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Researching Suicide via Empathic Inquiry: Speaking the silences

Abstract:

In presenting this paper I hope to enable *that* ubiquitous voice of silence that surrounds the phenomenon suicide and advocate for a greater awareness, appreciation and understanding of the suicidal mind. When I embarked on my PhD in 2009 I was not prepared for the depth of vulnerability that I was opening myself up to. Being an artist in an academic environment is challenge enough but when coupled with the issue of suicide being researched from a first-person perspective, traditional conventions often need to be confronted, questioned and sometimes bypassed. The silence that surrounds suicide exists, amongst other things, because suicide exposes and challenges our humanness. To find ways to breach this silence and to research and talk about the issue I had to develop alternative and unconventional methods of enquiry and expression.

The aim of creating artworks that re-present *original voice* (Webb, 2002) narratives, is to push beyond the taboos and stigma of suicide, beyond the stereotypes, distortions, and the malignant silence that pervades societal understanding and reaction to the phenomena. The difficulty for me as an artist, and as someone who has attempted suicide, has been how to express individual narratives in such a way as to present an underlying sense of humanity that is empathic, considered and is above all, an honest representation of this trauma.

My non-traditional approach to research relies heavily on the subjectivities of intuition and the imagination. To tease out and express “what being suicidal feels like” also requires strategies that are sensitive, non-threatening and I fervently believe need to be unsolicited. Gaining approval for my research through the ethics committee process filled me with an overwhelming sense of apprehension and anxiety. The experiences of other students and researchers confirmed my fears. The National Ethics Application Form (NEAF) requires responses to a series of questions that bore little resemblance to my research practice. Additionally the creative arts have traditionally required less need for ethics approval than projects carried out by the Social Sciences.

Since meeting with the ethics committee I have gained a newfound clarity as to the ethical, moral and methodological underpinnings of my research. How does one enable the voice of silence, then speak about that which was unspeakable without

compromising the original voice? The following is an account of my experiences and how I arrived at 'Empathic Inquiry' as a methodological form of research.

Biographical note:

Mic Eales is a PhD candidate at Southern Cross University. His research topic is titled *Different Voice, Different Perspective*: a visual arts inquiry into understanding suicide through original voice narratives. Mic has been creating artworks that examine the phenomena of suicide since 2002. He was the 2008 winner of the Windmill Trust Scholarship for regional artists that enabled him to travel to Italy and exhibit his installation *too few ladders* at the 2009 World Association for Cultural Psychiatry congress.

Keywords:

Suicide - Silence - Empathic

The original voice

The pervasive fear of death in our culture, sharpened by suicide where death is deliberately chosen, feeds this silence and deprives us of the language we need to talk about it sensibly. Shame, stigma, denial, self-doubt and fear combine to create a very real and powerful taboo against talking of our suicidality (Webb, 2002).

In an attempt to address my own suicidality and tackle the stigma and silence that haunts societal understanding of suicide I began to creatively express “what being suicidal feels like” from a lived experience perspective. I am a sculptor, an installation artist, a printmaker, a papermaker and a suicide attempter but I also consider myself a suicidologist. I study and research suicide by listening to stories that are *original voice* narratives of suicide. My approach is to then reinterpret these stories as artworks, installations or performance pieces, by employing strategies that are deeply reflexive. Sometimes I work cooperatively (co-research) with others in helping them express their lived experience of suicide whilst at other times I create artworks from narratives that use a more interpretive process. By utilising my own intimate experience of suicide along side the accounts of others I am able to create symbolic and metaphorical expressions of the suicide phenomena from a range of socio-cultural perspectives. However, to describe how I go about achieving this is not exactly easy. The subjective language that I use as an artist is vastly different from the objective world of the scientist.

The language of science, objective and rational, struggles to capture the dark mystery of suicide and our understanding of it suffers accordingly. The language of direct, first-hand experience - intimately personal and subjective, sometimes irrational and paradoxical, often poetic and spiritual, and possibly frightening to some - must be included in our discourse to empower others to speak up and to dismantle the ignorance and stigma around suicide (Webb, 2002).

