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The cultural context of youth suicide in Australia: unemployment, identity and gender

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Abstract

This article considers the impact, in terms of life and death choices, of the economic exclusion of young people in Australia, where suicide is the leading cause of death by injury. In the two decades from 1980 there was a dramatic increase in suicide rates for young males. Research demonstrates a correlation between youth suicide and unemployment but the complex relationship between the two has not been fully investigated. This article explores the perceptions of young people, parents and service providers of the cultural context of suicide and how it comes to be constructed as an option for young people experiencing economic marginalisation. In

Keywords

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The Cultural Context of Youth Suicide in Australia: Unemployment, Identity and Gender

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This article considers the impact, in terms of life and death choices, of the economic exclusion of young people in Australia, where suicide is the leading cause of death by injury. In the two decades from 1980 there was a dramatic increase in suicide rates for young males. Research demonstrates a correlation between youth suicide and unemployment but the complex relationship between the two has not been fully investigated. This article explores the perceptions of young people, parents and service providers of the cultural context of suicide and how it comes to be constructed as an option for young people experiencing economic marginalisation.

Introduction

Advances in transportation and communications technologies in recent decades have fuelled the emergence of the much-analysed phenomenon of globalisation (Grant, 1997). While the effect of globalisation on many aspects of life has been studied, probably the most fundamental dimension of the issue is that of economics, and, in particular, production (Coriat, 1997; Razin and Sadka, 1999). Worldwide consumer markets and production capacities have had a major impact on labour markets, particularly in industrialised societies, which are strong participants in the global economy. In Australia, industries that cannot compete internationally have markedly diminished or disappeared (Grough *et al.*, 1980), while others have grown to take advantage of new opportunities. Economic restructuring is occurring in response to these developments, and, with it, changes in the labour market. Many industries and occupations have been affected and substantial job losses have occurred in clothing, footwear, textiles industries and vehicle manufacturing. At the same time, businesses such as those associated with the wine industry, international education or primary products have expanded.

As in many other industrialised countries, economic restructuring and emphasis on increased productivity have had a major impact on the youth sector of the unskilled labour pool, resulting in high unemployment rates (Wilshire, 1980; Australian Parliament, 1992). The overall unemployment rate in Australia reached almost 11 per cent in 1993; the rate for youth was 23.6 per cent for those aged 15–19 years and 16.0 per cent for 20–24 year olds (Australian Parliament, 1992). Since then rates have gradually reduced (ABS, 2000). The overall unemployment rate was below 6 per cent for the first half of 2005 (ABS, 2005). For youths aged 15–19 years, the rate in 2003 was 15.1 per cent, and 8.7 per cent for

20–24 year olds (ABS, 2004a). Studies have considered the effects of economic exclusion on a range of social problems such as poverty, drug use, crime and teenage pregnancy (Morrell et al., 1998; McCulloch, 2001; Hill, 2000; Winefield et al., 1993).

Suicide is the largest single cause of death for young Australian males aged 15–24 years, exceeding motor vehicle accidents (24 deaths per 100,000 compared with 16 deaths per 100,000 respectively in 1997) (Moon et al., 1999). The peak for the age standardised suicide rate for the decade 1993–2003 occurred in 1997 and, like unemployment, declined thereafter. In 2003 the overall suicide rates for males was 17.7 per 100,000 and for females 4.7 per 100,000. The suicide rate for males and females aged 15–19 years were 12.7 and 3.6 per 100,000 respectively, accounting for 19.9 per cent of male and 13.1 per cent of female deaths. For those aged 20–24 years, the suicide rate was 23.3 per 100,000 for males and 13.7 per 100,000 for females, accounting for 26.1 per cent of male and 11.6 per cent of female deaths (ABS 2004b).

In an international context, Australia's overall suicide rates are not extraordinary – the overall male suicide rate ranking 28th in the world in 1994 (WHO, 1996, cited by Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). However, Australian rates of youth suicide (particularly of males) have been high when compared with other OECD countries (UNICEF, 1996, cited by Commonwealth of Australia, 1999). New Zealand, Norway and Finland are the only OECD nations with higher rates among the 15–24 year old group (Baum and McTaggart, 1998).

