The cultural perspective in suicide research and prevention

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- “People eat, drink and breathe culture”
  (Bhugra and Bhui, 2007, p. xvii)

Groups of challenges

- Conceptual
- Theoretical
- Methodological
- Ethical
- Political

Conceptual challenges

- Confusing mix of concepts used:
  - Transcultural
  - Inter-cultural
  - Cross-cultural
  - Cultural

- “We prefer to use the adjective ‘cultural’ rather than “cross-cultural” or ‘transcultural’ because it is more inclusive, less exotic, and does not imply a single methodology”.

(Favazza & Oman, 1978)

What is culture?

- Often, culture simply is taken to be the equivalent to countries or regions of the world (Valsiner, 1988)
- Culture is often viewed in an essentialist form as a static entity that has been rendered explanatory power (Berliner, 2001)

Tautology

- A phenomenon “observed in a sample from a ‘culture’ (here meaning ‘population’) can be caused by ‘culture’” (Valsiner, 1988, p. 4)

- “Italians are found to be ‘Italian’ because they are from Italy” (Valsiner, 2007, p. 25)

Valsiner's three meanings of culture

- 1) People "belong to" a culture
- 2) Culture "belongs to" each individual person
- 3) Culture "belongs to" the interrelation between the individual and the environment

(Valsiner, 2003, 2007)

Valsiner's first meaning of culture

- The most common meaning of culture is to use the concept to designate a group of people who 'belong together' because they share some features, and to say that this group of people 'belongs to a culture'
- Used in traditional cross-cultural studies
- Used by lay people
- Culture = countries/regions

Valsiner 2003, 2007

Valsiner's second meaning of culture

- Culture is something that belongs to the individual; thus culture is something that is found within the intrapsychological systems of each individual

  Valsiner, 2003, 2007

Valsiner's third meaning of culture

- Culture is conceptualized as something that belongs to the interrelation between the individual and the environment
- Culture is defined as the process of interaction between the person and his/her surroundings
- Culture is seen as the dynamics that arise in the interaction between the person and the environment
- This dynamics cannot be explained in a linear cause-and-effect relationship

Valsiner 2003, 2007

Implication

- Culture cannot be operationalized as a variable to be used in research projects (Jenkins, 1994)

- If culture is treated as a causal/explanatory variable in case differences between countries or regions or groups of people are found, it is very easy to overlook the *real* reasons for the differences that may or may not have anything to do with culture (Berliner, 2001)

- If we instead of culture talk about, for instance, oppression, marginalization, racism, unemployment, and stigmatization, we contextualize peoples' life situation (Berliner, 2001)

Methodological challenges

- "…very few (or perhaps no) methodological problems become easier when culture is added to the picture" (Cohen, 2007, p. 196)
- "..describing a moving target" (Medin et al., 2007, p. 637)
- "The methods themselves have assumptions built into them about what culture is" (Cohen, 2007, p. 230)

Problems with mainstream sucidological research

- Using the same (standardised) instruments in different cultural contexts raises problems with reliability and validity
- We don't always know what we are comparing.
- Reliability may (relatively speaking) be easy to obtain, but validity is a different matter
- Psychological variables are difficult to translate

Example

- Norwegians have a lot of different words for expressing sadness; Hansen (2005) mentions 14. These are not synonyms but express different nuances of sadness.

- The Yoruba in Nigeria use the same word to describe anger and sadness (Hansen, 2005); two emotions that for Norwegians are extremely different.

Problems cont.

- Differences found in such studies may have little or nothing to do with culture
- Difficult to know which variables represent culture, so which variables to control for and which ones not to (Medin et al., 2007)?
- Quantitative "cross-cultural" research studies the "collective culture" through averaging of the "personal cultures" (Valsiner, 2003)
- Neglect that individual differences may outweigh group differences in both extent and importance (Fernando, 2002)

- “I used to be cross-cultural psychologist, but now I’m not so cross anymore”

  (Serpell, personal communication 2005)

We need qualitative research

- Qualitative studies give us the opportunity to answer the “what”, “how” and “why” questions and such questions need to be answered *before* it gives meaning to ask the “how much” questions

(Brinkmann, 2009; Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2011)

We need qualitative research

- We need methodology that allows us to focus more on *understanding the meanings* of suicidal behaviour in different cultural contexts rather than on just trying to *explain* it in terms of different statistical relationships, for instance, with various risk factors
- Through different kinds of qualitative analysis, we can interpret, and thus develop an understanding of *how* socio-cultural factors contribute to the suicidal process (or not)

(Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2011)

Studies of individual cases valuable

- In studies of individuals we build systemic models of the cultural functioning of the individual in his/her social context
- This systemic model is in turn tested on another individual, which then probably will lead to a modification of the model
- This modified model is again tested on a third individual and so on
- This is thus a hermeneutic construction of knowledge about individuals' functioning in their environment, and, "the generalised model becomes ideally applicable to human beings in their generic state" (Valsiner, 2007, p. 29)

"Imagine I were to present a pig to a skeptical scientist, insisting it could speak English, then waved my hand, and the pig spoke English. Would it really make sense for a skeptic to argue, 'But that is just one pig, Ramachandran. Show me another, and I might believe you!'"

