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Book review : Discourse of Men's Suicide Notes : a qualitative analysis

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Galasiński, D. (2017). Discourses of Men's Suicide Notes: A Qualitative Analysis. London: Bloomsbury. 216 pages; ISBN: 978-1-350-00573-0; £85.50 (hbk), £26.09 (pbk), £25.04 (eBook).

In *Discourses of Men's Suicide Notes*, Galasiński uses 290 suicide notes, written by men, from the Polish Corpus of Suicide Notes (Polski korpus listów pożegnalnych sambobójców, <http://www.pcsn.uni.wroc.pl/>) to provide a qualitative, thematic analysis of this understudied discourse type. Using methods from discourse analysis, previous work from masculinity studies and insights from the emerging area of suicidology, Galasiński provides a rare insight into how suicide is discursively constructed by people who take their own life. He argues that, instead of the prevailing view in previous research, which suggests that suicide notes are 'gateways to the suicidal mind' (Galasiński 2017: 2), suicide notes should be viewed as situated social texts; that is, texts that are 'products of discursive practices drawn upon by those who write them' (Galasiński 2017: 2).

The book comprises nine chapters starting with an accessible introduction to suicide notes in which Galasiński details the fundamental dilemma explored in the book – the 'contradiction between the act of suicide and masculinity'. Citing research that demonstrates that people who have killed themselves are viewed as weaker and more cowardly (and therefore less masculine according to the dominant model of masculinity (Connell 1995)) than those who die of other illnesses (Sand et al. 2013), Galasiński makes a clear case for the value of research that explores the interaction of masculinity and suicide, two areas that he provides clear overviews of in the introduction.

Galasiński states that adopting a textually-orientated, constructionist (critical) discourse analysis approach the book allows for the bottom-up analysis of themes in the notes, in contrast to previous research which is, Galasiński (2017: 10) argues, 'representative of the researchers' interests and perspectives (or shall I say, biases) rather than of the data'. Following this, the book contains seven analysis chapters each exploring a different theme in the language used in the suicide notes: how suicide is conceptualised as a gift (chapter 2), the reasons for suicide (chapter 3), the distancing of the act

(chapter 4), identities in the notes (chapter 5), timing in the notes (chapter 5), non-finality in the notes (chapter 6) and instructions in the notes (chapter 7).

The analysis chapters offer some astute and interesting findings that have both theoretical and methodological implications, and that further our understanding of how suicide is conceptualised by those about to take their own life, and also challenge some of the long-held beliefs in research on suicide. For example, in contrast to previous research, which suggests that suicide is always a negative act, Galasiński finds that suicide is viewed by the authors of the notes as positive, and often as a gift. Furthermore, he finds that linguistic evidence shows that the reasons for suicide were more rational than emotional, i.e. the writers of the notes referred more to thinking than to feeling, which is in contrast with existing models of suicide (2017: 60-61).

Another key finding concerns reference to time in the notes. Through an analysis of time frames, Galasiński finds that contrary to his intuition (and to mine), some of the notes discussed the reasons for the suicide and the act of suicide as being in the past, compared with what one might expect – i.e. that the reasons for the suicide are in the past, but the suicide itself is positioned in the present. The men also made reference to taking part in future events after their death, including seeing their loved ones again in ‘the other world’ (Galasiński’s translation of the Polish phrase *tamten świat*). Galasiński (2017: 134) terms these references to life after death as ‘distanced presence’.

Galasiński’s research has clear implications for how suicide is conceptualised by people who are about to take their own life, and most importantly, how evidence from the data suggests that suicide is understood differently by the those taking their lives and the researchers and clinicians working in this area. Galasiński offers a clear argument for these differences. One such example is the definition of suicide. Prominent health organisations, such as the World Health Organisation, define suicide as ‘the act of deliberately killing oneself’ (<http://www.who.int/topics/suicide/en>) whereas, as Galasiński shows, the reference to time frames in the data, particularly reference to the future, suggest that the authors of the notes conceptualise suicide as a longer process than simply killing oneself, which at the very least, starts with the writing of a suicide note. Galasiński (2017: 122) terms this the ‘long suicide’. Throughout the analysis chapters, Galasiński clearly links the findings back to existing research in suicide notes and interprets the notes in reference to masculinity and how the men appeal to societal constructions of masculinity in these final words. For example, in chapter 5, Galasiński provides an overview of gender identity, linking the existing research in this area to one of the themes uncovered in the book - the idea that ‘men don’t kill themselves’ (2017: 91).

In the conclusion, Galasiński (2017: 176) writes that ‘ultimately the aim of the book is to be useful’ and to make a case for the adoption of discourse analysis in clinical and therapeutic settings. I think Galasiński can be confident that he has achieved both aims. In fact, the strength of this book is its interdisciplinarity: it is useful to a wide range of researchers, and Galasiński’s arguments for adopting discourse analysis in clinical research is convincing, well-argued and maintained through the book. However, due to the fact that the book is interdisciplinary, in parts, the linguistic aspects of some texts can feel a little underexplored. Further to this, the notion of face (Goffman 1967; Brown and Levinson 1987), which Galasiński (2017: 172) states is ‘at the heart

of the issue' is only mentioned in the conclusion of the book. Arguably, a reference to facework in the earlier analysis chapters would have been a straightforward way to combine existing theory in linguistics with the linguistic analysis conducted in the book prior to this point. However, as Galasiński states, this book is the first of its kind and, as such, time has to be dedicated to describing previous research into suicide notes and the methodological framework adopted. It is my hope that this monograph is the first of many to adopt and develop this approach.

Overall, this book constitutes an important publication that enriches our understanding of the key themes of suicide notes and uses these observations to challenge previous research. Moreover, it demonstrates the utility of linguistic analysis for researchers working in masculinity studies and suicidology, while providing an overview of these areas for the linguist and discourse analyst new to these areas. *Discourses of Men's Suicide Notes* is a valuable book for anyone interested in suicide research and health communication studies more generally. It will be of particular interest to linguistics and social science researchers as well as clinicians and practitioners. Galasiński provides a thorough exploration of this sensitive discourse type and does so with compassion. Every 40 seconds someone takes their own life (World Health Organisation 2019), and in this current climate, the importance of this research clearly reaches beyond academia.

Editorial Note

If you need emotional support and would like to talk to someone, please contact the Samaritans on 116 123 (or 0808 164 0123 for the Welsh language helpline).

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