bullshit. It hurts like hell. Very bad headache. Worst hangover you've ever had x 100. Plus very weak feeling. Plus brain damage... I ran my car in the garage for two and half hours and still didn't die. The story about running your car in the garage and falling asleep forever is a myth. You will pass out, eventually, and maybe even die, but it is sure as hell NOT painless.

Unable to resolve the issue of dependability once and for all – namely, what is out there (in our material environment) which can be trusted and depended upon in bringing out suicidal outcomes in reasonably sufficient ways for all practical purposes – suiciders (in a.s.h) frequently turn to the humorous devices that provide an accountable gloss on the acuteness and irreducibility of this problem. Moreover, non-serious dimensions of suicidal talk provide some fine counterpoints through which ‘dependability’ can be viewed in unsuspected light – what wouldn’t pass as ‘good suicidal methods’ (or even as ‘methods’ at all).

Excerpt No.1: Hi... I wanna kill myself and I won't pain... Does anyone know a good method ? A sure one ! A cool one too... And a fast one!!!

How about climbing into polar bear area in the Central Park Zoo. Polar bears are highly territorial and will probably eviscerate you before anyone can intervene. You'd be all over the local news...eh? And all over the polar bear area.”

In the following message another author improvises on this ‘suicidal tune’ with an even more intensity:

Excerpt No.2 : “I think that people should stop worrying about killing themselves in a painless way. I figure, why not a gruesome agonizing death that proves you are not a coward or took the easy way out. Sleeping pills and alcohol are too simple. Now swallowing hot coals with alcohol

and melting your internal body parts would be a fine way to go. Slitting your wrists ? No way , too easy. Go scuba diving, swim real deep, then swim as fast as you can to the surface. You will get a kick out of the nitrogen bubbles forming in your blood as the bends sets in. Death will be extremely painful and lengthy. Don't hang yourself in the simple way. Tie your neck to the bumper of a car and roll the car down a hill, this idea is innovative, fun and shucks, it is a great way to go. Plus if you live, you will have the option of trying it again in the future. So I say we put a stop to these simple suicides and start suggesting gruesome, horrible and gut-wrenching ways to go. Take it from an expert. I tried to kill myself by over-dosing on aspirin, and I tell you , liver damage is the most wonderful thing in the world. By the way, anybody has a liver they want to donate?”

The message replicated below contains another variation on the same theme – now through ‘difficult and good’ versus ‘easy and spoiled’ times. This intergenerational suicidal talk inadvertently brings to the fore the ‘heretic’ suggestion – a mere refinement of methodology and the availability of new options will not cure perennial suicidal (practical) worries.

Excerpt No.3: ...On a somewhat related note, what do you adults think about younger people and their thoughts on suicide? My parents feel that they are screwed up somehow, while at the same time they aren't willing to “help” curing my “illness”. And they say that the future will be bright...

You young whimper-snappers have it too easy! Why, when I was your age, I had to walk through knee-deep snow for five miles to the library, just to find out what the lethal dose of sodium ferrocyanide was. If you was not careful, you might catch your death of pneumonia just doing basic research on how to commit suicide.

We didn't have no fancy-shmancy braided dacron-kevlar rope, neither. No choice of colors to match the friction burn on our necks. We had some leftover sisal, stiff and prickly and smelled like fish, and I tell you what, we felt lucky to get it! Today's youngsters have all these easy toxic drugs and chemicals – when I was knee-high to a head-wound we only had hemlock and laudanum, and the poets and philosophers get at most of that before we could.

And single-shot Saturday Night Specials – that was a gun of choice in my day, sonny. You missed with one of them, and you had to melt up a bucket of lead and make another by-God bullet! I only wish I wasn't alive to see how soft this generation has gotten. I wish I could be turning in my grave right now at the sight of all the opportunities folks have for suicide today.

In the first part of this chapter we dealt with the issue of artful manipulation of various materials 'near' and 'at hand', that are 'known' to bring out suicidal outcomes, if it was autonomous host of problematics, sufficient in itself to shed light on the irreducible methodological puzzles. Now we will turn to discuss more fundamental requirements and conditions that must be fulfilled before the actual act of methodological

deliberation can occur at all. This part will address issues pertaining to the suicidal ways of seeing – or suiciders' ways of the culturally-asserted (Stoddart 1974) recognition of suicidally-relevant material.

In our everyday life we have many resources and supplies which are relevant to our diverse tasks of living. But when a decision is made to end this life abruptly, how can we *recognize* among things that we have (and routinely use) what is necessary for our present, suicidal relevancies? How are certain pills recognized as deadly potions when taken in a particular amount and in specific combination, how are trains *seen* as fatal blows instead of a convenient means of transportation, or how are bridges and skyscrapers perceived as places to jump off rather than as spaces to cross over or live in?

According to this perspective, suicidal methodological problematics are more deeply rooted in the structures of awareness that the previous discussion naively assumed. This problem of 'embeddedness' in a particular way of seeing, and the transformational efforts that must be concentrated on re-visioning the world in light of the new existential relevancies can be explicated more intelligibly if we compare basic problematics of suiciders to the related ones of alchemists⁹.

In their tractates, alchemists provided the following(or similar) directive on how to find the stuff, from which the Philosophers' Stone is made: "The thing is ...accessible and known to all men, of much superfluity, to be found everywhere, and by all." (Benedictus Figulus

1963). According to the alchemists, the problem with the majority of people is that they simply do not see *it* and cannot conceive *what* they must see and *where*. The problem with suiciders is a comparable one: they *see* what other people do not construe as 'seeing', and engage in strange 'relationships' with things that most people in everyday life take for granted as simply there and not worthy of additional contemplation. It is not new to the suicidal person that virtually *anything* can be re-visioned as a 'method', though viewed in retrospect by survivors, it is not at all clear to them how it was possible to go in such 'inconceivable' ways. To substantiate my thesis, let me cite one 'curious' method that I found somewhere in the a.s.h discussions:

Water-method: Could a person drink himself to death with water or would they throw up first ? And if is it possible to die this way? Is it painful? And how long would it take? Thanks.