Suicide attempt survivors are a stigmatized and neglected group within society (Litts, 2008). Historically these survivors together with the mentally ill have been viewed negatively by the general public and health care professionals (Lauber, 2006) and as consequence the voices of those who have *attempted* to take their own lives has generally been excluded from research into suicide and suicide prevention strategies. As someone who has attempted suicide as well as being bereaved by it, my lived experience of suicide was (and still is) concerned with intense psychological pain, something that the acknowledged father of suicidology, Edwin Shneidman, terms *psychache* (Shneidman, 1993: 51). The underpinnings of my own suicidality are alluded to through journal entries written over many years. These jottings have become invaluable insights into understanding my own triggers.

Suicide is very much on my mind, it is the one constant. Why is self-harm such an important aspect of my defence mechanism? It is what I retreat into when the pain gets too much. No one understands the pain, it overwhelms, it's not only the pain, it's also the confusion, the unknowing (Author's personal journal, early June 2003)

The empathic voice

So, how does one enable the voice of silence, then speak about that which was unspeakable without compromising the original voice? I believe that it can only be achieved with patience, sensitivity, honesty and above all with compassion. These are the attributes of empathy. Under these conditions stories and emotions can gently be allowed to surface of their own free will. What emerges is a style of insider research; one that is reliant on reflexivity (Sullivan, 2005: 164). My aim is to enable the humanity contained within the voices of silences, of shadows, of pain and of trauma. This is not an easy task but one that I feel can be achieved through a heightened sense of empathy. Theorists define empathy in a variety of ways but the one that suits my sensibilities is by Martha Nussbaum, when she writes, “empathy... involves an imaginative reconstruction of the experience of the sufferer”, and “a participatory enactment of the situation of the sufferer, but is always combined with the awareness that one is not oneself the sufferer” (Nussbaum, 2001: 327) Creative thinking teacher, Roman Krznaric, speaks about deepening our empathy with others through a process that he terms, *outrospection* (Krznaric, 2007) in which he suggests that we actively engage in learning about another's life, having meaningful conversations beyond the superficial and have some measure or experience of their life. This *outrospection* approach is similar to the heuristic quest in that it is based on recreating the lived experience “from the frame of reference of the experiencing person” (Moustakas, 1990: 39) Imagine, just for a second or two,

I am right on the edge – suicidal? I'm not too sure but I thought about driving the car into a tree on Thursday... I am really struggling... (Author's personal journal, 26 December 2009)

In late 2009 Suicide Prevention Australia (SPA) produced a position statement that publically supported suicide attempt survivors and acknowledged the value of their voice and perspectives in helping to contribute to a better understanding of suicide (Suicide Prevention Australia, 2009). This welcome shift in thinking emerged from the first national conference for survivors of suicide attempts...

suicide attempt survivors have traditionally felt excluded from the suicide prevention 'table', despite their unique insight into the issues involved (Litts, 2008).

My own *original voice* of suicide has at times been difficult to articulate but much like story telling, art has the ability to ‘speak’ to its audience through its layers of meaning (Katawana, 2011). The tension created between these embedded layers helps to contribute towards the overall success or failure of a piece. The ambiguity of art is its strength. Art has the power to upset, disturb and to question our beliefs, our assumptions and our prejudices (Gaut, 2007). My own inquiry approaches the designing, conducting and reporting of research through intuitive responses to information, vigorous engagement with the imagination and an openness and belief in occurrences of a serendipitous nature. These methods in cooperation with my studio practice contribute to a complex and reflective investigation that I hope will ultimately encourage greater awareness, empathy and understanding of the suicidal mind. This multilayered and heterogeneous approach acknowledges that,

some human experiences are so complex and intensely emotional, that creative forms of representation can reflect their texture more evocatively than traditional academic text (Brearley, 2000).

Unfortunately my non-conventional research methods are not generally accepted as reliable methods of data collection within the traditional qualitative research paradigm. Yet in persisting with this direction, some academics have cynically dismissed my research as being purely cosmetic, suggesting that images of various artworks might make interesting covers for conference or journal papers. That being said, I have also been encouraged to pursue this style of research by suicidologist, Dr Ermina Colucci, my co-researchers and the numerous individuals who have willingly shared intimate and detailed stories of pain. What has emerged out of my artworks and interdisciplinary relationship with Dr Colucci has been a series of workshops and artistic collaborations that explore the lived experience of suicide from a range of perspectives.

we are now embarking on a project which can bring together other people that have expressed the “what it feels like” about suicide through their chosen art form: poetry, drama, music, visual arts and so on (Erminia Colucci cited in Eales, 2009).

