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THOSE LEFT BEHIND AMONG THE LEFT BEHIND – BETWEEN LIFE AND SUICIDE OF A LOVED ONE

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suicide of a loved one
idiomatic nature of trace of experiencing loss
support

Summary

*The article continues the reflections initiated in the text *Those Left Behind – Between the Universal and Exceptional Experience of a Loved One's Suicide*. This part focuses on an in-depth analysis of the traces left by the experience of a loved one's suicide, highlighting the diversity of their expression and the idiomatic nature of their meanings. By recalling circumstances surrounding the loss—such as the relationship with the deceased (kinship, partnership, acquaintance), the nature of the suicidal death (including its tragic character and the brutality of the method), and whether it was anticipated or unexpected—we emphasize the idiomatic quality of the traces imprinted on the lives of those left behind. The reconstruction of attitudes toward a loved one's suicidal death, begun in the first part, becomes here a prelude to their deconstruction. Beneath what is seen as a common and shared experience, we seek the idiomatic elements; those that appear but remain hidden, concealed, incommunicable, and perhaps impossible to share with others. In this second part, we stress the importance of including both visible and hidden aspects in studying the experience of those left behind—that is, the idiomatic nature of a life that, despite apparent repetition, is full of unique, more or less manifest experiences. Recognizing the singular character of these traces is crucial for anyone aiming to offer support to those affected by such a loss.*

Introduction

As recalled in the first part of the article, the most common approaches in scholarly literature to describing the experience of losing someone to suicide are rooted in a tradition that seeks to understand this loss by contrasting it with deaths from other causes [1, 2]. In research, particularly quantitative studies [3], attempts are often made to compare selected aspects of bereavement, such as the duration or intensity of grief or the forms in which it manifests. Such efforts to understand the experience of the left-behind tend to emphasise how it diverges from bereavement following deaths from other causes. Yet descriptions grounded in presumed differences prove unreliable: meta-analyses show no clear evidence of significant distinctions between the experience of losing someone to suicide and to other causes [4].

With this foundation removed, researchers have begun to shift away from comparative studies between bereavement groups and towards a deeper exploration of the internal diversity within the group of the left-behind. Qualitative methods, including conversations and interviews, have revealed recurring themes in the narratives of bereaved individuals [cf. 5, 6]. The repetition of such themes points to shared patterns of experience which, nevertheless, unfold uniquely within each individual story.

In the first part of the article, we emphasised that the death of a loved one touches and stirs everything that constitutes our existence; both life and death are always someone's, always situated among something and someone. From this perspective, the life of the person who ended their own life leaves an indelible trace in the lives of those who remain; touched by this trace, their life continues on its course. The experience of a loved one's death is therefore personal and singular, and the metaphor of the trace, which we adopt here, does justice to the interweaving of life and death in the experience of the left-behind.

People affected by such loss repeatedly emphasise that the death of someone close becomes a defining part of their lives [7, 8, 9]. The literature likewise acknowledges that a loved one's suicidal death becomes tightly woven into the narrative the left-behind construct about themselves and their lives [10, 11]; it often becomes a central point of reference [12], around which other events revolve, to which they refer, and from which they derive or lose meaning.

The strength of this connection becomes apparent when the suicidal death of a loved one is understood as something that happened, or, more precisely, was unfolding, within their shared life: the life they lived together, the life that preceded the moment of taking one's own life. Within that life, death had already begun leaving its early traces, at times giving rise to anticipatory grief [13]. These traces were more or less visible (or entirely hidden), such as suicidal thoughts, acts of self-destruction, or past attempts by the loved one to take their own life. After the loss, those affected look for such traces – signs, anticipations, and hints – in the past they shared with the deceased loved one [14].

