

Gendered Endings: Narratives of Male and Female Suicides in the South African Lowveld¹

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Abstract Durkheim's classical theory of suicide rates being a negative index of social solidarity downplays the salience of gendered concerns in suicide. But gendered inequalities have had a negative impact: worldwide significantly more men than women perpetrate fatal suicides. Drawing on narratives of 52 fatal suicides in Bushbuckridge, South Africa, this article suggests that Bourdieu's concepts of 'symbolic violence' and 'masculine domination' provide an a more appropriate framework for understanding this paradox. I show that the thwarting of investments in dominant masculine positions have been the major precursor to suicides by men. Men tended to take their own lives as a means of escape. By contrast, women perpetrated suicide to protest against the miserable consequences of being dominated by men. However, contra the assumption of Bourdieu's concept of 'habitus' the narrators of suicide stories did reflect critically upon gender constructs.

Keywords Suicide . Gender . Masculine domination . Bushbuckridge. South Africa.

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Introduction

Two of the most consistent findings in the enormous international literature on the epidemiology of suicide are that gendered concerns directly influence the proclivity of persons to commit suicide; and that significantly more men than women are victims of fatal suicides. This is true of Europe and of the United States, and also of many other social contexts. Anthropological studies document that men were victims of 90% of reported suicides on the Micronesian Island of Truk between 1970 and 1985 (Hezel 1987:284), 70% of reported suicides in Western Samoa between 1981 and 1983 (C. and L. MacPherson 1987:309), and 92 % of those among American Indians in New Mexico between 1980 and 1987 (Van Winkle et al.1993:307). The same is true of studies of Africa. In the 1950s, 88% of the suicide victims in Northern Rhodesia were men (Chaplin 1961:147). In the same time period, men comprised 69% of suicide victims among the Busoga, 61% among the Nyoro, and 59% among the Gisu (Bohannan 1960:261).² Only certain forms of suicide, such as overdoses on medical drugs, are predominant among women (Littlewood and Lipsedge 1987: 303).

Yet, social theory seldom adequately accounts for these findings. In *Le Suicide*, which remains the single most influential monograph on this topic, Durkheim cites an impressive range of statistics, confirming these trends.³ But he pays scant attention to gender. Durkheim's primary contribution is to show how rates of suicide in Europe were an index of social solidarity, and of the individual's integration into social concerns. This is the basis of his distinction between 'egoistic', 'anomic' and 'altruistic' suicide. 'Egoistic suicide occurs with the rise of modern individualism, and

² Only among the Luo of Kenya did women suicide victims outnumber men: 59% of the Luo suicide victims were women (Bohannan 1960:261).

³ See, for example, the tables on suicide by marital status in different European countries (Durkheim 1951:176-8,183)

varies “inversely with the degree of integration of the social groups of which the individual is part”. (p.210). ‘Anomic suicide’ is closely related and is the product of the increasing normlessness and inadequate regulation over the individual’s activities (p.25). By contrast, ‘altruistic suicide’ occurs where individuality is too weakly developed. One example is widow suicide in traditional India.⁴ Durkheim only explicitly mentions gender under the rubric of ‘conjugal anomie’. He observes that there were few suicides where the ‘family spirit was strong’, but many amongst divorced persons. However, where divorce was less restrictive, male suicide increased and female suicide decreased (p.269). This, Durkheim suggests, was because husbands found tranquillity in a situation where their own desires were restricted, but the fixed object of their passion was forbidden to fail them. By contrast - wives found tranquillity by following their own instincts, and desired liberty. Hence, wives experienced monogamy as restraining, and as preventing them from changing their lot when it became intolerable (Durkheim 1951:274).

The above-mentioned studies do contain elaborate discussions of men’s suicides. But these tend to be seen as a response to general social problems rather than more particular masculine concerns. This is apparent in C. and L. McPherson’s (1987) suggestion that in Western Samoa young men commit ‘anomic suicide’, and older men ‘altruistic suicide’. The McPhersons contend that in the 1980s the gap between young men’s expectations and opportunities widened. Whilst education and the media made young men aware of alternative lifestyles, there were few means to satisfy their inflated hopes. Productive land was limited, the wage economy stagnated, and the opportunities for advanced education or for out-migration decreased. The

⁴ A final form fatalistic suicide, stemming from excessive regulation is relegated to a brief footnote. This form involves “persons with futures pitilessly blocked and passions violently choked by oppressive discipline”. In this regard, he briefly alludes to the suicide of slaves, and of married women who are childless (Durkheim 1951:276).

disappointments that arose in this context triggered suicides. Older men, they argue, faced a different set of constraints. In these authoritarian communities of Western Samoa powerful kinship bonds prevailed and the disreputable conduct of older men of high status might bring the whole group into ridicule, causing innocents to suffer. For them suicide offers a means of escape. A Samoan saying states ‘death is better than shame’ (*sili le oti i lo le ma*).

Social theorists have focused more explicitly on gendered concerns in women’s suicides. Marx (1999) argued that suicides by women in nineteenth century Paris was a direct outcome of the tyranny of the French bourgeois family. Marx saw oppressive family relations as the root cause for suicides by a woman whose family berated her for losing her virginity, a wife subjected to spousal abuse, and by a young woman who was impregnated by her aunt’s husband but refused an abortion. He also condemned the abuse of parental authority as a ‘cruel substitute for all the submissiveness and dependency people in bourgeois society engage in’ (p.54), and also the notion that a wife is the property of the husband.⁵

Firth (1961), Littlewood and Lipsedge (1987), and feminist anthropologists such as Strathern (1972) and Counts (1980), pursue this line of argument. They suggest that in situations where women lacked any alternative means of influencing the behaviour of others, women used para-suicidal behaviour to dramatise their plight and pressure others into accepting their will. When aggrieved Tikopian women swam out to sea, men usually took up canoes to find them (Firth 1961). In a desperate attempt to gain sympathy and support, Western women exaggerated their extrusion from the community by overdosing on psycho-topic drugs with someone else close by (Littlewood and Lipsedge 1987). Strathern (1972) and Counts (1980) contend that in

⁵ Marx (1999) refers to only one suicide by a man: a member of the Royal guard who lost his job and killed himself rather than to be a burden to his family.