Yes, it can actually happen. I've seen a notice in the Swedish newspaper about this happening once ... What happens is that your cells in the body will cease to work, or work a lot less efficiently. I don't remember how much water you have to drink and during what period of time , but I am sure it is a considerable amount. I would not recommend it though.

If virtually anything can be seen as a 'method' (however 'good') by those who are urgently in need of one, then we are now in a position to understand that which in the first part of this chapter was taken as an insoluble riddle, namely, the issue of methods' dependability. The inability of suiciders to provide a solution, once and for all,

by devising some perfect , efficient methodology (applicable beyond a few successful occurrences) can be intelligibly accounted for if we attend to another sense of the term 'dependability'- now taken not as something that can be relied upon , but in a more literal sense – as something that is dependent on the innumerable details of the local contexts. Harold Garfinkel (1967) describes in the following way this phenomenon of things' dependability on the contexts of their uses: "...descriptions involving them [in our case-suicidal methods] apply on each occasion of use to only one thing, but to different things on different occasions... they can be used to make unequivocal statements that nevertheless seem to change in truth value ... their denotation is relative to speaker... their use depends upon the relation of the user to the object with which the word is concerned". Garfinkel attaches these and other characteristics to what are known in linguistics and philosophy as 'indexical expressions'. The reason why suicidal methodology is hopelessly irreparable and ungeneralizable is the very same reason why alchemists' tractates are usually found as 'deliberately obscure and misleading'- i.e., that they are indexical through and through, or inexorably tied to the contexts of their actual uses. If almost everything(or more precisely, what is culturally perceived as 'everything') can be conceived *under particular circumstances* as a suicidal method , it is because there is really only *one* suicidal way to go – one that matches the incomparable details of its use –

one whose user can *reasonably see* as such. To illustrate this point it may be useful to provide an example of the alchemists' use of names and attributes, which, according to them, are numerous glosses for the *one* single reference:

"The Virgin and Blessed Water have philosophers in their books called by a thousand names, as a Heaven, Celestial Water, Heavenly Rain, Heavenly or May Dew, Water of Paradise, Aqua Regia, Corrosive Aqua Fortis, a sharp vinegar and brandy, A Quintessence of Wine, a waxy green juice, a waxy Mercury, a water becoming green, and Green Lion, a Quicksilver, a Menstruum, a Blood and Menstruum, urine and horse-urine, Milk, and Virgins' Milk, white Arsenic, Silver, a moon, a woman and woman's seed, a sulphureous, steamy water and smoke, a fiery burning spirit, a mortal penetrating poison, a basilisk which kills everything, envenomed worm, a poisonous snake, a dragon, a poisonous serpent which devours its offspring, a strong fire, and a clear, a fire of horse dung and horse dung, a sharp salt and sal armoniac, a saltary and common salt, a sharp soap, lye, and viscous oil, a vulture and hermetic bird, a seal and vessel of Hermes, a smelting and calcining stove. Innumerable other names of beasts, birds, vegetables, waters, humors, of milk, of blood, and of men have been given to it...[And yet] the receipt consists of only one thing..."(Benedictus Figulus, 1963).

The suicidal methodological glosses are of the same order as their alchemical methodological counterparts; their respective references – 'good method' for self-destruction and Philosophical Stone (or the stuff

from which it can be assembled) are *conceivable* to the extent that their practitioners can recognize what is before them, according to their current practical needs, i.e. to acquire the vision of suiciders' and/or alchemists in the first place.

Execution: The Problematic Spots of Suicidal Performance

Apart from the recurrent concerns about methods per se, there is also a significant cluster of practical worries about suicidal *performance* and its felicitous conditions. Suiciders' reasoning about their final act as a task (i.e. practical undertaking) frequently evolves around issues perceived as urgently relevant to the successful conditions of its flawless execution. According to this trend of problematics, accomplishment of the suiciders' goals is contingent on the host of particulars which are difficult to contain and control, in contrast to the bulk of our life-related tasks. The most important problem here is that the suicidal act is potentially preventable by the virtually everyone's capabilities of interference: the suiciders themselves, who, after all, are in charge of their task, and anyone else who may encounter or guess suicidal doings in the midst of the regular social life. The other set of problematic issues consists of those more familiar to all performers of a specialized activity, who are usually assessed as unprepared to execute their variable tasks without proper training and relevant practice.

The problematic features of suicide qua performance can be found in abundance in the following message:

-“I’ve tried to hang myself three times. The first time, I got an old rope in the garage, tied a noose to it , and tried to hang myself in the garage, but the rope broke. Then I went to the hardware store to get some good quality helm rope. The hardware store salesman looked at me strangely, and told me that he wouldn’t sell it to me, that I didn’t look right, that I looked like I was going to hang myself. At the next hardware store the guy looked at me kind of funny, and said ‘I don’t have any rope, not a drop’. I could see the coils of rope behind the counter , he was lying to me. I yelled at him ‘what makes you think I’m going to hang myself ?’. The third hardware store had a young guy at the counter, and he sold me the rope without question. I went home and tried to hang myself again. This time I had tied the rope too long and my feet went all the way down to the floor. I had failed again. In third attempt I tied the rope to the tree in the back yard, I kicked the stool out from under me, and I felt myself drop, and then I heard this loud ‘Ghaack!’ and everything went black. I could feel myself swinging... I know I was about to die and go to Hell... I felt myself drop again. I hit heavily on the ground on my side, and then all the light came swimming back in. My next door neighbor was standing over with machete. He had cut the rope. He yelled at me ‘of all the damn fool things I have ever seen, this takes the cake...”

