

A Qualitative Content Analysis of Quebec Suicide Notes

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## **Abstract**

### A Qualitative Content Analysis of Quebec Suicide Notes

William Pittman

This paper will present the results of a qualitative content analysis of 292 Québec suicide notes from the year 2005. The content of suicide notes differed based on age and sex; experiencing a recent breakup also affected the content of the notes. The sociological significance of the results is explored in an effort to gain insight into contemporary trends in Western suicide, most notably the prevalence of youth suicide and the over-mortality of males. Suicide notes from teens and young adults contained the most instances of complaints about society, which may indicate a level of disdain for the world they are leaving behind. In addition, youth suicide notes were characterized by a lack of precise meaning attached to their actions, which indicates either an inability to define their situation, or an unwillingness to do so. Suicide notes from females contained more soothing remarks as well as more remarks denoting vengeance or anger towards others; this is interpreted as a tendency to focus on interpersonal elements when framing their message. Males, conversely, focused more on their internal characteristics when framing themselves and their situation within the notes. For males experiencing a recent breakup, their tendency was to frame themselves as dejected and deserving of their fate; for females experiencing a recent breakup, their tendency was to frame themselves as a victim of harmful individuals. Regardless of gender, the presence of a breakup drastically changed the collective message of the suicide notes.

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## **Introduction**

Suicide is a worldwide phenomenon that no social group is immune to. However, social groups do have distinct rates of suicide, which is at the core of the sociology of suicide. Suicide has been linked to sociology since its inception as an academic discipline. Émile Durkheim's book *Le Suicide*, written in 1897, is a foundational text not only for the study of suicide but for the establishment of sociology as a legitimate science.

Since that time, the landscape of suicide has changed dramatically, calling for an updated sociological understanding of the phenomenon. New trends beginning in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have brought changes to the suicide rates of many Western nations; this included the contemporary emergence of youth suicide. Research is beginning to understand the nature of contemporary suicide, but much is still unknown. There are many great works that explore suicide from a sociological perspective, however most of the current literature is from other disciplines, most notably psychology.

The present research aims to make a modest contribution to the study of suicide that exemplifies how the discipline of sociology is needed in order to compliment psychology's understanding of the act as an individual phenomenon. Although sociology explores suicide in terms of its social characteristics, the act necessarily reveals itself through its individual manifestations. The *wave of potential* that is the social results in the *particle* that is the human being (to use a metaphor from quantum mechanics). Using this logic, it is possible to recognize indicators of a particular social reality within individual cases. By comparing the personal experiences of individuals who committed suicide, it becomes possible to observe the connections that define suicide as a collective phenomenon.

Perhaps the most direct way to gain personal insight into a suicidal victim is to analyze the notes that they leave behind. The value that suicide notes have as a research item comes from their unsolicited nature and their direct connection to the act of suicide. The note is an extension of the communication that suicide represents.

Suicide notes can be considered a dialogue because of how they converse with the reader, but the finality of the act of suicide makes it a one-way dialogue. The messages within a suicide note are necessarily one-way because most people would protest or intervene when someone tells them they are going to commit suicide. Authors usually display an understanding that their loved ones do not want them to commit suicide, and the note carries with it an expectation to justify an act that is generally frowned upon.

The paper will begin with a review of the literature in order to situate the current study within the broader context of research on suicide and suicide notes. The focal point of the literature review is about describing the researcher Edwin S. Shneidman, who was the first to study suicide notes in a systematic way. Shneidman's collection of works set the groundwork for many of the trends still present today in suicide note research. Even if some of his more specific ideas have been discarded, Shneidman and other early suicidologists outlined some of the core principles still present in the psychology of suicide.

Understanding how these trends originated will help to understand the current landscape of suicide note research in psychology, and question some of its underlying assumptions. In addition, the literature will attempt to outline how sociology distinguishes itself in relation to psychology in the study of suicide and suicide notes. Different methods of researching suicide

notes will be explored, with an emphasis on explaining qualitative techniques of content analysis. Important also will be discussing the modern landscape of suicide and how this should dictate the direction of future research.

## **A Brief Review of the Literature**

### **Section 1) The Definition of Suicide & The Nature of Suicide Notes**

One of the important functions of this literature review will be to help develop working definitions of key terms. For research on suicide, there is a particular importance placed on defining the topic of study (Volant, 1990). What may appear as an easy phenomenon to define becomes a nuanced topic to characterize.

Émile Durkheim found it necessary to define the concept of suicide systematically in order to move beyond common sense conceptions. Durkheim (1951) described suicide as an act (passive or assertive) where an individual consciously brings about their own death (directly or indirectly). This was a pragmatic way to define suicide that focussed on eliminating any grey area about which types of death were being classified.

Norman L. Farberow & Edwin S. Shneidman (1961, p. 62) use the term “self destruction” because they develop it as a specific psychological construct. This is done to characterize suicide as a response to some psychological need (Shneidman, 1985). Shneidman (1985, p. 206) describes the gesture as a “consciously intended act of self-inflicted cessation”, making sure to carefully define each word in the sentence. When defining suicide (self-inflicted cessation) Shneidman et al. (1970, pp. 15-17) classify the act into four subcategories of “intentioned” death,

where the actor has a direct and conscious role in their own demise; *psyde-seekers*, *psyde-initiators*, *psyde-ignorers*, and *psyde-darers*. Shneidman et al. (1970, p. 18) also acknowledge a *subintentioned* category of deaths that do not qualify as suicide, where the actor has a partial, indirect or unconscious role in their own demise<sup>1</sup>.

Éric Volant offers a different idea of how to define suicide that differs on a fundamental level from both Durkheim and Shneidman. When studying suicides as an ensemble, the definition of the phenomenon cannot be limited to the act itself (Volant, 1990). Suicide is still defined in terms of a mortal gesture executed by oneself, but also as the result of a series of “malaises” in their life leading up to the act (Volant, 1990, p. 25). Dagenais (2007b) describes suicide as an execution not only of oneself, but of one’s social identity. This all goes against the claim made by Shneidman (1985) that suicide is an inherently individual act and that its essential elements are psychological.

This research paper will use the term *suicide* to describe both the individual act of taking one’s own life, as well as its reality as a social phenomenon. The word *suicidee* will also be used in this paper in order to describe someone who commits suicide. The use of the term ‘suicidee’ is inspired by Volant’s (1990, pp. 26-27) use of the word “suicidant” as something different from being suicidal, or a person who has completed suicide. The *suicidant* is in a state where the likelihood of suicide is elevated; they are the ones that prevention efforts are primarily aimed towards. A **Suicidee** (as it is used in this paper) is a person who has committed suicide, or a person who has definitively chosen to commit suicide in the near future; defined retrospectively, because otherwise there is no way to know with certainty.

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the *psyde-chancer*, who has less of a chance of death than the *psyde-darier* in the intentioned category.

The majority of suicides are not accompanied by a written message. Shneidman (1969) declared that about 20% of suicides included a note, which is also the percentage that Volant (2006) gave when discussing the context of Québec. According to Paul-André Perron (Conseiller-expert en gouvernance et en surveillance des traumatismes at the *Bureau du coroner* of Québec), the percentage of suicidees who leave a note fluctuates between 20 and 25% in the province of Québec.

The percentage of note-leavers has been reported to be as low as 3%, and as high as 42%, which has caused some to question their generalizability; there is a lack of evidence suggesting that people who leave a note are representative of those who commit suicide without leaving a note, or people who leave a note but are unsuccessful in their attempt (Grayson et al., 2020). This means there is also a retrospective element when it comes to defining suicide notes. Those who die from suicide are a different, albeit overlapping, population from those who survive their attempt or suffer from ideation. Letters written from those who go on to live are therefore categorically different from the suicide notes used in this research paper.

The reasons for leaving behind a suicide note are numerous; they are sometimes practical, sometimes to prevent somebody from witnessing the scene, sometimes to affirm the act as a suicide (Volant, 2006). The intended (manifest) function of suicide notes are to express or release thoughts and emotions, however there is also a latent function of suicide notes which is a coordination between people with similar issues (Williams, 2017). The unintended coordination between suicidees is what makes comparing a collection of suicide notes possible.

The definition of a suicide note is not discussed much in the literature. Farberow and Shneidman (1961) do not go beyond describing them as written **communications** left from

people who later committed suicide. Volant (2006) also discusses this idea of suicide notes being a communication to others, saying they are more of a dialogue than a text because of how they are meant for somebody else. Antoon A. Leenaars (1988) defines suicide notes as a communication, and adds that they are unstructured and **unsolicited**. The unsolicited nature of suicide notes is also mentioned by Galasinski (2017b), which contributes to them being rare and sensitive items of research.

A suicide note is therefore an *unsolicited* personal document, meant as a *communication to others*, connected to the act of consciously ending one's own life<sup>2</sup>.

The value of suicide notes as a research document comes from their connection to a complex human behavior that cannot be inquired about directly. Unlike most complicated human acts, we cannot inquire directly from a person who has taken their own life; the only other options are statistics, third party interviews, or other types of personal documents (Leenaars, 1988). Researchers have been interested in looking through journal entries of people who committed suicide (Gratton, 1996), but these types of documents are distinguished from a suicide note. Suicide notes are distinct from diaries not only because the former are messages meant for others, but because they are messages directly connected to the act of suicide. Diaries and other personal documents do not hold the same special relevance.

There is also a temporal proximity to the act that tends to differentiate suicide notes from other personal documents like diaries. This period of time is referenced by Farberow and Shneidman (1961) when they describe the pre-suicidal phase of an individual who later takes their own life. Volant (2006, pp. 217-219) calls suicide notes a snapshot into the state of mind of

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<sup>2</sup> There has been a debate about how to define what constitutes an act of suicide, however, in most studies about suicide notes there is no disagreement about the deaths being classified as self-inflicted.

a *suicidant*, representing the sentiments inhabiting them at the moment of their departure. There will always be a time gap between the writing of a suicide note and the act itself (Volant 1990), though the notes are usually written moments before death (Leenaars, 1988). A small number of suicide notes are written days or even weeks before a person takes their own life, which may challenge this temporal classification. However, their decision to write a thought-out letter regarding their impending suicide suggests that they have crossed the threshold of being at mortal risk for suicide (thus becoming a suicidee).

Leaving a written communication before committing suicide may be indicative of a different set of priorities compared to those who choose not to leave a note<sup>3</sup>. Suicide note authors have a desire to say their final goodbyes and leave a trace in the world (Volant, 1990). Although the act of suicide is already a communication, leaving a suicide note distinguishes those who want to leave an explicit final message. More research is needed to determine how representative suicide note authors are of the total population of suicidees, however the implicit link between the two groups is that the act of suicide is in itself a very specific type of communication; the same message could not be achieved, for example, by simply disappearing without a trace.

## **Section 2) Methods in Suicide Note Research & Techniques of Qualitative Analysis**

Methods for studying suicide notes do not differ fundamentally from techniques used to study other written personal documents. Leenaars (1988) discusses the analysis of personal documents in general, describing them as materiel that allows researchers to gain maximum relevance into subjects with acceptable precision. Suicide notes are a reliable source of materiel;

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<sup>3</sup> A person may also be in a position where they cannot leave a suicide note due to lack of time, resources or ability.

not because they are accurate depictions, but because they can capture a certain reality in spirit (Volant, 2006).

Leenaars wrote in 1988 that the study of suicide notes is still in its formative years. These sentiments are being echoed in recent literature that calls for research on more up-to-date suicide notes (Grayson et al., 2020). Some researchers like Leenaars (1988) use the same notes that Shneidman studied in the 1950's, and others like Grayson et al. (2020) use some of Shneidman's corpus to consummate their own collection of notes. This attests to the scarcity of suicide notes as a research object, which contributes to them being an under-studied topic in suicide literature (Galasinski, 2017b).

Shneidman's approach to studying suicide notes was to compare genuine ones with a set of simulated ones. The specific methods used were techniques like the "discomfort relief quotient" (DRQ), which studied the notes by breaking them down into "thought units" that denoted relief, discomfort, or neutral sentiments (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957, p. 7). The data was used for statistical comparisons between the two sets of notes. Beginning with Shneidman, the vast majority of research on suicide notes has been statistical or quantitative in nature (Williams, 2017; Galasinski, 2017b).

Shneidman's studies are characterized by the use of scientifically controlled experiments; the simulated notes are meant to be a control group for the real notes. There are inherent issues with using scientific experiments to study suicide notes. The independent variable (suicide) has already occurred, and thus there is a lack of control over extraneous variables that can cause misinterpretations (Leenaars, 1988). Leenaars conducted controlled experiments in his own

research, so his critique is more about acknowledging the limitations of the methodology rather than arguing against its utility for studying suicide notes.

Leenaars (1988, p. 53) described his methods as “theo-conceptual” due to the importance it places on infusing a theoretical analysis into the study of suicide notes. All research implies at least implicitly certain theoretical positions, even if not every researcher explores them explicitly (Leenaars, 1988). Leenaars attempted to break down various hypotheses on the psychology of suicide proposed by influential thinkers such as Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and test their relevance for characterizing real versus simulated suicide notes. *Protocol sentences* were created to represent different theorists and their conceptions of suicide; these protocol sentences were compared to both the real and simulated letters to determine which theorists were most congruent with what was written in suicide notes (Leenaars, 1988, pp. 56-60). The goal was not about determining which psychological theories were correct, but which ones are more accurate at describing the suicide notes. The aim of Leenaars’ (1988) study was to isolate the common features of suicide and find commonalities between suicidal people. This compares somewhat with Shneidman’s goal to discover a “suicidal logic”, which aims to classify a certain aberrant mindset related to suicide (Shneidman et al., 1970, p. 63).

Both Shneidman and Leenaars use a deductive approach when trying to identify the special features of suicide within the letters, meaning they analyzed the content based on previously determined categories. The deductive approach aims to predict results and test hypotheses. Greyson et al. (2020), for example, aimed to test the applicability of Durkheim’s classic typology to suicide notes using predetermined codes and categories. Using a technique called the *smallest space analysis* to group together codes that co-occurred with one another,

evidence for all four categories of Durkheim's typology were found within the notes<sup>4</sup> (Grayson et al., 2020, pp. 146-150).

One limitation of the deductive approach is that it is prone to a bias towards the theories being tested. By utilizing previously established categories to study suicide notes, analysts run the risk of confirmation bias while coding (Rogers et al, 2007). Researchers have been criticized for classifying the language in suicide notes into pre-existing categories without proper consideration of the context of the words (Galasinski, 2017a). Shneidman's study necessitates that the statements within suicide notes be interpreted as positive, negative, or neutral according to the DRQ. When discussing certain shortcomings of this measure, the rigidity of the deductive approach is tacitly admitted by Shneidman. While the DRQ found no significant differences in *discomfort statements*, further examination made it apparent that the genuine notes were characterised by more deep and intense feelings (of self-hate or vengeance, for example) (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957, p. 7). The DRQ was unable to pick up on the qualitative differences between the two sets of notes, even though both showed quantitatively a similar amount of 'discomfort'.

There are also limitations associated with the use of statistical methods in general to study suicide notes. The majority of research on suicide notes has been statistical, and it has been criticized for not exploring the lived realities of those who take their own life (Williams, 2017). Although statistical research has and will continue to yield useful results, there is a lack of qualitative research on suicide that explores victims in a personalized way. One researcher that

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<sup>4</sup> Anomic and Egoistic suicide were recorded the most, followed by altruistic suicide, with Fatalistic suicides being found only rarely.

did aim to explore the subjective realities of suicidal victims was Francine Gratton (1996), who looked at five cases in depth.

Gratton (1996) is inspired by the theoretical groundwork of Max Weber, and posits that sociology can glean relevant information from individual action, even when one does not fully comprehend the act or its motivations. This is congruent with the idea that the social phenomenon of suicide is able to be found within a series of individual actions (Dagenais, 2007a). Baudelot and Establet (2008) also claim that suicide can shed light on society, but achieve this by researching broad social changes accompanying variations in the suicide rate. This highlights the difference between studying the social aspects of suicide from a macro perspective and studying the social through individual cases of suicide.

Gratton (1996) reconstructed the life histories of five Quebec youth suicide victims by analyzing personal documents like journals and school work, as well as conducting interviews with people close to the victims. Williams (2017) likewise chose a qualitative approach with fewer participants when studying a group of 10 suicide attempt survivors. Dagenais (2011) used a sample of 32 youth suicide cases that were analyzed in depth; this was achieved by conducting open-ended interviews with people who knew the victims, allowing respondents to give personalized responses.

Research that analyzes a comparatively small number of cases in depth will necessarily have different goals than a study that uses a larger corpus of suicide notes. When analyzing a large corpus of suicide notes like the one used in the present research, the nature of the analysis will be broader due to the difference in scale. Gratton (1996) emphasizes how qualitative methods should be custom-made for the specific situation, which is why a qualitative study on a

large number of suicidees must differ from her research not only methodologically, but theoretically as well. The analysis of a corpus of suicide notes cannot be as in-depth as a life history or an open-ended interview, but it is conducive to a more widespread study of the subjective experiences of suicidees.