Papua New Guinea women's suicides rather aimed to shame supposed offenders.⁶ Strathern shows that Mount Hagen women killed themselves out of grievance-sickness and revenge-anger called *popokl*. Through suicide they pointed out the guilt of others who were responsible for their misery. Counts insisted that among the Kaliai abused women who had no legal rights in their husband's village, could not overtly challenge male authority. These women used suicide as a form of political action to communicate a powerful message, and to alert the community into supporting vulnerable women. The deceased women's kin often sought revenge, and might actually retaliate against her tormentors (Counts 1980). Whilst the emphasis on gendered social inequality is an important theoretical advance, these approaches still fail to explain why the dominant are more likely to commit suicide than the dominated.

More recent writings by Moore (1994) and by Bourdieu (2000) might well enable us to transcend this impasse. Moore (1994) argues that it is necessary to distinguish between 'gender as it is constructed' and 'gender as it is lived'. She argues that whilst discourses construct men as active, aggressive, thrusting and powerful, these representations have only the most tangential relations to the behaviours, attributes and self-images of individual men. To acquire gender identities, individual men invest in certain of the diverse subject positions that these discourses provide (p.61). Men fantasise about the powerful identities that are inscribed in gender hierarchies, and commit themselves emotionally to these identities, and have a vested interest in them. But these investments are often thwarted. A crisis of self-representation ensues when men face contrary expectations, and when other persons

⁶ Strathern (1986) and Counts (1980) draw on psychoanalytic theory that a desire to kill another person is entwined in the act of killing oneself. Such suicides have been described as Samsonic – so named after the Biblical hero who pulled down the pillars of the house on his own head to kill his enemies (Jeffreys 1952).

refuse to take up or to sustain subject positions *vis-a-vis* themselves. The result is a crisis of self-representation. Moore (1994) contends that violence reconfirms the nature of masculinity otherwise denied, and represents a struggle for the maintenance of certain fantasies of identity and power (p.70). Self-eradication offers another resolution to the crisis of self-representation.

From this perspective, men commit suicide as a means of escape from situations in which they fail to display dominance. Bourdieu (2000) reinforces this view by insisting that masculine domination also inflicts symbolic violence on men - in so far as it constrains men to become 'dominated by domination'. Women, by contrast are more likely to commit suicide as a form of protest when they suffer excessively from masculine domination. This is not to say that women's investments in feminine subject positions cannot also be thwarted.

Suicide in Bushbuckridge, South Africa

This study draws on accounts of fifty-two fatal suicides that I recorded in Impalahoek, the South African village where I have been doing intermittent ethnographic fieldwork since 1990. Thirty-nine (75%) were perpetrated by men and 13 (25%) by women. Situated in the Bushbuckridge municipality of South Africa's north eastern periphery, Impalahoek has a population of about twenty-thousand Northern Sotho and Tsonga-speakers. During my annual visits to the field, informants regularly told me about the suicides of their kin, neighbours, friends and colleagues as 'newsworthy events' that interrupted the usual flow of life (Malkki 1997). Although I did not

personally observe any of these events, the accounts that I attained were often ‘experience near’.⁷

In telling me about these suicides, my interviewees generally valued the opportunity to speak out against men who took their own lives for no good reason, and also against the oppressive behaviour of others who drove women to take their own lives. Their accounts did not always provide a detailed, nor even an accurate, portrayal of the events that transpired. Yet, as witnesses they were a crucial party to performances of violence (Riches 1986), who shared the life worlds of the killers and victims, and understood the ‘grammar of motives’ involved (Burke 1955).

It is not purely the quantitative discrepancy between male and female suicides that differ. Tables 1-4, below, based on the information that I recorded in Impalahoek, show other differences. Male suicide victims are more likely to be slightly older and single, to hang or shoot themselves in their own rooms, and to experience insanity or guilt prior to suicide. Women victims tend to be younger and married, resort to more visible and violent methods, such as burning themselves in public, and to experience marital problems. This supports the interpretation of male suicide as a form of escape from situations in which men fail to dominate, and of female suicide as a form of protest against experiences of subordination.

The suicides that I recorded do not constitute a ‘representative sample’ of those committed in South Africa, or even in Bushbuckridge. Yet, the gender discrepancy that I observed is in line with most other South African studies. A far more statistically respected study in Pietermaritzburg found the ratio of

⁷ It is important to distinguish between narratives of suicide and actual suicidal behaviour. The information that I present relates only to the former. However, it is important to bear in mind that these two domains of social reality are not discrete. The act of killing oneself is not a solo venture. Suicide is rich with meanings and intentions, deeply rooted in culturally patterned forms of thought and emotion (Douglas 1967). Hence, narratives of suicide provide a ‘script’ for individual acts of suicide (Kral 1998).