Note that preventive capabilities of others (both direct and indirect) – in this case store clerks and neighbors – are not the usual kind of obstacles in the way of doing certain things. Though suicide can be done in the presence of others, and there are known cases of

public suicides (Bjelick 1991), suicide is by definition a lonely task (in contrast to homicide which involves at least two persons), that is – doing that solitary person performs on his/her self , and which is inconceivable as a usual kind of doing (that person can do to himself) by all competent onlookers. Once *some* act is interpreted as a suicide, the preventability-option is rarely seen as an *option*. It is no wonder, then, that suiciders systematically attend to these issues:

-“...Here is a list of everything I’ve thought about trying : 1) Jumping off a bridge. In the winter. For those who know the area , I had considered the George Washington Bridge , because the Brooklyn Bridge doesn’t seems high enough. Why I didn’t –am afraid of a cop stopping me as I walked along – want to do it at night , in winter , so it’d be cold...2) What I tried – ran a hose through the window and tried to gas myself . The hose made a really loud rattling sound so I got scared (I found the most deserted place I could , but remember I live in the city and in this age of overnight security guards at construction sites, etc., I still haven’t found a place I could trust) and stopped... I think we should talk more about not being able to do it.”

This negative condition – ‘no one around’ is, of course, insufficient in itself for the suiciders’ aims. There are also some positive conditions that must be fulfilled in order to feel confident about the desirable suicidal outcomes. ‘Not being able to do it’ may result from ‘not being allowed to do it’, but also from ‘not being qualified to do it’. As in any other

species of performance involving particular kind of auxiliary machinery, this machinery must be known in its very auxiliary qualities before it can be relied upon in the production of 'good act'. This knowledge is usually gathered through elaborate training and practicing – the 'parents' of all those things that work smoothly and in the predictably desirable direction. As Goffman (1974) put it : "The purpose of this practicing is to give to neophyte experience in performing under conditions in which (it is felt) no actual engagement with the world is allowed, events become 'decoupled' from their usual embedment in consequentiality. Presumably muffing or failure can occur both economically and instructively: what one has here are dry runs, trial sessions, run-through – in short, 'practicing'." Numerous warnings in the a.s.h can be successfully interpreted via this 'practicing perspective':

1. "Well, of course, anyone should practice – as a 'dry run' – any type of method on which practice is possible before actually suiciding. If someone is going to use any type of firearm, for example, it is a good idea to make triple sure that weapon is unloaded (to avoid accidents) and make sure one can keep it aimed while pulling trigger (if one can't pull trigger on an unloaded one, it is time to find another method)... Practice makes perfect. Imperfect makes long messing hospital stays and even longer stays at those nasty unfriendly institutions referred to as 'mental hospitals'."

2. "I know this is mentioned in the

methods' file but I just wanna say it again cause I realized this actually happens. If you plan on hanging yourself, you may want to test the structure you are using with the drop weight to stimulate the force. I tied sandbags, weighting twice as much as I do, to the rope, but just let it hang there. I guess the fall produced more force and the joist broke. It is not what you call unpainful. Just double check before you try it."

Though practice usually enhances chances of felicitous outcomes, there are still other problematic issues that are sufficiently 'beyond practice' and which warrant additional focus for suicidal concerns. Some of them are believed to *inhere* in the inner state of performers, while other (though related) – in the immediate atmosphere of the suicidal act. I will designate them inner and outer moods, respectively, in order to be faithful to their perceived source of origin. Theme of inner moods deals with the difficulty to find the right psychological time, which is felt as indispensable to the correct performance; outer moods – refer to features surrounding suiciders, which are believed to exert some influence, either positive or negative, (in contrast to a 'simply there'-neutral background) on the unfolding final act. Here are some examples of 'inner moods':

1. "I did some in-depth research of this subject [difficulty to pull trigger] about five years ago. In other words, I put a gun to my head and tested the barriers against pulling the trigger. Since I'm somewhat used to guns, I always treat them as loaded

and lethal (as anybody would at a gun club). Thus , the first step was to test it with an unloaded gun. After some initial resistance , I could pull the trigger. Needless to say , the first time was the only hard time.

I then loaded the thing with .357 soft tip hollow point. Of course, I couldn't pull the trigger, but I desperately wanted to get out (=be dead). After that came a series of strange feelings. Not being able to stand the pain of life and being devastated by not being able to shoot, I had muscle contractions, hit things out of frustration and in order to inflict physical pain, and felt as if I was exhausting myself. I was physically exhausted and soaking with sweat. It all ended when I was too exhausted. This was repeated a few weekends and one day, suddenly, I got the strangest feeling. It felt as if I had been through an intense, roaring and noisy storm and just reached the calm afterwards. I have never felt so calm in my life , neither before nor afterwards. At this moment there was no barrier at all against pulling the trigger. No will-power was needed. I even felt slightly happy. My mind was clear and I thought that there was nothing to fear... I also thought about my brother and that's why I didn't pull the trigger...

Some time after this, I lived with the great feeling that I had nothing to lose. That feeling is fantastic because you are not afraid of anything and no one can threaten you. Too bad that feeling didn't last forever.

If there is a next time, I won't have to worry about my brother, because he's married now and in a better situation to deal with the blow. The darn gun is gone, so it'll have to be a train instead."

Another story elaborates on the same problematic issue with distinctively British particulars (where guns are not readily accessible):

2. "At the start of the summer I was utterly switched off from everything , ... and actively made plans and preparations for my departure, including getting a new will sorted out and the like.

