

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

SUICIDE AND RELATED BEHAVIOUR IN DOSTOYEVSKY NOVELS

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Abstract

Objective: To examine the presentations of suicide and related behaviour in the novels of Dostoyevsky, with a view to understanding suicide in mid-19th Century Russia, and to use this as a point of reference when reading 21st Century western academic suicide literature. **Methods:** The data collected from Dostoyevsky's three most prominent novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* were examined for the text events, 1) completed suicide, 2) suicide attempts, 3) suicidal thoughts, and 4) other mentions of suicide. Findings were compared with current orthodox Western medical literature. **Results:** In Dostoyevsky's Russia suicide occurred not infrequently and the methods were hanging, shooting and drowning. The triggers were predominantly social factors (in contrast to the current time when the triggers are reported to be predominantly mental disorders). Attempted suicide appears to have been less common than suicide, and limited to occasions when others thwarted deadly actions (in contrast to the current time in which overdose and cutting are frequently encountered). Suicidal thoughts were common among the healthy population (which is in agreement with some current findings). **Conclusions:** Dostoyevsky's novels suggest that in mid-19th Century Russia, suicide was not uncommon and the main methods were similar to those of the current time. The triggers were depicted as mainly social/economic factors (rather than mental disorder). Attempted suicide has changed much. Suicidal thoughts appear common in both time periods, and frequently appears in the absence of mental disorder. *ASEAN Journal of Psychiatry, Vol. 16 (1): January – June 2015: XX XX.*

Keywords: Suicide, Suicide Prevention, Mental Disorder

Introduction

Suicide is a major, incompletely understood problem of the present time. The current medical literature is reductionist, contending that greater than 90% of completed suicide is the consequence of mental disorder, and that the main focus of suicide prevention activities should be the treatment of mental disorder [1]. Sociological [2] and historical [3] studies have identified many other important triggers, and there is need for a broader view of this behaviour [4]. Suicide is not unique to the present day [3]. We suggest lessons can be

learned by examining the topic across space and time.

Fiction is instructive; it has a role in teaching the society of the time of publication, and a role in representing the problems and practices of earlier times to subsequent generations. Chekhov wrote, "(t)he best writers are realistic and describe life as it is", [5] and Campbell, that one function of myth is "the pedagogical function of how to live a human lifetime under any circumstances" [6]. Fiction has been used to teach morals since the first appearance of the Greek epic poems; Currie [7] writes that in addition to factual information, fiction

enables us to assess our options and “change our moral outlook”.(p. 255)

The objective of this study was to examine the presentations of suicide and related behaviour in the novels of Fyodor Dostoyevsky (1821-1881), with a view to understanding suicide in mid-19th Century Russia, and by comparisons with 21st Century western academic literature, to grasp the topic more firmly.

Dostoyevsky was a prominent philosopher who explored the human experience using the novel form, at a time of political, social and spiritual unrest in Russia [8]. He trained as a Military Engineer and his first novel was published in 1846. Three years later he was arrested along with other liberal thinkers and sentenced to 4 years hard labour in Siberia. After his release he published his three most celebrated works, *Crime and Punishment* (1866) [9], *The Idiot* (1869)[10] and *The Brothers Karamazov* (1880) [11]. Dostoyevsky “accurately depicts the Russian reality of his times” [12]. We do not presume to comment on his philosophy or psychology, but to collate his presentations of suicide and related behaviour.

Methods

Part 1. Data collected

Dostoyevsky’s 3 most prominent novels, *Crime and Punishment*, *The Idiot* and *The Brothers Karamazov* were examined for the text events, 1) completed suicide, 2) suicide attempts, 3) suicidal thoughts, and 4) other mentions of suicide. Suicidal thoughts were counted when a particular individual had a thought about his/her life, which could have

been the first step toward suicide. Other mentions of suicide were not the thoughts of individuals concerning their options, but any mention which would serve to bring the topic of suicide to the awareness of readers. Text events rather than individuals were counted and therefore certain individuals contributed more than once to the totals. Details were also collected concerning suicide triggers (including mental disorder and social/psychological stressors) and methods.