Table 1: The Distribution of Fatal Suicides by Age and Sex of the Victims, Bushbuckridge, 1991-2009

Age Categories	M	F	Total
15-19	3	3	6
20-24	4	2	6
25-29	11	0	11
30-34	7	4	11
35-39	3	0	3
40-44	3	3	6
45-49	5	1	6
50-54	2	0	2
55-59	0	0	0
60-64	1	0	1
Totals	39	13	52

Table 2: The Distribution of Fatal Suicides by Marital Status and by Sex of the Victims, Bushbuckridge, 1991-2009

Marital Status	M	F	Total
Single	17	4	21
Married	16	9	25
Divorced	4	0	4
Widowed	2	0	2
Totals	39	13	52

Table 3: The Distribution of Fatal Suicides by Method and Sex of the Victims, 1991-2009

Method	M	F	Total
Hanging	27	4	31
Shooting	7	0	7
Gassing	1	0	1
Burning	2	7	9
Drowning	1	0	1
Poisoning	1	1	2
Eating glass	0	1	1
Totals	39	13	52

Table 4: The Distribution of Fatal Suicides by Major Preceding Event, Bushbuckridge, 1991-2009

Significant Event	M	F	Totals
Frustrated love affair	5	2	7
Marital problems	9	6	15
Conflict with Affines	2	2	4
Conflict with Parent	1	1	2
Conflict with Neighbour	1	0	1
Sickness and Insanity	12	1	13
Accused of witchcraft	2	0	2
Financial problems	3	0	3
Motor vehicle accident	2	0	2
Guilt after homicide	1	0	1
Unknown	1	1	2
Totals	39	13	52

black male to black female suicides to be 5.8: 1 (Wassenaar et al 2000). Other studies suggest that in South Africa as a whole the suicide rate was 24.5 per 100,000 amongst men and 6.9 per 100,000 amongst women during 2003 (Matzopoulos 2004).

However, in South African studies of suicide, the salience of race has eclipsed that of gender. Meer's influential study *Race and Suicide in South Africa* (1972) uses statistics from the Durban inquest court to refute many Durkheimian assumptions. She suggests that social deprivation is the most constant social factor in suicide: it is the poor, dispossessed and powerless who 'live in the shadow of suicide'. She argues that under the apartheid system repressive white authority was a persistent source of frustration and hopelessness to blacks. Only studies of the extremely stressful conditions of work within the South Africa's security services, point to the greater proclivity of men to take their own lives (Pienaar 2003).

Gender 'Constructed' and 'Lived'

A fuller understanding of accounts of suicide thus requires a focus on structures and ideologies of masculine domination in Bushbuckridge. These have changed significantly through time as wage labour replaced subsistence agriculture as the chief source of earning a livelihood, and again in response to industrial de-centralisation.

Following the implementation of the 1913 Land Act, Bushbuckridge was scheduled for exclusive occupation by Africans. Its residents were rent tenants who paid taxes to land holding companies for residential, cultivation, and stock-keeping rights. The settlement pattern was one of scattered *metse* (sing. *motse*, lit. 'village' or 'family'). The *motse* was a cluster of co-resident agnates rather than a strict patrilineage (Kuper 1975:71-2). Its inhabitants were typically a 'father' (called *mong wa motse* 'owner of the of the village'), his wives, sons, daughters-in-law, unmarried daughters, and grandchildren.

Like most southern Bantu, Northern Sotho and Shangaan kinship systems were Iroquois, and were marked by bifurcate merging. The father's and mother's siblings of the same sex were known by the same term, cross-sex siblings of parents by different terms, and parallel cousins were equated with siblings. In all these relations there was a pervasive elder-younger distinction. Cross cousins on both sides were classified together with no reference to age or sex, and shared a joking relationship (Hammond-Tooke 1981:24-26). Whilst Northern-Sotho speakers often married their cross-cousins (MBD or FZS), Shangaans avoided marrying any relatives. However, in both cases arranged marriages were common, and parents assisted their sons in paying bridewealth cattle. Residential rules were strictly patrilocal. A wife moved into the household of her husband's parents, and was expected to work for them. But she still retained membership of her father's descent group and was still addressed by her maiden surname. Only after the husband's

younger brothers had all married, could he and his wife set up their own homestead. Men perceived polygyny as the ideal, but they were expected to get the approval of their wives before entering into additional marriages (Hammond-Tooke 1981:21).

During this period of dispersed settlement, the *motse* was effectively a corporate group, and despite the authority of elderly men, a strict gendered division of labour prevailed. Women planted maize, sorghum, millet, beans, melons, marrow, sweet potatoes and ground nuts, hoed, cut thatching grass, and raised pigs and chickens. Within the home a young wife worked under the constant surveillance of her mother-in-law, and had to act in a subservient manner at all times. Men uprooted trees, ploughed, built homes and tended to cattle, goats and sheep. Other tasks such as sorghum threshing were not gender specific. Most *metse* met their subsistence requirements from what they themselves produced, and men intermittently worked on the Pilgrim's Rest gold mines.

With the advent of apartheid in 1948, Bushbuckridge became a Native Reserve. The farms now became reception sites for large numbers of people who were displaced by afforestation projects, and by the mechanisation of production operations on white-owned farms. 'Agricultural betterment' schemes (De Wet 1995) were implemented in 1960. Land was subdivided into residential settlements, arable lands and grazing camps. All households were relocated onto the residential stands, and very few retained their arable fields. Relocation drastically redefined the nature of domestic units. Given the smaller size of residential stands, large agnatic clusters were fragmented into smaller segments, and sons were allocated small residential stands separate from those of their fathers. Sons now paid their own taxes, kept their cattle in separate kraals, and their wives cultivated different gardens. The fragmentation of the *motse* undermined the material basis of agnatic cooperation. Since subsistence

agriculture was no longer a viable option, households became almost completely dependent upon wage earnings, generated by migrant labourers, outside the group. Because cattle herds were greatly diminished parents could no longer assist their sons with bride-wealth. Sons were now expected to pay bridewealth themselves in cash, and many young men incurred significant bridewealth debts. This meant that the status of wives was now more ambiguous, and that wives could retain recourse to the protection of their agnates throughout their conjugal lives.

Earlier gender parallelism gradually gave way to vertical stratification between men and women. A social survey conducted in 1990 of eighty seven households show how men monopolised wage earning: 113 (88 %) of the 143 men of working age were employed, as opposed to only 43 (17 %) of the 145 women. Women had previously played the predominant role in agriculture. Now their survival depended upon their ability to establish relations with male wage-earners. In this situation, conjugal bonds became disharmonious and fragile. This is partly because labour migration obliged husbands to live separately from their dependents for the greatest part of their working lives. Extra-marital liaisons called *bonyatši*, were now much more pervasive. Previously, husbands only kept paramours when their wives were pregnant or observed postpartum taboos: now, with the geographical separation of spouses, many husbands permanently kept paramours. Wives were obliged to tolerate the misdemeanours of their husbands, but they readily deserted any man whom was consistently unemployed.

