



SUICIDE IN ADOLESCENCE: A SINGLE CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

L'obiettivo della presente ricerca, richiestaci dalla famiglia della ragazza morta suicida e che chiameremo Aurora, è stato quello di individuare, mediante l'analisi testuale dei suoi scritti personali (lettere, diario segreto, discorsi in chat) eventuali segnali di disagio che potessero far presagire l'estremo gesto. La ragazza quando si è suicidata per precipitazione aveva 17 anni e frequentava con successo le scuole superiori. L'analisi è stata effettuata mediante l'utilizzo di T-Lab (Lancia, 2004), all'interno della cornice teorica dell'analisi testuale, a cui abbiamo poi affiancato anche una lettura psicodinamica. Dall'analisi dei dati sono emersi alcuni fattori di rischio come l'ambivalenza fra il desiderio di chiedere aiuto e quello di restare da sola ($\chi^2=4.6875$ $p=0,05$); fra la pesantezza della vita e la possibilità/impossibilità di chiedere aiuto ($\chi^2=8.2431$ $p=0,01$) emerge un primo punto fortemente ambivalente. La grande possibilità che ci è stata fornita dai genitori ci ha permesso di mettere in luce attraverso gli scritti personali di una giovane, l'estrema necessità di mettere a punto dei programmi di prevenzione e, soprattutto, di strutturare delle reti che permettano di contenere momenti di crisi.

Parole chiave: suicidio, adolescenza, analisi testuale, fattori di rischio, fattori di protezione

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research which has been requested of us by the family of the girl who committed suicide and who we will call Aurora, is to identify by means of textual analysis of her personal writings (letters, a secret diary, conversations on chat lines) possible signs of distress which could help to foresee the extreme gesture. When she committed suicide by precipitating the girl was 17 years old and was attending secondary school with success.

The analysis has been carried out by using T-Lab (Lancia, 2004), within the theoretical frame of the textual analysis, which we have then supplemented with a psychodynamic reading. From the analysis of the data some risk factors such as the ambivalence between the desire to ask for help and that of staying alone, ($\chi^2=4.6875$ $p=0,05$) emerged; between the gravity of life and the possibility/impossibility



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to ask for help ($\chi^2=8.2431$ $p=0,01$) a first very ambivalent point is revealed. The great possibility that the parents have given us has allowed us, by means of a young person's personal texts, to emphasize the extreme necessity to define prevention programs and, most of all, to organize networks that permit us to control the critical moments.

Key words: Suicide, adolescence, textual analysis, risk factors, protection factors

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this work is to offer a reading of suicide in adolescence, starting from a case of a girl whom we have called Aurora, who committed suicide. The World Health Organization (2002), attempting to supply an organic vision and a course of action for a shared approach to the problem, has differentiated the non-conventional actions on the basis of three categories:

suicide is the result of a gesture programmed consciously by the subject determined to die, of which the final conclusion is death; attempted suicide is the result of a gesture always followed liberally and voluntarily by the subject, but with the final result being survival; parasuicide (Kreitman, 1977) is a gesture that the subject performs in full awareness, but with the desire to achieve a goal different to death.

Di Vita and Bertoglio have estimated that "suicides represent, on a quantitative level, the second cause of death in the course of adolescence. Also the attempts at suicide are very frequent in this age group" (1999, p.25). Adolescence, in fact, is a crucial phase in which the individual finds himself having to face complex modifications, both on a physical and relational level. It could be defined as a suspended age, in which anything can occur, where "in the adolescent, no longer a child but not yet a man, the past and the future meet, the first with the weight of its acquisitions and its influences, the second with the illusion of its possibility" (Caprara, Fonzi, 2000, P. V). For this reason adolescents often live, in a more or less intense manner, feelings of solitude, uneasiness, uncommunicativeness, loss of planning skills and sense of the future. Sometimes adolescents implement detrimental and self-destructive behaviour, from running away up to the extreme temptation of taking their life or passing on to behaviour at risk (Pommereau, 1999).

Gabbard (2002) underlines that you can distinguish the risk factors in the short term from those in the long term. The former constitute predictable indexes of suicide within a year or so: panic attacks, mental anxiety, grave loss of pleasure and interest, depressive agitation with rapid passages of moods, from agitation, to depression, rage or vice versa; abuse of alcohol, diminished concentration and total insomnia; the latter, on the other hand, include suicidal ideation and intentionality, desperation and a history of previous suicide attempts.

