

Wasted Lives: The Social Dynamics of Shame and Youth Suicide

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Autobiographical Note

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Abstract

Youth suicide is a specific gesture of waste, a throwing away of the gift and thus it embodies a powerful statement about young peoples' refusal to live. In this article I suggest that it is a refusal to engage with, and be sustained by, the particular economies of value, morality and meaning that govern identity within contemporary cultural life. From a post-structuralist perspective the metaphors through which suicide comes to be known are examined via in-depth interviews conducted with young people (n=41) as part of a larger study also involving adults/professionals (n=40) within urban and regional communities. Shame figures predominantly in young peoples' accounts of suicidal experiences and the everyday social relations that govern the expression of emotion. In contrast to the positivist bent of much suicide research and policy, this article argues for the necessity of understanding the social dynamics of shame in relation to the forces of affect that constitute the emergent subjectivities of young people.

Keywords

Youth suicide, affect, shame, rural, subjectivity, metaphor

It really disturbs me, the fact that we have the highest suicide rate 16 to 24 or something like that. It is really worrying because I have a 16-year-old son, that is one of the reasons I worry about it, but also there also seems to be something fundamentally wrong in our society as so many young people are dying. I know there are a lot more attempts, particularly young women who don't succeed. So it is clearly a great problem and it worries me. It is such a waste of beautiful young people and then there is the personal issue of my own son. (Suzy, parent, Bordertown)

Suzy uses a metaphor that commonly figures in everyday reflections on youth suicide as the 'waste of a life'. It is also the waste or loss of potential living, an act of giving up or throwing away life 'as gift' in the turn towards death. Youth suicide is a specific gesture of waste, a throwing away of the gift and thus it embodies a powerful statement about young peoples' refusal to live. I want to suggest that it is a refusal to engage with, and be sustained by, the particular economies of value, morality and meaning that govern identity within contemporary cultural life. In this sense life as a gift also incurs a huge debt. This debt can be understood as the incredible weight of cultural obligation that makes specific claims on the subjectivities of young people - to act in accordance with certain norms, to make a 'success' of one's life and avoid 'failure' at all costs (McDonald 1999, Tait 2000, Wyn 2000). This neo-liberal imperative positions life as an object that the entrepreneurial self must maximise in value, productively utilize and never 'waste' (Rose, 1999). Suicide in these terms is a matter of becoming waste – the failed or shamed self, the life that did not live up to the expectation of rational autonomous self-management. Drawing upon a post-structuralist approach I analyse how this cultural vocabulary of waste and value

figures in the metaphors and stories of young people (n = 41) within urban and rural communities who participated in a larger qualitative research (n = 81) project on youth suicide (Alvesson 2000). There is a strong visual trope that mediates relations of waste and value ('out of sight out of mind', see Hawkins 2001) and this also extends to the emotional or affective dynamics that govern suicide, in particular the relation between shame and identity.

We all know the truism 'life is wasted on the young'. The economic metaphor also mediates understandings of the relation between life and death in public health policies that calculate the total years of productivity lost to suicide (Public Health Division 2002). Suicide becomes known through a calculative relation of risk and protective factors that inform the truth claims of promotion and prevention programmes, of mental health risk management and hence human waste reduction. National policy initiatives (*Living is for Everyone*, CDHAC 2000) mean we are all much more aware of suicide risk, but what kind of knowledge is produced about young people and their emotional lives? What are the implications of economic metaphors of waste for the way we understand and respond to emotional distress? Tatz (2001:189) claims that the whole research domain of 'suiciology needs to be liberated from this domination by statistical method'. Not only statistical method and Durkheim's legacy, but also biomedical and psychological discourses that locate suicide within a highly individualised cultural vacuum (Hassan 1995). This is not to suggest that we will then 'discover' the truth about suicide, but rather it is a matter of engaging with another way of knowing, of understanding the social relations that govern our most intimate decisions about life and death.