South Africa's first democratic elections took place in 1994. Bushbuckridge now became part of the Mpumalanga Province. But few promises of prosperity have materialised. Although government had drastically improved social welfare payments such as pensions, and constructed thousands of homes, Bushbuckridge still exhibited

many of the stereotypical features of a Native Reserve. These include high rates of unemployment, marital breakdown, witchcraft accusations and mortality.

Villagers had to cope with the devastating impacts of de-industrialisation and of AIDS. Throughout South Africa significant job losses occurred, particularly amongst men. Between 1993 and 1999 the number of labourers employed in gold mining decreased from 428,003 to 195,681; coal mining from 51,267 to 21,155; manufacturing from 1,409,977 to 1,286,694; and in construction from 355,114 to 219,797 (SAIRR 2001:336-8). These trends were also apparent in Bushbuckridge. During 2003 my research assistant and I revisited all previously sampled households: 105 (56%) of the 187 'economically active' men were now employed, as were 54 (35%) of the 250 women. These changes have, in many instances, eroded the material basis of masculine domination. Many younger men feel permanently excluded from the labour market, with little changes of paying bride wealth, marrying, and of effectively establishing paternity over children. At the same time, equal employment practices in the civil service, and social security payments have enabled women to attain greater independence from men.

Despite these changes, the old masculine dominated order has continued to exist as a 'virtual reality', removed in time and space from the contexts in which it was originally produced (Van Binsbergen 2005). Men still aspired to being a 'man of men' (*monna nna*) who supports their women and dependents, is decisive and brave, and has the final say at home. They perceived negative masculine counter-types to be 'idiots' (*sepolopoko*), 'cowards' (*lepshega*), and 'men without finesse' (*mpara*), who are controlled by women and juniors; as well as 'bachelors' (*kgope*) who lived by themselves. When a man died without leaving progeny, I was told, his family members would stick a burning log up the anus of his corpse to show their contempt.

Ideologies of masculine pre-eminence were also evident in the emphasis on etiquette and rules of ‘respect’ (*hlompa*) in everyday social intercourse. Juniors and women were expected to acknowledge the seniority of any older man by standing when he enters a room, offering him a seat, and by holding both hands when greeting him (or by kneeling). They should also refrain from looking straight into his eyes, calling him by name, waving for him to come, laughing when he commits a mistake, stepping over any part of his body, asking where he had been, saying that he is drunk, and from retaliating when he punishes them.

Despite a growing emphasis on gender equity in South African public life, women in Bushbuckridge still experienced profound subordination within the domestic domain. At home the *mosadi sadi* (‘woman of women’) embodied the ideal of feminine personhood. She was respected by her husband and advised him wisely. She took care of her children, her parents-in-law, her house, and of her husband’s property. She was reliable, honest and brave. The counter-types of feminine personhood were the *sefefebe* and *mapanyula*. They were whores who went around with many men, but were respected by none. The *nymba* did not bear children. Her husband was entitled to marry an additional wife. But villagers sometimes interpreted childlessness as a calling by the ancestors to become a diviner. Hence her stigma was not quite as great as that of the dishonourable *kgope*. Financially independent women often avoided marriage, preferring to head their own households.

These constructs of gender – still premised upon a situation of masculine domination – constituted an important subtext in the narratives about suicide. Men’s suicides occurred in the context of a disjuncture between notions of masculinity that were appropriate during the industrial era, and their actual experiences of dis-

empowerment in a rapidly de-industrialising world.⁸ The distress of women suicide victims occurred in the context of a disjuncture between contemporary discourses of rights, and continued experiences of subordination.

Men's Suicides: Thwarted Domination

My informants were adamant that the events preceding young men's suicides differed from those of adult men. They said that some young male suicide victims were deprived of a stable family life, and faced unforgiving parents. For example, Rufus Selepe first lived with his grandmother, but later went to live with his father. But here his stepmother fought with him and she refused to feed him any longer.

But failure to act as a proper man counted as much as the perceived need to belong to stable domestic units. Narratives of suicide foreground concerns about the precarious future of young men. Very much as the situation in Western Samoa (C. and L. MacPherson 1987) and in India (Staples 2012), there was a widening gap in South Africa between young men's expectations and opportunities. Given the inadequate schooling facilities, few youth had realistic hopes for advanced education. In a stagnating wage economy many men faced prolonged unemployment. Rebhun (2001) argues that in the case of north-eastern Brazil, when conventional avenues for demonstrating masculinity such as wage-earning and marriage is not available, young men perform hyper-masculine *macho* acts through displays of aggression, drinking and womanizing. Her argument illuminates important aspects of the local situation.

⁸ James (1988) observes a similar temporal displacement of discourses about gender amongst the Uduk of Sudan. Though the Uduk were agriculturalists at the time of her fieldwork, they used a lexicon from an earlier era of hunting to discuss constructs of masculinity.

In this context, young men were also extremely sensitive to situations that brought dishonour. The case of Ruben Shai shows the convergence of several factors. After he completed high school, Ruben enrolled for a BA degree at Venda University, and his brothers - a policeman and a building contractor - paid for his studies. But when Ruben impregnated a high school student, his brothers threatened to stop paying his fees, saying that they would not support both him and his family. Then Ruben experienced a problem with his examination results. He received failing grades for subjects that he had not even registered for. Ruben complained vehemently to his lecturers and to the registrar – but this was to no avail. Hence he became a university drop out. On the day that he committed suicide, Ruben took his mother and sisters-in-law to another village in his brother's car – but he badly damaged the rear door when he reversed. Ruben's brother was furious, and reportedly insulted him by saying, 'You're useless. You better leave this family. If you don't go, I'll leave'. At dusk Ruben hanged himself in his own room. 'Ruben wanted to be successful like his brothers. He wanted to have his own family and a car. But he could not make it educationally.' Ruben clearly perceived respect among his siblings and peers as a prerequisite to social acceptance and social integration in the Durkheimian sense.