Volant attempts a similar kind of large-scale subjective understanding with his analysis of suicide notes. Volant (1990, pp. 27, 38) attempted to outline tracks (“pistes”) within suicide notes with the aim of better understanding the authors by grasping their reality. Whereas Shneidman and other suicidologists attempted to outline the suicidal logic as a pathological mindset, Volant attempted a more empathetic understanding without assuming a flaw in their logic. The tracks that Volant (1990) aimed to identify in the notes were also more intimately connected to socio-historical considerations. The difference between Volant and Shneidman’s approach to studying suicide notes is related to their methods of content analysis.

Volant used what can be described as a qualitative content analysis, which yields results closer to the lived reality of those under study when compared to statistical analyses based on preconceived categories<sup>5</sup>. Qualitative content analysis (or ethnographic content analysis as it is sometimes known) is growing in popularity as a method for analyzing cultural documents, and offers many benefits in the form of flexible and reflexive techniques (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016). Emphasis is placed on generating novel descriptions of a phenomenon that is not based on deductively applied categories.

When conducting content analyses from a qualitative standpoint, it is particularly important for the researcher not to allow their own tastes and opinions to guide the analysis (van

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<sup>5</sup> This is not to discount the numerous benefits of quantitative content analyses in the study of suicide notes.

den Hoonard, 2015). This is because the researcher is relying heavily on their own insights to classify the material. Researchers must set aside their own theoretical notions in order to allow hypotheses to emerge from the data (Cresswell, 2007). Dixon-Woods et al. (2007, pp. 794-795) contrast ethnographic content analysis with what they call “traditional” forms of content analysis; the ethnographic approach offered benefits that the traditional coding methods were lacking, allowing for more detailed codes that directly reference the texts (Dixon-Woods et al., 2007).

One way of implementing a qualitative content analysis is to use initial impressions to develop preliminary codes, which eventually get refined into new labels that get grouped together into higher-order categories; all while the data is constantly referenced for validity (Keenan & Campbell, 2015). This type of content analysis may begin with a technique called **open coding** that does not use predetermined labels. Open coding begins by looking for broad clusters of data to label (Cresswell, 2007); the process generates new labels from the data that are unique to the study (van den Hoonard, 2015). During the preliminary stages of an inductive content analysis such as that, it is imperative that researchers remain open to exploring whatever theoretical possibilities could be discerned from the data (Charmaz, 2006).

Open coding is typically followed by a refinement of codes into categories, which leads to the development of themes or descriptions that emerge from the data in a way that describes it directly (Saldaña, 2013; van den Hoonard, 2015). When developing more refined codes, previously established theories can be utilized; pre-established theories may also influence categorization without the researcher being aware (Saldaña, 2013). After categorizing the data and finalizing all of the groupings, a comparison of the discovered themes is typically performed (Neuendorf & Kumar, 2016).

Volant (2006) exemplifies this process of refining initial codes into more specific ideas that get thematically analyzed; he begins with an affective analysis where spontaneous feelings are recorded, followed by an empathetic analysis where the intensity of the sentiments are explored, followed finally by an analysis of the notes that attempts to explore the deeper structures within them. The flexibility of these methods is also emphasized (Volant, 2006). As opposed to exploring how the words do or do not fit into a particular measure, qualitative content analyses can interpret what the text subjectively represents to those who wrote it.

Many aspects of qualitative coding, including the open coding process, have its basis in grounded theory (van den Hoonaard, 2015; Cresswell, 2007). The strength of grounded theory comes from its malleability and its responsiveness to data (Clarke, 2005); it can apply itself to a wide variety of contexts and explain a diverse set of descriptors (Charmaz, 2006). Gratton (1996) uses grounded theory because she wanted to construct a theoretical position that is anchored in the data she collected from suicidees. The development of **sensitising concepts** is a more modest goal than the creation of grounded theories, and aims to be more specific to the subjects under study; researchers justify their interpretations of the data as opposed to creating formal theories about the data (Clarke, 2005). Developing sensitizing concepts involves looking for factors that people use to explain themselves or their situation, and understanding the relevance that these ideas have for describing a particular social group (van den Hoonaard, 2015).

Volant (1990) implemented certain principles of grounded theory in his study of suicide notes, which allowed new hypotheses to emerge directly from the findings. However, Volant also explored certain preconceived ideas, particularly about the connection between religious decline and the increase of suicide in Québec. Volant (1990, p. 160) develops the idea of a posthumous self (“moi posthume”) in an effort to explore the spiritual profile created by the

authors. The goal was to gain a better understanding of the meaning and values connected to the suicidal gesture. Specifically, Volant (1990) developed a classification-system where notes were given a label (or labels) characterizing their content; the most popular label was “la fuite” (pp. 82-85) where the will to live has disappeared due to a lack of hope or too much suffering, and suicide is framed as the only option.

A different way of studying suicide notes qualitatively is to use discourse analysis. Discourse analysis explores the social context that language is embedded in (LeGreco, 2014). In a study of male suicide victims, Galasinski (2017b) analyzed the discursive formations within suicide notes in relation to norms of masculine identity. Discourse analysis juxtaposes the methods of researchers like Shneidman and Farberow (1957) who divide suicide notes into thought units. Galasinski (2017) claims that language should not be taken as a transparent medium to view the mind of those speaking or writing, and thus challenges the popular practice of equating words and phrases in suicide notes directly to an author’s thoughts. A recent example of this popular practice is exemplified by Grayson et al. (2020, p. 146) who segregated suicide notes according to “thought units”, which were defined according to their function within the letter; the thought units represent what the author achieves by the use of a word phrase.

### **Section 3) The Suicidal Mindset, Suicide Prevention & Comparing the Psychology of Suicide with the Sociology of Suicide**

Early suicidologists attempted to define the suicidal mindset and outline its problematic logic. In devising his logical analysis of suicide, Shneidman meant not to replace, but to complement the psychoanalytic approach in psychology (Shneidman et al., 1970). Shneidman

does not discount the existence of subconscious factors and other psychoanalytic drives, though his psychology of suicide is approached from a different perspective.

According to Shneidman, the suicidal logic is one that is fundamentally flawed in a specific way. Suicidal victims possess a *semantic fallacy*<sup>6</sup> in their logic which causes them to mistake their lived-self with their perceived-self; they perceive suicide as a way to achieve attention, but fail to see that their actual existence will not be around to receive this attention (Shneidman et al. 1970, pp. 64-65). While exceptions do exist, such as those that display a desire for eternal nothingness (Shneidman et al., 1970), this is the general flaw that is observed in the logic of suicide.

The suicidal logic is meant to be distinct from other logics, such as the logic of those in good mental health, or the logic of schizophrenics (Shneidman et al., 1970). The contrast between suicidal logic and normal logic seems to pathologize the suicidal mindset, especially as Shneidman also juxtaposes it with the logic of other mental illnesses. While Farberow and Shneidman do insist that suicide is not synonymous with mental illness (1961), they describe suicidees in terms of an abnormal psychology similar to that of a mental illness.

Shneidman's prevention strategies are informed by his ideas of the suicidal logic. The strategy is to discover the unique way of thinking that distinguishes suicidees in an attempt to identify those who require help. Leenaars (1988) likewise attempted to isolate the common features of suicidal individuals to aid in their treatment. It is about finding the danger signals of suicide, or as one book is titled, the *Clues to Suicide* (Shneidman & Farberow, 1957). If results are shown to be unsuccessful or unreliable, then it is attributed to methodological shortcomings

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<sup>6</sup> For example: I want attention; suicide results in attention; if I commit suicide, I will receive attention.

in terms of the ability to identify these signs of suicidal risk and predict how they affect behavior. The guiding principle is that in the future, with better methods, it will eventually be possible to reduce the complex and diverse aspects of suicide into a mathematical formula denoting the risk of committing suicide (Farberow & Shneidman, 1961).

The process of identifying factors related to suicide still informs suicide prevention efforts today in the realm of psychology. Researchers use environmental and psychosocial correlations to understand and predict suicidal behaviour (Adam, 1990). These “risk factors” are described as a wide array of variables or conditions that are related to suicidal behaviour; the term “protective factors” is also used to describe similar variables that correlate negatively with suicidal thoughts and behavior (Leenaars et al., 1998, pp. 278-279)<sup>7</sup>. A strong sense of self-continuity and a stable environment of cultural-persistence have both been cited as protective factors against suicide (Chandler et al., 2003).

Risk and protective factors for suicide are not meant to be a determination of who will or will not commit suicide, they are an assessment of the likelihood the act will occur (Leenaars et al., 1998). Many who experience both pre-existing conditions and a major stressor do not commit suicide (Leenaars et al., 1998). Suicide is exceptional in every case; for those experiencing a large number of risk factors, most will still not commit suicide (Baudelot & Establet, 2008).

Psychology’s emphasis on finding factors related to suicide displays how prevention efforts are aimed towards those who are already at risk. This is why Farberow and Shneidman

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<sup>7</sup> Leenaars et al. (1998, 282-284) divides risk factors into different categories, including *predisposing factors* such as having depression, *precipitating factors* such as losing a valued relationship, and *contributing factors* such as substance use or having limited resources in a community; examples of *protective factors* include possessing good coping skills and feeling part of your community.

(1961, pp. 60-61) find it important to develop measures like “self-destructive potentiality”, which is meant to be a guide for professionals in an immediate position to help. This idea of suicide prevention is still present in current psychological literature. Grayson et al. (2020) see the utility of their study on suicide notes as providing useful knowledge about suicide completers in hopes it can inform better therapeutic interventions.

In describing how the logistical fallacy reveals itself within suicide notes, Shneidman and Farberow (1957) describe how more neutral statements<sup>8</sup> are present in genuine suicide notes, which is interpreted as evidence of a feeling of omnipresence, as well as paradoxical motivations; authors are confused about whether they will actually be around to enforce their commands. The explanation for this fallacious logic is a false identification with one’s socially perceived self. Suicide note authors falsely believe that the effects of their social self (“I<sup>0</sup>”, or more simply, their reputation) will be experienced by their lived self (“I<sup>8</sup>”) which they fail to realize will no longer be around after the suicide (Shneidman et al. 1970, pp. 64-66). Though some of the notes display a belief in the afterlife (an “I<sup>8</sup>” that will continue after death), this is the general flaw in the suicidal logic (Shneidman et al. 1970, p. 66).

Shneidman at times questions the value of suicide notes given the authors’ psychological condition, saying that they only had a limited utility, and only if more background context is added (Volant, 2006). Suicide notes are considered somewhat barren by suicidologists like Shneidman and Farberow because the authors of the notes are in a problematic state of mind fixated on suicide (Galasinski, 2017b). The fact that the suicidee is in an incoherent state makes their account of the situation questionable, and diminishes the relevance of their words. Suicidal people are not in a good mentality to properly define their mindset or their problems

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<sup>8</sup> Neutral statements include, for example, leaving instructions or discussing mundane topics.

(Shneidman, 1985). Suicide notes are therefore not very reliable sources when it comes to defining the suicidal logic as a psychological construct (Shneidman, 1985).

Leenaars similarly acknowledges the limited utility of suicide notes to define the suicidal mind. While suicide notes do not give a complete account of “suicidal thinking”, they are useful when put in the context of people’s lives or personality, or in the context of a theoretical framework (Leenaars, 1988, p. 35). There are, however, major limitations when it comes to glean information from people who do not understand their actions well (Leenaars et al., 1998). The reason this is a major limitation is because suicidologists like Leenaars and Shneidman are interested in a clear understanding of the rationale behind the suicidal act for interventional purposes; if suicidees cannot properly identify and convey their thoughts and emotions, and if they are not reliable diagnosticians of their issues, then their insights are given only conditional value.

The psychological approach to suicide prevention has a tendency to disregard the one key witness to the act of suicide because it limits the relevance of what is said in suicide notes. The social reality of suicide is often given limited value as well, because social correlates like gender and income only represent secondary risk factors (Baudelot & Establet, 2008). The psychological approach has been defined as a microscopic analysis of suicide, whereas sociology takes a mesoscopic viewpoint of the phenomenon; psychology takes as its object the causes leading to suicide, while sociology is able to focus more on group dynamics and social context (Baudelot & Establet, 2008). However, the micro and macro perspectives do not have to be mutually exclusive, as Chandler et al. (2003) demonstrate with their exploration of Aboriginal youth suicide in relation to both psychological issues connected to personal persistence as well as societal issues of cultural preservation.

By using a more collective approach, the sociology of suicide is able to infuse a different kind of meaning to the words of a suicidee. The sociological significance of suicide notes stem primarily from their comparison, and not as a diagnosis of individuals. This is the primary principle allowing sociology to challenge the problem identified by Shneidman and other suicidologists, which is that suicide notes give an inaccurate and incomplete account of the true motivations underlying the author's act.

Psychological studies are likewise able to transcend the methodological issue proposed by suicidologists about the supposed unreliability of suicide note authors. Grayson et al. (2020) performed a narrative analysis of suicide notes that prioritized how individuals construct their identity and give their life unique meaning. The existence of narrative themes in the notes also supports the notion that suicide exists as a social phenomenon (Grayson et al., 2020). The ultimate goal of the research, however, is to aid the individual-level prevention strategies that characterize the psychology of suicide. Understanding the inner-narrative of suicidal individuals can provide useful information about their intentions, and ultimately help treat those suffering from ideation (Grayson et al., 2020).

There is a phase where a suicidal person reveals their self-destructive inclination, and a population exists at any one time of people suffering from this mindset (Farberow & Shneidman, 1961). The discipline of psychology has situated itself within the study of suicide as a problem solving discipline; identifying these vulnerable populations and intervening (Shneidman, 1985). Sociology defines itself by studying the phenomenon of suicide more holistically, and as a concept interconnected with socio-historical considerations.

Sociology is able to distinguish itself from psychology based on its comprehensive outlook and wider definition of the phenomenon of suicide. Sociology better recognizes the full reality of suicide as a collection of individual occurrences that connect to an overarching social reality. The discipline is suited to explore the broader significance of suicide notes and their relevance as a social document. The patterns and similarities in suicide notes can be interpreted as a collective phenomenon that incorporates societal-level diagnoses. This is contrary to the discipline of psychology which uses suicide notes to better understand, identify and treat the faulty mindset associated of those who are at an elevated risk for suicide.

The importance of both the psychology and sociology of suicide is no longer a major debate in the literature; there is no outstanding need to defend the utility of either discipline's outlook on suicide. Psychologists describe suicide notes as being *ultra social* as well as *extremely personal* (p. 151), and their importance as a communication to others is acknowledged, along with being an indicator of a particular mental state (Grayson et al., 2020). This was not always the case, however, beginning with Durkheim's (1951) use of suicide to defend the sociological method, and more recently with Shneidman's criticisms of the sociology of suicide.

For Shneidman, the sociology of suicide epitomizes the shortcomings of social or normative approaches in general; it is something that is effective in textbooks, but not in clinics or hospitals (Shneidman et al., 1970). This is true enough, as the clinical concern for prevention is firmly in the domain of psychology. More fundamentally however, Shneidman rejects the principles of a social reality of suicide.

Shneidman (1985, p. 209) does not believe in a mob mind or collective conscious; he does not believe in what he calls "institutional suicides". All suicides are individual acts, even if

they do, to varying degrees, reflect certain group or societal pressures (Shneidman, 1985). This displays an oversimplification of the social processes reflected in the individual acts of suicide. From Shneidman's perspective, suicide research is about recognizing those who already have a problem; tossing life preservers without asking why people are falling off the boat. Conversely, sociology is able to study the collective existence of suicide and what that knowledge means for everybody in society, not just those who possess a suicidal mindset. There does not have to be an overarching concern with how reliable the author is at diagnosing their own issues, because the main interest is in studying what suicidees include their posthumous message; whether accurate or inaccurate.

For the suicidologist, suicide notes are interpreted similar to how they would interpret somebody discussing their problems in a psychologist's office; you can learn something about them and their issues, but the patient has a limited ability to define their psychological state or the true sources of their problem. It is up to the professional to search for a more educated perspective on the individual's underlying issues. Unfortunately, the suicide note is final and one cannot inquire further into their mindset following their act. This is why Shneidman views the significance of suicide notes as limited.

Aside from Shneidman's devaluation of the words of suicidees, his ideas about the problematic mindset of those who take their own life are based upon a weak premise. The idea that neutral topics, like leaving instructions for loved ones, are indicative of confusion about one's continuance in the world is unconvincing. There are multiple conclusions one can make about the existence of neutral statements in suicide notes, and alternate explanations already exist in the psychological literature on suicide notes. Grayson et al. (2020) use various types of

propositions about neutral topics, such as funeral instructions, and apply them to their classification of different narrative roles found within suicide notes<sup>9</sup>.