One Sunday in August I felt ready, and bought a local newspaper to look for a cheap old car, my rustbucket to the stars, as I saw it (CO is my poison , if you'll forgive the pun). I spent the evening with my marker pen ringing likely cars for under 300 pounds (\$ 450?). Each individual car I highlighted took in my mind its own smiling face and little character and here was such a deluge of choice that I felt like shopping round for something very stylish indeed...('No, thank you, I won't take that car: it doesn't smile enough'). I then went to my cash-point and took out the money. It was too late to phone any of the car owners, and I collapsed into bed in the knowledge that I was actively making some moves. Apart from leaving behind my very fat and ugly cat , I had no regrets. Now, the following morning everything changed round. I woke up to find there had been a break-in into my back yard and that my motorcycle had been stolen. Oddly I cared very deeply about the loss of my Honda. Why would I care if later that day my rustbucket would be conveying me into the starts ? But care I did, and the sheer indignation I experienced at the utter cheek of the naughty fellow who relieved me of my machine quite snapped me out of

My suicidal intentions ; and, rather than plunging me further down, it shocked me UP into a very positive state of being...

...But now I'm back. And right back in all senses. The positive momentum has switched to inertia, I'm sleeping more, I'm resenting my inability to be assertive enough at work, and the smiling face of a possible car keeps cropping up in mind again..."

The concern for 'outer moods' presents itself usually in querying form: – what are the features of the suicidal background which would enhance suicidal performative¹⁰ (and even dramatic) qualities? Though solutions here are highly personalized, they are nevertheless meaningful to those into 'suiciding':

1. "I have a question for all of you : what, if any, would be your choice of music when you kill yourself ? I just thought of the question now because I'm listening to Coltrane right now – 'Giant Steps' – and thought it would be really funny and interesting , but not really appropriate to kill yourself to Coltrane. Personally, the way I'd prefer to go is wrists' slit in the tub with Chopin playing. Probably his nocturnes, namely op.27 in C#minor, op.32 in A-flat and op.72 in E-minor. Also I'd just have to fit in his waltz (op.62?) in C#minor. Unfortunately, I'd probably only have time for two of those. Actually an even better way I just thought would be actually to play those on piano in your final minutes. The keyboard would be covered with blood, and I'd probably start crying because it would be so beautiful ... Anyway post your favorite tunes."

2. [reply to the previous message] : "A beautiful lonely forest at dusk , with Allegri's Miserere playing on the car stereo. Or maybe some of the preludes of Bach's cello suits. If I may be so bold as to extend this thread , would people make any kind of special last meal ? My idea is to have something simple in the car with me, like a stick of French bread , some very garlicky cheese (Boursin) and red wine. I hope if I ever do go through with my plan that I shan't get so nervous that I lose my appetite."

Though suicidal performance may be problematized on the various points, it nevertheless does not seem a hopeless enterprise, but rather perceived as a potentially remediable task, - a task with its own distinctive field of felicitous prerequisites and conditions. To act in suicidal ways necessarily entails participation in this field , at least at the level of concern, at most – at the level of actual performance. Suicidal performances (in contrast to all other performances) are generally believed to be the final acts of their performers, thus every such performance is judged by its closeness to the point of irreparability(non-return), – i.e., completion of the task- the logical outcome for those suicidally-concerned and acting on their concerns.

In this way suicidal execution finds its place in the overall structure of suicidal practical concerns, before they bifurcate into other structurally relevant directions.

'Making it look like an accident': Suicides from an Accidental Perspective

The mode of death is one of the omnipresent backgrounds of our existential relevancies. There are several ways to articulate this relevance. First, we may conceive it as related to our major interpretive frames through which we sift all noticeable events of our experience: natural occurrences and guided doings (Goffman 1974). In the case of deathly human events, 'natural occurrences' will cover well known subclasses of natural and accidental deaths, whereas 'guided doings' will refer to homicide and suicide. However, in order to pinpoint the specific place of suicide in our hierarchies of relevancies we must dig a little deeper. One way to appreciate the specificity of suicide is to conceive of all the possible modes of death as constituting a distinct moral order. From this point of view, there are no pure natural occurrences, for *all* recognizable kinds of death are *somehow* (in one way or another) held accountable before an omnirelevant tribunal of this order. 'Somehow' is a key-word here – it points to the procedural designs that must be implemented *before* arriving at the particular consequential placement in the moral order of death (at least by one of the relevant parties), but it also points to our usual disinterest in and disattention to the role of mortal accountability in elevating this or that 'deadly' occurrence to its particular moral location.

Suicide, according to this view, is 'suicide' not because someone

deliberately killed him/her-self, but rather because other relevant parties warrantably believe that it is so. Suicide, from this perspective, is not only a social thing, as Durkheim was assured, but also a social *organizational* thing¹¹ that is destined to be produced in the certain ways in the midst of other organizational 'facts'.

The corpus of data collected in this chapter points to the *reliable* background of mortal accountability which may be employed for transforming one mode of death into another moral artifact – in our case, – 'suicide' into 'accident'.

There are certain well-known advantages of accident (as compared to suicide) which deem very important to prospective suiciders considering the various practical consequences of their final acts. "Wife and kids can collect the insurance money" and "it [suicide] will cause a whole lot of anguish to people I don't want to hurt" are the most frequent reasons that prompt suiciders to look for 'accidental ways'. However, they soon discover that there are some conditions that must be honored, or at least not violently transgressed, for suicide to appear in, what is perceived as, more benevolent guises. So what are these conditions which favor 'seeing' some sudden deaths as accidents, and which are generally known to competent members of society? The following paragraphs present some of the most remarkable among them.