For adult men the thwarting of investments into conventional avenues of masculine status was more clearly apparent. Trouble in marital and sexual relations preceded fourteen cases of suicide; financial debt three; illness and insanity twelve, dishonourable conduct three, and interpersonal conflict six cases. These categorisations of suicide prefigured the explanations for particular suicides (see Chua, this volume).

Sexual Failure

Men experienced failure to sustain proper conjugal relations as a threat to their very social being. Bourdieu (2000) argues that in masculine praxis contradictions can arise between the sex act and romantic passion. The sex act belongs to the logic of conquest and appropriation, and is seen as a manifestation of men's primacy, virility, prowess and honour. Pleasure is derived from an extreme form of submission, and any sexual encounter is an indirect challenge to the masculinity of other men (p.18-20).

However, love and romantic passion could potentially bring about a reversal in relations of domination (p.110).

Being a bachelor was not by itself a sufficiently powerful reason for suicide. Rather, it was the humiliating and shameful experience of being cheated by one's wife, or of being rejected by one's lover that triggered suicide. Amongst the most common responses to my questions about the reasons for men's suicides were, 'He was not on good terms with his wife' and, 'His wife was in love with other men.' Men's failure to control women could even outweigh their financial success.

Neighbours told me of Patrick Shabangu, a wealthy businessman who owned two general dealer stores, a café and a bar lounge with his brother. He married Maureen Nokeri, a woman from a much poorer family, and he paid for her to attend school and teacher's college. After they divorced, Patrick became extremely depressed. He desperately wanted to reunite with his former wife, and he begged her to return. But this was to no avail. One evening he came to her home, knocked on the door, but heard the voice of another man from inside her room. To his dismay, he discovered that Maureen's new lover was only a taxi driver. That evening, Patrick put a pipe from the exhaust through the window of his van, and gassed himself.

Financial Failure

Like experiences of being rejected by a wife or a lover, men's failure as providers undermined their masculine status. Sixteen (48%) of the thirty- six male suicide victims were unemployed. Yet there was not a single man who had committed suicide simply because he had lost a job. On the periphery of an unstable regional economy, job losses were too common an experience in men's lives.

Men were more concerned about the inability to settle financial debts, and about being unemployable, and as we shall see below, this concern was clearly apparent in cases of illness and insanity. The inability to settle financial debts also preceded suicide. A municipal employee told of his next-door neighbour, Dan Ngomane, who committed suicide due to mounting financial pressures in 2000. Although Dan was a talented music teacher, his efforts as a wage earner paid no dividends. No matter how hard he worked, his income remained insufficient to meet their domestic obligations. He simply had too many children to support. Dan was given custody over three children from a previous marriage. His current wife, Ester, had four children from her previous marriage, and she and Dan had one child. In addition, Dan had undertaken to provide for his deceased brother's two children, and one of them, Dan's niece, had her own baby.

To make matters worse, three of Dan's dependants attended institutions of higher learning. Robina's first born son studied at the University of Pretoria, Ester's son at a technical college in Johannesburg, and Dan's niece attended a technical college in Nelspruit. Because Dan had been unable to pay their fees, the institutions withheld the results of their June examinations, and threatened to refuse them re-admission. Dan could no longer tolerate their pleas for money and borrowed R8, 000 from a money lender at the exorbitant monthly interest rate of 50 per cent. Dan was confident that he would be able to repay the loan - as soon as he received his annual

bonus. Failing that, he could use his pension money. In November, Dan discovered that Ester's son had lied to him all along. The young man never registered at the technical college, but had misused the money in Johannesburg instead. My informant described Dan as an idiot. 'A child is a child. You should always wait for the account, pay with a bank guaranteed cheque, and get the receipt.' Dan also began to doubt that he would ever be able to pay the loan shark, and feared that his interests would forever accumulate.

On the evening of 15 November Dan asked his mother, 'If I die, please take care of my children.' But Dan's mother ignored these remarks: she thought that he was drunk and spoke nonsense. That night Dan got out of bed and told his wife he was going to the toilet. He entered the children's bedroom, tied a noose around the beam of their roof, and hanged himself. The children were fast asleep and only saw Dan's corpse dangling from their roof when they awoke the next morning. According to rumours Dan left a note that read, 'I'm sick and tired of living. Life is financially too trying for me. Life is no more okay. Young brother, look after the children for me. Control my assets. I have worked hard for eighteen years.'

This case shows a definite connection between male suicides and harsh economic realities. Frustration and despair was not merely generated by prolonged unemployment, but also by increased dependency ratios, occurring at a time when villagers could no longer plausibly attribute misfortune to the structural violence of apartheid (Niehaus 2012: 211-214).

Illness and 'Insanity'

Illness and 'insanity' featured very prominently in men's suicides. Residents of Bushbuckridge seldom spoke openly about sickness and used a limited vocabulary to

refer to physical and psychological pathologies. In fact, silence was a dominant response to stigmatising conditions, such as HIV and AIDS (McNeill and Niehaus 2009). For this reason it is extremely hard to ascertain to what extent AIDS-related sicknesses led to suicide. Moreover, villagers used the rather broad term *go gafa* – possibly best translated as ‘insanity’ or ‘madness’ - to denote various forms of mental distress and behavioural abnormalities including what psychiatrists might label ‘depression’ and ‘bipolar disorder’. However, villagers clearly perceived sickness as antithetical to the ideal of an active and dominant masculine persona. Illness and ‘insanity’ thwarted men’s prospects of ever being autonomous, earning a living, paying bridewealth, of supporting dependants, and of becoming a household head. Even more tragically, it reduced men to a miserable state of dependency. ‘Insanity’, in particular, was a prime attribute of negative masculine counter-types.

