Suicide in a South African town: A cultural psychological investigation

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Paarl, a large South African town, has experienced a dramatic increase in suicide among young, professional Coloured men during the period 1990 to 2000. Interviews were conducted with surviving family members and friends, and subjected to a qualitative, interpretative analysis. Theoretically and methodologically, cultural psychology is presented as a critical alternative to mainstream academic literature on suicide within psychology and sociology. Hence, the suicides of the young men are read as a cultural phenomenon within a particular post-Apartheid context. Cultural certitude and identity are presented as organising dialectic and phenomenological hemeinetic.

This study examines suicide in Paarl, a fairly large town of roughly 110 000 people in the south-western Cape. Particularly, it narrates the incidence of suicide among a subset of the Paarl population, that of young, professional Coloured men in the decade from 1990 to 2000.

Located broadly within cultural psychology, this study positions itself outside of a naturalistic, experimental, and positivistic psychology. While the assumptions and methodological implications of this placement within cultural psychology are elucidated in greater detail later, an early framing comment is in order. Inasmuch as data (re)presentation deviates from the “usual” (e.g. in terms of the “objective” third person address, or an academic protocol which follows a predictable format of aims, method, results, discussion, and conclusion), I will attempt to tell an interpretative narrative, as it unfolds from my personal, therefore, is not a mere stylistic choice, but a conscious attempt to interrupt “the distanced, distancing, supposedly neutral and objective language and stance most often employed in academic writing” (Ellsworth, 1999, p. 34); and to punctuate my particular location as researcher vis-à-vis the subject, the research phenomenon, and the research space.

In the sections that follow, I briefly examine the term Coloured, whereafter I situate suicide within a spatio-cultural semiosis and symbolic context. I then provide an overview of the literature, pointing out its shortcomings as prompt for cultural psychology’s entrée. Finally, I provide an interpretative reading of the research data, and impute meaning to the phenomenon in terms of identity and cultural certitude.

Coloured, coloured, “C/coloured”, Coloured, or so-called Coloured?
This section heading is not meant to be facetious, but speaks to the contested and controversial nature of the term, as reflected in written representations. Inasmuch as it occupies such a central place in this study, both the construct Coloured and my usage thereof demand some clarification.

Most readers of this journal will be familiar with the Apartheid use of Coloured as racial reference. The essentialised, biological view of race has, however, been soundly discredited in the academy, and is steadily supplanted by an understanding of race as social construction (of course, to question the existence of race is not to deny racism, a point whichBernasconi, 2001, p. 206, makes as follows: “racism has made race ‘real’ without making it true”). In addition to the difficulty with race as concept, its application to this particular group is specious given an understanding (both academic and lay) of Coloured ethnography as métissage, hybridity, creolization, variety, and “intermixing”. There is a palpable tension in attempts to delineate in bordered racial terms what Coloured “is”; a tension which the official Apartheid definition “resolves” by stating what a Coloured person is not: “A coloured person is a person who is not a white person nor a native” (Population Registration Act, 1950). Remarkably, this ambiguity is perhaps illustrated more vividly by the Population Registration Act’s definition of a White person as “one who in appearance is, or who is generally accepted as, a White person, but does not include a person who, although in appearance obviously a White person, is generally accepted as a Coloured person” (Population Registration Act, 1950).

This study does not use the term Coloured to denote race, although it acknowledges that this usage enjoys considerable purchase within the population at large. The extent to which the abolition of Apartheid and the project of non-racialism move the country to a “teleology of deracialization” (Posel, 2001), remains a thorny and open question, the examination of which falls outside the scope of this paper.

In contrast to its success in fixing racial categories, the Apartheid regime failed to establish a stable catalogue of ethnicities. While it did try to redefine Coloured as ethnicity in the late 1970s, the project failed spectacularly. One reason for this failure is that the regime did not provide a sui generis template of coloured ethnicity (assuming such an undertaking is even possible), attempting instead to append coloured as ethnicity to that of the Afrikaner. Hence, Coloureds supposedly shared language, religion, and “Western values” with the Afrikaner and was consequently “related” more closely to the Afrikaner than the African. Of course, all these “points of similarity” can be contested; the point here being only that there was no attempt to provide a grammar of originary coloured ethnicity, but rather a desire to co-opt Coloured into a secondary or “special” category of Afrikaner ethnicity. Moreover, albeit stated somewhat simplistically, this project came too late; Coloureds had already chosen sides in the late 1970s, and redefined themselves strategically as Black under the umbrella of a mass democratic movement to overthrow Apartheid.

It is, however, in the post-Apartheid space that the use of Coloured as ethnicity enjoys widespread circulation. An astounding increase in the contemporary literature on the topic reflects a wide range of positions, controversies, and debates. Some, for example, hold that the notion of a coloured ethnic
identity is a totally empty and meaningless fact of social engineering; others argue for a prior existence of culturally common traits, to be found in a reclamation of cultural rituals and codes most commonly found in the Khoi, now reinscribed and privileged as the ancestral forebears for Coloured identity; still others chart a middle ground, conceding the lack of an originary ethnicity, but acceding to a “Coloured group awareness”. While space does not permit a comprehensive examination of the debates around coloured identity and ethnicity (See Alexander, 1985, 1996; Bickford-Smith, 1992; Erasmus, 2001; Farred, 2000; Goldin, 1987; Lewis, 1987; Pickel, 1997), suffice it to say that ethnicity is frequently used in the same essentialised manner as race. Instead of being determined from within (race), one is now determined from without (ethnicity) in the assumption of a stable homogeneous ethnic identity or culture that explains people and their actions.