1) Suiciders are generally aware of the fact that not all methods(causes of death) are successfully explained

Away as 'accidental occurrences', and therefore are not seen as methods at all.

-“Here is a trick if you don't want to be held after your failed attempt. No one in the emergency-type medical area wants to believe someone wants to die, so if you can rationally and calmly explain what 'really' happened ('you see doctor it was an accident') they will let you off the restraints...

...Obviously this is fairly dependent on the method chosen. A plastic bag on your head is not easily explained away as an accident. 'I swear I was just wrapping my lunch and I thought, hey, I wonder if this is that new famous plastic bag that lets air through, I don't want my sandwich going stale, I had better slip it over my head and check, could've happened to anyone!'. May not be quite as believable as say, 'I was checking the view and I slipped and fell off the building!'.”

Thus, in this particular case, we see that the 'falling off buildings' method has more accidental potential than the 'bag on the head' design.

2) Another feature believed to influence an accidental reception is the local identity of the 'victim' in question:

-“I suppose you could have an 'accident' with third rail of an NYC subway, but it seems unlikely to be judged as accident if you aren't from NYC and you're wearing clothing with metallic threads.”

Similarly, frequent train-accidents on the Mexican-American border are usually viewed as accidents because the prevalent majority of victims are suspected to be illegal Mexican immigrants rather than Americans who

go that far to get killed. This fact prompted an envious comment by some ashers bent on the 'accidental' exit:

-“Well, that seemed encouraging, especially if you are Mexican-American in Texas. But what about the rest of us? Don't we get a chance to be run over by trains without raising an eyebrow...”

3) Finding a note or something which can be seen as a 'note' may also subvert the accidental reading of some sudden death:

-“This morning I heard the following Associated Press story reported on the news: 'Train Death Victim Identified: ... Authorities have identified a man killed in a weekend train accident near Gresson. Investigators say 20-year-old Ronald Miller of Gallitizin was dressed in black clothing and was sitting on the railroad tracks when he was struck by a freight train. The train crew used its horn to try to warn Miller to move, but there was no reaction.' So one can sit on the tracks in black clothing and ignore the blasts of the train horn and it still isn't ruled a suicide! What does it take? Apparently a note. May US ASHers will recall having heard this in the news recently: HOTCHKISS, Colo.(Reuters) - 'A woman convicted of stalking late-night talk show David Letterman was struck and killed by a train in an apparent suicide, officials said Tuesday... Delta County Sheriff Bill Blair declined to disclose the contents of note that was found near woman's body, other than to say it had a phone number of someone to

4) Accidental death is also reliably recognized by its assumed ('well-known') typical features¹² whose presence in the particular occurrence is judged as 'sure signs' of the unforeseen contingencies of some undertaking:

1-"...have your thought about hypothermia? Just go outside one night and take your clothes off. Supposedly people who die from hypothermia are *often* found naked (the cold screws the part of the brain that regulates body's temperature, making them think it is hot), or you can hang yourself, but make it look like erotic asphyxia. Make sure you are naked, have a piece of cloth between your neck and the rope so it doesn't leave a mark, and have pornography lying around."

2-"I don't know where you live but in my area the winters are very cold, an idea I had would be to go on a 'hike' and 'accidentally' fall into a river. If the water is cold enough, one could just float down stream, and within 5-10 minutes the cold should knock you out. After that it is just a matter of time. Also it is *just another* tragic accident." (added emphasis).

Accidents are also known to be 'typical' in particular ways: 'normal' accidents usually conform to the type of activity the victim was supposedly engaged in at the time of the occurrence, and the locality of 'genuine' accidents must be matched to this typical activity:

1-"... CO poisoning. Tent, charcoal grill, light it, and when the flames have gone out and the coals are glowing, bring it in to the tent as if you were trying to warm yourself. Fairly quick and shouldn't be painful. It also gives any relatives doubt (don't leave a note) about if you committed suicide

contact..."

or not as it seems to be a *quite frequent accident* among campers."

2-"...As far as I know (discussed this with friend who studied chemistry) the bleach and ammonia thing is true. Just make sure that room is closed. This seems to be a *typical domestic accident*, people who clean their toilets and die..." (added emphasis).

5) In addition to the presence of typical features, 'good' accidents must also *occasionally* be believable – 'tellable' and 'believable' for *this* particular event of sudden death:

-“Do you have train tracks (heavy duty, not light rail)? Then you could tell your friends that you are going to meet somebody on the other side of the tracks, and 'accidentally' step in front of a moving train. The cops will probably label it an accident caused by your haste to get where you said you were going. A bus can swerve – a train can't."

Disregarding this condition makes suicidal designs more visible to the relevant parties and potentially conducive to the production of 'untellable' accidental story:

Hey everybody, what do you think of ricin as a means of committing suicide? It seems to me that you might even get away with it looking like an accident, if the amount of ricin required is so small and the symptoms make it look like pneumonia is what did you in.

Oh yea, let's all go out to our castor fields and pick away! Wait, who the hell has wild (or cultivated) castor beans near their home (besides Californians)? Not me. I think the

Neighbors' descriptions of you wandering the hillsides for castor beans might be a give away that you did not die of pneumonia. That, and the fact that dying of pneumonia is usually preceded by 'having' pneumonia for at least a week or six.

6) The last element (in this collection) to be considered is the general belief that suicides are, for the most part, performed in solitude, where as fatal accidental happenings can occur anywhere, even in the presence of a reliable witness:

-“I've always wondered about the 'freak accident when cleaning my gun' method. Like, what would happen if I went out shooting one day, as I do often, came home, got all my cleaning supplies, laid all my guns out, cleaned one, then started on another (obviously my 9 mm) and then 'accidentally' shot myself in the eye as if I was looking down the barrel. Could happen...