Attributing neutral statements in suicide notes to a fallacious mindset is particularly questionable because of how most of these types of propositions would not be considered abnormal in other contexts. It is not considered abnormal for those on their deathbed to discuss mundane topics, or for individuals to give instructions about their funeral. It is also not considered a sign incoherent thought for people to project themselves into a future where they will no longer exist or talk about themselves as though they will be here after death. Suicide note authors have been found to have a good grasp of their future, but it is a future they do not wish to continue with (Grayson et al., 2020). There may be a suicidal logic that differs specifically and systematically from the logic of healthy-minded people, though the evidence put forth by Shneidman in order to characterize this mindset is not convincing.

Suicidologists begin with the premise that suicidees possess a fallacious mindset, which is related to why they are unreliable diagnosticians of their mental state. Volant addresses the idea of suicide note authors being unreliable, and agrees with Shneidman to a certain degree. For Volant (1990), suicide notes are written in a confused state which makes them difficult to study; this is compounded by the fact that statements can be interpreted many different ways. Volant comes to a similar conclusion about authors projecting themselves into a future where they will no longer exist, though he interprets the phenomenon in terms of deeply ingrained cultural beliefs.

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<sup>9</sup> Funeral instructions in particular relate to the “anomic hero” theme (Grayson et al., 2020, p. 149).

Volant (1990) noticed that suicide note authors anticipated an existence after death, and he interpreted this phenomenon in light of the widespread Western belief in the permanence of the self. In this view, projecting the self beyond death is seen as a social similarity rather than an abnormal psychology. Volant (1990) goes on to explain how suicidees develop a continuation of their social existence within the notes when constructing their posthumous self.

This present research paper will not concern itself with exploring how suicidees have a distinct logic or a specific self-construction, nor will it study how suicidees develop their narratives or how they discursively represent themselves. This paper instead focuses on the modest goal of describing and analyzing the propositions within suicide notes. There is no attempt to search for what is wrong with suicidees, only what is important for them to write about in their final messages. It is not about comprehending the act of suicide or doing a logical analysis of suicidal individuals, it is about attempting a subjective understanding of the contents of suicide notes using sensitizing concepts.

Suicide is understandable because of its personal significance, even if the act itself may be incomprehensible (Gratton, 1996). How the individual interprets their suicide is important, which is not dependant on suicidees being reliable diagnosticians of their condition. Suicide is only capable of comprehension because it possesses a precise meaning to those committing the act (Gratton, 1996). This subjective understanding is what the present research paper aims to touch upon in an effort to bridge the gap between individual experiences and social realities.

The social factors of suicide can be observed through individual cases (Gratton, 1996; Dagenais, 2007a). The social reveals itself through the actions of individuals, and researchers do not have to comprehend the suicidal act or its motivations in order to observe this collective

reality (Gratton, 1996). Sociological knowledge does not require an in-depth understanding of the logic behind an individual's actions. The psychology of suicide is based on prevention, which focuses on identifying and treating those who are already suicidal, often without much regard for how suicide manifests itself within society.

Shneidman (1969, 20) does mention that true *prevention* of suicide deals with “preventing mental health dysfunctions in the first place”. In this sense suicide *prevention* centers would be more aptly named suicide *interventional* centers, aimed at dealing with those at higher risk or immediate danger of committing the act (Shneidman 1969, 20). This idea of preventing suicide before it manifests itself at the individual-level involves addressing the mental health issues that are antecedent to suicide. Leenaars et al. (1998) express a similar sentiment when explaining how the most effective way to prevent suicide might be to enhance problem solving skills and general self-efficacy, along with destigmatizing mental illness.

Treating underlying conditions related to the development of the suicidal mindset could relate to how sociology may address a theory of prevention in the future. While outlining the social reality of suicide does not directly relate to treating those suffering from ideation, such information could inform better prevention strategies implemented by psychologists and clinicians. The sociology and psychology of suicide are distinct, but not mutually exclusive; significant advancement of suicide research will require furthering the knowledge in both domains and coordinating the results of both disciplines.

#### **Section 4) The Contemporary Picture of Suicide & Future Avenues of Research**

In Canada, males commit suicide more than females in every age category (Pan-Canadian Health Inequalities Reporting Initiative, 2018). However, the relationship between suicidality and gender is not a straightforward one. Suicidal attempts are more common among females than males (Pan-Canadian Health Inequalities Reporting Initiative, 2018). The amount of attempts appears to be fairly equal between the two genders except when looking at the very youngest age groups. Men and Women have also been shown to differ in how they linguistically construct their suicide notes. Women tend to use a more sophisticated vocabulary, and include more indications of hopelessness (Lester & Leenaars, 2016). Gender is therefore a key variable in suicide research because of the consistent and diverse array of differences displayed in suicidal behavior between men and women.

Males have recorded higher suicide rates in most places throughout history. There has, however, been an amplification of this over-mortality of males in contemporary Western societies (Dagenais, 2007a). There is only a very partial overlap between the suicide rates of the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> century overall (Baudelot & Estabiet, 2008), and an increase in male suicide is part of this changing reality. The most drastic change, however, must be the rise in suicide rates for teens and young adults.

Contemporary suicide has been characterized by the proliferation of youth suicide (Dagenais, 2007a). Since the 1970's, there has been a spectacular reversal of the trend of young people having low suicide rates, and elderly people having high suicide rates (Baudelot & Estabiet, 2008). Youth suicide went from an almost unheard of phenomenon to consistently one of the largest suicide rates among age groups in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century. Canada is not exempt from

the reality of youth suicide; for those under 24, it has become the second leading cause of death (Nakhaie & Datta, 2018). Youth suicide emerged in Québec under a unique cultural context. The onset of youth suicide in Québec began when the overrepresentation of males in the suicide rate was beginning to subside (Dagenais, 2007a). Overall, the changes to the gender and age dynamics of suicide seem to be related; males are more affected by rises in youth suicide rates (Baudelot & Establet, 2008).

Theories have emerged that attempt to explain this changing picture of contemporary suicide. The emergence of youth suicide can be viewed as a society's failure to persuade individuals to participate in its symbolic realm as an adult (Dagenais, 2007b). Others attempt to link the oil crisis in the 1970's and its impact on the economy with the reversal of the old-young trend in suicide rates; the oil crisis and subsequent development of the welfare state gives security and comfort for an aging population, while job insecurities rose which primarily affected younger generations (Baudelot & Establet, 2008).

While the halt in economic progress certainly affected youth disproportionately, the emergence of youth suicide will have a series of complex origins that involve a change in how people construct their identities. Dagenais (2011, p. 75) outlined social identities associated with Québec youth who committed suicide, one being the *refusal to become an adult*, another, the *fear of becoming an adult*. This is done in an attempt to discover evidence of how the Western phenomenon of youth suicide manifests itself within the individual. Chandler et al. (2003) related youth suicide to a weak sense of self-continuity (projecting a concrete idea of the self across time), which could be exacerbated by a society that has a weak sense of cultural continuity.

The changing landscape of suicide has also manifested a different set of sentiments popularly associated with the act. Suicide is no longer considered a crime in Western society<sup>10</sup>, but the stigma behind it has not disappeared completely. The act is less stigmatized than in the past, but is still often interpreted as a negative indictment on an individual; the act, for instance, can challenge certain masculine ideals and be perceived as a weakness (Galasinski, 2017b).

There has been a shift from condemnation of suicide towards tolerance of the act, but this newfound acceptance is half-hearted and non-universal (Daube, 1972). This is displayed by how the language used to describe suicide has changed in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Suicide is described in terms of open-ended statements and partial truths, often using vague words such as *tragic* or *unexpected* that allow people to avoid discussing the topic if they wish (Daube, 1972, p. 389).

The changes to the suicidal landscape dictate the need for new understandings. There have been numerous studies that helped contribute to an updated understanding of the phenomenon of suicide, but more knowledge is needed to fix the shortcomings in the literature. There is a need for new inquiries about the reversal of the suicide rates between young and old, and why men are more affected by the increase of youth suicide (Baudelot & Establet, 2008). Suicide note research in general has been criticized for its reliance on dated notes that have already been analyzed in numerous papers (Grayson et al. 2020)<sup>11</sup>. Given the over-mortality of males, it will also be useful to explore gender differences within suicide notes, which is currently an under-explored avenue (Grayson et al., 2020).

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<sup>10</sup> Although, we still do see traces of the criminalization of suicide today. Grayson et al. (2020) published their study of suicide notes in a journal primarily dedicated to criminal psychology, and the narrative approach implemented by the researchers is inspired by work linking criminals to their criminal actions.

<sup>11</sup> Shneidman's original corpus of suicide notes are still being used in papers published in 2020.

## **Methodology**

### **Epistemology & Research outline:**

The current research project aims to make a modest contribution to the study of suicide notes by investigating the social reality within them. The present study will analyze suicide notes from a sociological perspective that explores what the phenomenon of suicide can explain about society as a whole; the goal is to study what suicide can tell us about everyone, not only individuals who have or will commit suicide. In order to come to terms with the full reality of suicide, it is necessary to analyze the phenomenon beyond its individual manifestations. Studying suicide as a collective phenomenon can help shed light on contemporary trends in Western civilization, including the emergence of youth suicide and the prevalence of male suicide.

In studying suicide as a collective phenomenon, data will be collected at the individual level. The sociological significance of individual suicide notes, however, comes from their comparison, not from an exploration into any particular person. The purpose of the analysis will be to explore the social through its individual manifestations.

By exploring the social through the subjective realities of individual cases, there does not have to be an overarching concern with suicidees giving accurate or truthful accounts of their situation. What individuals choose to divulge in their suicide notes is inherently useful subject matter because it represents information relevant to the suicidee and their decision. The significance that the words have to the suicidee is enough to make all of what they say pertinent to their overall message. Suicide is in itself a communication to others, and suicide notes are an

extension of the message one makes when taking their own life. It is the suicidal message itself that the research attempts to tap into, from its individual expressions to its collective representation. Suicide notes, in their comparison, can therefore reveal reliable indicators of a particular social reality.

This particular sociological approach avoids the limitation commonly associated with suicide note research, the supposed unreliability of authors who are in a mentally compromised state. The methodology outlined in this paper does not concern itself with suicidees accurately defining their mental state or correctly identifying the nature of their issues. The current research design also avoids any major concern about how representative suicide note authors are in regards to the total population of suicidees. The goal of the analysis is not to make inferences about those who have or may commit suicide; the goal is also not about making inferences about the subgroup of suicidees who do leave a note. The results instead aim to characterize the specific corpus of suicide notes under study and explore the social aspects within them.

The strength of the results comes from the data being anchored in the content of the suicide notes. Only after the corpus of suicide notes is faithfully represented can the researcher consider making tentative explanations regarding any insight the results may provide about a broader collective reality. In this way, the interpretation of the results can remain unsure and open-ended without affecting the validity of the data. The analysis of a specific corpus of suicide notes is used to make inferences about the social milieu they were written in.

The particular social context is therefore important to consider (in this case, Québec in the year 2005), however the social reality explored is not limited to a particular province or year. Many nations are experiencing remarkably similar changes to their suicide rates that began in the

late 20<sup>th</sup> century. The similarities indicate that there is a social reality associated with contemporary suicide that is larger than the context of any single nation. The results of this study are relevant, therefore, not only for discussing the Québec context, but also the context of many Western countries that are experiencing similar (though still unique) trends of suicide.

Choosing a proper technique is a vital aspect of being able to study the social while still anchoring the study in a description of individual suicide notes. Qualitative sociology is useful in its ability to reference the collective phenomenon of suicide while incorporating individual-level analysis that aims to create data close the lived realities of those under study. Qualitative sociology is characterized by flexible methods meant to contour themselves to spontaneous findings and unexpected results. One of the key benefits of this type of research is its ability to uncover new avenues of inquiry. By letting the data speak for itself, the researcher has the ability to discover previously unexplored topics and connections.

The methods used in this current research project are inspired by grounded approaches to data collection, where participants define the form and direction of the research. The current research project falls under the umbrella of a qualitative content analysis, an approach that favors inductive methods and open-ended techniques. The goal is to discover findings that capture the reality of those under study. In contrast to studies that use preconceived coding categories to classify content, qualitative content analyses allow the researcher to create codes and categories that stem directly from the materiel being analyzed. A qualitative content analysis of a corpus of suicide notes allows the researcher to compare how different subgroups of suicidees construct their messages.

Grounded approaches to data collection are of course associated with grounded theories that emerge directly from the data. The current research favors the development of sensitizing concepts in order to create more modest inferences than a formal theory. These sensitizing concepts will aim to classify reoccurring themes within the suicide notes in order to enhance the understanding of the corpus as a whole. This operation begins with an open coding process that takes note of reoccurring thoughts or sentiments within the suicide notes. This is followed by classifying codes into different categories, and finally performing thematic comparisons. Although the nature of the inquiry will be qualitative, statistical analysis will also be implemented in order track the findings.

Tracking the codes statistically is necessary because of the number of notes included in the study. 292 individual cases will be studied as part of this analysis, which is large for a qualitative inquiry. The present research will not have the ability to delve deep into individual cases, however it does have the ability to study a greater number of suicidees, and make more comparisons. The strength of this broader form of analysis is that it allows for qualitative observations to be spread across a larger number of cases. The statistics are necessary in order to analyze which notes contain which codes, and to keep track of the differences between variables such as age and gender.

The statistical analysis implemented in the present research is simply a numerical representations of the codes formed during the content analysis. The statistics are therefore an extension of the qualitative content analysis; their purpose is to symbolize the results of the coding process.

The statistical results allowed the researcher to compare personal reflections about the notes to concrete numerical representations. Comparing initial impressions of the notes to the statistical results would challenge, confirm or enrich the researcher's intuition following the end of the coding process. Quantitative results were likewise able to be inspected qualitatively to explore what propositions exactly constituted the makeup of a code. The ability to go back and forth between qualitative observations and statistical findings gave a more refined perspective on the results.

Implementing a qualitative content analysis on a large number of people means that individual cases cannot be analyzed in-depth. The individual realities that the study aims to tap into are explored in a more general way that sacrifices some of the data's personal relevance for better comparability. The nuance of a particular proposition can be lost when coded together with similar statements from other notes; the phrase 'I think you are the greatest person in the world', for example, would be coded along with more reserved compliments. Although statements may lose some of their nuance, the coding system allows the researcher to study recurring thought units within the notes.

### **Research materiel & Variables:**

The suicide notes used in the present research were made available to me by my thesis supervisor Daniel Dagenais. Professor Dagenais and his research assistants at the time, Richard Violette and Justin Gagnon, spent one week at the *Bureau du coroner en chef* in Québec City to transcribe all the suicide notes from 2005 made available by the Coroner in Chief upon due authorization (Minister of Justice, Coroner in Chief). They were also given full access to the

coroner's report pertaining to each case of suicide. 292 suicide notes were included in the final analysis.

All the nominal information (name, address) has been removed from the record. The age, sex, date of birth, date of suicide, place of residence, place of suicide and means of suicide did appear at the top part of the transcribed suicide note, along with the coroner's office file number. Of this additional information, only age and sex were used when creating variables for the final analysis<sup>12</sup>.

The suicide note as such was followed by a commentary written by the note transcriber. This commentary is a direct transcribing of the Coroner's report, or a summary of it. These commentaries varied from lapidary remarks ("*Retrouvé par le propriétaire de l'immeuble*") to more substantial ones ("*Trouvé par son ex-conjointe; il vit seul avec son fils de 7 ans; bonne santé; aucun médicament; ni drogue ni alcool...*").

A blank template of what each suicide note transcription included can be found in the appendix (Appendix i).

In the transcribed version of the suicide notes, identifying information was altered so to not reveal personal information. All the names are replaced by initials, with mention of their gender. When, as it happened, several persons had first names beginning by the same letter, they were distinguished by, for example, M1, M2, etc. When possible, the relation to the persons referred to (daughter, friend) was mentioned in brackets following the name's first occurrence.

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<sup>12</sup> Males and females were the only two labels for gender included in the study. The values were taken from the sex included in the coroner's report. This is not meant to equate gender with one's biological sex. It is an imperfect way of studying an important topic; namely, the gender differences found between male and female suicide.

Sometimes, when the medium on which the letter was written was worth a comment (like: *note écrite sur du papier “Outillage Industriel Québec ltée. L’Outil de votre réussite”*), or when the author signified something more important by formal indications (underlined, capital letters, etc.) it was noted between brackets and in italicized characters to show that these remarks did not belong to the letter as such. Some letters included drawings (a broken heart, for instance) that would also be mentioned by the transcriber.