Suicide as waste is implicated in a whole moral vocabulary about living and dying - tragically sad, incomprehensible, unforgivable, pathological, abnormal, unstable, irresponsible, selfish, morally reprehensible (Fullagar et al forthcoming a). Yet as Suzy's earlier comment suggests there are other ways of speaking about the waste of life that resists the move towards calculation. Her comment, full of affect, echoes with a sense of indefinable loss and immeasurable grief. It is a sense of loss that exceeds the rationalised discourses of suicide prevention policy, and makes visible those difficult and uncertain emotional or affective forces. Brian Massumi (1996:229) argues that affect subtends emotion, it escapes capture within the signifying systems that render experience knowable and produces our sense of vitality and aliveness (see also Sedgwick, 2003, Hawkins, 2002, Tomkins, 1995). In this sense suicide can be understood beyond its equation with a desire for death. It also has something to tell us about the embodied, affective forces that shape our sense of aliveness, that deaden or heighten the desire to engage with life and to deliberately waste it. Affect is inherent in the metaphors that the young people in our research use to talk about their own and other's suicidal experiences. An analysis of metaphor thus enables the exploration of affect as it is experienced within everyday social relations and it is a post-structuralist approach that has not been taken up within suicide research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2000, Lakoff and Johnson, 1980). To ignore the affective dimension of the other's dying is to deny those experiences that disturb our own comfortable notions of what a meaningful existence is and hence the economies of waste and value that govern our lives.

Waste and Value

If we think about how we value life, as David Halperin (2001) does, we are perpetually wasting it for there is no way to recoup living nor can we exchange our lives for something else. He says, 'Waste describes an uncertainty in our relation to the value of our own existence. Waste names the ever-present possibility of failure in life, the dread of which haunts all human striving' (Halperin, 2001: 6). If living is necessarily wasting our lives in the shadow of desires for success, perfection and to avoid the failure of identity, then what does suicide have to tell us about different ways of valuing, of living with oneself? Suicide as 'a scene of departure', a final act of deliberate waste, forces us to rethink the ethical relations between the self and the world, self and others and one's own becoming as these relations flesh out the bones of living. Alphonso Lingis takes this notion one step further when he suggests that is it our response to the singularity of our mortal being that binds us together in a different kind of community than that of the rational order of civil society. He says,

Community forms when one exposes oneself to the naked one, the destitute one, the outcast, the dying one. One enters into community not by affirming oneself and one's forces but by exposing oneself to expenditure at a loss, to sacrifice. Community forms in a movement by which one exposes oneself to the other, to forces and powers outside oneself, to death and to the others who die...In the midst of the work of the rational community, there forms the community of those who have nothingness, death, their mortality, in common.

Lingis (1994:12-13).

Hence, it is in the recognition of the forces that shape the other's death that my own mortality and aliveness is realised through the affective relations that connect us.

The decision to die is a stark reminder that lives are deliberately wasted because they are implicated in hierarchical and highly moralised relations of value that render invisible particular aspects of subjectivity and particular kinds of young subjects. For example, suicide is associated with a culturally specific discourse of personal and professional success that submerges the affective and emotional relations central to becoming adult. Young peoples' emotional dilemmas are often reduced to the 'developmental issues of adolescence'. It is a discourse that implicitly values and makes visible a particular kind of self-responsible, self-managing rational mode of adulthood. This occurs at the expense of recognising the complexity of affect, of our emotional lives and aliveness to the world.

The Study

To think about these philosophical and thoroughly practical issues I have drawn on in-depth interviews with forty-one young people who were part of a qualitative research project examining how urban and regional communities (totalling 81 adults, youth service providers and young people) make sense of youth suicide (see Fullagar, 2001). The two communities, Subcity a middle class suburban area of a major Australian city and Bordertown a growing regional area with a range of small and large towns bordering two States, had active suicide prevention networks and campaigns. The young people were not selected because they were identified as 'at risk', rather we wanted to hear a diversity of perspectives and experiences. A range of recruitment strategies were employed to select participants with different socio-economic

location, employment status, gender, geographic and ages (15-24), although the majority were of Anglo-European descent. Local media coverage, fliers, hanging out in youth spaces, contacting youth workers, sports coaches, youth council representatives and personal contacts were used to recruit 21 urban (11 women, 10 men) and 20 rural (10 women, 10 men) young people. Nine other young people declined to be interviewed for reasons they did not disclose and a further two rural interviews were not utilised in the study due to equipment failure. Three young women in the rural cohort approached the researchers to be participants in the study and each of them had suicide related experience. Each young person was asked ten open ended questions relating to the reasons behind suicide, risk, knowledge of prevention and suggestions for change. In addition we utilised at least one of four different vignettes that described a young person contemplating suicide in order to focus discussion around specific examples (Finch, 1987).

