

Essay  
**The Presentation of the Self:  
An Hypothesis about Suicide Notes**

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**Abstract:** Typically, suicide notes are viewed as providing insights into the psychodynamics of the suicidal individual. The present essay proposes, in contrast, that some suicidal individuals use their suicide note to present a picture of themselves that they want others to remember. Suicide notes may sometimes present a façade self rather than a real self.

**Keywords:** suicide notes, presentation of self

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In taking any psychological test, there is always the possibility that, instead of responding truthfully, individuals wish to present a particular view of themselves. To detect this, the Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory (MMPI), for example, has subscales to detect presenting a healthy self (faking good) and presenting a pathological self (faking bad). Research has supported the ability of people to fake the image that they present to others. For example, Braginsky, Braginsky and Ring (1969) demonstrated that schizophrenic psychiatric inpatients could choose whether or not to report major symptoms (such as hallucinations) depending on the expected outcome (being placed on a locked ward versus being released). In a second study, Braginsky and Braginsky (1971) found that adolescents in an institution for retarded could vary their mental age on intelligence by three years, again depending on the

outcome (being placed in a pleasant versus unpleasant program at the institution).

Individuals present various images on a daily basis as a result of the different roles and corresponding functions that they perform. We are used to switching from one image to another and choosing the image to fit the occasion, and there is no reason to doubt that this is true when we die. In modern times, the popularity of online activities such as Twitter and Facebook have allowed people to craft the narrative of their lives and to present themselves to friends and family, and to the world, in a particular light. This fits a popular television message - Image is everything.

In contrast, some psychological tests ignore this behavior and assume that the individual's self-presentation is not faked. For example, the Thematic Apperception Test (TAT), a projective test, asks respondents to tell stories to pictures shown to them. The interpretation of their stories assumes that the stories will reveal accurate information about the respondents' psychodynamics. The scoring does not take into account the possibility that the respondents' stories are affected by the desire of the respondents to present a particular image of themselves. A recent volume, in which suicidologists were asked to write

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1,500 words about themselves (Pompili, 2010), resulted in a very diverse set of protocols. Some were very personal, revealing details of the writer's life; some listed professional accomplishments; some avoided personal information but were brief scholarly articles on a particular topic; while occasional essays revealed strong emotions such as anger. These essays illustrate the different ways for writers to present the self, and these essays may be treated as similar to TAT stories so as to speculate about the conscious and unconscious psychodynamics of the writers.

Suicide notes have been examined in the past in a similar way to TAT stories in that researchers assume that suicide notes reveal accurate information about the psychological states of those committing suicide and the reasons for their suicide. As a result, researchers have not viewed suicide notes as a possible means by which the suicides consciously present a particular self-image. A broader way of stating this hypothesis is to propose that those writing suicide notes have a hidden agenda.

The present essay argues that suicide notes may often be a result of a decision (conscious or unconscious) to present the self in a particular way and may not, therefore, provide clues to the psychodynamics of the suicidal act. In the following sections, five topics are covered: (1) examples of the hypothesis of the essay using suicide bombers and kamikaze pilots; (2) an exploration of whether the suicidal act and the suicide note can also be constructed so as to be presentations of the self to others; (3) pseudocides (i.e., those who fake their own suicide); (4) an analysis of one suicide note in detail; and (5) the classification of suicide notes by Jacobs is examined for its relevance for the present hypothesis. The final section draws some conclusions.

### **Crafted Self-Images by Suicide Bombers and Kamikaze Pilots**

A good example of the presentation of the self in suicide communications comes from the videos recorded by suicide bombers prior to their departure and released to the media after the suicide attack. Best (2010) analyzed the content of some of these videos and noted that they focus on the political nature of the act and that they cast the act as altruistically motivated. However, Best also noted that the videos show evidence of editing, and this editing is done by persons unknown (for example, by those who sent the suicide bomber on his or her mission or by the media outlets that broadcast the video). Although the videos seem to be produced for the public, unedited versions may have contained messages for the suicide bomber's family and indications of the individual's state of mind.

Most commentators on suicide bombers focus on the "official" motivation for the suicide bombing provided by the suicide bomber or the organization that planned the attack. There is a

reluctance by scholars to analyze the psychodynamic processes that led the individual to become a suicide bomber, as Lester, Yang and Lindsay (2004) have noted, and a reliance on what the individual says in the video as the "truth" rather than as an attempt to present the self in a particular manner.

A similar problem arises with analyses of the letters sent home by Japanese kamikaze pilots from the Second World War. Orbell and Morikawa (2011) analyzed the themes in these letters, a meaningful project, and classified the themes into mentions of an honorable or beautiful death, expressions of familial love, and so on. But to consider these letters as insights into the psychodynamics of pilots is perhaps misguided. These letters were written in the presence of other members of the unit and superiors, with the awareness that they might be read by superiors. As a result, the letters are most likely to be presentations of the self rather than windows into the minds of the pilots.