And although one might assume that death comes and goes, that in taking the deceased it erases its trace and ceases to touch those who remain, the vivid and emotionally charged accounts of the bereaved show that this experience does not recede neatly into the past [7, 8, 9]. The traces left by death carry forward into the future, into the continuing life of the left-behind, a life that must be lived with those traces. It continues despite death, against death, or perhaps even because of it. Seen in this light, every trace of death reveals the persistence of life; it bears witness to the lived experience of the left-behind; it preserves the difficulty of that experience so that it does not vanish without a trace. By following these traces, as witnesses and researchers seeking to accompany the bereaved, we attempt to perceive what they have endured in order to live on. We allow ourselves to be guided by those who have lived through death.

Recalling circumstances of loss, such as the relationship to the deceased (kinship, partnership, friendship), the nature of the suicidal death (including the tragic or violent character of the method), and whether it had been anticipated or came unexpectedly, we

focus in this article on the idiomaticity of the traces imprinted in the lives of the left-behind. In discussing these selected circumstances, we first present the results of analyses aimed at identifying recurring patterns in how such experiences are lived. We then offer a deeper reflection on these findings and draw attention to contexts that have been overlooked. In so doing, we emphasise that a trace is neither reducible to an objective sign nor adequately captured by descriptions that seek universal indicators of bereavement. Each trace, though it may appear repetitive, acquires a unique meaning within the context of a particular life and personal history. For this reason, reflection on the idiomaticity of the traces left by a loved one's suicidal death is a vital aspect of studying the experience of the left-behind. Drawing on these considerations, in the final part of the article we explore how these reflections might be translated into practices that offer meaningful support to those affected by this form of loss.

The relationship with the deceased

In the literature, the experience of a loved one's suicidal death is most often framed in relation to close biological relatives. Research findings indeed support an association between the degree of kinship and, for example, the duration of grieving [15].

Yet kinship alone does not necessarily illuminate how the loss is experienced. Such an approach risks placing undue emphasis on blood relations at the expense of other relationships, which, though not rooted in kinship, were nonetheless close and profoundly significant to the deceased.

Jordan and McIntosh therefore propose that, in analysing this experience, attention should be paid instead to the quality of closeness that connected the left-behind to the deceased, which they term the psychological bond with the lost loved one [16, p. 6].

Adopting such a perspective when designing support programmes for the left-behind also enables us to take into account the experiences of non-kin who were nevertheless close to the deceased. Research confirms the link – thus understood – between the psychological bond with the loved one and the ways in which their loss is experienced by the left-behind [16, 17]. Broadening the scope of meaningful bonds beyond blood relations makes it possible to recognise the needs of non-kin left-behind (such as friends or partners in informal relationships).

This broader view of the experience of the left-behind also draws attention to the traces that may be imprinted in the lives of children when a peer dies by suicide [18, 19]. This issue is particularly pressing in light of the alarming rise in suicidal behaviours among children and adolescents (e.g. KGP data indicating that in 2023 more than two thousand suicide attempts were made by 13–18-year-olds [20]).

Considering the trace that a child's suicide may leave in the lives of their peers, interview data collected over four time points across three years suggest that living through such an experience carries a risk of depression, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and the

emergence of suicidal thoughts of their own [21]. It was further noted that experiencing such a loss is associated with an increased risk of future suicide attempts [22]. The type of bond between the child and the deceased peer also matters: the closer the relationship, the greater the likelihood of PTSD symptoms emerging [23]. In this context, it must be remembered that adolescence is often a period of first romantic relationships, which may likewise be confronted with the suicidal death of a loved one.

The circumstances sketched above do not, of course, exhaust the many types of relationships that may significantly shape how such loss is lived and thus differentiate the experiences of the left-behind (e.g. the loss of a former partner, colleague, or friend). In the next section, we turn to the diversity of experiences that arise in connection with the type of suicidal death.

The type of suicidal death

The manner in which a loved one takes their life may also shape the kind of trace their death leaves in the lives of those experiencing the loss. The method of self-inflicted death may affect the condition of the body, which the left-behind must confront when identifying the deceased [24]. The more the method alters the body's appearance, the greater the likelihood of trauma and PTSD symptoms among those who had direct contact with it [25, 26].