In his study of suicide, Durkheim (1952 [1897]) alerted us to the social consequences of rapid economic change and restructuring. He argued that one consequence of industrialisation was the possibility of anomie, entailing a breakdown of traditional norms and mores, a tension between expectations and reality, and, as a consequence, an increase in suicide caused by individual loss of meaning. While his methods and underlying premise have been criticised for failing to take account of individual motivation and the socially constructed nature of suicide rates (Atkinson, 1978; Douglas, 1967; Taylor, 1982), it is worth considering the extent to which suicide rates among young men in developed Western nations are affected by factors such as economic restructuring associated with globalisation.

Due to its high incidence rate, suicide, especially among young males, has become a priority area for government policy and research (Commonwealth of Australia, 1999, 2000). Much of this has been undertaken by psychiatrists and adolescent mental health practitioners concerned with the problem of mental health/illness and with identifying individual pathology (Hassan, 1995). However, suicide is not necessarily conceptualised as a 'health' issue by young people themselves. Furthermore, the significance of social factors that affect the lives of young people is now being recognised. Among other things, youth suicide has commonly been correlated with unemployment, linking it to lifestyle risk factors such as illicit drug use, alcohol consumption and depression, all of which are higher among unemployed rather than employed youth (Hill, 1995; Lester, 1989; Morrell et al., 1998; Platt, 1984; Pritchard, 1995; Stack, 2000; Winefield et al., 1993).

However, studies that show correlations between youth suicide and unemployment are often unsatisfactory in that they do not address the social process by which the two are connected. In order to better understand this relationship, the research on which this article is based focused on the cultural context of suicide. We asked young people, parents and youth service providers about youth suicide within their community and how suicide may be constructed as an option for youths experiencing stress, such as

unemployment. It examines how the macro phenomenon of unemployment rates can have far-ranging implications for intimate spheres of life such as gender identity and mental health, and which in conservative, individualistically oriented communities can be ontologically threatening and play a major role in suicide decisions. In talking with young people, we found that employment issues were more significant for young men than young women. The responses of young men appeared to be in keeping with normative or hegemonic masculinity; their identities often threatened if they were unable to meet these ideals. Hegemonic masculinity refers to normative masculinity – not necessarily ‘normal’ in the statistical sense, but the most honoured way of ‘being’ a man in a particular culture. While masculinities are diverse and multiple, many men still position themselves in relation to hegemonic masculinity (Connell, 2005).

The study

The study was conducted in ‘Subcity’ – a fictitious name for a group of suburbs on the edge of a large Australian city. Subcity was chosen because of its reputation for having a high youth suicide rate. Relative to other jurisdictions, however, Subcity does not appear to have a particularly severe youth suicide problem (Stewart *et al.*, 1996).

Forty-one people from this community were interviewed – 20 parents and service providers (sports coaches, counsellors, church leaders, teachers and youth workers) and 21 young people (aged between 16 and 24 years old). All of the young people were under 25 years of age at the time of interview. The intention in sampling was to maximise the range of participants in terms of socio-economic background, educational institution and level, sex, age, suburb and employment.

A variety of methods was used to recruit interviewees, including posted notices; a community newspaper story; referrals from young people, parents, youth service workers or colleagues; and a selection of key informants from youth or suicide prevention related organisations. The focus on the community context of youth suicide meant that we did not purposefully select young people who had contemplated, attempted or been affected by suicide. Instead, we recruited a range of ‘ordinary’ members of this community to uncover the views of non-clinically identified people. Only one youth reported having contemplated suicide, although several others knew of people who had died in this way.

In-depth interviews were conducted using a schedule of nine open-ended questions about youth suicide. Questions were designed with reference to the existing literature and revised and modified as the research evolved. The iterative nature of the investigation allowed us to interrogate emerging issues in greater depth. Toward the end of each interview, participants were presented with scenarios about youth suicide. The use of scenarios (vignettes or case abstracts) in research is well established as a method to focus participants’ attention on key factors and determine their importance (Rossi *et al.*, 1982; Sniderman and Grob, 1996; Hughes, 1998; Miles and Huberman, 1994; Parkinson and Manstead, 1993; Finch, 1987; Rahman, 1996). While critics of vignette methodology argue that it is suggestive to participants, we found that participants freely disagreed with points they considered unrealistic.