The suicide notes (the digital transcriptions) were plugged into a qualitative data analysis software called *QDA Miner* which allowed the researcher to code and label sections of the text and explore the results based on variables such as age and gender. Whereas age and gender were easily categorized because there was corresponding information included with each note, a final variable was also used that was less straightforward to classify.

During the coding process, the relationship status of participants was recorded. This variable was recorded cautiously, meaning a label was only given if the relationship status was mentioned in the transcribers remarks or directly referenced by the suicidee; most notes were labeled “unknown” under this variable. The only subgroup of suicidees from this variable explored in the final results is the “Recent or impending breakup” label (describing those whose romantic relationship had recently ended or was in the process of ending).

### **The coding process:**

The coding process informally begins when the notes are first read and initial impressions are made. During this preliminary reading, the researcher does not make a definitive attempt to segregate the data and label it. Jotting notes are taken during the initial read-through to keep

track of any potential insights that could be useful when the coding formally begins. The jotting notes would serve as the basis for many of the final codes included in the results.

Using *QDA Miner*, the researcher was able to re-read the notes and highlight blocks of text and label it as a *code*. It was imperative that the researcher begin with overly specific codes that could later be merged into broader labels if appropriate; it is easier to combine two codes that are too similar than it is to manually separate a code that the researcher later believes needs two labels. As the coding process went on, labels would constantly change and merge.

*Categories* were created to group together different clusters of codes (for example, a category where every code is a form of compliment directed at others); *subcategories* also exist which grouped together codes within the same category. Single codes would often be analyzed alone, but sometimes every code in a category would be combined into a single statistic. *QDA Miner* was used to analyze how much a code appears in the corpus and how often particular codes appear in the notes of certain subgroups of suicidees; for example, whether a code appears more in the suicide notes of males or females.

*QDA Miner* was able to generate numerous statistics, but the one most commonly used in this study is the *% Cases*. The ‘percentage of cases’ is a measure of how many notes a code appears in at least once. It is a dichotomous measure, the note either contains a specific code or it does not contain it. A note that contains a certain code ten times would be no different than a note that contains the code only once in terms of the percentage of cases a code appears in. The only other statistic included in the analysis is *% Codes*, which measured how many times a code appeared in the notes compared to all other codes. The *% Codes* statistic is only used sparsely

and only as additional context for the *% Cases* statistic mentioned above; most of the time the two codes would vary between subgroups in a similar way.

The emphasis on dichotomous coding (*% Cases*) will mitigate one of the weaknesses associated with a lone coder, the inability to compare results. Potential coding inaccuracies will have less chance to affect the *% Cases* statistic (for example, a proposition is mislabelled, but the proper code was already present in the note and thus already counted). The product of the coding system is a more detailed version of the inductive approach implemented by researchers such as Volant (1990), who would assign labels meant to classify entire suicide notes. Assigning codes to individual propositions, as opposed to broad labels meant to classify an entire note, allows the researcher to create more specific factors to compare across the notes.

Sometimes the appropriate code for a proposition is questionable. Things like sarcasm, coyness, and unknown context made certain sentiments difficult to cleanly label as one code or the other. Although individual thought units will be explored, the whole context of the note is used when deciding how to label uncertain codes. Additional context from the coroner's remarks could also be used to better situate the context of a particular thought unit.

Struggles would arise more often with certain codes compared to others. Below are three of the biggest struggles when it came to coding the suicide notes:

- It was sometimes difficult to determine whether a proposition was a complaint about one's mental/ internal/ psychological state or a complaint about life/ the future; for example, when one suicidee writes "I suffer whenever I open my eyes". This particular sentence lacked the specificity needed to be combined under the label of complaints

about one's mental state, and was thus coded under the more general label of a complaint about one's life.

- Complaints about 'being heartbroken' and expressing you 'cannot live without another person' were separate codes that were sometimes hard to differentiate. There was usually a clear distinction between expressing heartache and expressing the inability to go on without a significant other, but this would sometimes be debatable. A note that included the "Cannot live without you/ them" code about a former partner would always also include a "Heartbreak" code, but the reverse was not true; a note could express being heartbroken without ever crossing the threshold of expressing that losing the person is unbearable.
- Sometimes an apology would appear on its own with barely any context. This would mainly be interpreted as an apology about committing suicide. The other option would be to label it as a miscellaneous apology, or to refrain from giving it a code.

There will inevitably be a degree of personal interpretation when it comes to labeling certain sentiments. However, the process was not and should not be a constant struggle. A sign of a well-constructed list of codes is that subsequent propositions become easy to label. Although further refinement is always possible, it is sufficient that by the end of the process most propositions within the suicide notes were easily identified as a particular code.

There were more overarching issues associated with the coding process as well. One factor that arbitrarily affected the results is when multiple suicide notes are included in a single case. Firstly, this may influence the % *Codes* statistic when the same sentiments are repeated across notes to different recipients. There were also issues of contradiction where a note intended

for, say, your ex wife would contradict statements in a note intended for your mother. Having contradictory messages is not in itself a methodological issue for a qualitative content analysis, however the spectrum of codes broadens whenever multiple people are addressed. This could dilute certain findings, most notably the results about suicidees who went through a recent breakup; a case with multiple suicide notes will have separate unique messages meant for friends and family that dilutes the message meant for their former partner because all the notes are coded together under a single case. Future studies with more time and resources may wish to segregate the suicide notes specifically meant for ex partners and study them separately.

### **Coding refinement:**

After the notes were coded and the labels and categories refined, statistics were generated for each code indicating what percentage of notes they appeared in at least once (*% cases*). In an effort to focus the results on codes that could be meaningfully compared between different groups, codes that appeared in less than 5% of the notes were deleted or merged with other codes. This process was tracked and an original file with the unfiltered codes was maintained. An example of a code that was eliminated because it appeared in less than 5% of notes was expressing a fear of death or dying.

There were four codes that were kept in the study despite appearing in less than 5% of notes, each with specific reason. The code “The act is courageous/ (perhaps) not cowardly” was kept in the study because it juxtaposes other codes in the category denoting suicide as a cowardly act (Appendix A-9). Similarly, the code “Your fault/ their fault/ its fault” was kept because it juxtaposes other codes in the “Blame” category (Appendix A-3). “Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt” was kept in the final list of codes because the topic of vengeance was a popular topic

discussed in other studies of suicide notes, including Volant's (1990) study of a Québécoise corpus (Appendix A-7). Finally, the code "Selfish/ easy way out" was kept because it applied to two categories of codes that were analyzed as a whole (Appendix A-9).

The code "Selfish/ easy way out" (Appendix A-9) was one of 5 codes that existed in two categories at once; it would be included when exploring both the "Suicide = Bad" category of codes as a whole, and the "Suicide = Good/ Justifiable" category of codes (this seemingly contradictory categorization between describing suicide as both good and bad is discussed more in-depth in the results section on page 44 of this paper).

An effort was made to make each category mutually exclusive when it comes to the codes it includes; having 5 codes that exist in two categories at once is the result of an inability to resolve the struggle of making each code fit neatly into a discrete category while not compromising the logical division of codes. The final product is a list of codes and categories that attempt to capture the spirit of the suicide notes, while maintaining as much as possible distinct and discrete labels. At the end of the coding refinement process, 61 codes remained under 11 categories. The final list of codes is included in the appendix, tables A-1 to A-11.

### **Coding analysis & Statistical comparisons:**

No hypotheses are tested in this research, meaning there are no predetermined expectations to compare results to. There was no exact formula when it came to identifying differences in the statistics. A difference of 8 percentage points is more significant when comparing 10% and 2% versus 62% and 70%. The former is an example of a significant difference between two values, whereas the latter is a more comparable pair of percentages.

The comparisons made in this study between all the codes and the different variables are too varied to create a universal threshold. Statistical significance is instead discussed more fluidly, meaning certain conclusions are associated with stronger levels of confidence than others. Whenever a statistical difference is discussed, it typically references a large gap relative to the size of the percentages. More tentative conclusions, however, are also discussed.

The flexibility of the research also translates to how variables are operationalized in the statistical analysis. The age groupings generally fit into three neat categories of 15-35, 36-55, and 56+. However, the original age groups input into *QDA Miner* began with 15-25, then 26-35, and so on until 66+. Although age-related results would first and foremost be explored in regards to the 15-35, 36-55, and 56+ age groupings (loosely representing young, middle-aged and old suicidees), the more specific age groupings would sometimes offer interesting complimentary results. If certain codes were found to be characteristic of youth suicide notes, then statistics could be generated that explore only the youngest age group possible (15-25) to see how results compared to the broader 15-35 age grouping; a more pronounced finding in the 15-25 age group would indicate even more strongly that such codes are characteristic of the notes from younger suicidees.

The flexibility of a qualitative content analysis also has its downsides; data can be more easily manipulated (purposefully or mistakenly) to match a particular worldview, while ignoring (consciously or unconsciously) data that counteracts such predispositions. A researcher cannot do much to counteract this criticism other than to stand by their commitment to scientific integrity and to provide justifications for their coding in the form of quotes from the text. Results that are counterintuitive are not ignored in this study, any unexpected results are addressed, and an effort is made to explore alternative interpretations in order to question the validity of every

conclusion. In the end, there is not much more a singular coder can do to validate their qualitative coding results.

## **Results and Analysis**

Tables A-1 to A-11 in the appendix display the final list of codes and categories developed in the analysis of 292 Québec suicide notes from the year 2005. Below is a brief description of the 11 categories of codes found within the notes.

### **Afterworld (A-1; A-1.5)**

This category encompasses statements that express a belief in or the potential for an existence after death. The most commonly occurring code in this category was telling others that they “**Will still be there**” after they die, which is present in 21.6% of notes. Merging each code in the category together, 39.7% of suicidees included these sentiments in their notes.

### **Apologies (A-2)**

This category encompasses apologetic statements and instances of expressing remorse. The category is divided into two types of codes: apologies about committing suicide, and apologies for issues not related to the suicide. Just over half of all notes (51%) included the “**Sorry for suicide**” code.

### **Blame (A-3)**

This category encompasses statements related to blaming or removing blame for the author’s suicide; saying it was either “**My fault**”, “**Your fault/ their fault/ its fault**”, or “**Not your fault/ not \_\_\_’s fault**”. It was much more common for suicidees to blame themselves for their suicide (12.3% of cases) as opposed to blame others (3.4% of cases). The most common code in the category was absolving blame, which occurred in 25.3% of cases.

### **Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self (A-4)**

This category encompasses derogatory statements made about various things. The most common type of complaint found in the notes was about “**Life/ future (general)**” (39% of cases) followed by complaints about “**Mental/ internal/ psychological anguish**” like depression (27.1% of cases). There is also a subcategory of codes labelled “Deprecate Others”, where the author insults a specific person in their notes. Only two codes from this subcategory made the final list, the “**Spouse/ (former) partner**” code, and the “**Insult/ deprecate (another)**” code which is a miscellaneous label for deprecations made about others unrelated to a romantic relationship.

### **Compliments Directed to Others (A-5)**

This category encompasses compliments directed at others; often towards those the notes are addressed to. These flattering remarks ranged from mild to very strong. Other than the “**General**” code which is a miscellaneous label, the highest occurring code in this category was suicidees telling others “**You helped/ are helpful**”, which occurred in 19.9% of cases. 44.5% of notes contained at least one compliment.

### **Informal Will (A-6; A-6.5)**

This category encompasses statements that address topics typically associated with last will and testaments, such as explaining how to divide their assets after death. There is a subcategory of codes labelled “Funeral Plans” that specifically refers to discussing funeral or burial arrangements. Merging the “Funeral Plans” subcategory specifically, we can observe that 24.3% of cases included some kind of funeral or bodily instructions.

### **Information or Instructions (A-7)**

This category encompasses a broad assortment of propositions that either relayed some kind of information or was an instruction given to others. This was somewhat of a miscellaneous category that included codes that did not fit well into more specific groupings. There were high-frequency codes in this category, including “**Love you/ them**”, which was present in 58.2% of cases, “**Thank you**”, which occurred in 31.5% of cases, and “**Motivate/ comfort/ wish well**”, which occurred in 34.6% of cases.

### **Self-Deprecation (A-8; A-8.5)**

This category encompasses negative statements made about oneself. The highest occurring code in this category is the “**Miscellaneous self-insult**” label, representing a variety of self-criticisms that were too unspecific or too infrequent to be a unique code; these self-insults would sometimes reference a particular incident, but more often than not they were general statements like one made by a 54 year old female suicidee:

“je ne fus à la hauteur”

The self-insult with the highest frequency other than the miscellaneous code is the “**World will be better/ I am a burden**” code, which occurred in 15.1% of notes. Merging all the codes in the category together, we can observe that 42.8% of notes included some form of self-deprecation.

### **Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (Suicide = Bad) (A-9; A-9.5)**

This category encompasses statements that describe one’s suicide as a bad thing. There is also a subcategory of codes labelled “Suicide is Cowardly” where suicidees discussed suicide as either cowardly or not cowardly specifically. The “**Selfish/ easy way out**” code was tricky to categorize; it occurred in only 10 cases, or 3.4% of notes. The code will be counted as both a positive and a negative description of suicide.

Describing suicide as selfish has a clearly negative connotation, but it also describes suicide as something ‘good for me’. This may dilute the differences between the two categories of codes (this one and “Describing Suicide in Positive Terms”), but it rightfully does so. Positive and negative descriptions of suicide often co-occurred in the same notes beyond the 10 cases that described the act as selfish. The code represents a dichotomy that many suicidees express in their notes about suicide being a negatively perceived act that will hurt their loved ones, but also as a decision they ultimately wish to go through with.

Merging all the codes together in this category (except describing suicide as courageous), we can observe that 57.2% of the notes included a negative description of suicide.

### **Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (Suicide = Good/ Justifiable) (A-10; A-10.5)**

This category encompasses statements that describe suicide positively. These types of propositions were almost never written in an enthusiastic way, but they discuss what good can come from committing suicide, sometimes serving as a justification about their decision. The most common code in this category was the “**Happier/ liberating/ no more pain**” code which was present in 12.3% of notes. Merging all the codes in this category together, we can observe

that 38.4% of suicide notes contained at least one instance of describing suicide in positive terms.

### **Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (A-11; A-11.5)**

This category encompasses statements that describe an inability to overcome the current situation. The difference between this category of codes and certain codes in the “Complain/ Criticize” category was context and threshold. Complaints about heartache or complaints about health do not necessarily cross the threshold of expressing that the current situation is unbearable. If a statement expresses that a suicidee is in so much pain they cannot go on, then this would be coded under the category of “Unhelpable/ Unbearable”, even if it refers to health related concerns (such a note would invariably also contain codes pertaining to ‘complaints’ about health).

The code in this category that occurred most frequently is “**I am no longer able (JNSPC)**”, which occurred in 36% of notes. The ‘JNSPC’ stands for “je ne suis plus capable” because many of the statements contained some version of that phrase; it was the most striking repetition of a particular phrase found within the suicide notes. Combining all the codes in this category together, we can observe that 65.1% of notes contained sentiments about their situation being unbearable or unfixable.

### **Complaints: Filtered by Age**

#### **Results:**

When looking at what different age groups complained about in their suicide notes, we can see some significant differences. When comparing the 15-35, 36-55, and 56+ age groupings, the oldest age group had the highest percentage of cases complaining about “**Health (physical)/ sleep**” with 30.6% (Appendix B-4). This is much higher than the 16.1% of cases when every suicide note is considered (Appendix A-4). When filtering for only those aged 66 and above, the number rises to 39.1% of cases (Appendix B-5). There is a linear relationship between age and health related complaints; the lower the age bracket, the less percentage of cases with such

complaints. The 15-35 age group had 8.2% of cases mention complaints about health (Appendix B-2).

### Analysis:

Older suicidees had more health-related complaints in their suicide notes. These sentiments dominate what the older age groupings discuss overall. One 66-year-old male begins his note by writing:

“J’ai extrêmement mal à mes articulations qui me font souffrir. J’ai de la misère à lever ma tasse de café, à marcher et depuis quelques mois mon cœur flanche. Je ne sais pas si je fais des crises cardiaques ou ???”

The rest of the note contained mainly neutral comments about his funeral arrangements and his personal affairs after death. As we will see in later sections, older suicidees have a lower percentage of many other common codes, which indicates that health-related complaints are particularly characteristic trait of their notes. This was something informally observed about the notes as well; older suicidees often focused their notes on describing worsening health conditions they are experiencing.

### Results:

Another qualitative observation about the notes was that younger suicidees often avoided any reference to a specific problem in their life. This observation is reflected in what younger age groups were found to complain about in their suicide notes. Of all the codes in the “Complain/ Criticize” category, the “**Life/ future (general)**” code is the most general; it simply

denotes criticizing one's current situation or future outlook without any reference to more specific topics. The lowest age groupings displayed a higher percentage of cases with such sentiments. The 15-35 age group contained the "**Life/ future (general)**" code in 49.3% of notes (Appendix B-2), compared to 39% for all age groups (Appendix A-4). The percentage of cases rises to 72% when considering only the 15-25 age group (Appendix B-1).