Men in their twenties and thirties experienced ill health as obstructing their paths to full manhood. Many male suicide victims who suffered from ill health had left their parental homes, but were unable to establish their own homesteads. Their sisters often cared for them. They suffered from tuberculosis or alcoholism, or were described as ‘not 100% normal’, ‘moody and temperamental’ or ‘somewhat mentally retarded’. A neighbour remarked upon the condition of a suicide victim called Alec Mzimba:

‘Alec used to pretend that he was a prophet. He used to shout and make a noise just like those Zionist prophets. At home he used to tell people, ‘You will die! Go away from here!’ When there was a family gathering Alec would move away without saying anything. After Alec visited his pregnant sister in hospital he became ill. We always knew him as someone who spoke too much,

but now he became completely quiet. He looked inhuman. He never associated himself with other people. The people complained that he stole corrugated irons where he repaired homes and his sister quarrelled with him because he smoked so much *dagga* [cannabis]. He once broke his leg.’

For older male suicide victims, ill health meant rapid downward social mobility, job loses, the breakdown of their marriages, and being demoted in the ranks of men. Platos Mnisi who was a steel construction worker, fell from a high building and fractured his skull. Platos was so badly injured that he was hospitalised for nine months. But even after he was released, Platos was not completely healed: he had lost his speech and hearing, and could only recognise his mother and his sister. Platos’ wife left him to marry an employee of an electricity corporation. A neighbour recalled, ‘Platos received workmen’s compensation, but he was useless. He was finished. Like a cripple he was a burden to his family. Platos used to be a wise man, but now he was a fool.’ Such experiences resonate with what post-Freudians refer to as fears of regression to the helplessness of infancy (M. and D. Gilmore 1979, Cooper 1986). In these situations suicide eliminated the vast discrepancy between masculine fantasies of power, and the realities of dependency.

Suffering Stigma

Durkheim (1951) suggests that in the case of ‘altruistic suicides’ the victim had not been wronged, but he himself had committed some wrong. In this case suicide was an attempt by the victim to spare the self, family, or community stigma and shame. We can also see altruism as an attribute of masculine domination: men were authoritative enough to represent the kin group and sufficiently elevated to be disgraced.

But as shown by the cases below, male suicide victims often displayed greater concern about their own reputation, than that of their kin. Neighbours remarked how Hoffice Chiloane – an elderly man - proved himself unworthy of being a household head and found shame hard to bear. One evening Hoffice was so drunk that he urinated and passed faeces in his own bed. His wife was furious, woke up their children, and showed them what he had done. Hoffice felt utterly disgraced. The next day he hanged himself.

In other cases men tried to eradicate themselves under pressure of legal prosecution, or social ostracism. Two men committed suicide because they had killed others, and three because they had been accused of witchcraft. Kally Moeng, who was a policeman, arrived at home unexpectedly, and found that his wife was having a party with other men. Whilst some men grilled meat his wife danced with a teacher. Kally asked the men, ‘What’s going on here?’ But he did not receive any answer. In the heat of the moment, he used his service pistol to shoot the teacher in the chest. Kally also fired three bullets at his wife, who crouched behind the sofa. When Kally realised that he had killed the teacher, and wounded his wife, he put the revolver to his own head and pulled the trigger.

Baumeister (1990) and Shneidman (1993) suggest that escape from a negative self and from psychological pain is common in all forms of suicide. Narratives about male suicides in Bushbuckridge emphasised these processes. With minor exceptions, men’s suicides were hidden. Men tended to commit suicide in private, where nobody could see them. Twenty-seven hanged themselves in their own rooms, in outside pit latrines, or in isolated places in the forest (see table 3, above). Hardly any men communicated their intent to commit suicide, and few left suicide notes, blaming others for their deaths. Men’s suicides were usually fatal.

Women's Suicides: Protesting Subordination

Narratives of women's suicides emphasise the miserable consequences of subordination to parents, lovers, husbands and affines.

Eight of the thirteen women suicide victims were younger than twenty-four years. The greater proclivity of younger women to commit suicide is indicative of their subordinate positions within the households of their parents. Daphney Lebala, who was also still a high school student, had been humiliated in the eyes of her parents. One evening Daphney went to visit her boyfriend in Violetbank, but he and his friends raped her. Daphney's mother scolded her and did not accept her excuse that the boys had compelled her to accompany them. She phoned Daphney's father, a policeman in Gauteng, and told him that in his absence Daphney went about with undesirable men and had been raped. Her father drove to Bushbuckridge to lay a charge against the rapists, but when he arrived, he found that Daphney had already hanged herself.

This factor is also apparent in Johannes Mathonsi's account of the suicide attempt by his own daughter, Doreen. Johannes described himself as a staunch Zionist, who did not tolerate his daughter's love affairs with irresponsible young men. Whilst she was still in school, Doreen eloped with a fruit vendor's son. But Johannes refused to accept bridewealth: he told me that although the young man was securely employed, he had a criminal record, and had once stolen R3, 000 from his paternal uncle. The next year Doreen eloped with the son of a diviner. She once disappeared for the entire weekend, and only returned at seven o' clock on the Sunday evening. Johannes told me that he had seldom been so angry:

‘When Doreen returned I said nothing. I waited until nine o’ clock when she was in bed. Then I woke her and beat her with a stick. Then I grabbed her and dragged her to the dining room. I asked, ‘Where do you come from? Why have you been away for so long? I told you not to go around with boys!’ She said nothing. Then I beat her again and again. Doreen broke the window and jumped through it, and ran into the darkness. We looked for her the whole night. Her aunts told me, ‘Maybe you beat her and she died at the river.’ But I replied, ‘Let her die!’”