In this article, Coloured is not used to reference either race or ethnicity. Instead, Coloured is used in Pierre Bourdieu’s (1984, 1990) sense of habitus. Originally used with respect to social class, several authors have applied habitus to ethnicity and identity formation (e.g. May, 1999; Smaje, 1997). In this usage, habitus comprises all the social and cultural experiences that shape us as people. It is a set of embedded dispositions, inclusive of a material form of life “turns nature”; it is recursive in that it is both a product of early socialization and continually modified by experiences of the outside world; it reflects the social and cultural position of its construction, as well as its transformations in current circumstances; it is mindful of the inter-relationship between individual action and group mores. Hence, as habitus, Coloured is liberated from the representational quotation marks of the “so-called”, from representation in erasure (Derrida, 1976; Heidegger, 1998), or the practise that writes coloured in lower case.

SUICIDE IN PAARL

Growing up in Paarl involved a belief that suicide simply did not occur within this, or for that matter, the broader Coloured community. To be sure, one was aware of its occurrence, but always elsewhere, and almost exclusively among Whites or “foreigners”. One may argue that Apartheid did not allow reporting of suicide among Coloureds, but even those newspapers, newspaper supplements, and magazines published specifically with this population in mind (e.g. Cape Herald, Rapport Ekstra) seemingly never addressed the issue. Another argument, that a particular cultural and/or religious stigma associated with suicide may have acted as censure (which has been reported in the literature - for example, Gijana, Louw, & Manganyi, 1989), is a viable one. However, within a proximally near, and communally close society like that of Paarl, leakage would occur into communal gossip, notwithstanding censure of public reporting or private shame. In the interviews (reported in greater detail later), I asked if interviewees could recall incidents of suicide prior to 1990. Two names came up consistently, almost always with the caveat that one “was not right in his head”, and that the other was an inkommer (someone who came to live in Paarl from somewhere else), and thus not “really” from Paarl. Again, the otherworldly explanation was echoed to the extent that that world was insane, physically removed, or a combination of both. The experiential belief from my enculturation in Paarl resonated with that expressed by the interviewees, crisply, and unambiguously as, “Coloureds just didn’t kill themselves”.

This understanding of suicide as a “foreign” occurrence was shaken dramatically and fundamentally in the 1990s. In ironic counterpoint, my memory of profound joy at ex-president Mandela’s release from prison in Paarl (in 1990) coincides with the sadness and shock at the suicide of a close acquaintance. In the years since, five other friends and acquaintances have committed suicide. Additionally, as a psychologist practising in Paarl during the mid-nineties, my path crossed those of family members and friends of three more people who had committed suicide. And, as this research progressed, six more suicides came to my attention, bringing the total to fifteen “completed” suicides in the span of ten years, eleven of whom were those of young, professional Coloured men. Suddenly, suicide was a very present phenomenon, the shock and unfamiliarity of which echoed in each sermon and interment I attended, and in each conversation I had in all the roles of friend, therapist, and later that of researcher. This, though, was more than shock at the loss of a friend, son, husband or partner, but also at the occurrence of something so strange in a community unready to deal with it.

A peculiar pattern became apparent. Overwhelmingly, the people whose funerals I attended, or whose family members I counselled, were young men, between 25 and 35 years, first generation university graduates in professional careers, from a markedly working-class background, with no psychiatric history, and who had counted involvement in the anti-Apartheid struggle, from active organisational involvement to an avowed correspondence with the goals and aims of the liberation struggle. Among this group were two medical doctors, one lawyer, a university lecturer, three school teachers, an insurance broker, a postgraduate student, a police captain, and a successful businessperson. None left any suicide notes, and the methods of death included shooting, gassing, hanging, and slitting of the wrists. By the markers that identify this group, suicide seems counterintuitive: economically they were well positioned, had no apparent psychological problems, saw their struggles realised in the abolition of Apartheid, and by virtue of their youth, had “their whole lives ahead of them”.

This study, then, ostensibly set out to investigate suicide as an academic response to a phenomenon begging elucidation. Additionally, it is also possible to motivate the study professionally as an attempt at clinical understanding, given my continuing role as psychologist practising in Paarl. Both these motivations would be true, but my position towards these suicides and the impetus to study it more particularly, probably derived in larger part from the recognition that the people killing themselves, were also me - a young man of colour in his early thirties, who grew up in working class Paarl, a first generation university graduate and professional who was himself actively involved in the anti-Apartheid struggle. As such, the auto-ethnographical is presented not only for the Heideggerian entry into the hermeneutic circle (Heidegger, 1927/1996), or the articulation of the postmodern researcher’s vantage point, but also for the manner in which the interpretive research loop is completed in appraisal.

THE ACADEMIC LITERATURE

A rather voluminous literature, primarily in the fields of psychology and sociology, reveal quite early that whereas there is considerable overlap between these disciplines at the level of descriptive, demographic suicidology, a vast chasm separates theoretical discourse on the topic. Durkheim (1897/1966) and Freud (1917/1961), putative patriarchs of the disciplines themselves, as well as the architects of the most enduring analytic theories of suicide, rarely share the same explanatory stage, and a stereotypical picture emerges of sociological explanations of suicide at the aggregate and group level, contrasted with psychological explanations locating the sources of suicide in the individual (Stack, 2001).
Such a distinctive focus notwithstanding, scholars within both disciplines seem bent on finding and describing an essential and prototypical suicidal person or group. So, for example, a decontextualised category of men is said to "successfully" complete suicide at a rate four times that of women, while women "attempt" suicide more frequently than men (Kaplan & Saddock, 1991; Lester, 1997). Of course, in certain settings this is true, but not in all, and certainly not by virtue of an anatomical predisposition. Similarly, the tools of the personality test have been used to distil the "suicidal person", one most frequently characterised as "irritable" and "impulsive" (Lester; 1967; Williams & Pollock, 2000), "hopeless" (Lester, Beck, & Mitchell, 1975), "low in self-esteem" (Lester, 1992), and "depressed" (Bonner, 2001).