OR the 'foolish fatal accident when playing irresponsibly with guns'- is a similar one - could load one of my guns, and call my brother into the room or something and say -‘Hey look at this new technique I have for fast-drawing’ or something and accidentally shoot myself. Who'd know?”

Witnessable accidents are presumably held higher - have a highest degree of accountability - in the hierarchy of 'tellable' fatal occurrences, but there are also other stratificational designs that bring differences into accidental events from yet another moral dimension. We even can say, after Orwell, that though all recognizable accidents are accidents, there are some accidents which are 'better' than others. 'Better' in this case

refers to the multitude of human relevancies that are accountable in culturally-accepted ways. Suicides attend to these known relevancies with varying degrees of concern. For example, many aspers frequently distinguish between 'tragic', 'stupid' and 'embarrassing' accidents. Here is an instance of the latter species:

Auto-erotic asphyxiation is a form of enhanced masturbation... There are occasional reports of people accidentally killing themselves trying to do it...

-It makes me wonder how many of these 'are' accidents... granted, there are accidental deaths, but otoh, it's a great way (maybe) to kill yourself (albeit embarrassing) and make it look like an accident.

M. Atkinson (1978), who studied the routine work of coroners, commented that "at the majority of inquests, ... it is almost a two-horse race, and the coroner can normally expect to return a verdict either of accidental death or suicide, and for it to be a suicide he must be convinced both that the deceased died as a result of his own actions and that it was intended". My study reveals that this two-horse race is frequently co-guidable by suicides' own practical worries; and in order to comprehend how sudden deaths are socially repackaged, we must attend to both: suicides' artful practices, and the just as artful practices of all other relevant parties (but who usually work on *already* organized in the certain ways mortal artifacts).

Discussion: Discovering Suicide

In the course of our inquiry into the practical organization of suicidal activity we reached and descriptively covered the three most prominent areas of voluntary deaths: methods, executions, suicides vis-a-vis accidents. Though our descriptive journey was of a strictly preliminary character, we found that the suicidal domain, like any other domain of social activity, can be characterized and intelligibly recognized in such characterizations as a practical undertaking – as something to be concerned about in ‘here-and-now’ terms. I think it is unnecessary to elaborate on the precise findings which are the unique trophies of this inquiry. Its main achievement – the most precious finding – is the possibility of perceiving suicide as a worldly affair, as something carried out in this world, and oriented toward its urgent relevancies.

However, there are also other, less discernable achievements, worthy, in my opinion, of our consideration. One of them pertains to the issue of discovering suicide in conventional sociological literature. It is my contention that suicide was not found and was principally un-findable in previous suicide-related studies because these have systematically disattended to the situated logics which form the actual suicidal practice¹³. This recurrent disattention is responsible for conventional findings *about* suicide, but, (most importantly), not *of* suicide itself. I would like to argue further, that suicide is findable by restoring it to its ‘natural’ practical locations which are ingenuously organized, and by examining the structure of this

organization. By failing to attend to the practical character of suicides and by dismissing their local structures as irrelevant to serious sociological concerns, we draw away from our initial task – to discover suicide in the midst of our social world.

Still another achievement of this study is re-tracing the ‘hidden topic’¹⁴ that refers to “a naturally organized phenomenon whose features are essentially missing in the account of their structure”(Pack 1986). Just as the designer’s work [that of an agent who constructs a particular notational system] is ‘invisible’ in the conventional theories of signs, so suicidal work (with its swarm of suicidal problematics) is nowhere to be found in the conventional sociological literature on suicide. Likewise, just as the designer’s work leaves no trace after its completion, so suicidal work remains essentially hidden after this or that suicidal outcome. In both cases we have respective (essentially) ‘missing persons’: in the case of sign-invention (hidden behind conventional theories of signs) – the designer of notational systems; in the case of suicidal occurrences (hidden behind conventional theories on suicide) – the person actually doing it. By placing suicide in its natural practical environments, we were able to overcome this barrier of ‘essential invisibility’ [of the relevant agency], and to show why suicide (per se, in-itself, sui-generis, as such) is inaccessible to studies which fail to do so.

The ‘minor’ achievements presented above must not be treated as denial of the intrinsic worth of Like

Any other previous studies in the field of suicide. ethnomethodological inquiry, they do not dispute the singular achievements of conventional studies – they are not ‘in spite of them’ or ‘against them’ , but rather must be treated as a potentially valuable *supplement*. Harold Garfinkel (1996) put it in the following terms : “EM [ethnomethodology] asks ‘What More’ is there that users of formal analysis [FA- conventional sociological formal analytical apparatuses] know and demand the existence of , that FA depends upon the existence of , for FA’s worksite-specific achievements in carefully instructed procedures, that FA uses and recognizes everywhere in and as its lived worksite specific practices”. He goes on to say: “EM is concerned with ‘What More’, in the world of familiar, ordinary activities, does immortal, ordinary society consists of as the locus and the setting of every topic of order, every topic of logic, of meaning, of method, respecified and respecifiable as the most ordinary Durkheimian thing in the world”. This study attempted to respecify the most familiar Durkheimian thing in the sociological world – suicide. I chose to apply an etnnomethodological perspective not because, in some respects, it is better than any other sociological approach, but because “...in the entirety of FA corpus, ‘What More’ is nowhere specified or specifiable. Nor can ‘What More’... be found with FA methods”(Garfinkel, *ibid.*).