Doreen stayed with her paternal aunt for two days, and returned to her parents’ home only after her aunt had pleaded on her behalf. But only a month after the incident, Doreen’s mother again saw her in the boy’s company, and scolded her. That evening Doreen drank an overdose of sleeping tablets. She clearly saw her overbearing parents as obstructing her desire for love.

Young women also committed suicide when they failed to establish stable relationships with male lovers, and when their aspirations of being wives with supportive husbands, mothers with their own children, and to having their own home, seemed to have no realistic chance of fulfilment. In the terms outlined by Moore (1994), young women’s investments in idealised feminine subject positions had been thwarted. A few women also committed suicide after they became pregnant out of wedlock, and had very little chance of taking good care of their babies. Refilwe Mokgope became pregnant when she was only sixteen years old. She found it extremely difficult to support the baby because she was still in school, and was from a desperately poor family. Her father had absconded, and her mother supported three daughters with the meagre profits she made from selling fruit and vegetables at the

local market. After Refilwe quarrelled with her boyfriend, and told him that she no longer wished to see him, she became extremely depressed and hanged herself.

The circumstances under which adult women committed suicide differed greatly from those that preceded the suicides of adult men. Women's suicides were a response to problematic social relations that they experienced in marriage. These suicides were indignant. Two adult women suicide victims felt that they had been mistreated by their affines, and seven felt that they were abused by their husbands. Their suicides expressed a sense of hurt, disappointment and rage (Hollan 1990). For example, Joyce Maatsie's cousin told me that she was made to feel like an intruder in the home of her in-laws. Her husband was a divorcee and the four children of his previous marriage still lived with him. It also seemed to Joyce's as if her affines preferred her husband's previous wife. Once her husband's former wife came to visit his home and took sugar, maize meal and tea from Joyce's kitchen. When Joyce objected, her sister-in-law reportedly told her, 'Keep quiet! This is not your place! She is the owner of the bridewealth.'

Many accounts relay how husbands had refused to support their wives financially, or had insulted their wives' dignity by being indiscreet about their extramarital liaisons. Merriam Mohlala's kin told me that although her husband worked at the Penge asbestos mine, he very seldom supported her and their three children. Whilst he had extramarital affairs and drank heavily, she had to fetch firewood in the mountains and sell it in the village to feed their children. The summer rains of 1990 were exceptionally good and Merriam pleaded with him to pay merely R30 for a tractor owner to plough their field. But her pleas fell on deaf ears. Merriam was pregnant, but had to cultivate the entire field with a hoe. Yet in the very same week her husband gave his cousin R200. Feita Mogakane caught her husband and his

paramour having sexual intercourse in her bed, and she beat her husband's paramour with a walking stick (*knobkerrie*). Feita committed suicide when, to everyone's surprise, her husband chased her from her own home. Not a single adult woman committed suicide because she had been consistently unemployed, suffered from illness or insanity, or had been guilty of a shameful, stigmatising act.

One cannot exclude escape from violence and patriarchy as a motive for women's suicides. But the narratives that I collected were more likely to emphasise theme of protest. This interpretation is supported by the fact that women's suicides tended to be more carefully planned. But only in rare cases – such those of Doreen Mathonsi who took an overdose of medical drugs – can we see women's suicides as a desperate plea for sympathy and support (Littlewood and Lipsedge 1987). In the clear majority of cases, the narrators saw women's suicides as 'protests' that were aimed at dramatising the culpability of domineering parents, neglectful boyfriends, disrespectful affines, and abusive husbands. The methods of suicide that women deployed were highly visible and involved maximal 'expressive violence' (E. Marx 1976). Seven women burnt themselves in the most gruesome manner, and one swallowed pieces of glass. Moreover, women tended to commit suicide in public spaces. They generally burnt themselves in their yards, and often hanged themselves in the living rooms, rather than bedrooms, of their homes.

My informants told me how, in a number of cases, women vocally allocated blame before committing suicide. Before Rina Ngobeni burnt herself, she reportedly asked her sister to look after her baby, and said, 'Her father does not want her [the baby]. He is a polygynist who fucks everywhere'. Maureen Ngobeni lived with a security guard, employed by the Tintswalo hospital. In 1995, she confronted him in public, accused him of speaking to other women at the gate, and complained

vehemently that he did not love her anymore. After the argument Maureen became sulky, asked R10 from her mother and bought paraffin. Maureen then burnt herself near the hospital gate. Villagers could see Maureen burning from far afield. Ester Segodi swallowed glass and was found lying on the veranda of her employer's home – with blood running from her mouth.

Villagers spoke about these suicides for months and these discussions provoked intense contestation and debate. Witnesses carefully scrutinised all information pertaining to each suicide, particularly those that seemed incomprehensible, for evidence of bewitchment by envious kin and neighbours (Niehaus 2001). For example, Johannes Mathonsi – whose daughter took an overdose of sleeping tablets after he had beaten her for eloping with her lover – invoked witchcraft in a bid to deflect blame from himself. Johannes suggested that his daughter's lover might have poured love potion (*korobela*) into her food. But these excuses were not always accepted.

There were also other grounds for contesting men's culpability for women's suicides. A neighbour told me of the conversation in his car when he took Ennie Mashego and her affines to hospital after she had drunk poison. On the way, her husband's cousin scolded her:

‘How can you do such a thing? It is a scandal. Those things [extramarital affairs] have been there since time immemorial. Where on earth can you find an honest man? If you do not want to stay with our cousin you should go.’

Ennie's own mother also reprimanded her and said that she should rather communicate her problems. 'Look. Your father has three wives. How can you kill yourself for a man?'