These studies are largely devoid of context, reductionistic, and operate on a rational positivist assumption that there is something defining, immutable, and universal about the suicidal person or group. The arguments of prediction and prevention concede an underlying, essentialised assumption that suicide is something one "has", like an illness, and which, when detected in a timely manner, can be cured. Indeed, the language of epidemiology is frequently invoked, and depression (Barraclough, Bunch, Nelson, & Sainsbury, 1974; Hawton et al., 1998; schizophrenia (Harris & Barraclough, 1997), and personality disorders (Lineham, Rizvi, Welch, & Page, 2000) are frequently posited as the causative movers behind suicide. Even when much contemporary research acknowledges the "multidimensional nature of suicide", this recognition in most cases fails to free the researcher from a delimited essentialism. So, for example, while Lester (1997, p. 53) remarks that "research indicates very little usefulness for standard psychological evaluations, such as intelligence tests and inkblot tests, in the prediction of suicidal behaviour", he continues, barely one paragraph later, to nonetheless attempt a characterisation of the "suicidal personality" as "unusually rigid and inflexible, usually depressed, with a negative view of themselves and a positive view of death, lacking in hope and with few acknowledged reasons for staying alive" (Lester, 1997, p. 53).

Even the sub-discipline of cross-cultural psychology fails to free itself of the search for the universal in suicide. As more and more international studies reported variations in suicide rates at national and cultural levels, one would expect a challenge to the articulation of a prototypical suicidal person, or universal predictors of suicide at a group level (for example, men do not necessarily "complete suicide" more often than women in China, Japan, or even South Africa) (Butchart, 2000; Iga, 1986; Pritchard, 1996). Closer scrutiny of these studies reveals, however, that they have not been "heretical" enough (Shwedler, 1991) in challenging the assumptions of positivist research. One move is to attribute ethnic and cultural variance in suicide to physiology and biology. Cheng and Lee (2000, p. 37), for example, argue that, "one possible explanation for differences in suicide rates across nations is that people from different nationalities may differ in the brain concentrations of the neurotransmitters responsible for depression". The implication is that culture is but the contaminating setting within which the biological finds differential expression.

As with physiological explanations of cultural variation in suicide, so too with psychological ones - the same quest for a stable, internal mechanism or process is discernible. Countless articles recount as many scales of depression, self-esteem, and the like which have been transported to populations other than Anglo-American, and called cross-cultural by this transfer. Not only is the assumption of a measurable universal still present, but more importantly, that this universal has been identified, can be taken to mean the same thing across cultures, and can be measured by Western scales. The research is cross-cultural not for the explanation of difference as emanating from the culture, but for the notation of variance in already determined constructs. Culture and context becomes a contaminating variable to be controlled, "noise" to be reduced or eliminated in the experimental quest for the universal. There is no patterned investigation of the ground of culture, but instead a rationalistic, universal presupposition of patterned processes in the figure, unaffected by the ground within which it expresses itself.

Turning to the classic theories of my training (most notably psychoanalysis and existentialism), explanations for suicide were clear and individual, from Freud's (1961) introjected conflict and guilt arising from the desire to kill the love/hate object, to existential alienation and neurosis (Frankl, 1986). These, and other motivational theories, however, at best illustrated individual acts, and then only partly. In their foursquare focus on the individual, these theories shared the grand assumptions of modernist psychological research in that they reduced context to an expression of the internal. None adequately explained why this particular group of individuals committed suicide at this particular time and place. More and more, I found myself at a loss to slide clients' stories into psychoanalytic components of suicidal hostility, or to advocate an existential respect for suicide as choice. The psychotherapeutic question my clients and friends asked was not, "Why did he do it?", in that pathological, individualised clearing that authorises existential or psychodynamic explanations, but rather, "What made him do it?", or "Who made him do it?", in the communal clearing that begged for a rooted answer in the situated world at hand. Rather than an embattled Sisyphus (Camus, 1942/1955), struggling heroically with his individual rock, the image conjured up by my placement right there, in the thick of things, was of Thebes under siege; of a community struggling, searching, and groping for an answer to the Sphinx which promised, with regular frequency, to devour the brightest and best of our young men until such time that we could solve its riddle.

The broader, social location invoked by the metaphor of Thebes under siege finds some resonance in Emile Durkheim's spectacular treatise, Suicide: A study in Sociology (1897/1966). In brief, Durkheim (1966) states that suicide rates vary with social integration (which Gibbs and Martin, 1958, p. 141, clarify as the "stability and durability of social relations"), social structure, and social change (Selklin, 1983). Suicide is therefore a function of the regulatory mechanism of society on the individual. Admittedly, a number of the very same criticisms directed at essentialised psychology are also levelled at Durkheim's project (for example, his attempt to distil essentialist societial laws from an array of statistical data; and his assumption of society as interior to the individual mind, of which external behavioural social facts are given to sense perception). The inspiration gleaned from Suicide, though, devolves much less from Durkheim's methodological positivism than from the profoundly powerful way in which he argues for a social context to suicide. The intersection of Durkheim's postulates with South African society is apparent, especially the notion that suicide is related to social change. Even so, however, I remained uncomfortable with the linear causality of his argument, and the embarrassing absence of my métier - the psyche - from the Durkheimian polis. Thus, I turned to cultural psychology.
CULTURAL PSYCHOLOGY

A discipline is emerging called cultural psychology. It is not cross-cultural psychology. It is not psychological anthropology. It is not ethnopsychology. It is cultural psychology. And its time may have arrived, once again (Shweder, 1991, p. 73).