Some compelling stories emerged largely from the rural participant's experiences, as only one young man spoke of attempting suicide (he identified as gay) and two of young women spoke of friends or family that had died or attempted suicide within the urban cohort. Within the rural cohort there were five young women who had attempted suicide previously, three had close friends/family who had died or attempted and two knew only of more distant deaths. With the young men, one had thought about suicide seriously, five knew friends/family that had died or attempted and four knew only distant stories. Nearly all the rural service providers and half the adults had known of suicides within their communities. This was much less apparent within the urban adults and service providers (see Fullagar, Gilchrist, Howarth and Sullivan, forthcoming c). Within the rural interviews there was quite a staggering

range of suicide related experience and in this article I will draw mainly on the stories of those young people with the closest experiences. Sometimes the issue was still very raw and very hard to talk about. The following comment by Ian, an articulate 16 year old, was made on the day that he heard that a ‘popular and successful’ friend at school had shot herself. He wanted to go ahead with the previously arranged interview, despite our concerns, because there were many things he wanted to explore in untangling why this had happened ‘without warning’.

Well that is the thing. I looked at her and thought god she had such a future and it was sort of like she spent all this time at school and stuff where she could have been having fun. She has been at school and sure it is fun but you know all of that is just gone now. Like it is almost like a waste. It feels like a waste, it is just terrible. (Ian, 16 years, Bordertown)

Ian’s feeling of waste in relation to the loss of the life of a friend he believed to be successful resounds with my own response to phenomenon of youth suicide and the unease I feel in relation to the positivist approaches employed in much of the current suicide research. To research youth suicide is to embrace, and brace oneself against, the terribleness of those human emotions and forces of affect that seek to overwhelm and engulf us. It is also to enter those dark spaces of existential dread that we mostly try to avoid or, as academics and policy makers, to contain through taxonomies of risk that seek to impose order on the ‘why and how’ of life and death. My deep ambivalence about engaging with this subject leads me to ask, where is the joy in researching youth suicide? This may seem like a strange question but it is far from that because the moments of joy are produced in the research relation when listening

to young people as they articulate, often for the first time, those messy and contradictory feelings and thoughts. It is not a carefree joy, but an affect produced within an intersubjective relation that connects us as different people, with different lives, and different ways of knowing the world. Their stories have haunted me, they disturb my familiar ways of engaging with others and make me realise the emotional dilemmas young people experience that are often 'seen but not heard'. Frequently seen as 'attention seeking', 'inappropriate behaviour' or 'mental health disorders'.

While we were all young once the claim about 'sameness' provides no epistemological basis for understanding the contemporary experience of becoming-adult. Hence, the relational, and yet singular, nature of affect is crucial to acknowledge within the research process as it connects and differentiates self-other (see also Robinson 2002). It is the first step in the process of developing of an ethics of listening and speaking that enables all of us, but especially young people, to develop a vocabulary for their emotional lives, for their torment and their joy. It may not necessarily be a vocabulary of 'words' as we often privilege spoken and written expression. It is rather, an embodied vocabulary of affect that allows the movement, the flow of feeling through art, or sport, or being with nature or any other kind of expressive relation that connects. These stories and expressions have much to tell us about the forces of living and how we need to make visible the often negated realm of affectivity within contemporary culture. However, this research does not intend to simply speak for young people or render their experiences visible, rather it seeks to unravel the cultural processes that govern subjectivity. In doing so it may create a space for exchange, for what Olubas and Greenwell (1999) call an 'ethics of listening' that calls for a responsiveness, a sensitivity to the nuances of everyday experiences

young people and the different speaking positions they occupy. This is also something young people themselves often reiterate, 'I think it is more the pressure of the fact that when you are going through something at a young age and you try to talk to an adult about it, not a counsellor or professional, but you try to talk to a normal person and they just say that 'it is nothing' compared to this and this. More people need to listen' (Buffy, 16, Bordertown). Through our interview conversations young people articulate the singularity of their experience of suicide, loss, joy and shame in a way that enables us to consider the effects of cultural relations on the experience of 'becoming-adult' today.