Younger age groupings also had a higher percentage of cases that complained about the world or society; 11% of cases aged 15-35 contained the code "**Society/ world**" (Appendix B-2), compared to 6.8% when all age groups are considered (Appendix A-4). What is also significant is that no older age groupings had a percentage of cases exceeding 6.5%, which suggests that the code is particularly characteristic of the younger age bracket. When considering only those aged 15-25, the percentage of cases complaining about the world or society rises to 20%; 5 cases out of 25 (Appendix B-1). In comparison to the 56+ age group, only 3.2% of cases contain a complaint about the world or society; 2 cases out of 62 (Appendix B-4).

#### Analysis:

Younger suicidees included fewer instances of precise grievances in their suicide notes, complaining instead about life in general. This finding speaks to the more general tone of youth suicide notes, which often lacked any precise explanation for why the person chose to end their own life. As one 17 year old male wrote:

"I can't explain why, but I wasn't happy while I was alive"

Although specific reasons are sometimes given to explain their displeasure with life, most of these codes express a general malaise when it comes to life. For one 21-year-old female, the only insight she offers into her situation is:

“...je n’ai plus la force de vivre. Chaque jour est une torture”

The rest of her note is devoted to apologizing for an act she acknowledges will be painful to those that love her, as well as comforting others and saying she loves them.

Complaints about the world or society were found to occur most often in the youngest age groupings. This means that youth suicide notes expressed more sentiments of antagonism against the world they are leaving. This contrasts with older suicidees that complained the least in their notes about the world they are leaving behind.

### **Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable: Filtered by *Age***

#### Results:

When merging the “Unhelpable/ Unbearable” category of codes, we can see that 65.1% of cases expressed these sentiments (Appendix A-11.5). Every age group contained these codes in a majority of their cases. When filtering this category by age group we can observe a linear relationship, with the youngest suicidees expressing these sentiments the most, and the oldest suicidees expressing these sentiments the least. The 15-35 age group contained the code “**Unhelpable/ unbearable (any)**” in 71.2% of cases (Appendix C-3), the 36-55 age group expressed these sentiments in 64.3% of cases (Appendix C-4), and the 56+ age group expressed them in 59.7 % of cases (Appendix C-5). When looking at the unmerged version of the “Unhelpable/ Unbearable” table, we observe that this disparity was primarily due to two codes within the category.

For the 15-35 age group, 46.6% of cases included the “**I am no longer able (JNSPC)**” code, and 34.2% of cases included the “**Something innate or unchangeable about current state**” code (Appendix C-2). This was higher than the unfiltered version of the table, which had percentages of 36% and 23.6% respectively (Appendix A-11); the older two age groupings had lower percentages than the unfiltered grouping. These two codes contributed the most to an overrepresentation in the “Unhelpable/ Unbearable” category for the 15-35 age grouping.

When observing only those aged 15-25, we can see an amplification of these findings; 60% of cases included the “**I am no longer able (JNSPC)**” code, and 40% of cases included the “**Something innate or unchangeable about current state**” code (Appendix C-1). This suggests that younger age is particularly correlated with an increased inclusion of these two codes.

#### Analysis:

The “I am no longer able...” code was essentially the miscellaneous one of the category because of its vagueness. The code expresses the fact that, for whatever reason, the will to go on has disappeared. The generality of this category adds to the observation that suicide notes left by teens and young adults did not contain many direct references to a reason for committing suicide. As one 18 year old male writes:

“Ouais, j’ai fini mes jours. Je ne savais plus quoi faire et sa fesait un moment j’y pensais. Je vous  
 aimais bien, j’étais juste plus capable”

The suicidee goes on to absolve his loved ones of any blame, then ends the note without any concrete explanation about what caused him to feel this way or what exactly it is he is trying to escape from.

As for the “Something innate or unchangeable about current state” code, it expresses the idea that there is no getting out of their current situation; this has inherently different connotations for younger and older suicidees who are at an earlier or later part of their life expectancy. Analyzing the “Something innate...” codes qualitatively, the older suicidees who include these sentiments tended to reference some specific form of mental or physical suffering that they can no longer handle.

For young suicidees, however, the “Something innate...” codes tend to reference a state that one will not be able overcome in their journey to old age. As one 24-year-old male writes:

“Je n’arrive plus à être heureux et bien même en me disant que c’est temporaire et que bientôt tout pourrait s’arranger. Le point de non-retour est atteint. Pour vous, il y a des solutions c’est sûr, mais pour moi c’est différent”

The suicidee does not go on to explain any precise cause or reason for feeling this way, which was characteristic of the majority of the “Something innate...” codes from the youngest age grouping. In accordance with previous findings, younger suicidees tend to not give a precise reason for their current state. One 19-year-old suicidee writes:

“Ma décision, mon obligation était implantée dans mon esprit depuis longtemps”

The suicidees sometimes describe their unspecified and inescapable malaise as being more or less recently onset (or more or less inbred). As one 15-year-old male writes:

“Peu à peu mes passions se sont évanouies jusqu’à à il y a quatre ou cinq mois ou mon choix était devenu définitif et obligatoire”

These findings bolster the idea that notes from younger suicidees frame their issues in general terms that they do not (or cannot) elaborate on in more depth.

There is one final statistical result worth mentioning here briefly that speaks to the lack of explicit rationale found within youth suicide notes. In the youngest age-groupings, it can be observed that the “**Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt**” code (in the “Information/ Instructions” category) occurs very rarely. Of the 12 total cases where this code occurred, only 2 were in the 15-35 age grouping, and only one of those two cases was in the 15-25 age group. Younger age groups therefore directed less vengeance towards others in their suicide notes.

### **Self-Deprecation: Filtered by Age**

#### Results:

Looking at the merged version of the “Self-Deprecation” category, 42.8% of total cases included these sentiments (Appendix A-8.5). Filtering for age groups, one major disparity is apparent. The oldest age group of suicidees insult themselves in their suicide notes less often than other ages. The 56+ age group had only 22.6% of cases with the “**Self-deprecation (any)**” code (Appendix D-3). The 15-35 and 36-55 age groupings have similar percentages to each other, at 47.9% (Appendix D-1) and 48.4% (Appendix D-2) respectively. There is therefore less instances of self-insults specifically for the oldest age groupings.

#### Analysis:

Older suicidees had less of a tendency to deprecate themselves in their suicide notes. The finding may be connected to the increased health-related complaints for this age group; a person

who otherwise has high self esteem could develop a condition that ruins their enjoyment of life. If this were true, then it would be expected for this age group to describe their suicide the most in positive terms, but as we will see in the next section, this is not the case.

### **Describing Suicide in Positive Terms: Filtered by *Age***

#### Results:

38.4% of total cases included at least one code from the “Suicide = Good/ Justifiable” category (Appendix A-10.5) and none of the age groups deviate much from one another. The 56+ age grouping does have the lowest percentage of cases in this category; the difference between them and other age groups is small but not negligible. Suicidees aged 56 and above reported 33.9% of cases with the code “**Suicide is good or justifiable**” (Appendix E-3). The 15-35 age grouping displays the same percentage as the unfiltered category with 38.4% of cases that described their suicide in positive terms (Appendix E-1), and the 36-55 age grouping is also very close to the unfiltered category with 40.1% of cases reporting at least one instance of describing suicide as good or justifiable (Appendix E-2).

Looking at the percentage of codes as opposed to the percentage of cases, we see more of a similarity between the three age groups. The percentage of total codes represented by “**Suicide is good or justifiable**” was 4.1% for the 15-35 age grouping (Appendix E-1), 4.6% for the 36-55 age grouping (Appendix E-2), and 4.3% for the 56+ age grouping (Appendix E-3). This is related to the shorter notes left by older suicidees and the lower number of codes recorded overall for these age groupings.

Analysis:

While the older age groupings are more likely to not include positive descriptions of suicide in their notes at all, they make up a roughly equal proportion of total codes compared to the other two age groups. With so many short notes, fewer codes are recorded overall for the oldest age groups. A qualitative observation about the 56+ group was a tendency for very brief messages that included only instructions, or a quick mention of their deteriorating health before apologizing and ending the note. For one 83-year-old male, after mentioning two people by name, all they wrote in their note was:

“mal jams”

The only other information in the note was the name of a funeral home. This is a particularly strong example of how many suicide notes from the 56+ age group are brief and center on health related issues; forgoing any direct reference to the act of suicide.

What all this suggests is that not including sentiments about suicide being a good or justifiable act may not necessarily reflect the overall tone of the notes. Though older suicidees justify their suicide as good or justifiable less often, it could be that they do not feel the need to discuss such sentiments. This idea is further supported by looking at how often the different age groups describe their suicide in negative terms.

## **Describing Suicide in Negative Terms: Filtered by *Age***

### Results:

57.2% of total cases included at least one code from the “Suicide = Bad” category (Appendix A-9.5). Similar to how the oldest age grouping had the least amount of instances describing their suicide in positive terms, those aged 56 and above had the lowest amount of instances describing their suicide negatively. In this category, however, there were noteworthy differences between all the age groups. The 56+ age grouping had 46.8% of cases include the code “**Suicide is bad (any)**” (Appendix F-3), the 36-55 age grouping recorded the code in 56.7% of cases (Appendix F-2), and the 15-35 age grouping had 67.1% of cases include these sentiments (Appendix F-1).

### Analysis:

The fact that the 56+ age grouping framed their suicide in negative terms the least bolsters the idea discussed in the previous section; older suicidees did not have less instances of positive framing of suicide because they were critical of the act in their notes, but because they did not feel the need to include such propositions. The 56+ age group described their suicide in positive and negative terms the least out of all the ages. Describing suicide in positive terms and describing it in negative terms often co-occurred with one another, which further speaks to the inability to attribute these categories to the overall sentiments characterizing the notes.

The oldest age grouping had the least amount of self-deprecatory comments, as well as the least amount of cases where they mentioned suicide in both negative and positive terms. The “Self-Deprecation” category was the only one out of the three just mentioned where they had a lower percentage of codes than any other age group (as opposed to percentage of cases). This

supports the explanation that the 56+ age group characterized themselves and their actions with less contempt, despite not discussing suicide more positively in their notes.

The more straightforward finding from this category was the higher amount of young suicidees that frame their suicide negatively. The 15-35 age group distinguishes itself by being the only age group with a percentage of cases above the unfiltered percentage. The relationship is linear; the younger the age group, the higher amount of sentiments about suicide being a negative thing. In contrast to the previous finding, young suicidees describing suicide negatively more often is indicative of a certain tone common within their notes. A negative tone towards suicide may be connected to more of a stigma surrounding the act of suicide for younger people, but this idea was difficult to explore further.

**Complimenting Others, Self-Deprecation & Instructions/ Information: Filtered by *Gender***  
Results:

Females and males have a similar amount of insults directed at the self in their suicide notes. For females, the “**Self-deprecation (any)**” code appears in 42.3% of cases (Appendix G-4), while for males it appears in 43% of notes (Appendix G-3). When looking at the category unmerged, however, there are noteworthy differences. Females are more likely than males to say in their notes that they were a “**Bad parent**” with 9.9% of cases expressing this sentiment (Appendix G-2); this compared to 4.5% of males characterizing themselves this way (Appendix G-1). Females also had a higher percentage for the “**World will be better/ I am a burden**” code at 21.1% (Appendix G-2) compared to 13.1% of males (Appendix G-1). Males had a higher

percentage of cases with the “**I am bad/ evil/ harmful**” code with 11.8% (Appendix G-1), compared to only 4.2% for females (Appendix G-2).

### Analysis:

The results indicate that both genders deprecate themselves to a similar degree, but do so in different ways. The finding that more females insulted their parental capabilities may indicate that males were less likely to write about being a bad parent, but it is difficult to explore this idea further without knowing with more certainty which suicidees did or did not have children.

Before conducting the statistical analysis, an initial observation about the notes was that males had a harsher tone when describing themselves. This was not reflected in the “Self-Deprecation” category when all the codes were merged. Looking at the individual codes however, males were over-represented when describing themselves as being a bad, evil, or otherwise harmful person. These codes had a more abrasive tone to them when compared to describing oneself as a burden, which is the type of self-insult women were more prone to characterize themselves with. The qualitative observation of males being harsher on themselves in their suicide notes is likely a function of the less abrasive sentiments expressed by females when insulting themselves.

### Results:

Merging every code the “Compliments (to others)” category, 50.7% of female cases included the “**Compliment (any)**” code (Appendix G-4) compared to 42.5% of males (Appendix G-3). Three other codes from the “Information/ Instructions” category were then explored to see

if the elevated amount of compliments reflected a more consoling tone overall in the female notes. Female suicidees have a higher percentage of cases for both the code “**Love you/ them**” with 67.6% and “**Motivate/ comfort/ wish well**” at 40.8% (Appendix G-6); males recorded 55.2% and 32.6% for those codes respectively (Appendix G-5). Males had a higher percentage of cases for the “**Thank you**” code with 33% (Appendix G-5) compared to females with 26.8% (Appendix G-6).

Analysis:

More compliments found in female suicide notes gave the initial statistical impression that they had a more consoling tone in general. The soothing character of female suicide notes was also displayed by more cases expressing love and more cases that included sentiments about motivating, comforting or wishing others well. Males did have more instances where the suicidee included a thank you in the note, however this particular code is qualitatively different from the other 3 that were just discussed. Looking at the context of the “Thank you” code in general, it is often preceded by some request like closing a bank account, and the ‘thank you’ comes off as formal in context. When a ‘thank you’ is meant in a warmer way, what precedes it is typically coded as some form of complement. Females are therefore overrepresented in every code related to consoling others except for expressing thanks, which is often said in a matter-of-fact tone for both genders. Exploring this idea further, the relationship between gender and describing suicide positively was tested.

## **Describing Suicide in Negative Terms & Describing Suicide in Positive Terms: Filtered by Gender**

### Results:

Merging everything in the “Suicide = Good/ Justifiable” category, 49.3% of female suicidees included the code “**Suicide is good or justifiable**” (Appendix H-4), compared to 34.8% of males (Appendix H-3). When looking at the merged “Suicide = Bad” category, we see a similarity between the two genders. 56.3% of female suicide notes contained the code “**Suicide is bad (any)**” (Appendix H-2), compared to 57.5% of male suicidees (Appendix H-1).

### Analysis:

The finding that more female suicidees described their act in positive terms may relate to the more consoling tone observed previously. The code may indirectly relate to comforting others by downplaying the somberness of a tragic decision in an effort to make the reader feel better about the act. The higher percentage of females describing their suicide in positive terms does not seem to influence how often they include opposite sentiments about the act. Males and Females were relatively equal in regards to the percentage of notes that include a negative description of suicide.

The findings can also be interpreted from the other direction. The male suicide notes had less of a tendency to include consoling remarks, which could imply a harsher tone overall when addressing others. This idea is not supported, however, by what the two genders tend to complain about in their notes (discussed in the next section).

## **Complaints, Blame & Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable: Filtered by Gender**

### Results:

Exploring the “Complain/ Criticize” category, we can observe some more differences between how male and female suicidees constructed their notes. Males had a higher percentage of cases for the “**Heartbroken/ dumped**” code with 15.8% (Appendix I-1); 9.9% of female suicide notes contained this code (Appendix I-2). Females on the other hand had a higher percentage of the “**Spouse/ (former) partner**” code with 11.3% (Appendix 1-2); males deprecated their (former) partners in only 3.6% of cases (Appendix I-1). The female suicide notes also contained more insults directed towards others in general, though the difference between genders for this code was smaller. 15.5% of female cases included the code “**Insult/ deprecate (another)**” (Appendix I-2), while for males this code appeared in 11.8% of cases (Appendix I-1). There was a higher percentage of female cases when it came to describing themselves as being a “**Victim of harm**”; 15.5% of female suicidees had this code recorded in their notes (Appendix I-2), and male suicidees included it in 8.6% of cases (Appendix I-1).

Looking at the merged version of the “Unhelpable/ Unbearable” category, both males and females had a high percentage of cases containing such sentiments. Female suicide notes had a slightly higher percentage of “**Unhelpable/ unbearable (any)**” codes with 69% (Appendix I-6) compared to males with 63.8% (Appendix I-5). Interestingly, when looking at all of the codes within the unmerged version of the category, females had a higher percentage of cases for every code except one. Males had a slightly higher percentage of cases with the code “**Cannot live without you/ them**” with 13.6% (Appendix I-3) compared to 9.9% in the female suicide notes (Appendix I-4).