In the last decade, there has been a tremendous interest in cultural psychology, and a growing number of researchers and theorists now identify thus. The writings of Michael Cole (1996), Richard Shweder (1991), and Jaan Valsiner (1987) have been central to this interest, and these authors remain the best sources for a fuller description of cultural psychology. Some of the theoretical precursors to cultural psychology include the likes of Giambattista Vico, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Wilhelm Dilthey, Johann Herder, Wilhelm Von Humboldt, Lev Vygotsky, Wilhelm Wundt, and Mikhail Bakhtin, among others. This grouping already suggests a position opposed to a psychology fashioned after the model of the natural sciences, where mind and world are conceived as distinct, fixed, and objective. Indeed, Wilhelm Wundt’s characterisation of a “second psychology” (his Völkerpsychologie) provides a representation of a road not taken - of a psychology that would orient itself descriptively to specifically human questions and experiences; that would concern itself with matters of Volk, and Geist, the study of “the spirit of a people”; a psychology that would locate itself descriptively in real-life situations and study people in relation to their societies and communities; a psychology which aimed for Verstehen (understanding), as opposed to Erklären (explanation); a purposive psychology concerned with meaning and interpretation, studied and revealed in ethnicity, linguistics, and folk wisdom.

In an attempt to define cultural psychology, Shweder (1991) says that it is:

the study of the way cultural traditions and social practices regulate, express, and transform the human psyche, resulting less in psychic unity for humankind than in ethnic divergences in mind, self, and emotion...[it is] the study of the ways subject and object, self and other, psyche and culture, person and context, figure and ground, practitioner and practise, live together; require each other, and dynamically, dialectically, and jointly make each other up (p. 73).

Action is understood in context, and the clear assumption is that while people are active agents, they do not act in a context entirely of their choosing. Indeed, “mind emerges in the joint mediated activity of people...[and is] ‘co-constructed’ and distributed” (Cole, 1996, p. 104). An epistemology for cultural psychology, then, would ground analysis in everyday activity and life events, would reject linear, cause-effect explanations in favour of interpretative inquiry, and would emphasise interdisciplinary investigations (Cole, 1996; Shweder, 1991).

The relationship between individuals and their contexts cannot be separated into independent and dependent variables, given the extent to which they interpenetrate each other. Humans seize meanings from their environments, but the range of meanings to be seized are discursively constructed, and this “seizing” alters the mental life of individuals, as well as the social world within which meaningful performance is situated. Clearly, such a view cannot tolerate an essentialist perspective of immutable and universal truths, or the centrality of the autonomous, individual subject (Packer & Tappan, 2001), but instead attempts to understand in the dialectical and dialectical nature of mind in context. Unlike a Platonist search for forms, and for essential psychological rules of operation beneath the surface of contextual “noise”, cultural psychology sees its task precisely as an articulation of the variation, organisation, and patterned structuring of such “noise”. Shweder (1991, p. 99) notes, “in the land of cultural psychology all of the action is in the noise. And the so called noise is not really noise at all; it is the message”.

In addition, though, to the view of the interpenetrating relationship between mind and culture, there is room within cultural psychology for an analysis of context as an arena within which power moves. Michel Foucault (1972, 1980), especially, provides a trenchant reminder that culture as context is more than Geertz’s (1973) “web of meanings”, Bruner’s (1990) “medium within which we dwell”, or even Cole’s (1996) “medium of mediating means”, but also “Michel Foucault’s notion of culture as a web of connections, even identities, among power, knowledge, and desire” (Packer & Tappan, 2001, p. 20).

THE STUDY

Methodologically, this study proceeds from its placement within cultural psychology. Interviews were all framed by the cultural psychological imperative to ground understanding in activity. The framing interview question was consequently not “Why do you think he did it?”, but rather, “What did he do and say in the hours, days, months, and years leading up to his death?”. The intent, to be sure, was to read action as text, given to study by “traces” in memory and historical record (Ricoeur, 1979).

Shweder (1991), provides some procedural guidelines for thinking through the interviews so that a “thick description” (Geertz, 1973) of mind in context is possible. First, there is the sense of the subject as a reflective and self-conscious expert on human experience, whose story is listened to, and entered into as such. The second way of thinking through the interview develops from the first in the sense that I wanted to get the other straight, and to provide a systematic account of that constructed and imbedded world. This implies, quite clearly, that action is meaningful in meaningful context. Third, I listened to the interviews in the manner which Shweder describes as “thinking one’s way out of or beyond the other” (Shweder, 1991, p. 109). It is an interpretative process whereby the narrative is revealed by what remains unsaid, and by its location in relation to systems of power, discourse, and meaningful worlds hidden from sight. Fourth, I listened to my location and situated presence as researcher and observer - a reflexive stance which recognises that Verstehen is not reproduced in an original meaning of the action, but is participative, and produced in dialogue (Gadamer, 1975). The sense of myself as all of participating actor, knowledgeable native, as well as storyteller making negotiated sense of the tale in interaction, is brought to bear on this stance towards the text - one that is of necessity descriptive, interrogative, reflexive, and dialogic.

Readers will note an absence of (the “usual”) suicide rates, columns of police statistics, and other such authorial/authorising numbers. While I have had access to such suicide statistics the identification of a phenomenon in the communal clearing does not need the validation of police percentages – a move that assumes a questionable assumption of such numbers as “unbiased” and “objective”. A subjective sense of the phenomenon – mine and that of the community within which I am dialogically situated – is as authorising of its existence. “Interpretative inquiry begins not from an absolute origin of unquestionable data or totally consistent logic, but at a place delineated by our everyday participatory understanding of people and events” (Packer & Addison, 1989, p. 23).
Furthermore, the description and interpretation of the phenomenon are rooted in an understanding of the grammar of the intentional world itself. Suicide rates are consequently not compared with those of other groups (the etic motivation being the prime reason for such comparative research), the focus remaining on the emic story of the particular intentional world instead.