Metaphors of Elsewhere: Escaping Shame

That's what I refer to my suicide as, a place. I've got a whole universe of suicide that I enter every so often and it's got its own little villages where you kind of go, into wrist slitting town and suffocate yourselfville and jump off a cliff town and everything. It's like being stuck in it and you work really hard to get out of it...kids don't necessarily commit suicide because they want to die, but because they want to get out of a situation that's causing them pain and god knows, I did. I was feeling very unhappy (about school bullying, difficult relations with parents, academic pressure, no sense of purpose) and very uncomfortable and not feeling worthy. So suicide looked like the only way out. (Tania, 17, Bordertown)

Suicide figures as an elsewhere in Tania's imagination. She talks about slipping into repetitive thoughts about suicide when she feels pressured and overwhelmed. The movement of her self into this other place enables her to momentarily escape those pressures that make her feel unworthy, or more specifically shamed. Whether she is

talking about being bullied at school about the fluidity of her sexual identity, or feeling disconnected from her family because of a parent dying with cancer, or her ambivalent reaction to the weight of academic expectation and uncertainty over her life direction, Tania articulates a sense of shame about letting others down, not meeting her own expectations ('I am the goddess of laziness, but I can get good marks when I try'). Within the suicide literature this 'obsessive thinking' is known as 'suicidal ideation' that presumes a psychologised disembodied state of mind. Yet, as some of the more recent explorations of the cultural and psychoanalytic dynamics of shame suggest, such inner thoughts are profoundly social and embodied within affective intersubjective relations (Adamson and Clark, 1999; Lester 1997; Lansky and Morrison, 1997; Sedgwick and Frank 1995; Lewis 1992). Scheff suggests that 'shame is the most frequent, and possibly the most important of emotions, even though it is usually invisible...Shame is *the* social emotion, arising as it does out of the monitoring of one's own actions by viewing oneself from the standpoint of others' (1997: 210-12). Invisible in the paradoxical sense that one's own shame is not necessarily 'seen' by others or acknowledged by oneself, yet it is born out of a situation in which one's whole self is made visible to others in humiliating ways.

Scheff's (1990:93) work identifies different degrees and kinds of shame behaviour and in particular he draws upon Durkheim to describe a 'pathological' form that is linked with rigid or excessive social conformity. When shame is not recognized as a response to threatened social bonds the emotion is 'bypassed' and this can generate an 'unending spiral' of painful feelings from which the self with 'low self-esteem' will do anything to 'avoid'. Insightful as it is Scheff's (2000) work privileges a unitary subject that is acted upon by constraining factors that effect social bonds. In contrast

Sedgwick's (2003) post-structuralist approach emphasises the shifting, relational nature of shame as it is enacted and embodied through the performance of inter-subjectivity. She says that shame is,

not a discrete intrapsychic structure, but a kind of free radical that (in different people and also in different cultures) attaches to and permanently intensifies or alters the meaning of - of almost anything: a zone of the body, a sensory system, a prohibited or indeed a permitted behaviour, another affect such as anger or arousal, a named identity, a script for interpreting other people's behaviour towards oneself. Thus, one of the things that anyone's character or personality is is a record of the highly individual histories by which the fleeting emotion of shame has instituted far more durable, structural changes in one's relational and interpretive strategies toward both self and others.

Sedgwick (2003: 62)

Against this intensified feeling of shame in the performance of one's self suicide becomes a seductive place (in Tania's story) to escape where uncertainty is replaced by a sense of purpose in relation to the question of how to perform this new 'goal'. The finality of death figures not as a fearful event, but rather death is just a place where the forces of affect no longer reign. Suicide is the fantasy of laying to rest tumultuous emotions or affective forces generated through a relation to self that is governed by particular expectations about identity. The comment by Buffy, 16, below resonates with similar affect,

It is all the worries that young people have to deal with...Being under 18 and stuck at home with nothing to do (unemployed)...and relationship or family issues...You feel let down, sort of rejected...it can start with the smallest worry and just get bigger. Sometimes it can just get too much to deal with. You just don't want to deal with it anymore... You think well if I kill myself then it is all going to be over and done with, and I don't have to worry about it happening in two or twenty years. (Buffy, 16, Bordertown)