Part 2. Data comparison

The data from Dostoyevsky’s 3 most prominent novels were compared to the western academic literature of the current time.

Results

Part 1. Data collected

Suicide: Over the three novels there are 14 accounts of suicide, involving 10 different characters, 5 of whom are named. The methods used by the named characters were hanging and shooting, among the unnamed individuals drowning was an additional means. The motives included escape from public disgrace (embezzlement) and from harsh treatment by others. For 2 characters a precise trigger was uncertain, one was a bored, aging murderer and rapist, and the other a murderer (perhaps about to be exposed) who had lost his “faith”. There was no mention of mental disorder as a trigger, except perhaps in the case of an epileptic man who was described as a “sickly idiot” [11] (p. 831) but was in fact generally healthy and highly intelligent. Table 1 provides details.

Table 1. Details of the suicides described in 3 Dostoyevsky novels

Suicides		
Novel	Named Individuals/Method	Triggers
Crime and Punishment No. of mentions: 7 Pages: 188, 191, 314(2), 491, 515, 523 Separate individuals: 5	Philip (314) Hanging Svidrigoylov (523) Shooting	Harsh treatment by employer Uncertain – aging, bored sadistic murderer and rapist
The Idiot No. of mentions: 1 Page: 387	Alexeyevich (387) Shooting	Disgrace – exposed embezzlement
The Brothers Karamazov No. of mentions: 6 Pages: 16, 23, 826, 831, 888, 901 Separate individuals: 4	Sofya (23) Hanging Smerdyakov (831) Hanging	Guardian an insufferable tyrant Uncertain – guilty of murder, loss of faith, “sickly idiot”

Suicidal attempts: Over the 3 novels there are 8 accounts of suicide attempt involving 8 separate individuals. The most common method was shooting with one example of hanging and drowning. There is one account of a man attempting to suicide following his fraud being exposed, but the triggers were often uncertain. For example, a disagreeable nihilist with terminal tuberculosis and a villain with a history of paedophilia attempted to shoot themselves, but the precise motivation at

the time of these attempts is uncertain. In most cases there are multiple social/psychological factors. In two cases a mental disorder might have been present, the first concerned a man who had earlier confessed to a murder he had not committed [9] (p.156) and the second concerned an unnamed woman who had been abusing alcohol and had a past history of a suicide attempt [9] (p. 189). Table 2 provides further details.

Table 2. Details the attempted suicides described in 3 Dostoyevsky novels

Attempted Suicide		
Novel	Individuals/Methods	Triggers
Crime and Punishment No. of mentions: 2 Pages: 156, 189 Separate individuals: 2	Nikolay (156) Hanging Unnamed woman (189) drowning	Uncertain – confessed to a murder although innocent Uncertain – alcohol use and previous attempt
The Idiot No of mentions: 3 Pages: 86, 459, 613 Separate individuals: 3	Ippolit (459) Shooting Totsky (613) Shooting	Nihilist with terminal TB Uncertain – past exposed corruptor of a female child.
The Brothers Karamazov No. of mentions: 3 Pages: 151, 154, 387 Separate individuals: 3	Lt-Colonel (151) Shooting Dmitri (154) Stabbing Zossima (387) Shooting	Disgrace – fraud Uncertain – mixed emotions Passive in duel

Suicidal thoughts: Across the 3 novels there are 23 mentions of suicidal thoughts from 10 separate individuals. The settings are frequently complicated with multiple social/psychological forces acting on individuals. Mental disorders are not depicted as playing a large part; one individual [10] (p.

242, 244) who is intimidating and ultimately murders for no clear reason may have psychopathic traits, and another [11] (p. 318, 344) who ultimately develops “brain fever”, a term which at the time of writing was used to described a strong response to stressful situations. Table 3 provides further details.