This is very serious if you think that, as Pietropolli Charmet (2004, 2009) reports, a relevant epidemiological fact is that, if an adolescent has attempted to take his life, he/she has a high statistical probability of dying by suicide in a very brief period of time, from one to three years. Attempted suicide is therefore the main risk factor with respect to death by suicide.

METHOD

The case of Aurora, the girl who committed suicide by precipitating at the age of 17, has been studied. The young girl, second daughter with a sister five years her senior, lived with her parents and sister in a flat in a small town in the province of Torino.

Both her parents worked, the father full-time and the mother part-time and both were actively involved in voluntary work. The sister was in the second year of the Faculty of Science at University and



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she commuted every day to attend lessons. Aurora was attending the third year of secondary school at a scholastic Institute in a nearby town which she reached travelling by bus. Following previous non-conventional attempts, from the age of 13, Aurora was followed for a few meetings by the Infantile Neuropsychiatry Service, interrupted then by her. In memory of the girl, a few months after her death the family decided to set up a voluntary association with the aim of averting juvenile distress and the possible non-conventional attempts with the involvement of other families who have experienced the event of their adolescent children's suicides also. Aurora was chosen for this single case study because the family, in the light of the activity carried out by the association and with the aim of prevention, they contacted us asking if we could use for the sake of research, the texts left by their daughter and if possible to derive from them details to prevent further adolescent suicides. Given the motive of the request we accepted to proceed with the research and obtained, in consequence, the authorisation to use anonymously, all the girl's available texts that were found posthumously.

As we can deduce from her texts and from the interviews made with her friends, parents and teachers, Aurora loved writing and she was a vivacious girl with many interests. She had friends who described her as cheerful and with a sunny nature; some of them agreed, for the sake of research and with the assurance that we respect their privacy, to make available to us the exchanges made in their chat sessions and recorded as file text on their pcs. The family, as well as having asked the teacher to hand over the letters that Aurora had written to her, gave us the girl's secret diary and the prints of all her chat sessions.

The materials used for the textual analysis therefore, were: the texts in the secret diary, the chat session files and the 4 letters sent to the maths teacher.

The procedure followed by us was as follows: the collection of all the paper and computer materials, loading of all the data by means of the program "block notes" and the subdivision of the texts in two bodies (paper and chat).

The analysis was then carried out by means of T-Lab (Lancia, 2004), a computer program made up of a combination of linguistic and statistical instruments for the analysis of texts. After the construction of the corpus for the elaboration of the text, we carried out the analysis on the frequency of the words, the comparison between the keywords, the analysis of the sequences and the maps of the thematic nucleus through the multidimensional scaling procedure.

RESULTS

From a first analysis of the words that appear with major frequency in the two corpus, a substantial difference emerges: in the chat sessions the words used are "you" (objective) (18 times) and "you" (subjective) (14 times), while "I" appears only 6 times; in the letters on the other hand, the word used the most is "I" (36 times) followed by "you" (formal) (25 times) and "you" (informal) (8 times), which however, even if added together result as inferior to "I". It is as if with her friends there is not much space for herself which only emerges in the deep relations with the adults of reference. It can be assumed that with her friends Aurora concentrates mainly on the others and their problems not being able to reveal herself and to ask for help for herself; with her teacher and her mother, on the other hand, she allows her individuality and her distinctiveness to emerge to a greater extent. Through the procedure of the analysis of the concordances, which permit the verification of the contexts of necessity of every lexical unit, you can emphasize the other significant differences between the two blocks. The word cry appears with opposite significance in the two parts: present for no less than 5 times in the letters, it is always used in the terms of an outlet of sufferance, sadness and pain; in the chat sessions on the other hand, it appears only once as a cry of happiness, with a significance of commotion and joy; the depressive nucleus of sadness, of solitude and of sufferance never appear in the texts addressed to the girlfriends but emerge with impetus in the letters addressed to the adults. The desperation appears only