Given the above, I started interviewing family members and friends of eight young men who committed suicide, and of whom I had knowledge given my placement in the community as member and therapist. During the course of these interviews, three more names were mentioned of men who fit the research profile, and of whose deaths I had no prior knowledge. I contacted the family members of these additional men, and eventually conducted at least one interview with a family member or close friend of all men. No one refused to talk to me. There were other suicides as well – I knew of four – which did not fit the research profile because of a longstanding psychiatric history, prior suicide attempts, or age (two were elderly, and one was a boy of 13 years). Again, the focus was on narrating the patterned suicides of young, professional men, and I do not presume to explain those deaths that fall outside of this population.

Invariably, some interviewees knew more than one of the men intimately, so that an interview would often thread information about two or even more subjects. As a case in point, I knew five of the young men, three of them rather well. Interviews were conducted in a variety of settings - some in parental living rooms, others around a braai (barbecue fire), and still others in a coffee shop or bar. Occasionally, as well, information (interviews) would present itself in an “informal” manner, in the daily course of my residence in Paarl (The following example is offered as illustration. One evening I went to the local gymnasium, where I met the brother-in-law of one of the deceased men, who proceeded to talk at length about his understanding of the event, and how he responded to it). Furthermore, as it became known that I was interviewing family members and friends, several people approached me spontaneously with their own stories and opinions. While the intent was to audio-record interviews, it becomes apparent from reading the interviews that this was not entirely possible. In these instances, I made written notes about the interview as soon after it as possible. With one exception, all interviews were conducted in Afrikaans. Direct quotations are reported in translation. I also engaged in auto-interviewing, writing down my responses to the men I had knowledge of, and adding these to the narrative corpus. I randomly assigned letters to the eleven men, and indicate the relation of the interviewees to the deceased; for example, “K’s fiancé remarked that...”.

**Change in the binary of the enemy and the ally.**

The Apartheid regime positioned almost every societal institution to serve the needs of a minority, and to entrench a matrix of privilege easily identifiable by the Whiteness it answered to. The enemy was easy to name and recognise in a discrete, dichotomising polarity of White and Non-White. Easy and comfortable as it was to organise around and against such a seemingly monolithic enemy, as quick and ready was it to apportion blame for hardship and failure to this enemy. “If we had their educational resources, we’d show them”; or “If we had their sports facilities, we’d all be Springboks”; and many phrases like these all spoke to the notion that the hardships of Apartheid, once removed, would provide a playing field upon which talent and ability would validate Coloured people’s worth to the fantastised extent where we would rub their noses in our excellence.

Inasmuch as binaries reflect, intersect, and inform one another, the ally, in much the same way, was constructed as a bloc of cadres and comrades recognisable by their Blackness and a common aim (even those White individuals actively involved in the anti-Apartheid struggle became Black by their own redefinition as well as that of their community which now expelled them as “Kafferboeties” (literally, “little Kaffir brother”, or “Kaffir lovers/dupes” in the demotic sense). While there were political divisions, to be sure, those were understood as ideological, but not threatening to an ultimate goal of freedom. In other parts of the country these divisions figured much more powerfully, and were even life-threatening, but in Paarl it was not uncommon for PAC (Pan Africanist Congress) members to work together with ANC (African National Congress) members, or for the NUM (New Unity Movement), small as it was, to venture out of the proverbial Trotskyist armchair into the Leninist streets. By the same token, while there were “sell-outs” or “collaborators”, they too were tolerated in the belief that they were misguided and that experience (Geertz, 1973), while keeping in mind that my task was also to provide “thick” description of their subjectivities – a task which required skilful tacking between being both “native” (Geertz, 1973) and ethnographer.

The interviews, in the majority of cases, initially proceeded with an attempt to provide a reason for the suicide in terms of some internal dynamic, or external stressor. This response, I venture, is located firstly in the knowledge of my professional role within the community. As psychologist, such an explanation may have seemed appropriate, or desired on my part. A second, and probably allied, reading of this tendency involves the hegemonic dominance of decontextualised knowledge explanations, widely and popularly disseminated in the media and the interventions of helping professionals. These explanations, often credentialled by experts, and validated as true by their media prominence, serve to undermine and invalidate commonsense, situated explanations generated by the people themselves. Gradually, however, as I continued to facilitate attention to action in context, such prior explanations and understandings emerged - first hesitantly and tentatively, then with liberating confidence as I welcomed hearing them. Now, for example, some interviewees felt able to articulate cause in the ill-will of someone with recourse to magic (oordey), the displeasure of a vengeful God, or the unfathomable will of a loving God, omnipotent complicity in the suicide of loved ones notwithstanding.

In the sections that follow, I present my reading of the interviews. And, while I have organised them in neat, thematic appellations they are not discrete typological categories, but in actuality interpenetrate, overlap, and interconnect.

**Reading the interviews**

The fact that the interviews were conducted in a variety of settings contains meaning in itself. All interviews with the parents and spouses of the deceased took place in their homes, while those with friends, girlfriends, and professional colleagues spanned the range from the living room to the local bars and coffee shops. At one level of interpretation, familiarity with friends and family members seemed to direct the setting, and the freedom of the interviewees to suggest that I stay for dinner or go to a bar to talk. In another way, though, the location within which the interviews took place, and the constitutive modes of interaction in those situated spaces, mirrored the shape and form of the spatial, embodied lives of the subjects themselves. In a very real sense, I was swimming in the streams of the subjects'
there was a transcendent mission that permitted activists to work for their freedom as well. Again, this was not the case in other parts of the country where “collaboration” was met with death or a stark ostracism that had far-reaching effects on those individuals’ livelihoods.