The neurologist Ramachandran interviewed by Doidge, 2007

Qualitative studies

- Qualitative studies are met with resistance, even prejudice, in psychiatric and psychological journals in general (Brinkman, 2009; Marchel & Owens, 2007), as well as in suicidological journals particular (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2011)

- Qualitative methodology is useful in both cultural and cross-cultural studies

We need qualitative studies

- More fruitful, as well as more methodologically sound, to now focus on *qualitative* research in cultural contexts where we have little or no knowledge about suicidal behaviour, for instance, in low and middle income countries outside the West, or, in minority groups in high income countries
- We also need qualitative studies to follow up the thousands of quantitative risk factor studies already conducted in the West (and elsewhere) to try and find out *why* or *how*, if indeed they are, connected to suicidal behaviour

(Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010; 2011)

Political challenges

- Two examples:
  - Editors of European and American based journals sometimes reject manuscripts *because* they contain a “cultural” perspective (i.e. conducted “elsewhere”), which is then deemed irrelevant for a Western audience
  - The current biologification of the suicidological field

Manifestations of biologification 1

Hjelmeland, in press

- A biological turn of the suicidological "language"
  - Common risk factors referred to as "endophenotypes" whether biological or not
    - partner violence, criminal behaviour, firearm ownership (Larkin & Beautrais, 2010)
    - hopelessness (Lazary et al., 2011)
  - Suicidal behaviour referred to as "phenotype" (e.g., Mann & Currier, 2011)
  - "Suicidal brain" (e.g., Audenaert 2006, Desmyter et al., 2011; van Heeringen & Marusic, 2003; van Heeringen et al., 2011)

Manifestations of biologification 2

Hjelmeland, in press

- Increased interest and enthusiasm with regard to (neuro)biological research on suicide
  - With the new developments in technology, various kinds of brain-imaging studies have received increasing attention and their great potential to contribute to suicide prevention is emphasised (e.g., Audenaert et al., 2005, 2006; Desmyter et al., 2011; Jollant et al., 2011; Mann, 2005)
  - With the high status of (neuro)biological research, the vast monetary interests involved in such research, and the constant emphasis of how promising the results from such studies are, there is every reason to assume that this type of research will increase in the years to come (Restak, 2006)

Manifestations of biologification 3

Hjelmeland, in press

- Researchers have for a long time searched for the genetic underpinnings of suicide and the mapping of the complete human genome created high expectations with regard to the potential of such research
  - Wasserman et al. (2009) list a number of genes that are of interest in relation to suicidal behaviour. And, for each of the (candidate) genes presented, they conclude that more studies are needed to clarify the relationship
  - Marusic and Farmer (2001) called for more molecular genetic research "because this may allow targeting of psychosocial or pharmacotherapeutic interventions at persons of high suicide risk" (p. 196)
  - There is thus reason to believe that genetic research will increase significantly in the years to come, perhaps focussing more on biological and clinical endophenotypes relevant to suicide than on suicide per se (Mann et al., 2009)

Manifestations of biologification 4

Hjelmeland, in press

- Depression is claimed to be the most important risk factor for suicide, even granted causal status by some (e.g., Isacsson & Rich, 2003)
- Isacsson (2000): treatment with antidepressants (biological treatment) might be a medical breakthrough in suicide prevention
- Isacsson (2003): the increased use of antidepressants have saved 2500 Swedish lives in the last 10 years
- A lot of research on this has been conducted and the topic vividly debated since

Manifestations of biologification 5

Hjelmeland, in press

- The Action Alliance for Suicide Prevention (2011) Research Task Force USA
  - Survey 2011 asking suicide researchers and others to suggest the aspirational research goals most likely to contribute to reduce the suicide rate the next 5-10 years
    - Example: “To develop medications that can quickly reduce suicidal thoughts and plans in distressed people”
  - Coincidence or symptomatic of a biological Zeitgeist in the field?
  - Next round (result): "Find better ways to use existing and new biological treatments (e.g., medications) to prevent suicidal behavior" was listed among the 12

Consequences of the biologification

- Increased focus on biological issues may lead to a decreased focus on cultural issues (Brinkmann, 2009; Hjelmeland, 2010; Lipton, 2010)
- Psychiatry and the behavioural sciences have developed in a very biological direction (Brinkmann, 2009)
- To maintain the focus on cultural issues is an uphill battle in psychiatry (Alarcón, 2009)
- Since psychiatry is one of the most prominent premise providers for suicidology, this may be an uphill battle in suicidology as well (Hjelmeland, 2010)

Consequences cont.

- If the future suicidological research is dominated by the biological aspects of suicidal behavior, we run the risk of going back to a very mechanistic view of human beings; reducing suicide, a conscious and intentional act, as well as a highly existential issue, to a mere biological “fault” or “chemical imbalance” that can be treated with medications
- Note: Vast monetary interests here!

Question to be discussed

- How can we counteract such a development and make sure that a cultural focus not only is maintained, but increased in such "biological times"?