

# Suicidal behavior as communication in a cultural context

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# Current status of suicide research

- ▶ Lack of theoretical frameworks is common in suicidological research
  - The field is dominated by risk factor studies with little or no theoretical basis (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010)
- ▶ Much of the research is based on the biomedical illness model
  - Often, mental disorders, particularly mood disorders, are presented as *the* most important risk factor of suicide and often a causal link between the two is implied (e.g., Cavanagh et al., 2003; Isacsson & Rich, 2003)

- ▶ The reductionist biomedical illness model fails to provide the necessary theoretical framework for studying the complex, multifactorial phenomenon (or rather phenomena) of suicidal behaviour (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2011; O'Connor & Sheehy, 2000)
- ▶ Taking the cultural perspective into consideration complicates matters even further since there are huge problems with the validity of psychiatric diagnoses across cultures (e.g., Fernando, 2003) as well as cross-cultural differences in the relationship between mental disorders and suicide (e.g., Vijayakumar et al., 2005)
- ▶ Thus, we need other theoretical frameworks, for instance, communication theory where suicidal acts are viewed as acts of communication

# Watzlawick (1967/1991)

- ▶ Everything a human being does is communication and will thereby influence others
- ▶ It is impossible for a human being not to act and thus not to communicate or influence others

- ▶ “The self-destructive behaviour thus becomes, in part, a communication with a particular purpose and content directed toward a specific audience. This approach emphasizes such factors as the content, audience, degree of directness, and purpose of communication. In addition, it is important to know what the relationship between the individual and his environment has usually been” (Tabachnik & Farberow, 1961, p.63)

# Suicidal behaviour as communication

- ▶ Suicidal behaviour is a phenomenon with a process character due to its dialogical communicative nature
- ▶ The suicidal act is the outcome of a range of earlier events and dialogues that have lead to a decision to kill or harm oneself
- ▶ This, in turn, functions as a statement and is a contribution to previous dialogues with significant others
- ▶ This connects the individual with their context
- ▶ Thus, communication theory is well suited as a framework to study suicidality in different cultural contexts

(Hjelmeland et al., 2002; 2008; 2011)

# Suicidal behaviour as communication

- ▶ Speech-act theory (Austin, 1962; Searle, 1969)
  - Developed further with regard to suicidal behaviour by Fleischer (2000) and Qvortrup (1999)



# Qvortrup's categories

- ▶ 1) Emotional towards others
  - statement is made about the emotional relationship between the suicidal individual and the other(s) that the act is designated for
- ▶ 2) Regulative towards others
  - the intention is to influence other(s)
- ▶ 3) Emotional towards oneself
  - lack of love for the individual's self is central, for instance, because of low self-esteem
- ▶ 4) Regulative towards oneself
  - punishment of oneself, as the individual feels that s/he cannot live up to the demands of the surroundings



# Examples of possible intentions (n=14)

- ▶ I wanted to get away for a while from an unacceptable situation
- ▶ I wanted to get help from someone
- ▶ I wanted to know if someone really cared about me
- ▶ I wanted to persuade someone to change his/her mind
- ▶ I wanted to die
  
- ▶ Scored according to the relevance with regard to the suicidal act:
  - major influence: 2
  - minor influence: 1
  - no influence: 0

From the WHO/EURO Multicentre Study on Suicidal Behaviour (Bille-Brahe et al., 2005)

# Emotional towards others

- ▶ I wanted to get help from someone (.75)
- ▶ I wanted to know if someone really cared about me (.74)
- ▶ I wanted others to know how desperate I felt (.71)
- ▶ I wanted to show someone how much I loved him/her (.59)

Hjelmeland et al., 2002

# Regulative towards others

- ▶ I wanted others to pay for the way they treated me (.89)
- ▶ I wanted to make someone feel guilty (.86)
- ▶ I wanted to persuade someone to change his/her mind (.73)

Hjelmeland et al., 2002

# Emotional towards oneself (Temporary escape)

- ▶ I wanted to get away for a while from an unacceptable situation (.82)
- ▶ I wanted to sleep for a while (.80)
- ▶ It seemed that I lost control over myself, and I do not know why I did it (.50)

Hjelmeland et al., 2002

# Regulative towards oneself (Final exit)

- ▶ My thoughts were so unbearable, I could not endure them any longer (.68)
- ▶ The situation was so unbearable that I could not think of any other alternative (.68)
- ▶ I wanted to die (.53)
- ▶ I wanted to make things easier for others (.51)