Table 3. Details the suicidal thoughts described in 3 Dostoyevsky novels

Suicidal Thoughts		
Novel	Individuals	Setting
Crime and Punishment No. of mentions: 6 Pages: 337, 528, 529, 533, 522(2) Separate individuals: 2	Sonya (337, 533) Raskolnikov (528, 529, 552(2))	Driven to prostitution to feed family Commits murder to test his philosophy/theory
The Idiot No. of mentions: 3 Pages: 242, 244, 450 Separate individuals: 2	Rogozhin (242,244) Ippolit (450)	Cold, threatening villain – ultimately murders Nihilist with terminal TB
The Brothers Karamazov No. of mentions: 14 Pages: 199, 204, 318, 342, 344, 459, 497, 519, 529, 561, 588, 748, 761, 790, 963 Separate individuals: 6	Grushenka (199, 459, 588) Dmitri (204, 497, 519, 529, 561, 761, 790) Ivan (318, 344) Lise (790) Katerina (963)	Abandoned by lover, etc. Many family, social and legal problems Sullen rationalist, develops “brain fever” “everything is so loathsome” Helps convict a loved man

Other mentions of suicide: Across the 3 novels there are 56 other mentions of suicide. Drowning, shooting and hanging are the methods mentioned. The situations giving rise to these mentions include loss of reputation, of one man it is said (p. 457) [10] “He has to

shoot himself because his honour is at stake”, and loss of a loved one, of a boy’s father it is said (p. 686) [11] “if Ilusha dies, he will go mad with grief or kill himself”. There is no suggestion that mental disorder will lead to suicide. Table 4 provides further details.

Table 4. Details other mentions of suicide in 3 Dostoyevsky novels

Other Mentions of Suicide	
Novel	Examples
Crime and Punishment No. of mentions: 14 Pages: 188, 216, 217(2), 338, 360, 401, 466, 473, 482, 487, 497, 511, 541	(188) Said of Raskolnikov, “He may drown himself”. (497) Said to Raskolnikov, “Why not blow your brains out?” (541) Police officer says, “Then we get those suicide cases – you can’t imagine how much they have increased lately”.
The Idiot No. of mentions: 14 Pages: 72, 206, 247, 248, 397, 431, 444, 456, 457, 516, 620, 625, 630, 638.	(206) Nastasya says, “You’ll hang yourself afterwards”. (457) Said of Ippolit, “He has to shoot himself because his honour is at stake”. (638) Crowd member says, “One night of love and my life I’ll gladly give”.
The Brothers Karamazov No. of mentions: 28 Pages: 42, 79, 160, 294, 342, 398, 406, 418, 466, 502, 558, 586, 613, 623, 633, 635, 639, 673, 686, 741, 824, 833, 842, 886, 913, 939, 976, 977	(406) Zosima (a monk) says of desire, “men even commit suicide if they are unable satisfy it”. (686) Said of Ilusha’s father, “if Ilusha dies, he will go mad with grief or kill himself”. (833) Ivan says, “Tomorrow the cross, but not the gallows. No, I shan’t hang myself”. (913) Penguin refers to “the sole and fatal way out of his terrible position”.

Data comparison

Suicide: Across 3 novels 10 people complete suicide; quantitative comparisons cannot be made, but it is clear that to Dostoyevsky and his readers, suicide was a not a rare phenomenon, suggesting similarity with the present time. Hanging, shooting and drowning were commonly represented methods, and remain so, and this is in agreement with current western academic literature. The triggers were largely social factors such as public disgrace and harsh treatment by others, with no example directly attributed to mental disorder, which is in contrast to the current academic literature.

Suicide attempts: There are 8 accounts of people attempting suicide. The methods were again hanging, shooting, drowning and stabbing. The triggers were also frequently social factors with some possible suggestion of mental disorder. There appeared to be less attempting than completing, which is in contrast to the current time. The methods were different to the current time, in which overdose is more common. The triggers for suicide attempts were frequently social factors

which in consistent with some current findings [13].

Suicide thoughts: There were 23 mentions of suicidal thought, frequently associated with social triggers and infrequently associated with mental disorder. This is consistent with current findings that suicidal thoughts, with a lifetime prevalence 9.2% [14], are more common than completed suicide, and that 67% of those who experience suicidal thoughts do not suffer depression [15].

Other mentions of suicide: There were many (56) other references to suicide. This is consistent with frequent current media stories and other literature [16] and opera [17].