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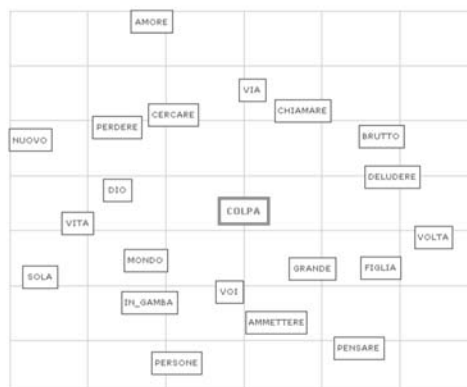
twice in the letter corpus, as with the tears, the sufferance, the difficulties and the word suffer. It seems that she can't speak of a pain too great with her girlfriends, perhaps for fear of not being supported. For no less than 7 times Aurora repeats the word "alone" in the letters while in the chat sessions only once, in a slogan referred to by her in inverted commas as if to indicate that it is not a sensation that she feels herself. This sad term appears in the chat sessions only in the abovementioned slogan, while it is present in the letters twice, referred to the world, which is seen by the girl as a "sad and ugly world". The words "death" and "to die" indicate that the explicit reference to death and to her suicidal intention can only be expressed to adults; the impression is that Aurora tries to protect her age group from her ideas of death. We could think that the girl also tried to protect the adults from her suicidal intentions, if we compare the frequency of the word death and to die with the word life, as if she had limited the expression of her intentions. Moreover, the word life gives back an χ^2 of 6.9280 ($p = 0.01$) with the term to lose, while the entry to want presents an χ^2 of 7.4134 ($p = 0.01$).

This data could signify her attempt to cancel the desire of death with that of life that, in a psychodynamic perspective, can be translated with the implementation of a reactive formation. Fear emerges only with the adults for no less than 5 times, as fear of not making it on her own, fear of men, fear of not being loved, fear of violence and fear of the world. The problems are brought back 5 times in the letters when Aurora speaks of her difficulties while in the chat sessions they appear twice with an ironic tone; the word pain is used only with reference to others: her mother's pain in the letters and the pain of her friend who is suffering for love in the chat sessions. Happiness, on the other hand, is expressed in reference to herself in the letters but not in the chat sessions (only once speaking in general of who is happy in love).

In the chat sessions the defence of displacement would emerge to a greater extent, as Aurora hardly ever speaks in the first person but always refers to others or uses phrases from songs or poems; this displacement could allow her to give an image of herself not overcome by anguish and misery, fearing perhaps a distancing by her friends, that could not bear a burden so great. In this way, however, a possible channel for immediate and direct help, that of her friends, is precluded. Her nickname renders visible her pain and her possible suicidal intentions; she presents herself with the name "death". In Aurora's texts we can read explicit reference to suicide and to previous attempts, not carried out in the end thanks to the aid of acquaintances or for her second thoughts.

In the writings of the young girl the blame is associated with the words big ($C=0.2673$), to disappoint ($C=0.2785$), life ($C=0.2698$), world ($C=0.2357$), God ($C=0.2132$), indexes of the importance she gives to such words. Feeling to blame could amount to losing someone or something, to disappoint others and her-self and having to admit to having made a mistake.

Fig. 1 - Associations with the keyword Blame.

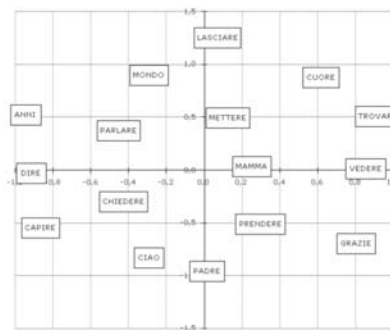




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Another risk factor is the incoherence perceived in the outside world, as it appears evident from fig. 2 and which confuses the girl, preventing her from understanding what is really the right thing to do and what others want from her. The analysis of the thematic nucleus makes use of Multidimensional Scaling; if in the analysed texts two lemmas often appear associated, this signifies that in the mental space of the adolescent they are close. In our case it would seem to emerge, from the distance between the lemmas to say and to see, the impossibility to say that which is seen or to see that which is said, as if there were a basic incoherence that prevents being authentic.

Fig. 2 – Map of the thematic nucleus (Multidimensional Scaling).

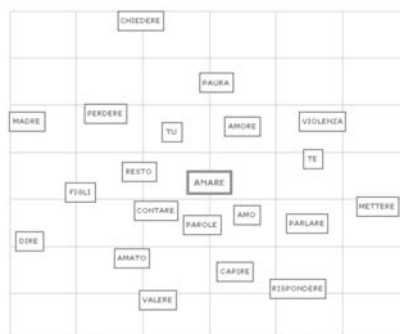


If it is important to know the alarm signals that indicate the possibility of suicidal ideation in an adolescent, it is just as useful to understand what the protection factors could be and not only those of risk, in order to strengthen them in the perspective of prevention.

