

SUICIDE NOTES

**Predictive Clues
and Patterns**



Antoon A. Leenaars, Ph.D.

SUICIDE NOTES

SUICIDE NOTES

Predictive Clues and Patterns

Antoon A. Leenaars, Ph.D., C. Psych.

Windsor

Ontario, Canada



HUMAN SCIENCES PRESS, INC.

72 FIFTH AVENUE

NEW YORK, N.Y. 10011-8004

Copyright © 1988 by Human Sciences Press, Inc.
72 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York 10011

All rights reserved. No part of this work may be reproduced or utilized in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, microfilm and recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without permission in writing from the publisher.

Printed in the United States of America
987654321

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Leenaars, Antoon A.
Suicide notes.

Bibliography: p.
Includes indexes.

1. Suicide. I. Title.

HV6545.L367 1988 362.2 87-21362
ISBN 0-89885-399-0

CONTENTS

	Page
<i>Preface</i>	7
<i>Foreword by Edwin Shneidman</i>	9
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	11
PART I. SUICIDE NOTES AS PERSONAL DOCUMENTS	
1. Suicide, Suicide Notes, and Other Personal Documents	17
2. Previous Studies of Suicide Notes	41
3. Protocol Analysis of Suicide Notes	52
PART II. TEN SUICIDOLOGISTS	
4. Alfred Adler	65
5. Ludwig Binswanger	73
6. Sigmund Freud	81
7. Carl G. Jung	92
8. George Kelly	101
9. Karl A. Menninger	109
10. Henry A. Murray	121
11. Edwin S. Shneidman	130

12.	Harry Stack Sullivan	147
13.	Gregory Zilboorg	156
PART III. IMPLICATIONS AND APPLICATIONS		
14.	Summary and Synthesis	171
15.	Suicide Notes, 1945–1954 and 1983–1984; Differences and Similarities	194
16.	Some Observations on Age and Sex	199
17.	Final Comments	207
<i>Appendices:</i>		
A)	Bibliography of Suicide Notes: 1856–1987	215
B)	Suicide Notes: 1983–1984	231
<i>References</i>		261
<i>About the Author</i>		271
<i>Name Index</i>		272
<i>Subject Index</i>		275

PREFACE

From the first day that I found a copy of Shneidman and Farberow's book, *Clues to Suicide*, suicide notes have been a focus of mine in studying suicidal phenomena. Suicide is a human malaise and suicide notes are the penultimate act giving a voice to this malaise. If I may quote my friend and "teacher": Shneidman, in *Voices of Death*, wrote that such personal "documents contain special revelations of the human mind and that there is much one can learn from them." Suicide notes allow us to learn about a person, to advance the nomothetic and idiographic approaches in science, and to aid in the aims of science in general—understanding, prediction, and control.

This is a book in both the theoretical and empirical traditions. My goal is to present, as straightforwardly as possible, the formulations of 10 suicidologists: Alfred Adler, Ludwig Binswanger, Sigmund Freud, Carl G. Jung, Karl A. Menninger, George Kelly, Henry A. Murray, Edwin S. Shneidman, Harry Stack Sullivan, and Gregory Zilboorg. These men have given us a rich history of suicidological thought. It is not the intent here to present their complete theories of personality but only their formulations regarding suicide. The book is also a presentation of new data: the

common and differentiating variables in suicide notes and, by implication, suicide; the differences and similarities of suicide notes from 1945–1954 and 1983–1984; and some observations on age and sex.

My driving need behind this book is the belief that understanding of suicide notes and, by implication, suicide can be used to assist us in preventing the event. When understanding is inadequate and based not on *any* sound empiricism, remediation (i.e., prevention, intervention, and postvention) is likely to be ineffective. It is hoped that the definition of suicide derived from suicide notes will assist a needful individual in some way.

In the appendices, there is a collection of suicide notes. These are within the public domain and were kindly provided through the office of the Los Angeles Coroner. However, the suicide notes themselves are disguised to avoid any invasion of privacy. The notes remind us that we are talking about people—people who experienced unbearable pain and saw suicide as the *only* solution. We are in debt to these individuals for letting us know what it was like for them at the last moments of their life.