Scenarios were drawn from epidemiological literature about youth suicide and designed to stimulate discussion on topical or key issues identified in the literature. One scenario described the history of Mark, a 23-year-old unemployed young man:

Mark and his friends were looking forward to the Battle of the Bands concert that was coming up on the weekend. Mark was 23, unemployed and was worried about the cost of the ticket and some drinks with his mates because he was behind in his rent. Mark's friends reckoned that this was one of the coolest events of the year and that everyone was going to be there. Mark told his friends that he was definitely going, but not to wait for him. On the night of the concert, he never turned up and his friends had no idea what had happened to him. Mark was found dead by police in his brother's car. The engine was still running and Mark had suffocated.

Interviewees were asked to comment on this scenario and to say where Mark might have sought help; who or what was responsible for his situation; and what might have been done differently. Twenty participants comment on this scenario.

All interviews were tape recorded and transcribed, coded and thematically analysed using NVivo software. Pseudonyms are used throughout this article to maintain the confidentiality of participants.

Findings and discussion

We asked participants why young people decided to take their own life. While almost half ($n = 18$) specified unemployment, it was only one of many reasons offered. In frequency, it ranked lower than relationship difficulties, lack of social support and problems at school. In identifying causal factors, one-third ($n = 14$) referred to poverty, money or social class issues, all of which overlap with unemployment (Beautrais *et al.*, 1998; Winefield, 1993; Platt, 1984; Lester, 1989; Dudley *et al.*, 1998). The two most common responses to this question were family problems, and general stress and coping – both suggested by 34 participants. Some thought that these problems were caused or exacerbated by economic exclusion. For others, it was what some cultural theorists have argued are among the effects of globalisation, i.e. an increasing societal emphasis on materialism and celebrity.

Twenty participants were asked to respond to the 'Mark Scenario' from which three main themes emerged. The first related to the importance of employment and money in the *identity development* of young people. Second, was the significance of employment and affluence to the *hegemonic masculinity* present in the lives of young men. Finally, and closely tied to the first two themes, was the concept of *individualism* – that individuals are ultimately responsible for themselves.

Social participation and identity development

There is a lot of unemployment, a lot of young ones lack education and experience, and a lot of menial jobs, like factory and store work, have been reduced because of modern technology. I don't think there are as many opportunities today and so a lot of young ones feel inadequate. (Felicity, parent)

Felicity acknowledged how economic and social exclusion can lead to problems of self-esteem and self-image. She saw employment as a crucial part of a young person's identity and believed that youths without education or skills were particularly vulnerable to transformations in the economy and labour market. Participants spoke of depression, feelings of uselessness, boredom and loss of motivation caused by unemployment.

If you've been unemployed for ages you lose your motivation and you probably just sit at home all day and get depressed and then just think that you are worthless. (Penny, 23, young person)

I think with unemployment if you don't have anything to do all day you can just spiral down. I think you've got nothing else to think about and you've got no money to do anything. (Sally, parent)

These remarks reveal the perceived significance of employment (or occupation) and money. Both were viewed as vital to good mental health and well-being, and to the development of identity. Parents, more often than youths or service providers, expressed a connection between unemployment and youth suicide commenting that the erosion of unskilled jobs put pressure on young people and made them feel inadequate. They saw a connection between unemployment, depression and suicide for young men like Mark. A typical comment was:

I really think that's where children will feel a lot less self-worth if they couldn't at the end of all their years of study come out and get a job. And that would be a major factor [in the cause of youth suicide]. (Jenny, parent)

There was also a view that financial pressure on the current generation of youths had increased as Australia's welfare state began to be dismantled. Despite this, none of the parents who responded to Mark's scenario thought it plausible or likely to occur in their community.