Now, in the aftermath of Apartheid, the stories told by the interviewees speak to a time where the playing fields are ostensibly equal and level, but we are still not performing - in fact, we are disappointingly below average. Our children attend Model C schools and still do not bring home good grades; sport facilities are all integrated and accessible, and still we do not play in the first teams of rugby, cricket, and hockey. Paarl has had three mayors of colour, the last “a bumbling idiot that shames me for being Coloured” (D’s father). Failure cannot be blamed on an external enemy anymore, particularly at a local level where political power is now firmly vested in Black hands. Blame and shame become internalised in the charge that “now we have only ourselves to blame, and he knew that if he didn’t succeed [with a brokerage firm] it was not because of Apartheid” (I’s wife). D’s father remarks that “He [D] worked as hard as he could, but always felt that it wasn’t enough, that the White lawyers made it look so easy”. The rhetoric of the meritocracy not only absolves Whites through the truth and reconciliation of their past, but obscures the extent to which a transition to political power has not removed or addressed the many other entrenched levels of power and privilege which still define daily life in Paarl, and provides the advantage that accounts, in many cases, for who wears the laurel leaves. In the absence of a clearly defined enemy to blame and to whom to attribute disappointment, one is forced to turn inward to a recognition of individual agency. In the absence of a coherent, constant, and dependable Satan, the intentional world of the deceased, according to those closest to them, had changed to the extent that they were forced to turn inward, their dreams and endeavours now seemingly unbounded by the strictures and obstacles of Apartheid.

As for the narrative of the ally, friendships were often forged around political involvement, and loyalties were cemented in the many experiences that accrued from this commitment. Now, however, many of these erstwhile comrades occupy central positions in local and national government. Their roles have changed dramatically, and the social prestige and status associated with these positions have become all too visible. “A year ago he [the local traffic chief] was still sleeping on our couch, a little pip-squeak who couldn’t open his mouth to say, ‘Bah’, and now he’s a big shot” (C’s mother). For at least three of the young men, their families and friends related a powerful sense of betrayal, a notion that their comrades and friends had “betrayed the struggle, and... [were]... enriching themselves” (C’s best friend), or “had forgotten the people we were fighting for”, and now “instead doing things out of greed and... [enjoying] their new status from their high and mighty positions” (D’s girlfriend).

Not unlike the change in the narrative of the enemy, there is here a new story that portrays the motivation for one’s actions less as one borne from a communal purpose than from an individual need and desire. Again, too, there is a movement towards the attribution of shame, blame, failure, and disappointment to individual actions. Not only is there no enemy to blame, and has the collapse of the Apartheid-ceiling allowed seemingly limitless advancement, but the ally has been fractured and fissured, to be reinscribed anew as individuals out to secure a first class seat on a material and vitiolated gravy train.

Change in social status
For all of the men who committed suicide, a marked change in class status was evident. All came from working class backgrounds, and all were first generation professionals. Due to their education and occupations, they entered a middle-class and affluent world: “He used to tell us, all the time, about the parties he had to attend with the movers and shakers of this town. He had to do it - these were his clients now, but he always came home unsettled at the money they threw away so casually... and their ways - he just couldn’t get used to their ways” (D’s best friend). “You know he’d come home, to this neighbourhood, over the weekends, but it was as if he wanted to be here, and as if he didn’t want to either - kind of like a man between two chairs, you know, and sitting on neither, and falling on his ass. He couldn’t understand that he didn’t really belong here anymore with his big car, but I don’t think he belonged there, on the other side of the river, either” (G’s friend).

Apartheid homogenised economic and social status for people of colour. Some people were better off, but the divisions were not as stark, and frequently less in terms of material trappings than in terms of the social fact that one was a teacher and the other a carpenter. Both often had the same material appearance of wealth, and lived alongside each other. Comparisons of worth took place within a very narrow range, and almost always provided a comparative backdoor, so that while the Joneses bought a new refrigerator for Christmas, their children were all wearing the same suits for the third year running. We were all in the same boat, although some had a slightly better view of the ocean. Furthermore, Apartheid decreed bounded geographical spaces outside of which we could not colour. Everyone knew each other, knew each other’s business, were close enough to each other physically, and no one really moved anywhere in the permanence of poverty and restrictive movement.

This all changed rather rapidly, though, as access to the entrepreneurial economy and jobs previously reserved for Whites brought great wealth to a few: “Well, you know C used to hang out with X, who is now the mayor, and who is chauffeured all around town... and C’s other friend was Y, who printed T-shirts out of his garage - we used to feed him - ... he’s a millionaire now and prints all the T-shirts and clothes and stuff for the army and the police... He built a large house on the mountain-slopes and hardly comes here anymore” (C’s father). Salaries were raised to achieve parity with Whites, and with the demise of residential racial segregation, migration occurred not only into previously White areas, but new ones (like Klein Paris - literally, “Little Paris”) were now clearly organised around both the social (profession) and the economic (income and wealth). “He used to comment on people moving out of the area, and the Camy’s they’re driving now, and how they’ve all forgotten where they came from” (D’s father). Now, these stories seem to suggest, we were not in the same boat anymore - some people seemed to row harder, smarter, more cunningly, and were rewarded for it by the shores of gold they landed on. Comparisons of worth assumed less of a social meaning in terms of oppression and the blocking of potential, but approximated the rather individual meanings of merit and perceived talent or cunning.

The struggle, at the level of the individual men, so powerfully articulated as an ambiguity of belonging, was cast in material and monetary terms. There remains, however, an unarticulated structure of privilege where mobility is not only a movement over one social class to another, but involves a change in the relations of power and “repertoires of representation”, in Hall’s (1992) memorable turn of phrase. Class interpenetrates.
how to be, and for these young men, the struggle was also an ontic one that typed belonging, place, allegiance, loyalty, and the experience of an interstice where no ready answers provided instruction on how to be.