Edwin Shneidman is a special person to me. He has been the guiding light to this book and my study of suicide and people in general. Anyone who knows his work will know his influence on me.

A.L.

June, 1987

FOREWORD

Not at all surprisingly, I am extremely happy to be asked to write a foreword to an extraordinarily fine book in which my own work is examined and discussed. For me, this act has something of the quality of a silent self-directed prayer: To call a blessing on oneself.

Part of my qualifications in this present instance is that I have had a long and keen interest in suicide notes. Since 1949—when I came upon hundreds of suicide notes in the vaults of the Los Angeles County Coroner's Office and almost continuously since then—I have been fascinated with suicide notes as a special kind of thematic material—a response, as it were, to the Blank card of the Thematic Apperception Test written by a person in a suicidal context, and amenable to the rules of thematic interpretation in general.

Over the past almost 40 years I have held more than one view about the power and usefulness of suicide notes as “golden windows” into the world of suicide. Like an amateur Hegelian philosopher I have undergone my own dialectical process, first (in 1952) believing the *thesis*—that suicide notes were *the* absolutely best way to study the affective and cognitive components

of the suicidal act; then (in 1973), proposing the *antithesis*—that suicide notes, written, as I asserted, in a state of great constriction and closed-mindedness, could not, by virtue of the circumstances in which they were composed, be the wide-ranging and revelatory documents I first thought them; and finally (in 1980), the *synthesis*—in which I appreciated that both the thesis and the antithesis had been overstatements, and that many suicide notes, when put in the context of life history of that individual who wrote the note, could throw enormous light on the life, just as the life could help illuminate many aspects of the note. I now believe that, in the overall study of suicide, suicide notes are very important documents and play a special role both in the study of suicidal phenomena generally and in the analysis of specific cases of suicide.

Dr. Antoon Leenaars has done the kind of study with suicide notes that I highly endorse. He has embedded his intensive study of suicide notes within the larger context of suicide theory. His previous published studies of this genre include his analyses of notes-and-theory of Binswanger, George Kelly, and Freud. And now he has turned to other published work on suicide, including my own.

Here, in Dr. Leenaars's book is the first extensive operational study which attempts to combine notes with suicidal theory. Hypotheses generated from theory are, through the examination of suicide notes, put to empirical test. Leenaars's attempts to use suicide *notes* as the vehicle for establishing an empirical suicidology are the most extensive that I know. He is doing the marvelous thing of scientizing our field by use of its most dramatic personal documents. I support and applaud his efforts and give him every encouragement in this exciting and fruitful endeavor. I recommend this book to every practicing or aspiring suicidologist for both its brilliant methodology and its insightful clinical implications.

Edwin Shneidman, Ph.D.
UCLA
1988

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

First and foremost, I need to make explicit my debt to E. Shneidman. Not only are his formulations central to this book, he read the entire manuscript several times. He made numerous suggestions for improvement, all of which added to its scholarly aspect. I wish, with the deepest gratitude, to thank him for his sense of “generativity.”

I am pleased to acknowledge the assistance of W. Balance, who worked for years with me on the research and assisted the book with his fine Southern pen. The Judges—P. Arnaut, J. Berrek, D. Chernets, S. Clyne-Jackson, T. Fellbaum, C. Loughner, C. McMullin, D. Mooney, D. Rudzinski, and S. Wenckstern—who obviously worked long hours, made the data possible. The patient secretarial assistance of L. Brown, N. Dawid, R. Edwards, and L. LaPorte are greatly appreciated. The support of my family, former teachers, friends and colleagues has been encouraging. My wife, Susanne, made various suggestions that improved the book. My children, Lindsey and Heather, allowed me to work on the book (despite the occasional, “No dada, Me!”)

I am extremely appreciative of the editorial guidance of Norma Fox, editor-in-chief and her excellent staff at Human

Sciences Press, Inc. A word of thanks to May Dikeman for a thoughtful editing of the manuscript.