In my experience (his mates) would all chip in and take him anyway. . . . I think that mateship would come to the fore. I find it unlikely that Mark would take such drastic action [simply due to being unable to afford a ticket to the concert]. (Felicity, parent)

This may be related to the distancing found throughout the study. Most parents and young people were concerned about the issue of youth suicide but did not think it likely to directly affect them. One parent felt that Mark was too old to suicide 'over such a small thing'; another that the immediate precipitating event was trivial; and another that this would only happen if Mark was unsupported, or had poor relationships with his parents. When suicide did occur within the community, responsibility was usually attributed to the individual or to their families (see later discussion). There was a general assumption that in a situation such as Mark's, their own children would turn to family and friends for understanding and support and that this would be forthcoming and provide successful intervention. This view contradicts a strong theme in the interviews overall, i.e. that individuals were essentially responsible for themselves. Given that parents were the most likely group to view unemployment as a reason for youth suicide, this is a rather incongruous finding; an issue to which we return in the discussion below.

The majority of participants who responded to 'Mark's Scenario' felt that financial problems caused by unemployment rendered him unable to do things that other people of his age took for granted. This led to feeling excluded. Participants spoke of him not fitting in or feeling left out. Mark 'can't keep up his coolness' (Malcolm, 22) and '[he] doesn't want to look like a drop kick' (Carson, 20). For these participants young men like Mark struggled but ultimately failed to be socially acceptable. Melissa, a youth development officer, saw the main issue in terms of social comparison and identity development: 'He felt like he didn't fit in . . . kids peg themselves with their peers.' The youths who responded to this scenario appeared to feel this more keenly than the adults. This is unsurprising

given that adolescence is regarded as a time when individuals strive to develop clear and stable identities and a sense of independence, especially from parents. Conformity with peers is often used as a bench mark by youths to assess their success in these areas, and they expect to be well advanced in the process by their early 20s. This perhaps provides an explanation for why young men like Mark might not seek assistance from family or friends, even if this were readily available.

Most participants, however, thought that a young man like Mark would not suicide solely because of unemployment. As Cathy (22) suggested, 'That night was just the tip of the iceberg.' Yet having a job and financial independence were seen by many as essential elements of masculinity. Accordingly, the material losses associated with unemployment were viewed as contributing to young men's ontological insecurity and feelings of worthlessness, problems that might ultimately become too great to overcome.

Normative masculinity

Almost half of the young men who participated in the study and half of the young women identified unemployment as a possible cause of suicide. While young women speculated that unemployment might be a problem, they had little more to say on the issue. Most had no direct experience of unemployment and only one of the women who mentioned unemployment elaborated on its effects. In contrast, the young men who spoke of unemployment had more insight into the possible relationship between unemployment and youth suicide, although only one had actually been unemployed.

Low motivation, when you're down, like lots of people would be smoking pot and would be getting themselves into debt and therefore even more worried about what they are going to do. (Carson, 20).

While some indicated that unemployment could lead to financial difficulties and depression or low self-esteem, Carson added an intervening step of inappropriate drug use.

Significantly, nine of the 14 participants who talked about the pressures of money were male, and they were more likely to talk in terms of material possessions and finances than the women who talked about poverty, money and class in more general terms. For example:

I think now there is such pressure on people to achieve, and recognition of their achievement is where they live, what sort of car they drive, and do their kids go to a certain level of school. (Ian, parent)

Not that it would bother me, but I think a lot of people get really depressed about it and think, 'Oh, I'm going to have no money and what am I going to do, everyone hates me and I'm dumb' and stuff like that. (Isabel, 16)

That the young men demonstrated more concern about unemployment suggests that, in the context of self-worth, employment may be more important to them than to young women as it is part of the hegemonic masculinity of this community. Stable employment is vital for men who continue to expect to play the role of breadwinner and provider (Komter, 1991). Totten (2000), in a study of male gangs, found that unemployment and

poverty among young men led to an inability to perform traditional gender roles. One consequence was their marginalisation from mainstream mechanisms of patriarchal-authority (for example, family breadwinner) and a consequent turn to violent and aggressive behaviour. Traditional attitudes to masculinity and femininity were dominant in the interviews conducted for this study.

That a greater number of male participants felt that money pressures were a cause of youth suicide may be attributed to the stereotype of men as breadwinners and women as homemakers. While there may be several forms of masculine identity and behaviour in urban and more heterogeneous communities in Australia (Connell, 1995), Subcity has a reputation as a socially and politically conservative area where traditional family values are often espoused and aspired to. Young men may thus feel pressure to establish themselves financially, and consequently experience the inability to do so as a source of great stress.

