

MORAL JUDGMENT PRECEDING ATTEMPTS OF SUICIDE: ACCOUNTS OF SUICIDE ATTEMPT SURVIVORS AND SUICIDE VICTIMS

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Suicide is a growing problem in Sri Lanka. However, little is known about the thought process that precedes the act. This study explores several questions: What is the process of moral decision making that precedes the act of committing suicide? Do people consider the moral norms when they make the decision to end their lives? The objective of this study is to understand the process of moral judgment of those who died by suicide and those who attempted but survived the same. This is work in progress, and the paper presents the theoretical framework of the study. The Dual Process Theory of Greene (2007) posits that deontological judgments are driven by automatic emotional responses, and utilitarian judgments are driven by controlled cognitive processes. The Social Intuitionist Model of Haidt (2001) claims that moral judgment is caused by quick moral intuitions and is followed by ex post facto reasoning. This study examines how quick, automatic moral judgements and effortful rational moral judgements can lead to different outcomes in relation to suicide. The model takes into account the role that emotions play in the making of moral judgments, as proposed by Shweder, Much, Mahapatra, and Park (1997). Using the theories of morality, the authors have developed a model to examine the formation of moral judgments prior to an attempt of suicide. The argument in the proposed model is that the trigger event may result either in an immediate/impulsive reaction or in a deliberative reaction, both leading to attempts at suicide. If the reaction is impulsive, the action is a result of intense emotions without moral considerations/judgments. If the individual survives the suicide attempt, he/she may engage in ex post facto moral reasoning. If the reaction is deliberate, the individual would engage in moral reasoning until he/she arrives at the moral judgment that attempting suicide is 'right' and then proceed to attempt suicide. If the individual survives the suicide attempt, he/she may engage in moral reasoning again. This research is a qualitative study and will be carried out in two phases. Phase 1 involves in-depth interviews with suicide attempt survivors. Phase 2 uses letters relating to motives of suicide left behind by those who have committed suicide. The data will be analyzed according to the concepts in the proposed model. The results of this study will explore how people make the moral decision to end their own lives. It would fill a research gap by providing answers to one of the most fundamental questions pertaining to the judgement whether life is/is not worth living.

Keywords: Suicide, Moral Judgment, Emotions