**Change in the narrative of the collective**

Many researchers have commented on the cultural organisation of several African communities around the collective. In Paarl, as well, the salience of the collective has been present in multilayered ritual, embodied cultural transactions, and the unthinking manner in which culture surrounds. People “dropped in” (visited) unannounced at anytime of the day (or night), weddings and funerals were communal affairs, and one’s circle of friends and acquaintances was large. One argument holds that this may be a palimpsest of the social organisation of the Khoi and Malay slaves - two lineage groupings for the Coloured community - but it is in all probability also the effect of the mediation of Apartheid in bounded geographical space, the company of poverty, and the communality of oppression. All interviewees commented on loss not only in terms of the family and loved ones, but also of the community. By virtue of their stellar academic and professional achievements, these men represented a generative promise to a community in need of their services, but also, I venture, a symbolic and heroic example of triumph over obstacles. The expectation was that they would plough back into the community whatever skills they had acquired; and the communal found further expression in the assumption that their successes were never only theirs, but also the successes of their parents, extended families, and communities.

However, interviewees spoke of waning ties to the collective in the new South Africa: “We’re different, now - used to be people would be interested in you, and help you. But now, where were his friends when he needed them? No one trusts each other anymore. He was a police captain, for crying out loud... [and]... probably arrested or jailed half of the people there for drunkenness and unruly behaviour”. E’s friend, likewise, remarks that “he wouldn’t drink with us anymore - although I know he wanted to - but his wife probably didn’t think it was befitting of their new house and car”. A friend of B’s states that “we would go to the shebeen and it was always one of us plebs that had to run in to get the alcohol while he ducked on the backseat because those were the people whose kids he taught... and you know how a story gets going here in Paarl... Meester hanging out at the shebeen just wouldn’t do”. Finally, F’s long-time friend states: “Just a week before he died, he came here and woke me - it was around one-o-clock in the morning. He was at that talk at the Grande Roche [one of the most exclusive hotels in South Africa] and I think Trevor Manuel [South African Minister of Finance] was there - H came here and asked me if I wouldn’t just drive him to the skom [shebeen] and buy a couple of longnecks [quarts of beer] - he’d pay - to drink with him for old time’s sake because everyone there at the Grande Roche was drinking red wine and hobnobbing with the larney whiteys... and he just didn’t fit, and just wanted to drink a couple of beers. So we drove to the cemetery - you know how quiet it is there and no one bothers you - and we sat drinking there till the sun came up. Little did I know that we would bury him there a week later”.

**Expressing the affective**

In the 1980s, Naas Botha emerged as an icon of South African rugby. A blustery athlete, Botha was the linchpin around South Africa’s rugby prowess, primarily...
because of the deadly accuracy of his kicking boot. At the height of his career, presumably frustrated by South Africa’s sporting isolation, Botha travelled to the United States to try out as kicker for the Dallas Cowboys, an American football team. His failure was spectacular, and upon his return to South Africa, he was asked how he felt - to which he replied, “Cowboys don’t cry”. This statement was not only carried prominently in national media headlines, but was taken up with remarkable alacrity and inserted as response to any and all affective hardships. Certainly, a gendered valency to this statement is acknowledged, but I do propose that it also plumbs an orientation towards doing and activity, as opposed to feeling and the articulation or acknowledgment thereof.

In the intentional world of Paarl, you did not tell your parents that you loved them, but bought them a new television instead. You did not tell your friend that you were angry with him or her, but simply did not “drop in” for a couple of days. This was a communication clearly understood, and sedimented in the clearing of our located lives. In the last decade, however, the horizons of this clearing shifted, and cowboys were increasingly expected to cry. Oprah demanded that we do. As a psychologist, I went on local radio and expertly opined that people should express their feelings, while popular magazines and newspapers cautioned against “bottling up one’s emotions”. Thus, D’s fiancée says that “he did not know what he was feeling”, while C’s mother sadly comments, “maybe if he talked to you, he could express what he felt”, and I’s sister hesitantly offers that “he was such an emotional person, he just didn’t have the language for it”. The behavioural world of the Paarl cowboy had reached its liminal threshold, and like drinking and socializing, evacuated the ground on which action was predicated.

The church: The church played a pivotal role in galvanising and directing anti-Apartheid energies. From the declaration of Apartheid as heresy, and owing to the political leadership of religious leaders like Bishop Tutu, and the Reverends Boesak, Chikane, and Naude, the church provided a sanctuary, and in many instances, a mobilising site for political action. “He was always at the church, involved in the youth, and always had meetings there...[which made it]... all the more strange that he did not go to church at all in these last years” (D’s father). The church was a place where comfort and strength was gleaned from communal action and organisation, where meetings were held, where priests held placards aloft, and led protest marches.

Now, though, the church went back to saving souls, and the communal, the security of group and the clarity of goal receded. Unable to glean coping support from the church in community, and unwilling to engage with the church on religious terms, the interviews tell a story of diminishing church involvement, or a rote and dispirited attendance. “He was never really religious” (A and C’s friends; I’s wife), “… and in the last couple of years mostly attended church so that his mother could stop begging him” (D’s girlfriend). “It’s funny, he was so involved with the church when Padre M was in jail, what with organising to get him out, but I think he was secretly an atheist - and you know how holier-than-thou his parents are” (I’s friend).

Change in the narrative of crime
The “other”, especially the racialised other, is frequently constructed to contain a host of unsavoury characteristics. Criminality was a particular attribution to the Coloured community, but it was cast in a peculiar form, qualitatively different from attributions to Africans who were constructed as murderous and violent. For Coloureds, criminality was represented as the conniving, good-natured type (echoes of the jolly hotnot); people who could not be trusted, but whose criminal behaviour was generally of the non-lethal type. The Coloured community participated in this discussion, adding an air of one-upmanship in the valorisation of the con. In this reworking, the con was some sort of righteous punishment for greed, stupidity, or letting one’s guard down. Indeed, the con could be written and read as ingenuity, fashioned upon a Robin Hood narrative that deemed it less a crime than social justice to take from the haves, the most representative of whom were White. Thus, when someone turned up at one’s doorstep with a car radio, a case of frozen crayfish tails, a brand new diesel engine(1), the unspoken subtext held that it was “liberated” from Whites or their institutions, making it a “victimless” crime and lending it an air of righteous retribution.