Discussion

The limitations of quantitative comparative studies include the absence of statistical conclusions, and the need to depend on alternative measures and evidence of value. Support for findings of such work relies in large part on logic in the design. The aim of this study was to explore the fiction of Dostoyevsky (1821-1881) with the expectation

that it would contain credible information about the regional society at the time of publication, and that through comparisons with current western findings (comparison across both time and place), agreements would indicate credible suicide generalizations.

Anthony Trollope believed “a novel should give a picture of daily life” [18], a belief echoed by Anton Chekov [5]. There are obvious exceptions, as in the case of science fiction, but all agree that Dostoyevsky, one of the greatest writers of all time, sought to realistically portray life in mid-19th Century Russia [8,12,19]. As fiction can teach factual information and even moral values [7], it is reasonable to consult his novels for information on suicide at that time and place. At the same time, it is appreciated that the novelist may need to exaggerate and distort to some degree in the interests of exciting and absorbing reading.

Other limitations involving the subjective nature of the study include the selection and categorization of examples. For example, a character (Zossima) [11] who later became a leading religious figure, found religion after having given offence and accepted a duel. He attended that meeting and passively allowed himself to be shot at [11] (p. 387). Influenced by the argument that duelling was not infrequently a “substitute for suicide” [3] (p. 153), we categorized this event as attempted suicide, but others may well have interpreted it differently.

Dostoyevsky was writing at a time of political, social and spiritual unrest in Russia [8], the fundamental requirements of anomy, raising the question of the appropriateness of comparisons with the present time. While only some of the west is involved in other nation's wars, with terrorist bombings, public suicides view on the web, and global and European financial crises, society in the west is also in a state of change.

From these 3 novels we learn that suicide was by no means uncommon in mid-19th Century Russia. Ten different individuals took their lives, and importantly, these events are described in matter-of-fact manner. Of course, understatement may be used to increase the impact of an event, but in these 10 descriptions

there is a sense of unremarkable, almost inevitable consequence. The main methods (hanging, shooting and drowning) are much as they are in current times. Jumping from a high building is not reported, but high buildings were less available at that time. The main triggers were social factors such as disgrace and harsh treatment by others; there was little mention of mental disorder as a trigger for suicide, but no chronically severely mentally disordered individuals were among the characters. A comparison between the two ages suggests that little has changed in the field; a reading of Dostoyevsky confirms that suicide is not an uncommon event, and may occur in non-mentally disordered individuals. There are only 8 accounts of attempted suicide, and these involved attempted hanging, shooting and drowning. In these accounts others persons intervened to prevent completion of the deadly acts. The current situation is quite different, we see vastly more attempted suicides than completed suicides. This may be explained by the current culture, greater availability of prescription medications and Emergency Departments and Mental Health Services which assist people with cuts. Reading Dostoyevsky suggests there may have been an increase in ‘attempted suicide’, but there are definitional issues here, and current debate over the terms attempted suicide and non-suicidal self-injury [20].

Across these 3 novels there were 23 mentions of suicidal thought, frequently associated with social triggers and infrequently associated with mental disorder. As mentioned above, this is consistent with current clinical experience. This strongly suggests that at least since the mid-19th Century, adversity has been associated with consideration of the option of escaping predicaments through suicide.

These novels contained another 56 mentions of suicide. Thus, the topic was not restricted to the occasional thoughts or actions of key characters, but a theme which permeated the fabric of the novels. These additional mentions made/make it additionally difficult for readers either at the time of publication or subsequently to remain unacquainted of the topic.

In summary, comparisons of mid-19th Century novels of Dostoyevsky and current academic

findings in the west suggest that suicide is not uncommon, and hanging, shooting and drowning are prominent methods. Dostoyevsky indicates that suicide may be as consequence of adversity. Attempted suicide raises definitional problems, but in the mid-19th Century Russia this appears to have been uncommon and mainly involved suicidal acts which were interrupted by others, while currently in the west this is common and involves the use of prescription medication and non-fatal cutting. This indicates change. Suicidal thoughts appear to me common in both times/places, suggesting adversity is associated with consideration of suicide as an escape option.

Conflict of interest: Nil

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