### Analysis:

Males were more likely to complain about being heartbroken, while females were more likely to deprecate their (former) partner. The statistical findings are interesting considering that females expressed being a victim of harm more often, which seems to rule out the conclusion that there is an overall victim mentality when it comes to male notes. This suggests that there is something connected to the loss of a partner that causes this difference between male and female suicide notes. Qualitatively, there was a distinct difference between males and females when it came to describing their feelings in regards to a recent separation. Men were more timid, somber, and self-critical when addressing their former partners, while women expressed more vengeful and insulting remarks.

In line with these informal observations, males were more likely to describe their situation as unbearable because they cannot live without a particular loved one. The difference between the genders on this category was not very remarkable, but it was the only code in the category males were overrepresented in. The findings suggest that males and females have different reactions to the loss of a partner when it comes to writing their suicide notes, males expressing more internalized feelings of despair, and females expressing more outward expressions of anger.

Considering the previous finding that females had a more consoling tone in their notes, this is apparently not the case when considering insults to others, particularly when it comes to deprecating (former) partners. The polarization between these two different findings is also reflected in the “blame” category of codes, where females again are overrepresented in both soothing and critical remarks.

### Results:

Females had a higher percentage of cases when it came to both blaming others and absolving others of blame for their suicide. 32.4% of female cases included the code “**Not your fault, not \_\_\_’s fault**” (Appendix I-8) compared to 23.1% of male cases (Appendix I-7). For the “**Your fault/ their fault/ its fault**” code, 8.5% of female cases included this sentiment (Appendix I-8) compared to 1.8% of males (Appendix I-7).

Females and males were relatively equal when it came to blaming themselves for their suicide. 11.3% of female cases included the “**My fault**” code (Appendix I-8) compared to 12.7% of cases for males (Appendix I-7); neither gender deviated much from the unfiltered category.

### Analysis:

Similar to self-deprecations, males and females blamed themselves for their suicide in a similar percentage of cases. There were, however, gendered differences for the other two codes within the “Blame” category. One would expect that blaming others for their suicide and absolving others of blame would negatively correlate with each other, but for females these codes are both found more often than average in their notes. Combined with the previously mentioned findings about females having more cases with both comforting and disparaging remarks towards others, this result could perhaps be expected.

Blaming others for your suicide is an indirect way to disparage a person, and absolving others of blame is an indirect way to comfort others. In previous results, male suicide notes were found to be less comforting and less insulting towards others, which is reflected by how they both blame others less for their suicide and absolve others of blame less. Conversely, female suicide notes seem to lean strongly in one of these two directions depending on the individual

note. As mentioned in the previous section, there were discernible differences between male and female suicide notes when it came to interactions with their partners following a separation. This difference appears to offer insight into what types of female suicide notes contribute to their overrepresentation in soothing versus deprecatory codes.

One particular case from the corpus exemplifies these dual tendencies within the female group of suicide notes. The note was written by a 37 year old woman who was also tagged under the *Recent or impending breakup* variable. The case was actually a combination of suicide letters written to numerous different people (something that was atypical but not uncommon); one of the messages was for her former partner, the others were for friends and family. The note to her former partner was very harsh, blameful, and insulting, while the notes to others were mostly filled with compliments and instructions (and a few statements insulting her ex partner to them as well).

Looking statistically at those who went through a recent breakup, we see, among other things, an amplification of both women and men insulting their spouse (as would be expected). However, the female numbers are much more affected by this amplification.

### **Blame, Complaints & Other Categories: Filtered by *Gender and Relationship Status***

#### Results:

When filtering for cases with the variable *Recent or impending breakup*, both codes in the “Deprecate Others” tree went up. “**Insult/ deprecate (another)**” was recorded in 18.9% of cases, while “**Spouse/ (former) partner**” was recorded in 16.7% of cases (Appendix J-1). This is up from the unfiltered category, which had percentages of 12.7% and 5.5% respectively

(Appendix A-4). When filtering for a recent breakup *and* gender, male breakup notes had 16% of cases include the “**Insult/ deprecate (another)**” code, and 9.3% include the “**Spouse/ (former) partner**” code (Appendix J-2); females who went through a breakup had much higher percentages on these two codes with 33.3% and 53.3% respectively (Appendix J-3).

Exploring the “Blame (for Suicide)” category, males experiencing a breakup only had two cases of the “**Your fault/ their fault/ its fault**” code (2.7%) (Appendix J-2), while women had 4 cases with that code making up 26.7% of cases (Appendix J-3). Male breakup notes, however, had a higher percentage of “**My fault**” codes with 17.3% (Appendix J-2) compared to female breakup notes with 13.3% (Appendix J-3); this is different from males and females not filtered for relationship status where the percentages were closer to equal. The previous finding that women absolved blame for their suicide more often than men was maintained when filtering for a recent breakup; 28% of male breakup cases included the code “**Not your fault...**” (Appendix J-2) while 40% female breakup cases included the code (Appendix J-3).

Looking at the “**Cannot live without you/ them**” code in the “Unhelpable/ Unbearable” category, the numbers change dramatically when filtering for recent breakups. 38.9% of those going through a recent or impending separation included the “**Cannot live without...**” code in their suicide note (Appendix J-1), while only 12.7% of cases included such sentiments in the unfiltered grouping (Appendix A-11). Males had a higher percentage of these sentiments before filtering for relationship status, though this trend reversed when considering those going through a breakup; 37.3% of male breakup notes included the code “**Cannot live without...**” (Appendix J-2) while female breakup notes included this sentiment in 46.7% of their notes (Appendix J-3). Males who went through a recent breakup included the “**Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt**”

code (in the “Information/ Instructions” category) in 5.3% of cases (Appendix J-2), which is much lower than females who went through a breakup with 20% of cases (Appendix J-3).

Males going through a recent breakup included more instances of compliments, which is a reversal of the trend between the genders prior to filtering for relationship status. Female breakup notes included the code “**Compliment (any)**” in 46.7% of notes (Appendix J-3), while for males the number was 53.3% (Appendix J-2). There was also a reversal in which genders included more instances of the codes “**Love you/ them**” and “**Motivate/ comfort/ wish well**”; males had higher percentages for both these codes only after filtering for a recent breakup. Male breakup notes had 73.3% of cases include expressions of love (Appendix J-2), compared to 66.7% of women (Appendix J-3); the percentage of cases for the “**Motivate/ comfort/ wish well**” code were similar to each other, with male breakup notes at 42.7% (Appendix J-2), and female breakup notes at 40% (Appendix J-3).

For males experiencing a breakup, the percentage of cases that included some form of self-deprecation is slightly higher. Male breakup notes included the code “**Self-deprecation (any)**” in 56% of cases (Appendix J-2), which is relatively equal to female breakup notes with 53.3% (Appendix J-3); the percentage of codes for this merged category was 8.9% for males (Appendix J-2) and 5.9% for females (Appendix J-3). When filtering only for recent breakups (and not for gender), the percentage of cases that included the “**Self-deprecation (any)**” code was 55.6% (Appendix J-1), which was higher than the unfiltered group that had 42.8% of codes include such sentiments (Appendix A-8.5). Noticeable differences were also found when looking at what those going through a recent breakup criticized in their notes.

The two codes from the “Complain/ Criticize” category that had a notably higher percentage of cases for those experiencing a recent breakup were the “**Heartbroken/ dumped**” code and the “**Victim of harm**” code. 42.2% of suicidees who experienced a breakup complained about being heartbroken or dumped, and 16.7% reported being a victim of harm (Appendix J-1); this compared to 14.4% and 10.3% respectively for the unfiltered category (Appendix A-4). For the “**Victim of harm**” code, females who went through a breakup included these sentiments particularly frequently. 40% of female breakup notes expressed being a victim of harm (Appendix J-3) compared to only 12% for their male counterparts (Appendix J-2).

#### Analysis:

The qualitative impression going into the statistical analysis was that males experiencing a breakup tended to attack themselves rather than insult their former partners; males would frame their partner’s decision almost as a good choice given their inadequacy. Conversely, females who went through a recent separation appeared qualitatively to be much more contemptful about their situation, and angry towards their (former) partner who they blame for ruining their life or treating them badly. There were many aspects of the statistics that backed this impression, but also some that did not.

One finding that contradicted the qualitative observations was the relatively similar amount of self-deprecatory comments between the two genders (when filtered for a recent breakup). Although male breakup notes had a slightly higher percentage of cases with such comments, the difference was negligible and not enough to support any strong conclusions. The percentage of *codes* for self-deprecation was a bit more lopsided for the males, but still too close to the female percentage to say that it supported the qualitative observation that males going

through a breakup were more inwardly harsh. There was more of a difference between the two genders compared to when they were not filtered for a breakup, but again this difference was not large enough to be confident about any differences between the content of the two sets of notes.

Other codes yielded larger differences, but were unreliable due to a small amount of cases. 'Females going through a breakup' had the lowest n of any grouping studied in this paper with only 15 cases total, and thus the percentages are more prone to chance and misunderstandings. For instance, it may seem significant that 26.7% of females compared to only 2.7% of males blamed others for their suicide, but a closer look into the cases behind those stats reveal that two of the four female cases are not related to a current or former partner, and therefore less relevant to the discussion about breakup notes. Males were found to blame themselves more, which does correspond to the qualitative observation about male breakup notes containing more self-criticism. However, only 2 cases from the female grouping were necessary to record 13.3%, and the group was only one female case away from being relatively equal in terms of percentages.

Some of the stronger evidence backing the qualitative observations came from how often both groupings deprecated others in their suicide notes. Females going through a recent breakup were overrepresented when it came to how much they insulted others, particularly when it came to deprecating their (former) partner. This speaks to the more vengeful tone of suicide notes written by women experiencing a recent or impending breakup.

Female suicidees tagged under the breakup label also wished for more 'harm, revenge or guilt' in their notes by a wide margin. Although only 3 female cases included this code, that was only one less than the male breakup notes, despite the n for the males being 75 compared to the n

of 15 for females. Female suicide notes had a higher percentage of ‘wishing for harm’ before being filtered for a recent separation, but this difference was negligible without the breakup filter. Both genders had an elevated percentage of cases with the “wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt” code after being filtered for a recent breakup, but this rise was particularly drastic for the female group. This indicates that such vengeful sentiments were largely characteristic of the female suicidees who also experienced a recent or impending breakup.

There was also evidence that suggested the comforting tone found in female suicide notes disappeared when filtering for a recent breakup. Females went from having a higher amount of suicide notes with compliments and a higher amount of cases with loving remarks to lower percentages on both these measures. Female suicide notes also went from having a higher amount of motivating or comforting remarks to being relatively equal to (and even slightly below) males after filtering for a recent breakup. Females continued to absolve others of blame more than males, however this was only an indirect way of measuring a soothing tone.

The higher percentage of female breakup notes describing themselves as a ‘victim of harm’ reflects this overall sentiment. Although the breakup filter caused both genders to have a higher percentage of notes with the “Victim of harm” label, there was a particularly drastic increase for the female grouping. In congruence with the informal observations, it appears that females were more likely to characterize their breakup as a personal attack in their suicide notes, while males framed the breakup as a reflection of their failures. Men described themselves as victims insofar as the breakup may have destroyed their lives, but women characterized the situation more as a harmful act unfairly inflicted upon them.

Another code that increased for both genders when filtering for a recent breakup was “Cannot live without you/ them”. However, this time it went from a slight overrepresentation of males before the breakup filter to a sizable overrepresentation of females after the filter. This code is more difficult to interpret because, although females appeared to express more anger toward their former partners, the source of their anger was often still connected to the loss of a valued relationship (as expressed in their notes). Furthermore, this code does not necessarily relate to a romantic partner. Although the vast majority of the “cannot live without you/ them” code relates to a former partner, it sometimes relates to children (who may have been taken away as part of a separation), and more rarely to some other family member like a recently deceased parent. The decision to label these instances together dilutes the code’s ability to indicate how male and female suicidees addressed their former partners in their suicide notes.

The increase in the “Cannot live without...” code does, however, reflect how a ‘recent or impending breakup’ greatly influences the overall content of suicide notes (regardless of gender). The breakup tends to become the main subject of the suicide note and dominates what the suicidee chooses to write about. Both the “Cannot live without you/ them” and “Heartbroken/ dumped” code increased dramatically despite most other codes in their respective categories lowering or remaining the same. Both aforementioned codes increased by more than 200% compared to the unfiltered group in regards to percentage of cases, and both more than double their respective percentage of codes. These changes indicate how breakup notes are dominated by sentiments about their recent separation.

## **Discussion**

The results of this paper focus on describing the content of suicide notes. There is no way of knowing to what degree the sentiments expressed in the notes represent how the authors really feel about their situation, or how accurate they are at describing their life. There is also no way of knowing to what degree the differences found between social groups are a reflection of dissimilar circumstances or dissimilar reactions to circumstances. The significance of the results come from the comparison of different suicidal messages; every suicide is in itself a message communicated to others, and suicide notes are a conscious extension of that message that offers more explicit elaboration. When the current research explores the content of suicide notes, different expressions of suicide are compared more so than the individuals themselves.

Interpreting the results of this study is therefore about finding patterns in how the meaning of suicide is framed by different subgroups. The findings have a particular relevance to the context of 2005 Quebec, however the broader relevance of the findings is to the contemporary trends of Western suicide. Exploring how younger suicidees construct their suicide notes can give insight into the emergence and continuing prevalence of youth suicide; exploring the differences between suicide notes left by males and females can give insight into the over-mortality of men from suicide.

Before discussing the results and analysis of the research on a specific level, it is worth mentioning on a general note how some remarkable similarities existed among certain thought units coded in the notes. It became increasingly clear as the coding process went on how particular codes would repeat themselves in very similar ways. Iterations of the phrase “je ne suis plus capable” was particularly noteworthy for how similar the phrasing could be among many

different notes. Other sentiments would also be expressed very similarly, like how many suicidees discussed how ‘from the outside, their life seems fine’. The reoccurrence of certain phrasings indicate the fruitfulness of discourse analysis as an emerging method of studying suicide notes, even if the current research aims to study propositions as thought units and not as linguistic constructions.

### **Comparing the coding results to previous literature**

In the review of the literature, many findings were noted that resemble the results of this present research. This is significant because the analysis began with an open coding process that avoided the use of preconceived categories and codes. The codes were meant to represent the data directly and faithfully, creating codes that uniquely represent the corpus under study. Similarities between the findings in this study and the findings of previous research strengthen the claim that such sentiments are an enduring feature of suicide notes.

One example of this is Volant’s (1990, 82-85) notion of “la fuite”, where the suicidee expresses that they are in too much pain or otherwise have no hope in life, causing them to frame their suicide as a resignation from life. This label used by Volant to classify certain suicide notes is similar to the category of codes in this study labeled “Unhelpable/ Unbearable”. The “Unhelpable...” category of codes encompasses this notion of resignation; with codes such as “Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction” and “Want to die/ tired of living”, this category expresses how life could no longer be endured due to mental or physical factors. These types of sentiments were also found in research done by Grayson et al. (2020, 149-150), though they were not grouped together under a common category; their paper segregated statements about ‘suicide being the only option’ and statements about ‘wishing there was another

solution' into different classification labels (the "Egoistic Victim" and "Anomic Hero" theme respectively). This exemplifies how the same sentiments may be found in two different studies, but grouped together in different ways.

Another finding that was replicated in the current study despite being differently grouped was the presence of neutral statements. An important aspect of Shneidman and Farberow's (1957) conclusions about the suicidal mindset stemmed from their finding that more neutral statements were found in genuine suicide notes as compared simulated ones. This is difficult to compare directly, because the researchers only classified the statements into one of three categories denoting comfort and relief. The finding that suicide notes contain a lot of mundane topics or matter-of-fact instructions, however, is replicated in the current research. There is not a category of codes that specifically represent neutral statements, but many codes that would fit in such a category are present in a significant portion of the corpus. Nearly a quarter of all notes (24.3%) included some kind of instructions about their funeral or bodily arrangements (Appendix A-6.5), and 24% of the notes included information or instructions regarding their personal affairs following their death (Appendix A-7). These and other codes represent what Shneidman would categorize as 'neutral'.

Another topic that was mentioned by suicide note researchers in various ways was a belief in the afterlife. A significant portion of the cases in the present study (39.7%) included sentiments about the afterlife (Appendix A-1.5). The propositions included in the "Afterworld" category of codes were varied, but in many cases it was a way to express the notion that this message is only a goodbye for now. Future research may be interested in exploring whether the belief in an afterlife affects the overall message of suicide notes.

## **Youth suicide notes & The differences between age-groups**

Though no preconceived hypotheses were tested, certain results were predicted prior to the reading of the notes. For example, it came as no surprise that complaints about one's physical health were more prevalent in older age groups. Growing old is typically associated with bodily deterioration, so more complaints about health from older suicidees is something to be expected. What is interesting about the results was how prevalent these sentiments were to the overall message of older suicidees; expressing health-related concerns appeared to be one of the primary reasons for leaving a suicide note for this age group. Combined with the observation that many of the notes written by the 56+ age group are shorter than average, a common reason for older suicidees to leave a suicide note was to give a brief and direct explanation about their current situation before saying their final goodbyes. Such a message denotes a clear reason for their suicide without dwelling on the subject of killing themselves.