People who end their lives sometimes recognise that their act may influence how they will be viewed after death and may overshadow the good moments they shared with others. Some choose to leave a note; however, contrary to cultural expectations, research by Shneidman [27] and Antoon Leenaars [28] shows that only around 15% do so. Even among these, most notes are brief messages intended not to explain motives but to protect loved ones (e.g. warning of gas in a room) or to ensure the body is not discovered unexpectedly and that the appropriate services are contacted [27].

It is, of course, impossible to consider here all the ways in which the method of suicide may influence the experience of loss. For instance, this article does not examine the important issue of surviving extended suicide (so-called murder-suicide).

However, we do wish to reflect on the possibility that the method of death may prompt the left-behind to question the intentionality of the act. Beyond the distinction between circumstances that demonstrate clear suicidal intent (e.g. death by hanging) and those that leave open the possibility of unintentionality (e.g. overdose), we also draw attention to the experience described in the literature as subtle suicide [29].

The experience of suicidal death is typically considered in the context of the sudden, and often unexpected, tragic loss of a loved one [30]. In literature devoted to analysing the suicidal act, its motivations, methods, and unfolding [cf. 31], the significance of the shared life with the person expressing suicidal intent is often pushed into the background, along with the everyday experiences of those who lived alongside them. Ronald Maris,

in his 1981 proposal of the concept of a suicidal career, called for a methodological shift that would enable researchers to trace the development of suicidal tendencies across the life course [32]. Although more than four decades have passed since its publication, longitudinal studies of this kind remain extremely rare [33, 34]. In response to the recognition that suicidal thoughts may unfold across a lifetime [35], the concept of subtle suicide was introduced [29, p. 7]. The difficulty of defining this form of loss and of identifying the frameworks through which it may be lived by the left-behind, marks the experience of subtle suicide.

Subtle suicide¹ is defined as a pattern of self-destructive feelings, thoughts, and behaviours that persist over time and whose continuation may shorten a person's lifespan [29, p. 7].

In the literature, suicidal behaviour is typically viewed as deliberate action aimed at shortening or ending life. In the case of subtle suicide, however, self-destructive behaviours (such as harmful habits, addiction, or neglect) do not necessarily shorten life or lead directly to death. Individuals exhibiting a subtle-suicide pattern may behave in ways detrimental to their health and yet die of natural or other causes long before their self-destructive behaviours would have led to their death. The group in which such behaviours can be observed is diverse with respect to the degree to which individuals are aware of the long-term consequences of their actions and of the intentionality with which they undertake them. Such attitudes are further reinforced by the ambivalence these individuals experience regarding the value of survival (the tendency to oscillate between extremes concerning the meaning of staying alive).

Outlining this framework of experience among people exhibiting subtle-suicide patterns simultaneously reveals the life their loved ones accompany. The challenge facing those close to them is evident; supporting someone whose actions inch them towards death can be profoundly difficult. Testimonies of the left-behind speak of sorrow tied to rejected offers of help, persistent denial of reality, and the neglect (of health, responsibilities, and relationships) whose burden fell upon them at the moment of the loved one's death. Seen in this light, the death inflicted upon their shared life appears intimately connected to the actions undertaken by the deceased while still alive.

¹) The term *utajone samobójstwo* is our proposed translation of the English phrase, as this mode of experience has not yet been discussed in the Polish literature. Subtle suicide encompasses situations in which suicidal intentions and acts remain concealed, elusive, and difficult to detect within a person's life. The term, inspired by the Latin *subtilis* ("fine", "delicate", "barely perceptible"), underscores the subtlety of the signals that can be discerned only through attentive reflection on the deceased's relationship with their surroundings. Like Franz Kafka's "*Prozy utajone*", subtle suicide hides narratives that invite deeper interpretation, suggesting that what is not visible at first glance may be as significant as what is overt. For the left-behind, the difficulty of this experience is connected to the subtle, often hidden traces of everyday life they encounter after the death of their loved one. These traces, once left by someone alive, are now read by those who confront their loss. They lead back to someone who will never return to their lives. If that person does return, it is only in memory, in remembrance, recollection, re-living, and the continual return to what has become irreversible. In this way, the lives of those who remain are marked by the repeated reappearance of traces of past closeness and by the "search for a time that cannot be lost" [36, p. 22].