In setting out to find ‘what more’ about suicide can be proposed as its description , we have found that not every method and perspective can assist us in this quest. It turned out that the

discovery of suicide, as a discovery of anything else, is initially dependent on ‘where’, ‘how’ and ‘what’ we look for. Though no claim is entertained here that our ‘where’, ‘how’ and ‘what’ are better than their conventional sociological counterparts, we still believe, that judging by ‘what more’-measures this study allows us to ‘see’ deeper into suicide and to recognize in this ‘seeing’ its discovery.

Suggestions for Further Research

It is customary for conventional sociological studies to suggest further paths that may be paved from those newly found or to expand on their promising beginnings. This study differs slightly from conventional studies in several respects. First, although , as other studies do routinely, it may consider itself as a preliminary undertaking and a call for more extended studies, it cannot dismiss its intrinsic dependence on the particular corpus of data and particular stance toward this corpus. As it was argued in the previous chapter, the very possibility to say ‘more’ about suicide, or add ‘something at all’ to the already extensively researched areas of interest, depends on our treatment of particular data in particular way or, even more importantly, on ‘its’ recognition as ‘data’ that might be treatable by some version of researching activity. Thus, our first suggestion to anyone willing to extend our present efforts in whatever relevant direction may be summed in the following terms: try to find what is there about suicide that is accessible to everyone and

Warrantably constitutes its all-too-familiar appearance, which is systematically relied upon and used as explanatory auxiliary device in the various areas of research, but nevertheless fails to become a topic in its own right – as something that, - ‘after all’, can be construed as another picture of suicide, though not routinely findable in the sociological family-album.

The second suggestion refers to the pioneering method of researching every possible kind of social activity, besides suicide, that was exemplified in this study. As it was mentioned several times in the introductory chapter, it is my belief that we can fruitfully study every possible kind of activity by its profile (a unique array) of practical concerns. A preliminary inquiry of this sort in the field of suicidal action can be regarded not only as a model for studying suicidal activity, but also as a potentially extendible tool to arrive at a detailed definition¹⁵ of any activity in question, through its unique location in the field of its intrinsic concerns. By relating to the present study as exemplary, rather than as a topical achievement, we hopefully contribute to the opening of new opportunities for the investigators of various social fields of activity, in a manner which would respect their singularity and, at the same time, be potentially applicable to any other kind of social action¹⁶. Since every conceivable kind of social activity is potentially distinguishable by its collection of corresponding concerns, we may feel assured that these practical concerns tell us something unique about the given domain of action, but this very ‘distinguishability’ provides us with the

warrant that other fields of activity, too, have their own voices in the vocabularies of their local concerns.

To Conclude

I’d like to conclude this study with a quotation from David Sudnow’s “Ways of the Hand”(1978) – a book which proved extremely helpful in finding my own way among the crisscrossing paths of suicidal problematics. Though I did not strictly conform to the spirit of this book, it may be said that it is there I caught the glimpse of the possibility to undertake the analytical journey which I now can call my own. You can read this passage as a solemn confession of commitment to the particular form of social inquiry, or you can, alternatively, treat it as an instructional exercise. For me it has been – both. The reader is also asked to bear in mind that Sudnow’s phenomenon of ‘jazz music’ and my phenomenon of ‘suicide’ are interchangeable notions (for the purposes of this conclusion); his assertions about ‘jazz music’ in his study (in this particular passage) are also applicable to ‘suicide’ in my own:

“If there is to be the phenomenon of ‘jazz music’ to explore (or any other phenomenon of social action) for others to write of and analyze, for psychology, history, philosophy, linguistics, sociology, biology, musicology, and the rest, first there must be its production. How must the ‘is-ness’ of this conduct, its ‘quiddity’- to use Harold Garfinkel’s favored term – be established as the definitive ground for further

Descriptive inquiry? I treat the actor's perspective as definitionally critical for the initial specification of this quiddity, for establishing the 'what' of social action, to which all accounts must be addressed. This is not a question of argument; it is statement of program. And the task then becomes making that specification as richly detailed as possible, as a definitional effort."

Notes

1. Renowned studies by Garfinkel (1967) and Sacks (1966) on suicide, that were conducted at the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center, are no exception. Atkinson in the very useful study (1978) provides a somewhat bitter summary of an ethnomethodological 'affair' with suicide: "Although suicide has featured in the writing of both Garfinkel and Sacks, it would be misleading and incorrect to view their works as studies of suicide in any conventional sense." He goes on to say: "As far as the continued study of suicide as a topic of research is concerned, it should be clear that ethnomethodology has no glib or easy solution. As a source of data on members' methods of practical reasoning, it is clearly as suitable as any other possible source and hence may continue to attract ethnomethodologists... So just as it was argued that a suicide as a topic for empirical research was traditionally of less interest to sociologists than the theoretical and methodological issues raised by Durkheim's 'Suicide', it may now seem that the ethnomethodologists' indifference to suicide as a topic both in past and possible future studies ensures that a similar situation will persist."

2. On my usage of the term 'suicider' and the like see relevant passage in the "Suicide as a subject of concern" section.

3. But I am interested mainly in their peculiar 'fillings'.

4. Does it mean that in some selected areas of social life we are 'natural' ethnomethodologists?

5. "Official guidelines" in a.s.h are far more developed than their counterparts in other news-groups and consist of three mutually-referential documents: general FAQ (frequently asked questions) providing basic information on a.s.h's aims and epistemic

orientations; Debate-FAQ explaining how discussions are expected to proceed; and Methods File containing alphabetically organized data on suicidal methodology.

6. Term 'concern' will always refer to practical concerns, unless stated otherwise.

7. MF is re-posted every two weeks. Thus, every visitor has a fair chance to come across this document upon his/her first 'arrival' to a.s.h.