For example, in one of the most conforming populations in the world where what others think of you is of paramount importance, no Japanese pilot wrote that he was doing this because he was too scared not to volunteer, according to Orbell and Morikawa (2011). No pilot wrote home that he was experiencing panic or somatic symptoms of terror. No pilot said that he had had a lifetime of depression and that going on a kamikaze mission was a way of committing suicide in a covert manner.

### **Suicide Notes as Public Statements**

As Etkind (1997) argued, suicide notes are meant to be public. They are written for others to read and sometimes to be published. Etkind noted that writing suicide notes became more common after newspapers in Europe started publishing them in the 18th Century. MacDonald and Murphy (1990) observed that suicides, expecting their suicide notes to appear in the newspapers, saw that they had access to a mass audience, and the suicides could craft their suicide note so as to achieve sympathy or revenge, or perhaps to project an image that others would remember.

Etkind (1997) presented suicide notes from those accused of misdeeds and noted that they often do not admit guilt, but rather present themselves as victims of persecution. For example, Major Henry Hubert manufactured evidence to convict a Jewish officer, Captain Alfred Dreyfus, of treason. Hubert's suicide note in 1898 made no admission of guilt.

Some suicide notes are written to advance a cause – perhaps assisted-suicide or for political reasons. Percy Bridgman, a Nobel Prize winner in physics, committed suicide in 1961 suffering from cancer and wrote: *It isn't decent for society to make a man do this thing himself. Probably this is the last day I will be able to do it myself.* Bridgman's note is often used by those advocating physician assisted-suicide.

Jo Roman (1980) wrote a book, as well her suicide note, arguing for the establishing of places where people could go in order to commit suicide peacefully in pleasant surroundings. Craig Badialis and Joan Fox committed suicide after a Vietnam Peace Moratorium rally at Glassboro State College (in New Jersey) on October 16, 1969 (Asinof, 1971), and left notes that advocated peace (but which were suppressed by the local authorities). Etkind argued that, "instead of being intensely personal documents, many suicide notes should be read as social acts" (Etkind, 1997, p. i).

Suicides can indeed be choreographed. Etkind (1997) described the suicide in 1944 of Lupe Velez, a Hollywood actress known as the Mexican Spitfire. She was divorced from Tarzan's Johnny Weismuller and pregnant by a man who was unwilling to marry her. She ordered a Mexican feast, decorated her bedroom with satin sheet, flowers, candles and a crucifix, and ingested 75 Seconals. Her note was addressed to the lover and blaming him for her death and that of their unborn child.

Some suicides occur in public, along with a public statement intended to shape the image presented to others. Yukio Mishima committed seppuku in 1970 in front of a regiment of soldiers after urging them to rise up and restore the Emperor to his rightful, powerful place in Japan. Bud Dwyer, the state treasurer in Pennsylvania, was convicted in 1986 of taking a \$300,000 kickback after awarding a state contract and faced a 55-year prison sentence and fine. On January 22nd 1987, one day before sentencing, he shot himself in his office in front of newspaper and television reporters, proclaiming his innocence.

### Pseudocides

Some people fake their suicide, leaving a suicide note and then disappearing, moving elsewhere to start a new life. These instances include notes left on the Golden Gate Bridge in San Francisco for which no one saw anyone jump off the bridge. Seiden and Tauber (1970) studied these notes and found that they differed from those left by suicides. They tended to be longer, gave more realistic reasons for suicide (such as financial and legal problems), had less positive emotion, and made less mention of death and suicide than the genuine notes. Shown below is one short suicide note from a man who was a member of the board of San Francisco supervisors who turned up a year later selling bibles in Houston.

*Loved ones: My nerves are shot. Please forgive me. Chris.* (Etkind, 1997, p. 61).

### An Illustration of the Thesis

To illustrate the thesis of this essay, here is a genuine suicide note from a man in his 90s who committed suicide.

*A terrible fright! I wake up this morning at 9 o'clock and look over to my spouse's bed, and she doesn't move - on closer inspection she is dead. She had been ailing in the afternoon and stayed in bed, but had in the evening freshened herself up and enjoyed her supper, was, on the contrary, for the most part buoyant following her stay in the hospital. I gave her the medication. She did cough a lot, but she finally calmed down. I lay down and then fell asleep. After I awoke, see above.*

*What the cause of her decease is I cannot determine. I shall leave everything in the room the way it is. I myself am, at my age of 93, utterly unhappy and have no desire to continue living, above all as I have often been ill for years now. Why should I go on now?*

*I wish to add that my spouse was just in the clinic and had just been released by Dr. Y. following a thorough examination.*