Feeling overwhelmed or worried or ashamed about not coping is positioned here as abnormal, something to be rid of in the quest for a coherent identity or a self that mirrors the expectations of rational self-management. In their analysis of suicide notes Messner and Buckrop (2000:4) also suggest that the metaphors of order and chaos figure in the shamed subject's quest for transcendence, mortification or redemption. They argue that the younger people who suicided were generally more critical of themselves, displayed tremendous guilt and shame and often felt they deserved to die. In this sense the failure to manage one's emotional self induces profound shame, where the eye of the other is turned upon the self with devastating judgement. Historically, it was also the eye of god that cast the shameful self out of paradise. This is not a benevolent or compassionate gaze, but a look of condemnation at the self who fails to 'measure up'. As Foucault's metaphor of the panopticon suggests, the gaze works to expose the self and render it knowable in particular ways (see for example Mason 2002 on vision and homophobia related violence). Suicidal feelings are shaped through the gaze of the other (being acted upon) as part of the process of subjectification through which the self comes to act, to see and to know its own emotional life and value. Deleuze's (1988) metaphor of enfolding also articulates the

way in which the subject is constituted by taking up the exterior world (tumultuous emotions are essentially bad) into the inner self (if I cannot manage such emotions I am bad). In relation to suicide this does not infer alienation from a true self, but rather suggests the relations of power that shape subjectivity are imbued with affect. Hence, they effect how the subject sees and experiences themselves as worthy or not.

Shame is very much connected to the embodied performance of identity in relation to cultural norms, as it produces feelings of self hatred, disgust and loathing that are not easily detached from the self as 'cognitions'. For example, Sedgwick (2003: 63) argues that shame is the intense mediating force in the constitution of queer identities and different embodied desires. The connection between sexual identity and suicide has been consistently identified although there has been little connection with the dynamics of shame (see Nicholas and Howard, 1998). Lewis (1992:31) and Tomkins (1995: 149) suggest that the different experiences that produce shame (for young people, failure at school, unemployment, lack of sporting prowess, unstable relationships etc) work to 'block desire' and prevent enjoyment and interest as heightened self-consciousness prevails. Hence, as an embodied affect shame exists in an oppositional relation to joy, pleasure and sociability, implicating the self in a spiral of negativity, depression, helplessness that in turn produces a desire to escape oneself. The following comment by Ian, 16, illustrates this sense of becoming 'stuck' or immobilised through the blocking of desire,

She (a friend who recently suicided) probably had some things in the closet that were buried and she didn't want anyone to know about it. She could not deal with it and I don't know what it could have been. And that is the thing,

there are so many rules in society that restrict us from being ourselves, so if you have some things in the closet that you don't want people to know, plus you have some outer concerns (like fighting with your father) and everyone thinks you are ok and you don't know how to address something, you are sort of stuck. (Ian, 16, Bordertown)

Interestingly Ian uses the queer metaphor of the closet to talk about hidden, shameful aspects of one's life that need to be concealed in the effort to perform a 'successful identity'. He identifies the pressures that young people experience in maintaining an adult-like appearance of self management and yet feeling unable to cope with not feeling ok. Kyle from Subcity is 17, gay and had previously attempted suicide in response to his parent reaction when he 'came out'. He talks about the shame of being 'found out' or rendered visible as a homosexual subject and the humiliation of his parent's homophobia related violence.

You get found out. Because the moment you step out that door and come out to someone, even if it is your own mother or father, they can attack...My mother smashed me up against the wall and said 'you're weak, you're pathetic, you faggot, you might as well die now'. I went to my room, my sister walked in and found me with a knife in my hand...I had to go see a psychiatrist...Mum and dad had always told me to go to them, but they attacked me, so I can see why other people wouldn't want to go for help. (Kyle, 17, Subcity)

Apart from shame inducing homophobic relations, it is interesting to consider how the individualising discourses of neo-liberalism are implicated in perpetuating shame (and

perhaps intensify homophobic responses to perceived 'weakness'). The emphasis on self-responsibility for emotional life is intensified through the attribution of 'weakness' to identities that differ from established norms. Cathy, 22, also speaks about the intense pressure to conform to middle class, materialistic values about looking right, acting right and achieving that she feels pervades the urban culture of Subcity. This intensifies the self-blame that the young person contemplating suicide feels and thus deflects criticism and judgement away from cultural norms and expectations. The response to shame becomes 'there is something wrong with me, my body, my headspace, my ability to live in relation etc' rather than there is something wrong with the relations of value through which I am judged/judge myself. It is not so much that shame per se is problematic, but rather the individualising cultural response that mediates our lived relation to it. Rather than view the effects of shame as Scheff does in terms of self-esteem, we might consider how shame is implicated in the process of identity formation within the normalising practices of everyday life. Processes that individualise shame also participate in the medicalisation of emotional distress through the reliance on psy-experts to solve or fix the dilemmas of modern identity and embodied feeling (Rose 1999, Lupton 1998). Probyn (2000: 23) also suggests that 'shame allows us to penetrate the body and offers a doubled optic into the construction of corporeal subjectivity'. Her comment alludes to the visual trope mediating shame and suicidal feelings that positions the inner self as absolutely lacking, chaotic and inevitably incomplete. The precariousness of identity may result in some young people wanting to make their inner selves disappear, to be invisible as a means of escaping the judgement of others through becoming the exterior as death and waste. As Cloe says,