And yet, behaviours associated with subtle suicide rarely appear as obvious acts of self-harm; as a result, the left-behind remain in a state of uncertainty about the nature of their experience. Doubts difficult to dispel, concerning the intentionality of the deceased's actions and whether they were aware of their harmfulness, leave space both for the hope that the death was "a matter of fate" and for guilt over not recognising signs of suicidal thinking.

Here, then, emerges the question pursued in the next section. When accompanying the life of a loved one, is it possible to sense the arrival of their death?

Sensing the approach of loss

Reflection on the varied ways of experiencing a loved one's suicidal death, considered in terms of how far the loss was anticipated, may begin with reference to the notion of anticipatory mourning [37], most often discussed in relation to the death of a loved one following the shared experience of chronic illness.

The time spent accompanying a loved one through illness invites confrontation with the possibility of their death and, already during their lifetime, indirectly prepares one for a future lived in their absence. By contrast, a sudden and unexpected loss increases the likelihood of shock, a sense of unreality, and difficulties in progressing through grief [38].

Drawing on the considerations above, it becomes clear that the experience of losing someone to suicide cannot be reduced solely to that of sudden, unforeseen loss, for suicidal thoughts often develop over time and accompany the shared life of the deceased and the left-behind. For this reason, we turn to the literature that examines the extent to which the left-behind anticipated the suicidal death of their loved one.

Several studies [e.g. 39] indicate that many left-behind individuals were, to some degree, aware of the approaching loss during the period preceding the death, sometimes even for a number of years. Warning signs often included previous suicide attempts, self-destructive behaviours, or periods of hospitalisation that made the seriousness of the situation unmistakable [cf. 40]. These constitute clear indicators of the loved one's distress and, at the same time, a call for support. Yet the left-behind frequently feel guilt (often linked to self-blame for perceived neglect) even when the suicidal death was not preceded by suicidal behaviour. This raises a central question in suicidology: Do those who experience suicidal thoughts express them? Do their signs allow one to anticipate (and prevent) a suicidal death?

Evidence shows that nearly one-third of people struggling with suicidal thoughts see a physician within a week, and more than half within a month, before their death [41]. Many seek psychological or psychotherapeutic help and convey their intentions to doctors, relatives, or friends [42]. But can such indicators reliably signal the risk of suicide? Linehan's research suggests that around 20% of the general population report suicidal thoughts at some point, most of which do not reflect an intention to act [43].

Some scholars argue that suicidal death cannot be predicted [44]. Simultaneously, it is estimated that roughly half of suicides are expected to some degree [45, p. 273]. Jamison illustrates this with a testimony from a left-behind individual: “When I heard about it [the suicide] over the phone, my immediate thought was: so it has happened” [45, p. 273].

Reading numerous testimonies of those who have endured such a loss, one sees how often their thoughts are accompanied by anxiety that they “missed” a death that had been unfolding within the shared life they lived with the deceased [46]. We cannot evaluate the accuracy of such doubts, but we must acknowledge their significance – the trace they leave in the lives of the left-behind.

Among the many testimonies, we also encounter accounts of those who accompanied a loved one’s suicidal death through assisted suicide [47]. In the context of reflections on the anticipation of suicidal death, this experience must be distinguished.