But some of the most dramatic suicides did expose the unreasonableness of the social situations that others expected women to endure, and did mobilise public opinion against those whom had wronged the suicide victims. In some cases the agnates of the victim sought to retaliate. After a woman burnt herself to death in Maviljan, her agnates publicly accused her husband of being irresponsible. They required him to settle all outstanding bridewealth debts, and to pay all funeral expenses. The husband was so humiliated that merely a week after the funeral, he too committed suicide.

These discussions were sometimes moments of deep, critical reflection, on the nature of gender constructs, and on the morality of masculine domination. Neighbours and kin of women suicide victims often commented extremely negatively on men who mistreated their wives. One man told me:

'Our culture is very oppressive against women. The old people say that if you cheat your wife you must do it discreetly... But if your wife cheats you, you must divorce her. That woman committed suicide because she loved her husband very much.'

These discussions might even question whether domination is worthwhile.

Conclusions

In his classical study, *Suicide*, Durkheim (1951:51) writes that “each society is predisposed to contribute a definite quota of voluntary deaths”. Carstens (2000) finds this general insight more fruitful than his well-known taxonomical divisions between ‘altruistic’, ‘anomic’, ‘egotistic; and ‘fatalistic’ suicides. He suggests that extremely high incidence of suicide among aboriginal people in Canada might well be a manifest and latent function of confinement to Native Reserves. Not only do aboriginal people exert little control over their own destinies, but they experience the Reserves as a ‘closed system of human interaction’ marked by ‘socio-economic incompleteness’ (Carsterns 2000). As in the Canadian Native Reserves, a situation of social, political and economic marginalization in South Africa’s former Bantustan areas might well be conducive to high rates of suicide. Durkheim’s focus on the individual’s integration into social concerns also illuminates some of the individual cases presented in this article, including the experiences of suicide victims who do not belong, find themselves excluded, and divorced from valued gender roles.

Yet, in understanding narratives of suicide in Bushbuckridge, it is essential that we transcend Durkheim’s analytical insights. Durkheim’s analysis of suicide tends to valorise the sense of community, and minimise social differences and conflicts such as those evident in gendered power relations (Hollan 1990). Residents of places such as the Canadian Reserves and former South African Bantustans have not experienced the impact of broader forces uniformly. Such differences are most clearly apparent in the different proclivities of men and women to commit suicide. An emphasis on structures and ideologies of masculine domination, and on what K. Marx (1999) called ‘the tyranny of family relationships’ is crucial for greater understanding of suicide in places such as Bushbuckridge.

But we are left with an unanswered question, namely why ideologies that privilege men, lead to a situation in which significantly more men than women commit suicide. I have suggested that Moore's (1994) theory that violence results from the thwarting of the investments by individuals in gender identities, and Bourdieu's (2000) concept of symbolic violence can lead us from this theoretical impasse. Bourdieu (2000) insists that masculine domination also inflicts symbolic violence on men - in so far as individual men are also victims of dominant representations. In certain ways, he argues, male privilege is a trap. Through the hard labour of socialisation men learn the pursuit and exercise of domination. There is a permanent tension to assert manliness in all circumstances, and the point of honour presents itself as a system of demands that are in many cases inaccessible (2000: 48-50). Men experience the demonstration of sexual and reproductive capacity, and of violence, and the pursuit of glory in the public sphere almost as a sacred duty. But the tests of masculinity, and the fear of being excluded from the realm of men, are also a source of immense vulnerability. Bourdieu (2000) argues that like honour, men feel shame before others. In an earlier essay, Gilmore too argued that the tests of masculinity imply humiliating failure. Its vindication is doubtful, resting on rigid codes of decisive action in many spheres of life: as husband, father, lover, provider, warrior. A restrictive status, there are always men who fail the test. They are the negative examples, the effete men, the men-who-are-nomen, held up scornfully to inspire conformity to this glorious ideal (Gilmore 1990:17). In Bushbuckridge, men perceived the tests of masculinity as deadly serious business. Although narratives about suicides of men do contain an element of protest, they are more likely to emphasise the theme of escape from humiliating situations of failure (Baumeister 1990, Shneidman 1993).

Bourdieu (2000) argues that in addition to the physical violence that women experience as the objects of male abuse, women suffer symbolic violence. This occurs when women apply the categories of the dominant to their own point of view, and depreciate or denigrate themselves. Women often internalise their own subordination, and view marriage as the prime means of acquiring social position. In Bushbuckridge, women's suicides, like those of men, constitute a form of escape, but such escape is constructed as an act of protest against violent patriarchy.⁹

In theoretical terms we can argue that whereas men's suicides were more likely to pertain to problems about the 'individual' aspects of their masculine personhood, women's suicides foregrounded problematic 'relational' (dividual) aspects of feminine personhood (Li Puma 16 1998). Men's concerns centred on the performance of autonomy and authority, and men frequently blamed themselves for their failures to sustain dominance. Women's concerns were more about their position within a wider set of social relationships, and women often blamed others for their misery. Indeed, these cases show how women perceived of their own well being, dignity, status and financial survival as centred upon conjugal relations.

But even in the case of suicide, we need to recognise limitations of Bourdieu's theory of *habitus* (Farnell 2000). Bourdieu argues that below the level of consciousness matrixes of perception and dispositions, deeply embodied in practice, perpetuate masculine domination. This may well be true of suicidal behaviour. For example, Kral and Johnson (1996) argue that suicide is not the result of deliberative thinking. They locate the act of suicide at the level of the cognitive unconscious that intuitively organises experience and directs behaviour. However, it is essential that we

⁹ Stølen (1996) applies the concept 'hegemony' to masculine dominance in rural Argentina, and shows how gender inequalities have been effectively "naturalised". As in rural Argentina women of the lowveld seem to have idealised love, marriage and motherhood.

transcend this focus on habitual behaviour, and pay equal attention to the narrative reconstructions of suicide. Within Bushbuckridge particular suicides provoked conscious reflexivity about gendered constructs, serious discussions that could potentially pave the way towards a more equitable future.

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