Most Subcity residents interviewed felt that men were conditioned to stoicism. Several spoke of the self-imposed, economic, peer and family pressure they thought young men like Mark would feel:

I can feel Mark's pressure. Mark's doing things really tough. There's the pressure to be something, the pressure to be part of a group. (Malcolm, 22)

Part of this normative masculinity is that men 'stick it out' and handle things by themselves. However, a number of participants suggested that, while some men maintain a façade of traditional masculinity by appearing to be self-sufficient and in control, failure to attain the milestones of employment and financial independence became a heavy weight to bear. Cathy felt the common pattern of men's lack of communication with their friends was directly related to gender expectations.

Oh, guys, they are such a problem. They're worried that there is going to be some gay stigma, some feminine stigma put on them. They just don't tell each other these things, especially if it is [something] serious. (Cathy, 22)

Individualism

One facet of both normative masculinity and identity development is individualism, and the notion of responsibility for oneself. This was highlighted in the research in several ways. Two of the youngest men interviewed expressed a strong belief that anyone could get a job if they wanted to.

To me there is no such thing as unemployment. I've been out of work before and it takes me two or three days to find another one. I don't believe in the unemployment thing. It is not that hard to go out and get a job. (Carson, 20)

Expressions of self-sufficiency ranged from taking responsibility for finding help, to dealing with problems independently of others. Carson believed that it was entirely up to Mark to solve the deeper problem of unemployment by simply 'going out and getting a job'. It was also frequently noted, that at age 23, Mark was no longer a child and, therefore, it was up to him to solve his own problems. This highlighted the tension between individual responsibility and family support, with most participants seeing a limited supportive role

(if any) for friends, and barely any reference to government interventions such as mental health services.

The most convincing evidence for the significance of individualism derived from participants' responses to the question, 'Who is responsible for this situation arising?'. A large majority of participants believed that Mark alone was responsible for his suicide. Although many expressed sympathy for his situation, his inability to find work and to meet his financial needs were regarded by most as his own fault.

You don't want to blame him, poor Mark. But, I mean it is not like anyone else has caused it, (Penny, 23)

Indeed, some passed harsh judgements on Mark, accusing him of being unresourceful and selfish.

There are jobs out there if you want one. (Jade, 21)

Yet three of the youths interviewed suggested that perhaps Mark's friends should take some of the responsibility for his suicide by indirectly putting pressure on him to join group activities, while failing to recognise his dire situation. Another three participants commented that society or the community in general contributed to Mark's death by making him feel inadequate. Mark had clearly felt pressure to achieve cultural goals and when he had failed to do so had felt social pressure to deal with the consequences himself. Ultimately, however, these participants still believed that Mark was essentially responsible for his own suicide.

Young people (both male and female) were more likely than parents to see Mark's scenario as a realistic situation. What they viewed as unlikely about his situation (if anything), was that he had been unable to ask his friends for help. This is despite the fact that many had earlier acknowledged that one possible reason for not talking to friends was pride and the embarrassment of being unable to achieve employment and independence. One young man felt this sort of situation was likely only to happen in the public housing areas of Subcity. His comments carry the implication that people living in government housing either cannot or will not find work and that middle-class youth are insulated from economic pressures and associated social problems, and are, therefore, less likely to encounter suicide. This type of distancing, or insulating oneself and one's group from the issue of youth suicide, emerged as a theme in the research.

Conclusion

In examining the possible relationship between unemployment and suicide, it was clear that participants saw a connection between the two. This was primarily in the context of young males for whom the gulf between expectations and reality had become impassable. The findings note the significance of participation in the labour market and financial independence, particularly for young men, on their sense of personal identity, on gendered role expectations, and on control or independence in their lives. While each of these themes may be considered separately, they appear to be interconnected and the implications of each intertwine with the others.