Most studies on the left-behind highlight feelings of abandonment, rejection, and betrayal by the deceased, whose life had shown no sign of imminent death [48, 49, 50]. In cases of assisted suicide, however, the left-behind accompanied a life in which death was unfolding and remained with the loved one until the end. The earlier doubts about anticipating loss here give way to questions about the boundary between supporting life and permitting the death of a loved one. The anxiety reported by those who accompany a loved one during assisted suicide often takes the form of fear that they failed to support the person’s life sufficiently and, through respecting their wishes, contributed to their death. At times, the overwhelming guilt and sense of responsibility that arise can make them feel undeserving of support in their grieving [51]².

On the life of death

Testimonies of those living in the shadow of a loved one’s suicidal death prompt reflection on the possibility of experiencing death within life. From the perspective of the left-behind, as outlined in this article, we can see that the experience of suicidal death may accompany life both before and after the loss³. This raises a question: Can death have a place within life, even when it stands opposed to life’s continuation?

The circumstances surrounding a loved one’s suicidal death, as discussed above, find expression in the testimonies of the left-behind, in which they bear witness to the endurance of a life upon which death has been inflicted. The coexistence of life and death in their experience is captured through the metaphor of the trace. The traces of this experience that can be discerned reveal how differently death touches life, for example, when

² Here we only signal the complexity and importance of loss in the context of assisted suicide – an issue which, due to space constraints, cannot be elaborated in depth. It nevertheless requires thorough study and continued research.

³ Research conducted between 1980 and 2016 by Anne Ranning’s team suggests that such experiences may sometimes be observed even in the lives of subsequent generations who were not directly affected by the death [52].

a shared life is interrupted suddenly, or when it is brought to an ultimate end (as in the case of subtle suicide). This leads to the insight that death never leaves only a single trace. Yet the literature often seeks universal trajectories for understanding the experience of suicide loss – an approach that risks obscuring its idiomaticity, its literal unutterability, and its resistance to being captured by generalising frameworks.

Drawing on bereavement research [e.g. 53], the fifth edition of the DSM introduced the term Persistent Complex Bereavement Disorder (PCBD) in Section III as a condition requiring further study. In 2022 (in the DSM-5-TR), this mode of experiencing the loss of a loved one was described as a distinct diagnostic entity under the name Prolonged Grief Disorder (PGD). The diagnostic criteria for PGD, which include the duration and intensity of grief, aim to assist practitioners in identifying complicated forms of grieving (complicated meaning entangled in life, woven through it). A frequent point of discussion in the literature is the criterion of time [54, 55], derived from earlier studies suggesting that after roughly six months, the bereaved generally “come to terms” with the loss, resume suspended activities, and undertake the effort of continuing life without the deceased [56]. However, this proposed trajectory differs notably in cases of suicide loss [57]. Psychologists observe that a divergent grieving process (one that would qualify as CGD) is present in as many as 15% of their patients [58]. Thus, the patterns presented in the literature do not always encompass the experience of losing someone to suicide.

Objectivity in science is often associated with distance, which is then contrasted with subjectivity, understood as close-up view and individual approach. A subjective approach in research is often understood as a way of looking at the other that recognises our own position in relation to them, and to ourselves, as beings who live, think, speak, feel, and act in the world. Yet adopting such a stance does not entail the subjectivisation of knowledge; on the contrary, it contributes to its objectification. When our attempts to apprehend reality include reflection on the one who is attempting to apprehend it – that is, when observation incorporates an awareness of the observer and their position in relation to what is observed (in this case, the person experiencing loss) – the field of vision expands; it is amplified rather than reduced. In this light, an objective gaze is one that includes the one who seeks to enter into relation with another.

Yet when, in the pursuit of scientific distance, we withdraw too far, we risk reaching a point at which the subject becomes indistinguishable from the object, and the trace they leave is rendered negligible or goes unnoticed (unless it forces itself into view). This calls for attentiveness in shaping the language of practice. For it is difficult to accompany an experience if one withdraws from the living, taking refuge in forms of thought, speech, and perception that no longer resemble them. In the next article, we shall examine how the left-behind move through the experience of losing a loved one. Drawing on their testimonies, we will highlight what is most important for those who seek to accompany them and to offer support along this path.

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