Sometimes it (the desire to suicide or self harm) is like a sudden emotion that comes over you, that's really powerful, it depends whether it's really wanting to hurt yourself or wanting to be like dead and buried...I don't think you even think about life after death because there's no more of what you're having to put up with now...
(Cloe, 23, Bordertown)

The affective forces shaping suicidal feelings are clearly articulated by Cloe when she identifies the powerful emotions that overwhelm or 'block' her desire to live. Suicide in this sense is not so much a desire for death, but rather occurs in the absence of desire or where desire is blocked, connectedness is severed and isolation occurs. This example points toward the necessity of understanding suicidal feeling as profoundly embodied, rather than simply a problem of 'mind' as mental health discourses presume. To take this key conceptual point further Williams (2001) argues that mental health is a contradiction in terms because it is premised on a mind/body opposition that disregards the social relations of affect and desire as they inform our experience of emotional wellbeing. Cloe talks about her experience with mental health professionals over a number of years and the shame associated with being 'seen' as a young adult with a 'mental health problem'. She uses the metaphor of dirt to articulate the cultural value assigned to young adults marginalised as 'waste' by virtue of their use of public mental health services. This is contrasted with the celebrity status of being able to afford a private therapist,

All the mental health staff, psychiatrist and counsellors are in the main building and once you hit the magical number of 17 or 18 or whatever it is, you go around the corner to the other Centre and tucked in with all the, you know, bag ladies and the

crazy and the bums and the schizophrenia or, you know, whatever...It's like all of a sudden it's a dirty thing. Yeah and once you get to an adult it's like you're a drain on services, you're a pain and, you know, you're dirty and not clean... Whereas before that it was something that, you know, like it might be the little ballet dancer that has anorexia or something. So, it's sort of like trendy. Not trendy, but it's acceptable. I thought it was like cool to be seeing a counsellor and stuff...All these famous people they're all in therapy, you know, and like with ... 'oh my therapist said this or in therapy I did that' ... Like you haven't 'made' it unless you've got a therapist in LA and stuff. (Cloe, 23, Bordertown).

Cloe moved from associating the youth counselling with something celebrities do, to adult mental health services as abject – the realm of human ‘dirt’ and disorder that unsettles the fantasy of rational order within the social. Seeking support from the underfunded and overcrowded adult mental health service works to further intensify the dynamics of shame for Cloe. Discourses of mental health and illness within suicide policy and prevention programmes actually work to invisibilise the effects of culture on the embodied self. The emphasis on diagnosis and treatment of suicidal ideation, depression and self harm as mental health problems may actually participate in the process of subjectification where by the subject ‘sees’ their own self as pathological and hence shameful. Cloe talks about the shame of being made visible and hence known by others as having attempted suicide as thus ‘a bit crazy’ or ‘failed’. She says,

Young people are taking their own lives because they are not happy. Because they don't see any other way because there's no-one offering them help and people don't

ask for help because like why would anyone want to listen to what I've got to say, sort of thing. No one else knows how I'm feeling...It's also the stigma of it (suicide attempts), being known as the person who swallowed the Panadol, you know, you've either failed or you're going a bit crazy... I think often things don't get seen. They are not even realised as 'attempts', like a little cut across the wrists...like at school you know you are really upset but um you sort of want to die, but you sort of didn't...People go on and on like that through out the rest of high school and haven't got any help in the early stages. That's one thing I've noticed around this area is that you have to be practically holding a gun to your head to be able to get any help...once you get over 18 and have to go to adult services it is just so blocked up. (Cloe, 23, Bordertown)

The visible/ invisible relations at work in the dynamics of shame also figure in the metaphors young people use to talk about their efforts to make their emotional distress known, to seek help. The shocking image of a young person holding a gun to their head in order to get help is highly visual, countering the invisibility associated with the intensity of shame inducing emotions. Cloe talks about the invisibility of suicide attempts and the signals young people give out instead of talking about their feelings. The issue of inadequate support services in rural areas for young people 'early on' and those who are no longer adolescents, are key concerns in rural communities where talking about emotional 'problems' poses risks to identity in relation to confidentiality and reputation. This issue of reputation is discussed by Ben who is a 22 year old student and a youth worker in a small town that has seen several young men suicide over the last few years. Ben knew both young men well and has spent much time thinking about what contributed to their deaths,