The research voice

From the beginning I have struggled with assigning my research methodology with a particular label. Is it performative research, practice-based, practice-led, ARTography perhaps, or is it an arts-based inquiry or possibly a bricolage? As an artist who works predominantly with feelings, emotions and the imagination, none of these terms either *felt* right or was an accurate description of the processes that I employ in creating artworks. Storytelling however, has always played pivotal role within my art-practice, so it seemed only logical that one of my research methods would include narrative

inquiry. Interestingly in her research of parents bereaved by suicide Myff Maple was able to discover that parents' narratives were actually silencing the stories that they themselves were communicating about their own children. This paradox of being unable or unwilling to talk about their child was in direct contrast to their desire to do just that (Maple & Edwards, 2009). Societal pressure or social norms often place the issue of suicide in the 'too hard basket' but as Maple's research progressed and she revealed more of herself and her motivational reasons behind her research, parents began opening up and sharing a depth of data that would have been impossible otherwise (Maple & Edwards, 2009). In connecting with these parents I believe that Maple was able to get them to *speak out of* their experiences and memories rather than simply speak about them (Bennett, 2005: 38). It is this approach of tapping into sense memory as opposed to common memory (Bennett, 2005: 27) that is so crucial to my own research.

It's hard to comment on the silence in my family without feeling as though I'm criticizing or passing judgment. As I get older and learn to speak about this more, I realize that we have all done the best we could, that this is a sad story with no winners. Yet the tragedy has been exasperated by the fact that we have all suffered in silence (Hinshaw, 2008).

The questioning voice

Within any research, moral and ethical beliefs of researchers influence a range of decisions concerning "the design, methodology, interpretation, and dissemination of research" (Mishara & Weisstub, 2005). Conversely, a similar range of beliefs and attitudes also influence ethics committee members in their review of various research projects. Life experiences, cultural and community attitudes also play an important and determining role in the *how, why, what* and *when* of research. This also applies to individuals reviewing ethics applications and how they might respond to various submissions. Additionally the issue of suicide is particularly imbued with a vast assortment of community held attitudes, myths and prejudices that need to be addressed. Misconceptions can easily cloud or possibly prevent valid research from taking place. Norwegian suicidologist Professor Heidi Hjelmeland noted in an email to me earlier this year the difficulty that she has had with ethics committees in overcoming false impressions relating to suicide.

One of these committees also wanted to forbid us to ask people who had previously been admitted to psychiatric hospital following a suicide attempt about whether they would like to participate in an interview study on how they had been treated in the hospital. They were no longer in hospital, but the ethics committee did not think they should be allowed to decide for themselves whether they wanted to participate in the study or not. It turned out that in the eyes of this committee they were still PATIENTS because they previously had been in a psychiatric hospital (H. Hjelmeland, Author's

personal correspondence (email), 25 May 2011).

Whilst attending various seminars and conferences I heard many stories relating to the difficulties involved in the gaining of approval from the ‘dreaded’ ethics committee. Some stories were from other post-grad students researching social issues, but nothing it seemed to me, to be anywhere near as confronting as the issue of suicide. I spoke with the head of my ethics committee and received a warm and supportive response, but still stories kept emerging of hindrances and obstacles being placed in the way of what seemed valuable and sound research. The taboo’s surrounding suicide and the unorthodox nature of my research methodology meant that neither of my supervisors was able to allay my fears as to how the ethics committee might respond to my submission. Together we were travelling into uncharted territory. I expressed my trepidation to other researchers working in the area of suicidology and it was acknowledged that the ethics process can be a difficult one. Dr Colucci understood and shared my frustrations.

Ethics is an hard one, I totally understand your feelings and when you are an artist it must be even more frustrating to know that no one checks all the ‘bullshit’ (pardon) that is displayed around but as soon as art gets into academic research, the whole world gets concerned about damages to humanity... (E. Colucci, Author’s personal correspondence (email), 27 September 2010)

The ethical voice

Articulating my methodology on paper was made even more difficult by my assertion that my ‘subjects’ are not subjects: they are my co-researchers, my friends and my mentors. Our relationship is mutually supportive. It needs to be in order to provide an open and honest account of suicide’s *original voice*. There are no questionnaires, no formal or structured questions. Conversations occur over cups of coffee, a pot of chai or a pizza at night and what emerges is allowed to surface of its own free will. This unusual and unorthodox approach to research, especially within the field of suicidology is one in which there are no expectations. For my part I simply listen, observe and together we share feelings and emotions that are woven into the fabric of pain and silence that pervades suicide. We explore ways in which the *original voice* of suicide can be revealed, narrated and expressed creatively. It is an instinctive and intuitive process.