In the totality of Aurora's texts, we went looking for indicators of the quality of relations, the presence or absence of a support network both of friendship or on the part of the adults mentioned, her capacity to remain in the relations, or to believe and to trust in someone or an ideal.

With regard to the quality of the relations we have sounded out the emotions revealed in the texts. Love is expressed frequently, in its diverse meanings, filial, romantic, and friendly. The word heart appears with reference to the desire for maternity and aimed towards God. In Fig. 3 we see the associations of words with "to love": apart from being linked with all the derivatives of the word love, it is tied to "words" and "to speak", a signal that the feelings can be said and expressed to the people dear to her. Associations with "understand" and "count" also exist, which express the importance of feeling loved, of being understood and to count for someone. Unexpectedly "violence" appears, which makes it difficult to see a logical connection with the keyword "to love". We could assume that the violence seen in the world or suffered by Aurora has also pervaded the concept of love that in fact creates "fear".

Fig. 3 – Associations with the keyword "to love".



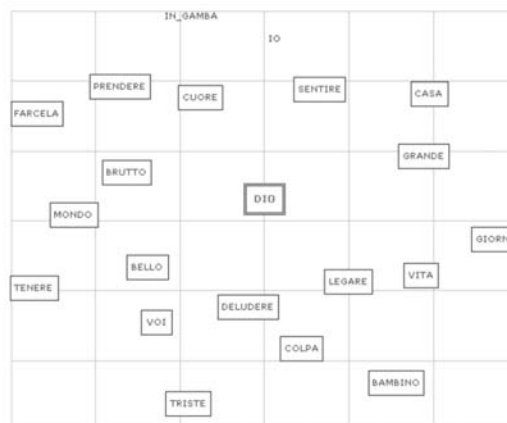


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With regards to the support network, friendship is rarely mentioned, leading to the assumption of a distancing from her girlfriends and from her age group in general as also the already mentioned difficulty to speak of distress and personal problems with her girlfriends would indicate. The maternal support would seem to persist instead, as adult of reference who the girl can ask for help: the word life is correlated with the word help (χ^2 8.2431, $p= 0.01$). Aurora names mummy 19 times and mother 11 times, emphasizing a very intense bond between mother and daughter. This bond, like that with the father, proves to be ambivalent with respect to the words mummy-to beat ($C=0.2810$), mother-worse ($C=0.4523$) and father-thrash ($C=0.4000$). From the analysis in fact, a certain weariness in the adults of reference, who have to face numerous problems emerges and they are seen by Aurora as in need of protection ($C=0.3829$). In this case the strong point could become a risk factor should the young girl have to worry about the adults of reference, as there would be a detrimental reversal of roles in this particular age bracket. As Ladame (2004) states, an intergenerational barrier must exist which implies a difference between the subset formed by the parents and that formed by the children, in which the first must act as holding environment for the second and not the other way around. In this case, instead, the girl often expresses the desire to protect the mother or explains the choice to avoid suicide to remain near her.

Another factor that could be intended as protection in the girl's moments of crisis, is the faith in God: in her texts the girl uses the word God no less than 11 times declaring that she believes in God, in his mercy and in his help. In a hypothetical prevention program, such a strong opportunity for the girl as this would have been supported, permitting an authentic and a high spiritual level of communication with Aurora who shows a great sensitivity and a very reflective nature. At the same time, though, you would have tried to moderate the vision of God who judges in a too demanding and strict way, reducing in this way the girl's fear and shame for everyone of her errors. If you observe the association of words with the lemma God (fig. 4), in fact, you can see both the connection with the positive words life ($C=0.2132$), beautiful ($C=0.2727$), heart, great, to feel, home, indicators of a faith that can save and help, and with the negative ones, ugly ($C=0.2697$), to disappoint ($C=0.3015$), blame, to make it, and with the neutral ones like to bond ($C=0.3015$). These associations bring to light the ambivalence towards the figure of God and it becomes a concrete reality in the two words to disappoint and to bind. In another instance the protection factor of God could change negatively because in case of error Aurora would feel overcome, fearing punishment on the part of God and of his estrangement.

Fig. 4 – Associations with the keyword God.