In the last decade, however, a particularly violent quality inserted itself into the narration of crime, if not the actual. Hardly a house in Paarl does not have burglar bars, and almost everyone tells an anecdotal story of violent crime which revolves around rape, murder, kidnapping or armed robbery. Experts and government officials have offered many reasons, explanations, and even denials for the incidence of crime (or the fantasy of crime), an examination of which falls outside the scope of this article. What is of importance, though, is that the narrative of crime pervades nearly every waking moment - the caution inherent in where one drives, whether the doors of one’s house are locked, which valuables are to be had, rehearsing one’s reaction to hijacking or robbery, etc. It is a fatiguing, hypervigilant space where everyone is suspect, and almost all behaviour is potentially ominous and circumspect. A persistent anxiety, shifting between ground and figure, trails like a shadow through daily life. The men in this study commented on it on numerous occasions, from the expression and recognition of fatigue – “He told me that he was just so tired of always looking over his shoulder, and worrying whether I was safe at home during the day” (I’s wife) – to the disappointment of a dream-perturbed – “He told me, once, that he did not go to jail for this... and it just saddened him to see this crime... he didn’t know what to make of it” (D’s father). Inasmuch as the group is now forced to expel earlier constructions of the ingenious con from its self-definition, what stares out from the mirror is a Wilden picture of seemingly essential, barbarous nature.

Suicide, cultural certitude and identity
I have presented several thematic readings of the interviews. To the extent that the spun strand hold the web together, I propose that these themes radiate from cultural certitude and identity as dialectic. I argue that the suicides of these eleven men are performative of a tension between the instruction provided by narratives of community and/or the codes of an intentional cultural world (cultural certitude), and a definition of self that accrues from placement within that world (identity). The disruption of sedimented cultural codes and practices therefore cues an interruption in behavioural rules about what to do or how to act, as well as in the construction of the mind as it seizes definitional meanings about whom it is. The representational and signifying codes of the cultural world have changed so much, and so dramatically, that certitude about appropriate behavioural forms are interrupted and evacuated, leaving confusion and a suicidogenic context.

Identity, I propose, is subject to the continuous play of history, culture, and power. Less essence than positioning within discourses of history and culture, identity is read in Hall’s (1994)
terms of both being (offering a sense of unity and commonality) and becoming (a process which highlights discontinuities in identity formation). This reading of identity highlights the belief that the context I have described (within which suicide is occurring) is best thought of as an interregnum. In the post-Apartheid space, a shift is demanded from prior constructions of certitude given shape by imposition and opposition (a functional identity arising from Apartheid and the reaction to it in political mobilization) to an unsettled location for the identity of becoming. That is, the change is not from one thing to another in a substitutive sense, but rather from a position of some cultural certainty to an interstice where new representations have not fixed meaning yet, and are still jockeying for hegemonic dominance. A vacuum with respect to behavioural codes of instruction, to be sure, but also - perhaps more importantly - a world from which a sense of self-in-community (or even being-in-the-world) is no longer available. In the absence of certitude, one response is in a space of lonely, confusing, internalising individualism - the apotheosis of which is suicide.

CONCLUSION
I have provided an interpretative reading of suicide in Paarl, and have argued that cultural psychology allows for an understanding (Verstehen) of suicide that is richer, and more meaningful than that of Cartesian psychology which, at best, explains (Erklären). I argued that the suicides of young, Coloured men in Paarl cannot be thought of as manifestations of individual pathology, but must be situated in a socio-historical space and time. As such, the post-Apartheid space is theorised as unsettling and suidicogenic, an interstice within which several discursive meanings circulate and vie for dominance about how, and who to be culturally.

Additionally, while I have interpreted suicide in Paarl, I venture that this story is not wholly unfamiliar to a broader South Africa. There is a vocal articulation of a seeming increase in the incidence of suicide, anecdotally and in newspaper reports. The Saturday Star, for example, documents an increase in “Black suicides” in Durban from 1% in 1988, to 4% in 1995 (increase in Black suicides, 1998), and 75% in 1998 (Jackman, 1998, December 14). The Natal Witness reports that “a previously taboo cultural form of behaviour has shown an increase of nearly 60% over a 10 year period... Black people have overtaken other ethnic communities” (Lifestyles at risk, 2000, p. 6).

Similarly, these reporters and the people they have interviewed seem to voice an intuitive explanatory placement in a context broader than individual pathology. For Pieter Spaarwater of Die Burger, suicide is a function of a bleak political future (Spaarwater, 1993). Gerhard de Bruin (1999, November 28, p. 4) attributes a 60% increase in suicide among Black South Africans to “stress resulting from increasing pressures to achieve [in less isolated post-Apartheid South Africa]”, and the Saturday Star (Children, 1997, p. 1) reports that “the recent upsurge in suicides... is a reflection of how fragile our society has become”.

In spite of this popular articulation of a “new” kind of suicide, academics have been slow to examine this phenomenon. While I hope that they do, it is also my desire that when the academy directs its gaze at suicide, it does so with the complex, contextual richness it deserves. One is, after all, speaking of a very particular silence - one that we, for that reason, need to get straight. “A man’s life, as unique as his death, will always be more than a paradigm and something other than a symbol” (Derrida, 1994, p. xv, dedication to Chris Hani).

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