Appreciation is acknowledged to the following for permission to reproduce materials that appear in this volume:

Excerpts from "The Case of Ellen West" in *Existence: A New Dimension in Psychiatry and Psychology* by L. Binswanger. (W. Mendel & J. Lyons, Trans; R. May, E. Angel & H. Ellenberger, Eds.) Copyright, 1958 Basic Books, Inc. Reprinted by permission of Basic Books, Inc.

Excerpts from "Mourning and Melancholia" from Volume XIV, "A Case of Homosexuality in a Woman" from Volume XVIII and "The Ego and the Id" from Volume XIX of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* by S. Freud. (J. Strachey, Ed. and Trans.) Copyright, 1974, Sigmund Freud Copyrights Ltd, The Institute of Psycho-Analysis and The Hogarth Press. Reprinted by permission.

Excerpts from *Collected Papers, Vol. 2, by Sigmund Freud*, Authorized Translation under the supervision of Joan Riviere. Published by Basic Books, Inc. by arrangement with The Hogarth Press Ltd. and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London. Reprinted by permission.

Excerpts from *Collected Papers, Vol. 4, by Sigmund Freud*, Authorized Translation under the supervision of Joan Riviere. Published by Basic Books, Inc. by arrangement with The Hogarth Press Ltd. and The Institute of Psycho-Analysis, London. Reprinted by permission.

Excerpts from "The Ego and the Id" from Volume XIX of *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud* by S. Freud. Reprinted with permission from W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.

Excerpts from "Psychological Types" from Volume VI, "The Relations Between the Ego and the Unconscious" from Volume VII, and "Symbol and the Interpretation of Dreams" from Volume XVIII of *The Collected Works of C. G. Jung* by C. G. Jung (R. Hull, Trans.). Copyright, 1974, 1977, by Princeton University Press/Routledge & Kegan Paul. Reprinted by permission of Princeton University Press.

Excerpts from *Man Against Himself* by K. Menninger. Copy-

right, 1983, 1966 by Karl A. Menninger. Reprinted by permission of Harcourt, Brace, Jovanovich, Inc.

Excerpts from *Voices of Death* by Edwin Shneidman. Copyright, 1980, 1982, by Edwin Shneidman. Published by Harper and Row, 1980 and Bantam Books, 1982. Reprinted by permission of Edwin Shneidman.

Excerpts from *Definition of Suicide* by Edwin Shneidman. Copyright, 1985, Edwin Shneidman. Reprinted by permission of John Wiley & Sons, Inc.

Excerpts from *Clues to Suicide* by E. Shneidman and N. Farberow (Eds.) Copyright, 1957, by McGraw-Hill Book, Co. Reprinted by permission of McGraw-Hill Book Co.

Excerpts from *The Collected Works of Harry Stack Sullivan* by H.S. Sullivan. Copyright 1940, 1956, 1962, 1964 by W.W. Norton & Co., Inc. Reprinted by permission of W.W. Norton & Co., Inc.

Excerpts from "Differential diagnostic types of suicide," *Archives of Neurology and Psychiatry*, 1936, 35, 270–291, by G. Zilboorg. Copyright, 1986, by American Medical Association. Reprinted by permission of American Medical Association.

Excerpts from "Considerations on suicide, with particular reference to that of the young," *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 1937, 7, 15–31, by G. Zilboorg. Copyright, 1937, by American Orthopsychiatry Society. Reprinted by permission of American Orthopsychiatry Society.

Part I

SUICIDE NOTES AS PERSONAL DOCUMENTS

Understanding suicidal phenomena—like understanding all complicated human acts—is a complex endeavor, involving information and insights drawn from many sources. One obvious source is the suicide note. This volume introduces the reader to a definition of suicide in terms of suicide notes. Part I consists of three chapters: A discussion of suicide notes and personal documents; a review of the literature on suicide notes; and an outline for a theoretical analysis of suicide notes. All this is preliminary to Part II which presents a study of 10 suicidologists. Part III presents some implications and applications.