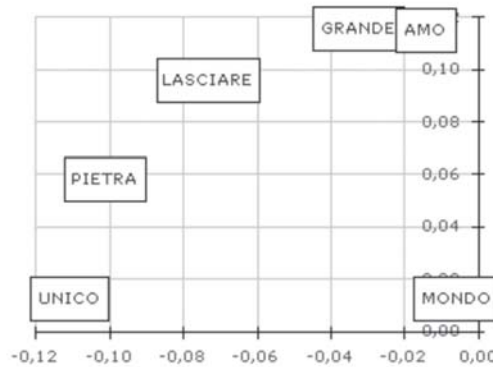
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Therefore it would be dealing with a God perceived as a Super I, too rigid and disappointing ($c=0.3015$) that could substitute the father figure, which doesn't appear, other than only rarely, in Aurora's texts. Perhaps the father figure doesn't appear in terms of father but as Father in the form of God who, however, judges and punishes.

As Pietropolli Charmet sustains (2004, 2009), it is essential to try to re-establish the paternal role during the adolescent suicidal crisis: we must therefore always speak with the father, even if he is absent, indolent, a deserter, delegating party, disagreeable to us, or to the child or the mother. It seems to us that the positive escape from the tunnel of the crisis is often correlated with the reappearance of the father on the adolescent's educational and emotional scene that in his absence has decided to disappear without even trying to fight. Aurora, most likely, tried to do this, but without great results ($C=0.4472$).

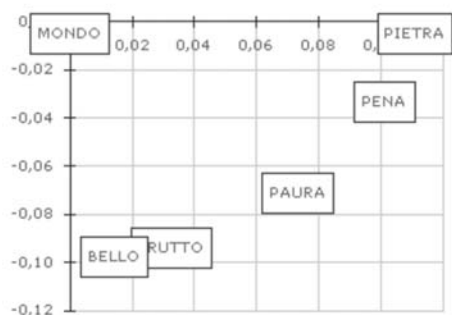
Interesting then is the presence of the word world, on which the young girl reflects. With the analysis of the sequences the words preceding that lemma are drawn to attention (see fig. 5), which seem to be conflicting with each other because they express on one side a great world, loved and unique but at the same time a world to leave behind, a world of stone.

Fig. 5 – Words predecessor the lemma world.



Analysing the successor then the contrast increases, because it is a beautiful world, but at the same time ugly, which is frightening and painful and that "throws stones at you". As you can see in fig.6 it seems that beautiful wants to cover ugly, remembering again the mechanisms of defence of cancellation and of reactive formation. If you count the number of times that the two words appear moreover, you note that beautiful is present 11 times while ugly only 5, confirming this hypothesis, as if trying to cancel the ugly from the world with its opposite, the beautiful.

Fig. 6 – Words successor the lemma world.





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CONCLUSIONS

From the analysis of the data the great ambivalence of Aurora towards her own family, friends and to life in general is revealed. Perhaps it is precisely this detail that, at a certain point, no longer permits the girl to see with lucidity what is happening. The comparison between the types of texts, is also particularly interesting; the ones on paper and the ones on the chat sessions, because they emphasize the diversity of the "being" within a relationship. As Pietropolli Charmet (2009) sustains, it is essential that in the moment of confusion, the adolescent can count on stable and good parental figures, and in this way be able to be reflected and re-emerge from possible situations at risk. A second point worth mentioning in our opinion is the desire on the part of Aurora to change things, to modify a world that she doesn't like and to which she doesn't surrender without a fight. Her tenacity, her high ideals and her courage could have been protection factors that, if adequately reinforced would have permitted to read her request for help.

Without doubt this case brings to light the importance of a primary prevention, with the objective of acting at an environmental level and of the individual, to prevent the appearance of disturbances and of suicidal ideation; secondarily, with the detection of the initial disturbances and of a *tertiary* prevention that consists in a subsequent assistance as a precaution of the occurrence of chain suicides or the development of depressive syndromes. Literature emphasizes how parents and teachers are not considered by adolescents as privileged interlocutors: friends and school companions would be the most suitable people to help their age group with suicidal ideations, nevertheless, most of the time they don't have the tools to be able to help. It is to be hoped in our opinion also in the light of the data obtained, to define prevention projects oriented towards the organizing of a support network including the family, the school, the recreation/sport centres, the parish ones, and the health service so that you can give a loud voice to those words that, too often, are not able to be shouted.

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