8. The signs ">>>", ">>", ">" designate participation in the same string of talk. A descending number of ">" indicates sequential positions of participants by time. The last participant has no ">" queue-indicators (this is standard abbreviation for e-mail communication).

9. This argument is based on the very insightful ideas of Trent Eglin, presented in his "Introduction to a Hermeneutics of the Occult: Alchemy" (1986).

10. It is common belief among certain suiciders that suicidal performance 'turns out' much better in a soothing atmosphere, which supposedly provides a reliable background for an 'easy' and 'calm' suicide.

11. It must be organized as suicide to be seen and treated as such.

12. See Sudnow's "Normal Crimes" (1965) for a brilliant discussion of the typical features' problematics. Like 'normal crimes', 'normal accidents' too, have their own field of typical traits.

13. This line of argumentation is heavily influenced by compelling arguments derived from M. Baccus' "Multiple Truck Accidents and Their regulations" (1986).

14. Here I draw inspiration and a useful point of comparison from C. Pack's "Features of Signs Encountered in Designing a Notational System for Transcribing Lectures" (1986).

15. A 'detailed definition' is, of course, not exhaustive one, but a metaphor for a rich description, generous in intent and finely attuned to its social referent.

16. This method is especially suited for the investigating various Internet's social forums (news-groups, mailing lists etc.), but with minor remodifications it can be fruitfully used in the research of the more conventional social settings.

References

- Atkinson , Maxwell (1978) *Discovering Suicide: Studies in the Social Organization of Sudden Death*. London: Macmillan .
- Baccus .M.D. (1986) 'Multiple truck accidents and their regulations', in Garfinkel , Harold (ed.) *Ethnomethodological studies of work*. Routledge & Kegan Paul : London and New York.
- Barthes , Roland (1978) *A Lover's Discourse : Fragments*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Bjelic , Dusan (1990) 'Public Suicide as a Deed of Optionless Intimacy', *Symbolic Interaction* 13 : 161-183
- Breed , Warren (1963) 'Occupational Mobility and Suicide Among White Males', *American Sociological Review* 28 : 179-188.
- Button , Graham & Sharrock , Wes (1998) 'The Organizational Accountability of Technological Work', *Social Studies of Science* 28 : 73-102.
- Durkheim , Emile (1952) *Suicide*. Routledge & Kegan Paul : London and New York.
- Eglin , Trent (1986) "Introduction to a Hermeneutics of Occult : Alchemy" , in Garfinkel, Harold (ed.) *Ethnomethodological studies of work*. Routledge & Kegan Paul : London and New York.
- Figulus , Benedictus (1963) *A Golden and Blessed Casket of Natures Marvels*. Vincent Stuart : London.
- Garfinkel , Harold (1967a) *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs , NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Garfinkel , Harold (1967b) 'Practical Sociological Reasoning: Some Features in the work of the Los Angeles Suicide Prevention Center", in Shneidman, Edwin (ed.) *Essays in Self-Destruction*. New York : Science House , Inc.
- Garfinkel , Harold (1988) 'Evidence for Locally Produced , Naturally Accountable Phenomena of Order, Logic, Reason, Meaning, Method, etc. in and as of the Essential Quiddity of Immortal Ordinary Society', *Social Theory* 6 : 103-109.
- Garfinkel , Harold (1996) 'Ethnomethodology's program', *Social Psychology Quarterly* 59: 5-21.
- Gibbs , Jack & Martin ,Walter (1964) *Status Integration and Suicide*. Eugene, Oregon: Oregon University Press.
- Giddens , Anthony (1966) 'A Typology of Suicide', *European Journal of Sociology* 7: 276-295.
- Goffman , Erving (1974) *Frame Analysis : An Essay on the Organization of Experience*. New York : Harper & Row.
- Halbwachs , Maurice (1930) *Les Causes du Suicide*. Paris: Alcan.
- Henry , Andrew & Short , James (1954) *Suicide and Homicide*. New York: The Free Press.
- Motto, Jerome (1967) 'Suicide and Suggestibility – the Role of the Press', *American Journal of Psychiatry* 124: 252-256.
- Orwell , George (1986) *Animal Farm*. New York: New American Library.
- Pack , Christopher (1986) 'Features of Signs Encountered in Designing a Notational System for Transcribing Lectures', in Garfinkel, Harold (ed.) *Ethnomethodological studies of work*. Routledge & Kegan Paul: London and New York.
- Pierce, Albert (1967) 'The Economic Cycle and the Social Suicide Rate', *American Sociological Review* 32: 457-462.
- Sacks, Harvey (1967) 'The Search for Help: No One To Turn To', in Schneiman , Edwin (ed.) *Essays in Self-Destruction*. New York: Science House Inc.
- Sacks, Harvey (1972) 'An Initial Investigation of the Usability of Conversational Data for Doing Sociology', in Sudnow, David (ed.) *Studies in Social Interaction*. New York : The Free Press.
- Sacks, Harvey (1974) 'On the Analysability of Stories by Children' , in Turner, Roy (ed.) *Ethnomethodology*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.
- Sainsbury, Peter (1955) *Suicide in London*. London: Oxford University Press.
- Stoddart , Kenneth (1974) 'The Facts of Life about Dope: Observations of a Local Pharmacology', *Urban Life and Culture* 3: 179-204.
- Sudnow, David (1965) 'Normal Crimes: Sociological Features of the Penal Code in the Public Defender Office', *Social Problems*. 12: 255-276.
- Sudnow, David (1978) *Ways of the Hand*. The MIT Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts, London.
- Vetlugin , Oleg (1996) 'Secret Life of the Solitary Walker: Inconveniences of Aloneness in Public'(unpublished paper).
- Vetlugin , Oleg (1997) 'Notes on the Art of Being Alone in the Public Places'(unpublished paper).