And so the collaboration began: like-minded artists with similar life experiences, and a personal quest to live a meaningful life, one guided by “imagination, inspiration and improvisation” (J, Author’s personal correspondence, (email), 3 May 2010).

Numerous drafts and an exorbitant amount of emails later I finally submitted my ethics application. I felt very much at the mercy of the committee. The National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research itself acknowledges the ambiguities inherent within the NEAF application when it states,

This National Statement does not exhaust the ethical discussion of human research. Even a single research field covers a multitude of different situations about which the National Statement will not always offer specific guidance, or to which its application may be uncertain (NHMRC, 2007).

I felt that it was important to attend the committee's review of my application. My 2 o'clock appointment, ever so slowly, became a 2.45 one. It was obvious that much discussion was taking place amongst committee members with specific questions and concerns being raised. Finally I was ushered in. Thirty or so minutes later I emerged feeling relieved, happy and my work vindicated. In responding to questions regarding my methodology, one committee member in particular, helped me clarify points that I was having difficulty with in verbalizing. I felt supported if not nurtured throughout the interview process. The committee made it clear that their responsibility extended not only to my co-researchers but to me also. What strategies did I have in place for my own emotional wellbeing? Was I prepared to walk away from the project if I became too overwhelmed by it? I appreciated their honesty and concerns but most of all I appreciated being listened to with a sense of empathy. On reflection I was received without judgment and my research methodology was not marginalized as I had expected. I sensed that the committee realized and understood that feelings of suicidality are genuine and authentic experiences and as such need to be honoured and respected (Webb, 2010: 6). The encouragement offered by the ethics committee and by my supervisors to pursue a somewhat unusual and innovative approach to understanding suicide has been very much appreciated. Researching suicide can be likened to an emotional rollercoaster ride or a delicate balancing act, in that lives can potentially be placed at risk (Mishara & Weisstub, 2005) and in my situation that life could possibly include my own. The reality of this is evidenced from one of my journal entries.

And then tonight for the first time I contemplated hanging myself – I pulled myself together fairly quickly but still the thought was there (Author's personal journal, 26 December 2009).

The concluding voice

The concept of using empathy as a form of inquiry arose out of weeks of deeply reflexive thought. From my artist researcher perspective, enquiring into the *original voice* of suicide through an *empathic inquiry* makes perfect sense. It allows me to conduct a more intuitive and imaginative approach than I could possibly achieve

otherwise using approaches such as Narrative Inquiry or Heuristic methods. The principal aim of my research is to engender a new language and perception into the trauma and silence that pervades the lived experience (Bennett, 2005: 24) of suicide. What does the act of suicide symbolize for *that* individual and to the socio-cultural group in which they live (Colucci, 2006) and how can I as an artist ethically and morally honour the voice of *that* which has for far too long been unspeakable? Empathic responses can be elicited between artworks and audiences through processes of interpretation of personal, social and cultural meanings. Illustrating this point, the project *Framing Marginalised Art*, carried out by the Cunningham Dax Collection, examined how such works might be displayed in ethical and responsive ways.

(the exhibition)... made me more aware of how art is not just one thing. It's obviously a creative expression but it's also an expression of internal experience, a form of self-identification or it can be an occupation—so it adds meaning to people's lives in different ways (Jones, 2010).

As an artist the challenge remains: how can I authentically and respectfully illuminate and give voice to the lived experience of suicide? Extending beyond traditional human relationships the concept of an *empathic inquiry* carries across into my studio practice and also into exchanges that can occur between the artworks and the audience. The intuitive relationship that I have with the objects, materials and forms that I use and the tacit dialogue that occurs between us has, I believe, the ability to transfer across into the realm of the exhibition or workshop space.

Could a greater miracle take place than for us to look through each other's eyes for an instant? (Henry David Thoreau, cited in Owens, 1981: 11)

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