This lack of dwelling on the subject of suicide is connected to how older suicidees expressed less negative and less positive feelings about suicide in their notes. While about half (46.8%) of all notes from the 56+ age grouping included negative sentiments about suicide, this was lower than any other age group (Appendix F-3). Suicide notes from younger suicidees, in contrast, contained negative descriptions of suicide in the highest amount of cases (67.1%) (Appendix F-1).

Discussing suicide more in negative terms could relate to the act being especially stigmatized for younger age groups. Committing suicide at an older age may be more justifiable from the perspective of society, as concepts like assisted suicide become more acceptable means of ending one's health-related suffering. This would also imply that older suicidees have a higher

level of comfortably with themselves and their decision, which may relate to why the 56+ age group deprecated themselves significantly less in their suicide notes.

It is difficult to ascertain to what degree these differences between age groups are a function of age (one's point in the lifespan) or generation (the era one was born in). Certain findings are easier to infer than others; more health related complaints for the oldest age groups is likely a function of one's point in the lifespan. Other codes are less easy to determine. It is more difficult to infer, for example, whether older suicidees including less negative sentiments about suicide is the function of growing older or a different generational outlook.

Even though the 56+ age group had the least amount of cases with codes from the "Suicide = Bad" category, describing suicide negatively is present in a high percentage of the notes regardless of age or gender. Acknowledging the negative impact of suicide therefore seems to be an enduring theme in the corpus; most suicidees felt the need to address the negative connotations surrounding their actions, anticipating how others will react poorly to their decision. It would therefore be unfair to say that a high amount of negative comments was specifically characteristic of youth suicide notes, because these sentiments existed in a high amount cases regardless of age; it is significant that such sentiments appeared more in the notes of younger suicidees, though describing suicide negatively was not a particularly distinguishing feature of this younger age group.

A more distinguishing feature of youth suicide notes was the lack of precise meaning found within them when it came to describing their actions. In contrast to many of the older suicidees that cited issues such as health, suicide notes from teens and young adults often lacked any specific explanation about their current state or their reason for committing suicide. The

complaints found most often in the notes of younger suicidees instead centered on life in general. Younger suicidees would also discuss their pain and suffering in more general terms compared to other age groups. The general malaise described by these younger suicidees is perhaps the most distinguishing feature of their suicidal message. Not every suicide note from those aged 15-35 contained an imprecise reason attached to their act, but collectively it was a characteristic feature of youth's suicidal message.

Taken together, the quotes from teens and young adults display an unsurety about the source of their issues, or at least an unwillingness to go into detail about their issues. Despite this unsurety, youth suicide notes also express having no hope about overcoming their issues or having a happy and successful future. These findings may seem to complicate the question of youth suicide, but a lack of any precise rational for suicide may be also hold the key to understanding this demographic. The findings indicate that there is a pointlessness felt by young suicidees when it comes to identifying and solving their issues. Although this diagnosis may not offer any direct solutions to youth suicide, it offers some insight into their problematic existence. Young suicidees in this study did not tend to express vengeful wishes about specific others in their notes, or specific complaints about life, but instead a kind of unspecified despondency.

There was one specific topic that was complained about most often in youth suicide notes, which were aspersions about the world or society. Criticisms about society or the outside world was only found in a minority of youth suicide notes (11% for the 15-35 age grouping but 20% when considering only those aged 15-25), though these sentiments were found significantly less often in other age groups (Appendix B-1; B-2). Older age groups contained such complaints about society in the least amount of cases, which is likely a reflection of less antagonism towards the world. Given that many older suicidees also cited health related issues, this would indicate

that their message is less about expressing disdain for the world, and more about abandoning a life that has become personally unbearable. It is worth keeping in mind as well that suicidees from the 56+ age group have outlived members of their generation who have committed suicide at an earlier age, whose reason for suicide may have been connected more to a disdain for society.

Committing suicide at a younger age is more of an indictment on society in general because it indicates an unwillingness to participate in the world laid out before them. Discovering that younger suicidees complained more about the world or society in their notes could be a reflection of this unwillingness to participate in collective existence. The higher number of complaints about the world found in youth suicide notes is compatible with the theory that young suicidees rejected the symbolic realm of society (Dagenais, 2011). More antagonism towards society likely reflects an important aspect of the emergence of youth suicide, where teens and young adults would rather end their own life than continue with their existence.

The emergence of youth suicide is only an extreme result of this antagonism towards the world; the broader relevance of these findings is as a diagnostic tool for the social milieu that all teens and young adults experience in their own personalized way. The prevalence of youth suicide is a reflection of society's failure to create an environment these individuals are able to thrive in; this failure, however, will also present itself in less extreme manifestations like drug and alcohol abuse or other problematic behaviors. Although younger suicidees were more vengeful towards society/ the world in general, they only rarely displayed vengeance directed at others. The grievances they describe instead relate to the world they no longer wish to inhabit and the imprecise issues they have within themselves.

### **Contrasting male and female suicide notes**

Although an initial reading of the notes gave the impression that males deprecated themselves more, this observation was challenged when looking at the coding statistics. Males and females insulted themselves to a similar degree when considering the “Self-Deprecation” category as a whole. However, it was interesting to note how distinct the self-insults were when looking at individual codes within the category. While females described themselves as being a burden (or the world being better without them), males describe themselves more as a bad or harmful person. The difference between these two notions is subtle but meaningful; the latter, expressed by males, has a more abrasive tone towards the self that likely contributed to the informal observation that males were more self-deprecatory.

Describing oneself as a burden (as more females did in their notes) focuses more on how others feel about you, while describing oneself as bad, evil or harmful (as more males did in their notes) is more of a personal indictment. While both comments discuss the self in a negative way, the latter has a harsher tone towards the self, leading to the impression that males insulted themselves more in their notes. This finding highlights the importance of using statistics to keep track of such a large-scale qualitative analysis, as without a more objective count it would not be easy to observe how self-deprecations were relatively equal between males and females. The statistics also helped delineate which types of self-insults were more prevalent for each gender.

Another difference found between male and female suicide notes pertain to the “Suicide = Good/ Justifiable” category; females were more likely to describe suicide in positive terms. This does not seem to reflect a more approving tone towards the act of suicide overall for female suicidees, particularly because males and females did not differ in how much they described

suicide in negative terms. Combined with the other findings from the coding analysis, it seems as though females described suicide more positively as part of a more comforting tone constructed in their notes. Many of the codes in the “Suicide = Good/ Justifiable” category denote sentiments of comfort, like saying that they ‘are going to a better place’ or saying that ‘suicide will liberate them from the pain of their existence’. These positive sentiments about one’s suicide reflect a desire to mitigate how upset others will be.

Many other findings contributed to the conclusion that female suicide notes had a more soothing tone. There were more sentiments of love expressed in female suicide notes, more compliments to others, and more instances of the code “Motivate/ comfort/ wish well”. Female suicide notes were also characterized by absolving others of blame, which can also be interpreted as a comforting gesture.

Females not only absolved others of blame more in their suicide notes, but also blamed others more for their suicide. This duality characterizes a series of other findings where female suicide notes were more aggressive towards others in their notes, despite their more soothing tone compared to males. Female suicide notes had more insults directed at others, particularly their former partners. Essentially, female suicide notes were on the extreme end when it came to being both nice and mean to others in their suicide notes.

Males, conversely, were less comforting and less insulting. Again the easiest example to illustrate this is the “Blame” category of codes; males blamed others for their suicide less and also absolved others for blame less. Males deprecated other people less in their notes and contained fewer cases with loving and comforting remarks.

One interpretation of these findings is that male and female suicide notes differ in terms of whether they focus more on external versus internal factors; females may focus more on interpersonal elements in their notes, while males focus more on themselves and their own feelings. This would explain why females are more comforting and more hateful towards others in their notes, and why males are underrepresented in both these extremes. Both positive and negative feelings are more likely directed towards others in female notes, and such feelings are more likely directed towards the self in male notes.

This internal versus external focus may also offer some insights into the different types of self-insults present in male and female suicide notes discussed earlier. Female suicide notes had a higher percentage of cases describing themselves as a burden, which focuses on how one affects others; they also describe themselves more as bad parents, which references their relationship to others. Males, conversely, had a higher percentage of cases describing themselves as a bad, evil or harmful person, which focuses more on one's internal characteristics. The self-insults that females are overrepresented in focus on external consequences, while for males they relate more to internal characteristics.

This female tendency to focus their comments on others and the male tendency to focus their comments on themselves was the most consistent difference found between the two groups of suicide notes. The significance of this finding is unsure, however it may represent an interesting future avenue of research. Nonetheless, this interpretation helps explain many of the differences between males and females found in this present study. It can be seen when looking at how males complain about being heartbroken more often, while women insult their (former) partners more in their notes; similar to the previously discussed results, males focused more on their internal reaction to the loss of a partner and females directed their sentiments more towards

others. This finding foreshadows how male and female suicide notes differ when filtering for a recent breakup or impending separation; females displayed a more outwardly vengeful tone while males expressed more of an internalized dejection.

### **Experiencing a recent or impending separation**

As would be expected, there were more instances of insulting a (former) spouse or partner after filtering for a recent breakup (many suicidees were single, and therefore do not even have the opportunity to insult a partner). The increase was much more pronounced, however, for females. The finding that female suicide notes displayed a more aggressive tone towards others (before filtering for a recent breakup) is partly explained by their propensity to insult their former partners more following a breakup.

Conversely, male suicide notes showed signs of being less aggressive towards others following a breakup. A much lower percentage of male suicidees wished for harm, revenge or guilt after filtering for a recent breakup. Males went from having significantly less loving remarks and compliments compared to females to having slightly more cases with such remarks after filtering for a breakup. The amount of motivating and comforting remarks, previously overrepresented in female suicide notes, also become relatively equal after filtering for a recent breakup. All this suggests that males reacted to recent breakups in their suicide notes with more dejection and internalized anguish; this compared to the more outwardly aggressive tone of female breakup notes. Many male suicidees framed themselves as an acknowledged loser who deserved their fate, while females portrayed themselves more as a victim of others' actions.

These sentiments were not only different from each other, but also different from males and females before filtering for a breakup. This highlights how exploring certain subgroups

within a variable like gender can yield more specific results. The flexibility of the methods implemented in the current study allowed the researcher to explore the differences between male and female suicide notes more intricately by filtering for cases that also included a recent or impending breakup.

Although there was a noticeable difference between males and females who experienced a breakup, there were also affects that applied to both genders. The changes that occurred to both males and females represent more enduring (or less gender-specific) characteristics of suicide notes from people experiencing the loss of a partner.

Certain codes were expected to rise when filtering for a recent or impending separation because they most commonly applied to the context of a breakup. One such code is the “Cannot live without you/ them” label which increased in both male and female suicide notes. Although the code increased more dramatically for women (it went from being mentioned more by males before filtering for breakups to being mentioned more in female notes), the more significant finding is how much more the code occurred regardless of gender. Another expected increase was in the amount of complaints about being heartbroken or dumped; 42.2% of notes from those experiencing a recent or impending breakup included such sentiments (Appendix J-1).

Both aforementioned codes increased dramatically when filtering for a recent breakup, which indicates that sentiments about the separation dominated the notes of these suicidees. Other codes that are corollary to the subject of a breakup like the “Love you/ them” label also rose for this subgroup. For those experiencing a recent or impending breakup, the purpose of the suicide note seems to be heavily influenced by their separation. Evidence within the notes

suggest that, for many of these suicidees, the timing of their decision to commit suicide was heavily influenced by their separation, and this is reflected by how many fixate on the subject.

Experiencing a breakup appears to leave a distinct mark on the messages left behind in suicide notes. Although males and females framed their situations differently in regards to their recent or impending breakup, both tended make the point of addressing the subject, and used many similar sentiments to do so. The suicide note is a message you intend your partner to see (or you intend others to see where you can discuss your former partner), and it is clear that this motivation altered the purpose of the note for these suicidees as a whole, which in turn changed their collective message.

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## Appendix

### [i] Suicide note transcription template

No dossier du coroner :

Date de naissance :

Date du suicide :

Age :

Sexe :

Lieu de résidence :

Lieu de décès :

Moyen :

Note de suicide :

Remarques :

[ii] Sample numbers & Description of statistics

Total number (n) of suicide notes in the corpus = 292

15-25 years old: n = 25

15-35 years old: n = 73

36-55 years old: n = 157

56+ years old: n = 62

66+ years old: n = 23

Males: n = 221

Females: n = 71

Recent breakup: n = 90

Recent breakup (males): n = 75

Recent breakup (females): n = 15

**Cases:** The number of suicide notes that include a code at least once

**% Cases:** The percentage of suicide notes that include a code at least once

**Count:** The amount of times a code appears, including co-occurrences within the same note

**% Codes:** The total number of codes divided by a code's count

## [A]

## All Categories and Codes

(Unfiltered)

Square brackets at the end of a code mean that the code represents more than one category. For example, the code “Apologizing for suicide” is part of the “Apologies” category of codes, but it also represents the “Suicide = Bad” category of codes.

A-1

**Afterworld (“A.W.”)**

Unfiltered

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Afterworld				
• A.W.	35	0.7%	28	9.6%
• God (reference, plead, visit)	49	0.9%	35	12.0%
• Possible A.W.	16	0.3%	15	5.1%
• Visit/ Join dead relatives [S=G]	18	0.3%	16	5.5%
• Will still be there	99	1.9%	63	21.6%

S=G: Suicide = Good/ Justifiable (A-10)

Missing code: “Going to a better place” (in A-10)

A-1.5

**Afterworld (“A.W.”) (\*Merged)**

Unfiltered

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Afterworld				
• Expressing a belief in or the potential of an afterlife	235	4.5%	116	39.7%

A-2

**Apologies**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Apologies				
 Sorry for issues/ inadequacies [SD]	39	0.8%	27	9.2%
 Sorry for suicide [S=B]	286	5.5%	149	51.0%

SD: Self-Deprecation (A-8)

S=B: Suicide = Bad (A-9)

A-3

**Blame**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Blame (for Suicide)				
 My fault	49	0.9%	36	12.3%
 Not your fault/ not ___'s fault	110	2.1%	74	25.3%
 Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	15	0.3%	10	3.4%

A-4

**Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	85	1.6%	47	16.1%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	76	1.5%	42	14.4%
 Life/ future (general)	209	4.0%	114	39.0%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	121	2.3%	79	27.1%
 Society/ world	29	0.6%	20	6.8%
 Victim of harm	56	1.1%	30	10.3%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	73	1.4%	37	12.7%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	23	0.4%	16	5.5%

A-5

**Compliments Directed to Others**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Compliments (to others)				
 Friendship	26	0.5%	18	6.2%
 General	199	3.8%	92	31.5%
 Good spouse/partner	31	0.6%	25	8.6%
 Will Miss/ will not forget	34	0.7%	24	8.2%
 You helped/ are helpful	79	1.5%	58	19.9%

A-6

**Informal Will**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Informal Will				
 Give item(s) or money to...	153	2.9%	92	31.5%
 Pay back/ pay for	20	0.4%	19	6.5%
 Funeral Plans				
 Incineration	44	0.8%	40	13.7%
 No service/ exposition/ etc...	31	0.6%	31	10.6%
 Special requests	77	1.5%	54	18.5%

A-6.5

**Funeral Plans (\*Merged)**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Informal Will				
 Funeral Plans				
 Instructions about funeral or body	152	2.9%	71	24.3%

A-7

**Information or Instructions**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Information/Instructions				
• Advice/ suggestion/ warning	86	1.7%	53	18.2%
• Body (do not enter, call police...)	40	0.8%	35	12.0%
• Confirm or describe suicide	72	1.4%	60	20.5%
• Give letter to...	19	0.4%	16	5.5%
• Hope/ will understand	56	1.1%	41	14.0%
• Inform others/ get information from...	67	1.3%	51	17.5%
• Love you/ them	460	8.9%	170	58.2%
• Miscilaneous instructions	71	1.4%	49	16.8%
• Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	193	3.7%	101	34.6%
• Personal affairs	113	2.2%	70	24.0%
• Self-compliment	33	0.6%	24	8.2%
• Take care of (person or pet)	68	1.3%	55	18.8%
• Tell (love, goodbye...)/ give hug or kiss to...	31	0.6%	26	8.9%
• Thank you	181	3.5%	92	31.5%
• Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	22	0.4%	12	4.1%