Hjelmeland et al., 2002

Emotional  
towards others

Regulative  
towards others

Intention

Emotional  
towards oneself

Regulative  
towards oneself

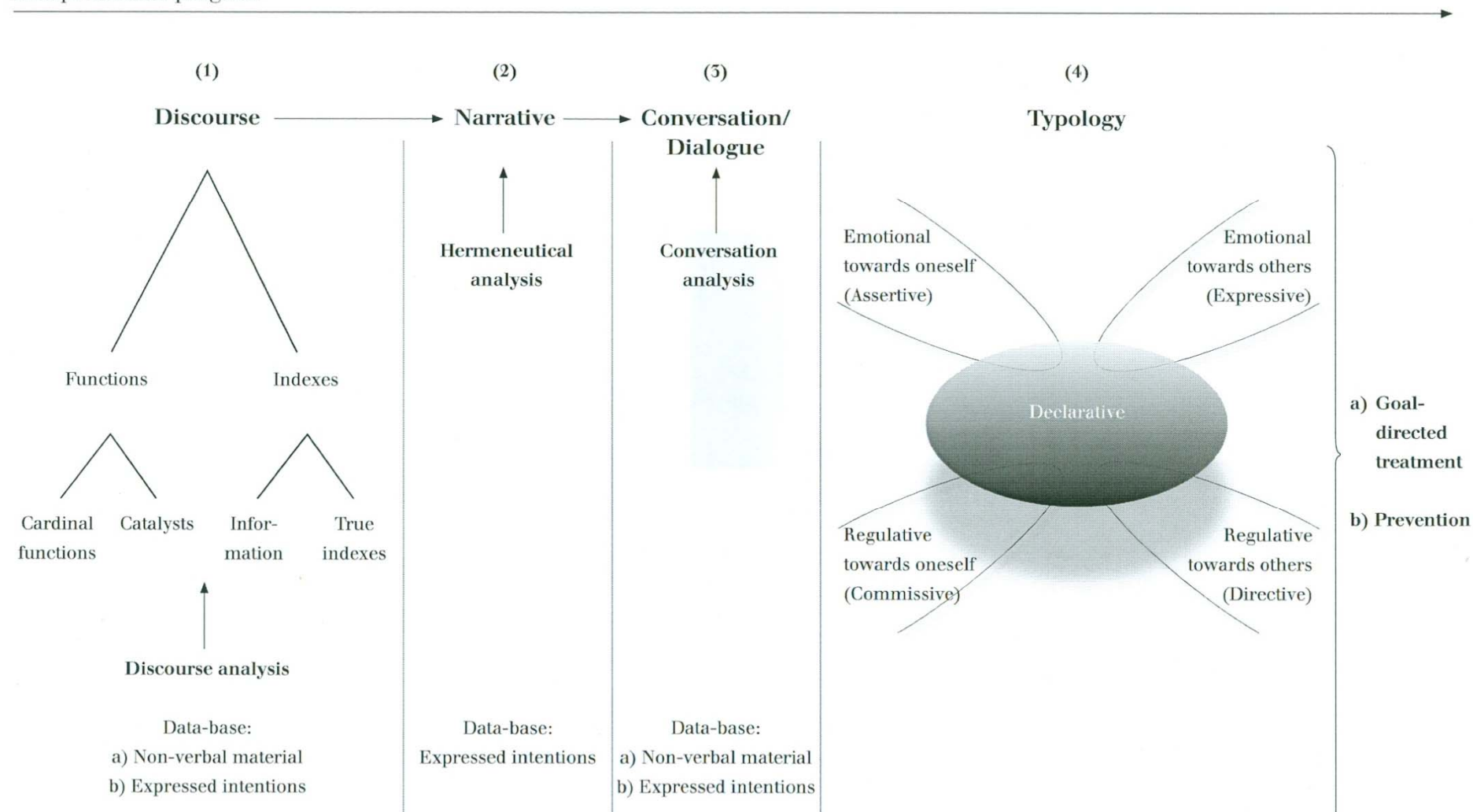
# Two-factor model in Uganda

- ▶ External dialogue
    - Emotional and regulative towards others
  - ▶ Internal dialogue
    - Emotional and regulative towards oneself
- (Hjelmeland et al., 2008)



Figure 1: Interpretative scheme

Interpretational progress



- ▶ To look at suicidal behaviour as communication is complementary to other models
- ▶ The main issue is where we focus our attention:
  - on psychiatric diagnosis
  - on tension reduction
  - on the communicative aspects of suicidal behaviour?

# Looking at the suicidal process as communication

- ▶ aims at understanding the mechanisms of giving meaning to the suicidal act with regard to
  - how the suicidal individual sees him/herself
  - how the suicidal individual places him/herself in the actual social/cultural context
  - how the suicidal individual perceives his/her action radius or chances to influence or change a specific, perceived unbearable situation and which means that are employed

# Suicidal behaviour as communication

- ▶ Suicidal behaviour is meaningful and can be perceived as a process in form of an internal and external dialogue
- ▶ Understanding how an individual in despair perceives a specific unbearable situation in a specific cultural setting and his/her possibilities to influence this by communicating with others
- ▶ This knowledge can be used at
  - group level for targeted prevention efforts
  - individual level for goal directed therapeutic efforts

# The value of our model is two-fold

- ▶ Understanding suicidal behaviour as such in the framework of communication theory, can, in research, enhance the possibility of understanding the communicational aspects of suicidal behaviour due to a systematic usage of different qualitative methods
- ▶ Understanding the suicidal individual's behaviour in the framework of communication theory, can, in therapeutic practice, help the therapist in a systematic way to take bearing on what aspects should be strengthened, developed or changed in the individual's interplay with his/her specific socio-cultural context

- ▶ "Every rescue operation is a dialogue; someone cries for help and someone else must be capable of responding to him"

Litman (From Roche Medical Image and Commentary, exact year is unknown, but from the 1960's, p.28)

# Questions to be discussed

- ▶ What do you think about looking at suicidal behaviour within the framework of communication theory?
- ▶ Is this a fruitful approach in different cultural settings?