Maybe sometimes it is the fact they have tried to indicate here and there and it is fobbed off as bad mood or whatever...Maybe sometimes it is that they are 'too tough'. I suppose one of the big things to me seems that they can't see it getting any better. Maybe in cases they think I am pretty down and I am not enjoying myself and I am feeling depressed but it is not bad enough to call kids helpline. The perception is that 'who goes to counselling', no one, none of my mates go to counselling....They think 'people might think that I am a looney'. I don't know whether that is more predominate in rural areas or not. There is probably not as many services available and maybe not so many people that you run into that have been to services... (Ben, 22, Bordertown)

In rural communities with a history of social and geographical isolation shame can also be intensified for young people who fear humiliation if they talk about themselves. Ben's reflections on the pervasive influence of masculine norms suggests that shame is also highly gendered in relation to cultural practices that regulate emotional expression and help seeking in everyday life. The overt emphasis on suicide as a problem for 'young, rural men' also works to deny the gendered nature of shame and the way young women also govern their emotions (with suicide attempts being higher for young women and suicide completions higher for young men, CDHAC 2000). Sky, who was 22 and had been unemployed for several years, talked about her suicide attempt when living out of town without a license, no transport and only a once a week visit to the pub for social interaction beyond home. She says, 'I missed being around people and I felt depressed being by myself...and people putting me down all the time for not working...but I think I sort of stopped myself

(swallowing more pills). I thought it is not worth it. That's when I moved into town, I went back to my family. I missed my mum...People don't think that anyone will help them, they're too scared of being rejected and they feel stupid' (Sky, 22, Bordertown). Sandra below also reiterates this relation between shame and the cultural sanctions on speaking.

Once you get to middle high school you get a lot more pressure, you gotta start thinking about your career and everything, and your parents expect you to try and get a job. That's when the expectations are the greatest...Most kids attempt suicide to make a message, to show people they are in trouble, that they are worried and something is wrong...That's what happened to me (four years ago) and I ended up in intensive care for a couple of days...I couldn't ever really talk to my dad, he was very hard and cold at times. He was an ex-Vietnam veteran and he saw a lot of bloodshed and loss...I felt I couldn't talk to him about what was going on...I couldn't talk to anyone. (Sandra, 19, Bordertown)

For Sandra a suicide attempt is embodied signification. It is an act of rendering visible the complex and confusing affective forces that govern the self by almost 'writing oneself off'. In this way a suicide attempt cannot be simply understood as a self-conscious choice nor the product of an unconscious desire to die. The suicide attempt occurs at the point of intensification where the subject cannot bear the cultural weight of silence and the invisibility of shame any longer. Being unable to talk to anyone, and a parent in particular, closes off the desire to engage in helpseeking options promoted by prevention policies. In this sense seeking 'help' is not a straight forward matter of knowing where to go or what to do whether there are adequate services

available or not. Helpseeking is entangled in the cultural vocabulary of shame and the sanctions that prohibit the expression of certain affective states and emotional experiences. Tory, 22, in describing how she has supported several friends and her sister when they felt suicidal, talks about how shame is compounded through discourses about abnormal emotions,

It's also like there's a big issue of shame with it. Like with depression it's abnormal. 'Oh you must be mental', stuff like that. I think there's also the thing where people know that there's such a sense of shame with it, that they're not game to approach people. Like they think oh if I go to this person and tell them how I feel they're going to reject me, they're going to send me away, they're going to say, oh I'm too busy or I don't want to know or just because you're mental don't bring it to me, sort of thing and it's just I mean that's just going to compound the situation. (Tory, 22, Bordertown)

Tory's comment suggests that it is not a matter of getting rid of the 'stigma' surrounding suicide attempts as the issue is linked to the way affect is valued in narrowly defined ways. Youth suicide becomes the visible waste, the cost of a refusal to see or hear the profound emotional distress that some young people face in negotiating their emergent subjectivities. As Tomkins (1995:133) puts it 'shame is felt as an inner torment, a sickness of the soul'. The powerful effects of shame become apparent when we consider the stark reality that some young people risk their own lives rather than risk expressing their overwhelming sense of inner turmoil to someone else.