Adolescence is commonly understood to be a period of transition between childhood and adulthood during which young people develop a sense of personal identity. In Western

societies this transition is commonly associated with an expectation of employment, the potential for financial security and being able to fully engage in a consumer society, independent living, taking responsibility for oneself and the prospect or possibility of a future, which might include taking responsibility for others (for example, children). The findings from this research suggest that, despite conforming to traditional stereotypes, this 'ideal type' continues to act as a kind of 'gold standard' for young people, parents and service providers in communities such as Subcity. There is, however, an inconsistency between these cultural expectations and the economic reality in which some young men have found themselves.

Among our interviewees, there also tended to be a lack of awareness of some of the tensions and contradictions in the opinions that they expressed. For example, on the one hand, many spoke of a masculine identity and individuality in which men are independent and responsible, while, on the other hand, they noted the problems associated with male emotional reserve and what was often perceived as an inability to ask for help and support. Similarly, in Subcity, young men were expected to be able to find work and to purchase consumer goods, which are symbolic of success and independence, yet some participants noted the problems of unemployment and the impact this had on a young person's capacity to 'fit in' with peers and live up to the expectations of society. In many respects, Subcity may not be exceptional in these ways. Indeed, it is often noted that Western notions of masculinity entail separateness, independence and reliance on the self (Hallam *et al.*, 1999; Cross and Madson, 1997). There is also a tension in the culture of individualism. On the one hand, people are expected to be independent and to provide for themselves financially, and emotionally (within the context of a family, friendships or intimate relationships), but, on the other, there is an expectation that they will conform to social norms.

Few options or choices appear to be available for young people who are unable to meet these expectations. In this context, it is understandable that young men who are unable to compete in the labour market may become profoundly distressed and regard themselves as failures with little hope of change. In communities with a culture of individualism and self-reliance, and that support notions of traditional masculinity, young men who find themselves unemployed, and hence economically disadvantaged, may come to perceive suicide as a viable alternative to an enduring sense of personal failure. In this context Durkheim's (1952) observations that anomic circumstances (arising in periods of economic restructuring or rapid social change) may lead to suicide, remain applicable in modern communities such as Subcity.

The effects of globalised systems of production on labour markets and consumption patterns have been explored by many authors, yet the implications of globalisation for cultural milieux are less well understood. This article suggests a link between the macro phenomena of globalisation, economic restructuring and changing labour markets with more micro-level issues such as unemployment, gender, identity and youth suicide. While globalisation *per se*, and even unemployment, cannot be said to be the sole or direct determinants of youth suicide, social structures set a context within which agency is exercised, and the findings from this study certainly suggest connections between the two.

This research adds weight to the suggestion that youth suicide prevention strategies would benefit from reorientation. While epidemiologists study risk factors that are correlated with suicide and psychologists play an important role in assisting those

who have been identified as at risk, our findings suggest it would be useful to further develop health promotion strategies aimed at social and cultural interventions. One such strategy, that of the 'Health Promoting Schools Framework' (Rowling, 2002), has been developed for use in schools in Australia. This framework adopts a whole school, or whole community approach to the problems of mental health and suicide risk. The intention is to create a supportive and positive environment that places emphasis on connection between the school curriculum, school policies, practices and partnerships. It aims to achieve these goals by organising curricula that address issues of mental and social health, by promoting positive interaction in the classroom, through the design of activities that encourage communication around issues of challenge, success, failure, and so on, and by 'the promotion of a culture of high but achievable expectations' (<http://cms.curriculum.edu.au/mindmatters/23/10/06>).

A strategy such as this, which focuses on an examination of cultural norms and expectations, and encourages school students and staff to develop open and supportive approaches to mental health issues, may well result in a change in cultural norms and expectations for young people leaving school and entering the labour market. Indeed, one key element of the framework is to support young people through the transition out of school and into the workplace. As the WHO Report on Health Promotion suggests, empowering communities and individuals to make healthy choices entails three elements: 'promoting healthy action, promoting healthy policies, and advancing knowledge and ability to act upon the social determinants of health' (WHO, 2000: 2). In the context of suicide among young, unemployed men, this would require the development of health promotion programs that are based in the community and located within community settings such as sports centres, youth and community centres, or health centres. The promotion of community rather than individual responsibility, as well as the development of an individualism that accepts and supports individual differences, rather than emphasising independence, are likely to be effective interventions to reduce youth suicide.

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