A-8

**Self-Deprecation**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
• Bad Parent	22	0.4%	17	5.8%
• I am bad/ evil/ harmful	56	1.1%	29	9.9%
• Miscilaneous self-insult	176	3.4%	91	31.2%
• World will be better/ I am a burden	68	1.3%	44	15.1%

Missing code: "Sorry for issues/ inadequacies" (in A-2)

A-8.5

**Self-Deprecation (\*Merged)**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
Self-Deprecation				
• Self-deprecation (any)	361	7.0%	125	42.8%

A-9

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
Suicide = Bad				
• Know You disapprove/ will be angry/ will (probably) not understand	32	0.6%	24	8.2%
• Selfish/ easy way out [S=G]	16	0.3%	10	3.4%
• Suicide is harmful/ inconvenient/ dishonourable	71	1.4%	47	16.1%
Suicide is Cowardly				
• The act is courageous/ (perhaps) not cowardly	16	0.3%	13	4.5%
• The act is cowardly	35	0.7%	26	8.9%

S=G: Suicide = Good / Justifiable (A-10)

Missing code: "Sorry for suicide" (in A-2)

A-9.5

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
Suicide = Bad				
• Suicide is bad (any)	440	8.5%	167	57.2%

A-10

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms**

	Unfiltered			
	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 For the better/ good for me	23	0.4%	20	6.8%
 Going to a better place [AW]	18	0.3%	17	5.8%
 Happier/ liberating/ no more pain	45	0.9%	36	12.3%
 Thoughtful/ non-impulsive act	33	0.6%	28	9.6%

AW: Afterworld (A-1)

Missing codes: “Want to die/ tired of living” (in A-11);

“Selfish/ easy way out” (in A-9);

“Visit/ join dead relatives” (in A-1)

A-10.5

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**

	Unfiltered			
	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 Suicide is good or justifiable	227	4.4%	112	38.4%

A- 11

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	62	1.2%	37	12.7%
• I am no longer able (JNSPC)	155	3.0%	105	36.0%
• Metaphor (intolerable, unfixable, had enough)	23	0.4%	19	6.5%
• Something innate or unchangeable about current state	125	2.4%	69	23.6%
• Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction	87	1.7%	67	22.9%
• Want to die/ tired of living [S=G]	74	1.4%	45	15.4%

S=G: Suicide = Good/ Justifiable (A-10)

A-11.5

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)**

Unfiltered

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Unhelpable/ unbearable (any)	526	10.1%	190	65.1%

[B]

Complaints:

Filtered by Age Group

B-1

**Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self**

Filtered: 15-25

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	1	0.2%	1	4.0%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	2	0.4%	2	8.0%
 Life/ future (general)	28	5.0%	18	72.0%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	16	2.8%	11	44.0%
 Society/ world	13	2.3%	5	20.0%
 Victim of harm	9	1.6%	5	20.0%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	6	1.1%	2	8.0%
 Spouse/ (former) partner				

B-2

**Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self**

Filtered: 15-35

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	10	0.7%	6	8.2%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	15	1.1%	9	12.3%
 Life/ future (general)	67	4.8%	36	49.3%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	30	2.1%	22	30.1%
 Society/ world	16	1.1%	8	11.0%
 Victim of harm	16	1.1%	8	11.0%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	18	1.3%	9	12.3%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	5	0.4%	5	6.8%

B-3

### Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self

Filtered: 36-55

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	43	1.4%	22	14.0%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	55	1.8%	27	17.2%
 Life/ future (general)	113	3.8%	59	37.6%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	66	2.2%	40	25.5%
 Society/ world	11	0.4%	10	6.4%
 Victim of harm	35	1.2%	21	13.4%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	43	1.4%	23	14.6%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	17	0.6%	10	6.4%

B-4

### Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self

Filtered: 56+

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	32	4.0%	19	30.6%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	6	0.8%	6	9.7%
 Life/ future (general)	29	3.6%	19	30.6%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	25	3.1%	17	27.4%
 Society/ world	2	0.3%	2	3.2%
 Victim of harm	5	0.6%	1	1.6%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	12	1.5%	5	8.1%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	1	0.1%	1	1.6%

B-5

**Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self**

Filtered: 66+

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	15	6.8%	9	39.1%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	2	0.9%	2	8.7%
 Life/ future (general)	6	2.7%	3	13.0%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	5	2.3%	3	13.0%
 Society/ world	1	0.5%	1	4.3%
 Victim of harm				
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	1	0.5%	1	4.3%
 Spouse/ (former) partner				

[C]

Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable:

Filtered by Age Group

C-1

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable**

Filtered: 15-25

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	1	0.2%	1	4.0%
• I am no longer able (JNSPC)	25	4.4%	15	60.0%
• Metaphor (intolerable, unfixable, had enough)	4	0.7%	3	12.0%
• Something innate or unchangeable about current state	32	5.7%	10	40.0%
• Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction	6	1.1%	4	16.0%
• Want to die/ tired of living [S=G]	3	0.5%	3	12.0%

C-2

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable**

Filtered: 15-35

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	12	0.9%	9	12.3%
• I am no longer able (JNSPC)	47	3.3%	34	46.6%
• Metaphor (intolerable, unfixable, had enough)	11	0.8%	8	11.0%
• Something innate or unchangeable about current state	56	4.0%	25	34.2%
• Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction	27	1.9%	17	23.3%
• Want to die/ tired of living [S=G]	7	0.5%	6	8.2%

C-3

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)**

Filtered: 15-35

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/Unbearable				
 Unhelpable/unbearable (any)	160	11.4%	52	71.2%

C-4

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)**

Filtered: 36-55

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/Unbearable				
 Unhelpable/unbearable (any)	286	9.6%	101	64.3%

C-5

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)**

Filtered: 56+

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/Unbearable				
 Unhelpable/unbearable (any)	80	10.0%	37	59.7%

[D]

Self-Deprecation:

Filtered by Age Group

D-1

**Self-Deprecation (\*Merged)**Filtered: **15-35**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	127	9.0%	35	47.9%

D-2

**Self-Deprecation (\*Merged)**Filtered: **36-55**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	213	7.1%	76	48.4%

D-3

**Self-Deprecation (\*Merged)**Filtered: **56+**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	21	2.6%	14	22.6%

[E]

Describing Suicide in Positive Terms:

Filtered by Age Group

E-1

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **15-35**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 Suicide is good or justifiable	57	4.1%	28	38.4%

E-2

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **36-55**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 Suicide is good or justifiable	136	4.6%	63	40.1%

E-3

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **56+**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 Suicide is good or justifiable	34	4.3%	21	33.9%

[F]

Describing Suicide in Negative Terms:

Filtered by Age Group

F-1

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **15-35**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Bad				
 Suicide is bad (any)	147	10.4%	49	67.1%

F-2

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **36-55**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Bad				
 Suicide is bad (any)	223	7.5%	89	56.7%

F-3

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **56+**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Bad				
 Suicide is bad (any)	70	8.8%	29	46.8%

**[G]**

## Complimenting Others, Self-Deprecation &amp;

Instructions/ Information:

Filtered by Gender

G-1

**Self Deprecation**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
 Bad Parent	12	0.3%	10	4.5%
 I am bad/ evil/ harmful	53	1.4%	26	11.8%
 Miscilanious self-insult	138	3.7%	71	32.1%
 World will be better/ I am a burden	48	1.3%	29	13.1%

G-2

**Self Deprecation**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Self-Deprecation				
 Bad Parent	10	0.7%	7	9.9%
 I am bad/ evil/ harmful	3	0.2%	3	4.2%
 Miscilanious self-insult	38	2.5%	20	28.2%
 World will be better/ I am a burden	20	1.3%	15	21.1%

G-3

**Compliments Directed to Others (\*Merged) & Self Deprecation (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Compliments (to others)				
 Compliment (any)	261	7.1%	94	42.5%
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	283	7.7%	95	43.0%

G-4

**Compliments Directed to Others (\*Merged) & Self Deprecation (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Compliments (to others)				
 Compliment (any)	108	7.2%	36	50.7%
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	78	5.2%	30	42.3%

G-5

**Information or Instructions**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Information/Instructions				
 Advice/ suggestion/ warning	58	1.6%	37	16.7%
 Body (do not enter, call police...)	31	0.8%	28	12.7%
 Confirm or describe suicide	52	1.4%	45	20.4%
 Give letter to...	15	0.4%	12	5.4%
 Hope/ will understand	39	1.1%	28	12.7%
 Inform others/ get information from...	50	1.4%	40	18.1%
 Love you/ them	296	8.0%	122	55.2%
 Miscellaneous instructions	50	1.4%	34	15.4%
 Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	130	3.5%	72	32.6%
 Personal affairs	96	2.6%	58	26.2%
 Self-compliment	27	0.7%	20	9.0%
 Take care of (person or pet)	49	1.3%	43	19.5%
 Tell (love, goodbye...)/ give hug or kiss to...	19	0.5%	18	8.1%
 Thank you	141	3.8%	73	33.0%
 Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	15	0.4%	8	3.6%

G-6

**Information or Instructions**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Information/ Instructions				
• Advice/ suggestion/ warning	28	1.9%	16	22.5%
• Body (do not enter, call police...)	9	0.6%	7	9.9%
• Confirm or describe suicide	20	1.3%	15	21.1%
• Give letter to...	4	0.3%	4	5.6%
• Hope/ will understand	17	1.1%	13	18.3%
• Inform others/ get information from...	17	1.1%	11	15.5%
• Love you/ them	164	11.0%	48	67.6%
• Miscilaneous instructions	21	1.4%	15	21.1%
• Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	63	4.2%	29	40.8%
• Personal affairs	17	1.1%	12	16.9%
• Self-compliment	6	0.4%	4	5.6%
• Take care of (person or pet)	19	1.3%	12	16.9%
• Tell (love, goodbye...)/ give hug or kiss to...	12	0.8%	8	11.3%
• Thank you	40	2.7%	19	26.8%
• Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	7	0.5%	4	5.6%

**[H]**

Describing Suicide in Negative Terms &amp;

Describing Suicide in Positive Terms:

Filtered by Gender

H-1

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Bad				
 Suicide is bad (any)	297	8.0%	127	57.5%

H-2

**Describing Suicide in Negative Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Bad				
 Suicide is bad (any)	143	9.6%	40	56.3%

H-3

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
 Suicide is good or justifiable	140	3.8%	77	34.8%

H-4

**Describing Suicide in Positive Terms (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Suicide = Good/ Justifiable				
<input checked="" type="radio"/> Suicide is good or justifiable	87	5.8%	35	49.3%

## [I]

## Complaints, Blame &amp;

Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable:

Filtered by Gender

I-1

## Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self

Filtered: Male

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	59	1.6%	34	15.4%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	58	1.6%	35	15.8%
 Life/ future (general)	154	4.2%	88	39.8%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	82	2.2%	57	25.8%
 Society/ world	16	0.4%	14	6.3%
 Victim of harm	38	1.0%	19	8.6%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	47	1.3%	26	11.8%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	10	0.3%	8	3.6%

I-2

## Complaints or Criticisms Not Directed at Self

Filtered: Female

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	26	1.7%	13	18.3%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	18	1.2%	7	9.9%
 Life/ future (general)	55	3.7%	26	36.6%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	39	2.6%	22	31.0%
 Society/ world	13	0.9%	6	8.5%
 Victim of harm	18	1.2%	11	15.5%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	26	1.7%	11	15.5%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	13	0.9%	8	11.3%

I-3

### Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable

Filtered: Male

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	42	1.1%	30	13.6%
• I am no longer able (JNSPC)	103	2.8%	75	33.9%
• Metaphor (intolerable, unfixable, had enough)	16	0.4%	13	5.9%
• Something innate or unchangeable about current state	86	2.3%	47	21.3%
• Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction	62	1.7%	49	22.2%
• Want to die/ tired of living [S=G]	52	1.4%	34	15.4%

I-4

### Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable

Filtered: Female

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	20	1.3%	7	9.9%
• I am no longer able (JNSPC)	52	3.5%	30	42.3%
• Metaphor (intolerable, unfixable, had enough)	7	0.5%	6	8.5%
• Something innate or unchangeable about current state	39	2.6%	22	31.0%
• Too much suffering/ cannot find happiness or satisfaction	25	1.7%	18	25.4%
• Want to die/ tired of living [S=G]	22	1.5%	11	15.5%

I-5

### Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)

Filtered: Male

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Unhelpable/ unbearable (any)	361	9.8%	141	63.8%

I-6

**Describing their Situation as Unbearable or Unfixable (\*Merged)**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Unhelpable/ unbearable (any)	165	11.0%	49	69.0%

I-7

**Blame**Filtered: **Male**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Blame (for Suicide)				
• My fault	41	1.1%	28	12.7%
• Not your fault/ not __'s fault	82	2.2%	51	23.1%
• Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	5	0.1%	4	1.8%

I-8

**Blame**Filtered: **Female**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Blame (for Suicide)				
• My fault	8	0.5%	8	11.3%
• Not your fault/ not __'s fault	28	1.9%	23	32.4%
• Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	10	0.7%	6	8.5%

## [J]

## Blame, Complaints &amp;

Other Categories:

Filtered by Gender and Relationship Status

J-1

**Blame, Complaints, and Other Relevant Codes**Filtered: **Recent or impending breakup**

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Blame (for Suicide)				
 My fault	21	1.0%	15	16.7%
 Not your fault/ not __'s fault	42	2.0%	27	30.0%
 Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	9	0.4%	6	6.7%
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (physical)/ sleep	9	0.4%	5	5.6%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	72	3.5%	38	42.2%
 Life/ future (general)	72	3.5%	35	38.9%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	40	1.9%	27	30.0%
 Society/ world	7	0.3%	5	5.6%
 Victim of harm	36	1.7%	15	16.7%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	40	1.9%	17	18.9%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	22	1.1%	15	16.7%
 Compliments (to others)				
 Compliment (any)	131	6.3%	47	52.2%
 Information/ Instructions				
 Love you/ them	205	9.9%	65	72.2%
 Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	86	4.1%	38	42.2%
 Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	16	0.8%	7	7.8%
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	169	8.2%	50	55.6%
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
 Cannot live without you/ them	60	2.9%	35	38.9%

J-2

**Blame, Complaints, and Other Relevant Codes**Filtered: **Males & Recent or impending breakup**

	<b>Count</b>	<b>% Codes</b>	<b>Cases</b>	<b>% Cases</b>
 Blame (for Suicide)				
 My fault	19	1.2%	13	17.3%
 Not your fault/ not __'s fault	33	2.1%	21	28.0%
 Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	3	0.2%	2	2.7%
 Complain/ Criticize				
 Health (phisical)/ sleep	4	0.3%	3	4.0%
 Heartbroken/ dumped	54	3.5%	31	41.3%
 Life/ future (general)	51	3.3%	29	38.7%
 Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	26	1.7%	22	29.3%
 Society/ world	5	0.3%	4	5.3%
 Victim of harm	23	1.5%	9	12.0%
 Deprecate Others				
 Insult/ deprecate (another)	26	1.7%	12	16.0%
 Spouse/ (former) partner	9	0.6%	7	9.3%
 Compliments (to others)				
 Compliment (any)	103	6.6%	40	53.3%
 Information/ Intructions				
 Love you/ them	149	9.6%	55	73.3%
 Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	60	3.9%	32	42.7%
 Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	10	0.6%	4	5.3%
 Self-Deprecation				
 Self-deprecation (any)	138	8.9%	42	56.0%
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
 Cannot live without you/ them	40	2.6%	28	37.3%

J-3

## Blame, Complaints, and Other Relevant Codes

Filtered: **Female & Recent or impending breakup**

	Count	% Codes	Cases	% Cases
 Blame (for Suicide)				
• My fault	2	0.4%	2	13.3%
• Not your fault/ not ___'s fault	9	1.7%	6	40.0%
• Your fault/ their fault/ its fault	6	1.1%	4	26.7%
 Complain/ Criticize				
• Health (physical)/ sleep	5	1.0%	2	13.3%
• Heartbroken/ dumped	18	3.4%	7	46.7%
• Life/ future (general)	21	4.0%	6	40.0%
• Mental/ internal /psychological anguish	14	2.7%	5	33.3%
• Society/ world	2	0.4%	1	6.7%
• Victim of harm	13	2.5%	6	40.0%
 Deprecate Others				
• Insult/ deprecate (another)	14	2.7%	5	33.3%
• Spouse/ (former) partner	13	2.5%	8	53.3%
 Compliments (to others)				
• Compliment (any)	28	5.4%	7	46.7%
 Information/ Instructions				
• Love you/ them	56	10.7%	10	66.7%
• Motivate/ comfort/ wish well	26	5.0%	6	40.0%
• Wishing for harm/ revenge/ guilt	6	1.1%	3	20.0%
 Self-Deprecation				
• Self-deprecation (any)	31	5.9%	8	53.3%
 Unhelpable/ Unbearable				
• Cannot live without you/ them	20	3.8%	7	46.7%