An Ethics of Living

Referring to HIV/AIDS activism Probyn (2000: 24) makes a point about the dynamics of shame that is pertinent for thinking about youth suicide and an ethics of living. She says, 'Thanks to the courage and work of so many, HIV/AIDS has slowly moved from being the site of shame to constituting the ground of thinking about how to act ethically...Simply put, the trauma of living in shame has produced what Tomkins calls the perpetual sensitivity to the dignity of others'. Shame in this instance is clearly associated with sexual identity and metaphors of contagion (see Bashford and Hooker, 2002), that are also relevant to thinking about youth suicide. The question of ethics is central to both in terms of the kinds of subjectivities and affective relations that are produced in response to shame. The stories that young people have shared with us about suicide confront us with the cultural forces that render the affective dimensions of becoming-adult invisible and morally suspect. They alert us to the pervasive influence of medicalised discourses of mental health and illness on our everyday understandings of emotions and affective relations. The metaphors of wasted lives reveal an economy of value driven by the logic of closure. Identity in this sense is premised on a rationality that exists in an oppositional relation to affect, embodied feeling and a multiple conception of self. Where I am right, you must be wrong. A shame inducing economy that also works to block the desire to live, to feel and negotiate the 'how' of everyday social relations. How might we begin to acknowledge and challenge the effects of such logic and the forces of shame that bind the young self to impossible demands of contemporary selfhood? How might we open up the possibility of desire, of other expressive relations that may enable the creation of different formations of self and connections between self and other. From ways of talking and writing to the arts, queer politics, the domains of sport and leisure (on

writing and shame see Adamson and Clark 1999)? For example Ben talks about the importance of music in expressing his grief at losing two friends to suicide in a small town ‘...in high school I wrote a song about both mates and sung it at the funeral. There was also a band I used to know who have a song about suicide and they will sing it even if they have a fifteen minute set. The drummer lost a close mate from his old school. (Ben, 23, Bordertown). We need to start by listening to the ways in which young people have managed to find a way through the maze of cultural sanctions that intensify shame and deny affect. This is particularly important in relation to the emergent subjectivities of young people in rural and urban communities as Ian says,

When it comes to rural areas you have got more limited ways of deciding who you are, like identifying as an individual. Like we all want to be individuals but we also want to belong. Because there are less people and less exposure to diversity I think, in cities they have more of an outlet to being themselves because even if they feel part of a minority or feel alone there are so many other people you can contact or be part of a social life where people are like you...I think the thing with suicide is that people are caught up in their thoughts about what things are and how things are and they can't see any other way...I reckon there are ways to be satisfied, like fulfilling your desires and I suppose they are conditioned too. I suppose ultimately your desire is to feel good but you can go about it in lots of ways. You can go about it by seeking a good career or by having a good social life or having a good balanced life or whatever...You know I like using the Internet too because I can express myself without being degraded by other people's opinions, because you know at the end of the day you can turn the computer off and it doesn't matter what you have said. In real life though, if you are talking directly, to a degree it does matter because they

can see you... also, a big thing for me at the moment... is that I feel disconnected from the environment and I believe that when we are connected to the environment it just makes you feel like you belong. When you feel separate in this world of artificial everything it can make you feel very restricted in who you are and how you can be. I don't think a lot of kids have been camping and I am not suggesting that we all become 'bush tucker men' but I am saying it is not good if we don't have enough balance. (Ian, 16, Bordertown)

Ian makes an interesting point about visibility in relation to his preference for chatting on the Internet where he can't be 'seen' and hence judged. New forms of communication enable different kinds of expressive relations and hence identities. It is interesting that when young people are asked what they think needs to happen in their communities to prevent youth suicide very few mention increasing traditional mental health services. Overwhelmingly young people in our research talked about the importance of being able to express oneself, feel connected with others and to participate in a range of experiences not necessarily governed by codes of success, goals or achievement, but that were youth friendly, fun, relaxed and inviting spaces. They are talking about an ethics of living through the creation of spaces of belonging, where affect is not rationalised away and a diversity of identifications are possible. When thinking about alleviating suicide we also need to take heed of Foucault's point that 'everything is dangerous', which includes current well intentioned discourses about youth suicide that rely heavily on normalised notions of mental health and illness at the expense of understanding the social dynamics of shame and the forces of affect.

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