*Our marriage has lasted since 1926 and might doubtless be termed good. My married son lives in <address>. He is a teacher, but very often ill, is not allowed to visit us, his grief! Instead, his wife helped out in our household while my spouse was undergoing surgical treatment (eye operation) and returned home when my spouse was released. As I said, I have no desire to continue living and am going to take my life with some medical drugs I collected years ago. I have not informed anyone of my spouse's death, as my own will follow immediately.*

*In deepest mourning  
<signed>*

At first reading, this note suggests an elderly, possibly frail man with not many years left to live, acting impulsively on discovering that his wife has died. His son is not well, and he may feel that he would be a burden to his son and daughter-in-law if they had to take care of him. He shows evidence of feeling that he would be a burden to others, and the death of his wife means that he has lost a very important social tie. This elderly man, therefore, seems to fit neatly into Joiner's (2005) theory of suicide which proposes that perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness are the two most important causal factors for suicide.

But let us look at this note from a *presentation of the self* perspective. First, the note carefully lays out the facts and the man's decision-making processes. He is presenting himself as calm and rational. He is not a crazy, elderly man with dementia. Second, he knows (or strongly suspects) that his son and daughter-in-law will read this note. How will they feel? His son may feel guilty, and

perhaps his father wants him to do so! Although the son is ill, he has not visited his parents, nor had them visit him. He left taking care of his parents in an emergency to his wife. Has he telephoned or written regularly to them? How long ago is it since they were invited to visit and stay with him? Did he make his parents feel welcome if they did visit, or did he make them feel that they were an inconvenience? The man's suicide seems to be a sudden decision, but he and his wife may have talked about what they would do if one of them died. In their 90s, illnesses are common, and the day-to-day tasks of living quite difficult. Suicide may have been a well-thought out plan.

Alternatively, could this be a murder-suicide or double suicide, with the suicide note intended to mislead the police? After all, the wife is in her 90s, and a natural death is very likely. Is the medical examiner going to conduct as thorough an investigation as he or she would if the couple were in their 30s or 40s? Moreover, a double suicide is not a crime and, even if it is murder-suicide, the murderer is dead too, and why upset the children any more than the natural death plus the suicide will? Studies have found that the authorities sometimes show concern for the survivors. For example, Carpenter, et al. (2011) found that coroners in Queensland (Australia) were less likely to carry out a complete autopsy on a suicide if the family had concerns about the procedure or if the religion of the deceased had proscription against autopsies.

#### Jacobs's Classification of Suicide Notes

Since the circumstances leading to suicide are subject to a wide variation, it is plausible to assume that suicide notes may be determined by the desire to present the self in a particular way. According to Jacobs (1967) suicide notes can be classified into four types: (1) the person has a terminal illness, (2) the person accuses another of causing his or her death, (3) last will and testaments, and (4) *first form notes*. It is this last category that is relevant to the present hypothesis. By and large, in this type of note, the suicide tries to reconcile the image of himself/herself as a to-be-trusted person (who has been given the sacred trust of life) with the fact that he/she is about to break this trust through the act of suicide.

Jacobs summarized several components, some of which might be found in first-form suicide notes. (i) the person is faced with extremely distressing problems, (ii) he views this state of affairs as part of a long history of such distressing crises, (iii) he believes that death is the only solution to his problems, (iv) he has become increasingly socially isolated so that he cannot share his distress with others, (v) he has overcome his internalized moral constraint that categorizes suicide as irrational or immoral, (vi) he has succeeded in this since his social

isolation makes him feel less constrained by societal rules, (vii) he has constructed some verbal rationalization that enables him to view himself as a to-be-trusted person in spite of his trust violation by defining the problems as not of his own making or as open to no other solution, and (viii) he has made some provision that his problems will not occur after death. It is typically found that these notes beg forgiveness or request indulgence, show that the problem is not of his own making, notes the history of the problem, communicates that the problems have grown beyond endurance, notes the necessity of death, and finally communicates that he is fully aware of what he is doing but knows that the reader will not understand his reasons. While Jacobs felt that this expressed the genuine thoughts, desires and emotions of the suicide, the present hypothesis would view the suicide note as deliberately presenting the image of a rational and reasonable person making a sensible decision.

#### Conclusions

The hypothesis presented in this essay is that suicide notes may not simply reflect the motivations and psychological state of the person committing suicide, but rather may be a constructed so as to present an image to the person's significant others. In this case, the suicide is committing a psychosemantic fallacy, a term coined by Shneidman and Farberow (1957) to describe the situation where a person confuses the self as experienced by the self with the self as experienced by others. The suicide in this case is concerned with the reactions of others even though he or she will not be around to witness these reactions.

It is not possible to prove that a particular suicide note is a result of a desire to present the self in a particular manner, but likewise it is hard to prove that the note is not the result of such a desire. We should use caution, therefore, when using suicide notes as a means of understanding the psychodynamics of the suicidal mind.

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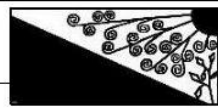
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