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“The self-murderer from Orminge”: A bereaved daughter’s remonstrance to “rescue” her *Self* through a performed memoir of revolt

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Moral discourses, which operate to create difference among people, construct and reconstruct a “suicide stigma” whereby the suicide-bereaved are stigmatized in their social contexts and thus prevented from communicating their experience of loss. Departing from a performance-based pragmatic approach, this article uses Bamberg’s (1997) positioning theory to analyze a young woman’s performed memoir as her way of resisting this stigmatizing position.

Following her mother’s suicide, the daughter-narrator breaks the silence, renegotiates meaning and claims her normalcy – and that of people like her. The audience members, who partake in the emotional and relational aspects of her grief, are positioned as witnesses. They represent society and “the moral court of law”, and are endowed with the power to liberate the narrator from her guilt. This article showcases how the narrative format of a performative memoir can enable a process of de-stigmatization and in addition work to empower and help normalize the stigmatized experiences of others.

Keywords: adolescent, bereavement, identity, narrative, performance, stigma, suicide

Introduction: “The performative memoir” as a way to negotiate stigma

“You will now be part of a journey – some snippets of my life – but first and foremost about my relationship with my mother who was mentally ill and committed suicide...”. These words are spoken in the introduction to the one-woman theatre play, *The self-murderer from Orminge*, which narrates a young woman’s experience of her mother’s suicide during adolescence. I saw the play live on one occasion in the fall of 2011, in my position as an audience member while at the same time a research student in the field of suicide bereavement puzzled by the silent nature of suicide narratives. The performed narrative is a unique case in the genre of memoirs on suicide bereavement not only because it is a theatre play, which in itself is rare on this subject, but also because its aim is to challenge the suicide stigma by locating the suicide problem where it belongs, that is, in society. Like other public suicide bereavement narratives, for example, written or filmed documentary memoirs (e.g. Lukas, 2008; Rappaport, 2009; Rice, 2000), and oral storytelling in grief intervention projects (Kelham, 2012; Ryan, Lister and Flynn, 2013), the story is told from a stigmatized position, where the breaking of silence is ascribed most importance. Here, the narrator explicitly introduces herself as the daughter of a “self-murderer” and by reintroducing this historical concept of stigma, she signals that her identity – as the “daughter left behind” and narrator of the story – is at stake due to her experience.

The stigmatized position of the suicide-bereaved can be explained by Goffman’s (1963) theory of stigma as a *social process* that takes place in social interaction, whereby a deeply discreditable characteristic is attributed to the individual so that the “bearer is reduced from a whole and usual person to a tainted and discounted one” (p. 3). Here, the suicide triggers or amplifies this stigmatized position, depending on earlier life circumstances and the social contexts in which the bereaved socially interact. At the same time, this stigmatizing process

must be understood as rooted in the societal context, through widespread notions about suicide as a deviant death that exercise power due to fear and ignorance (Joiner, 2010). Moral discourses that permeate society operate to create difference among people, and by internalizing them the suicide-bereaved also internalize experiences of stigma or “Otherness”. “The new public health” (see Petersen and Lupton, 2000) is a case in point because it supports the idea that the individual must take responsibility for her health, and ultimately for her whole life. Thus, suicide is the definitive proof of moral failure. This discursive process of stigmatization originates from Foucault’s (2003 [1999]) theory on how abnormality is (re-)constructed through societal perceptions, tied to powerful discursive practices that have a constitutive power within the individual.

In accordance with this reasoning, suicide stigma has frequently been reported in research as socially inherited by bereaved family members, as the social network’s insecurity and avoidance (Cvinar, 2005; Feigelman, Gorman and Jordan, 2009) and in terms of “self-stigmatization”, that is, the bereaved individual’s own perceptions of strangeness (Dunn and Morish-Vidners, 1988; Silvén Hagström, 2013). The latter indicates that the stigmatic experience of suicide bereavement negatively affects the identity of the bereaved. As a consequence, most suicide bereavement experiences are left unspoken – even within the bereaved families (ibid.). This seriously restricts the availability of social support and complicates grieving. In addition, the silent nature of suicide narratives constitutes the nucleus for further stigma in society. By actively taking a stance to make the suicide stigma visible and negotiable, the theatre play in question represents a *counter-narrative* (see Andrews, 2004a) – a remonstrance against the cultural meanings associated with suicide. As such, it offers an example of narrative resistance against a shameful position so often defined by its silence.

This article departs from the theoretical framework of narrative inquiry, which emphasizes the connection between the act of narrating and the shaping of personal experience and identity (Brockmeier and Carbagh, 2001). The main idea is that storytelling in all its forms, from written texts to narrative practice in everyday interaction and public speaking, offers opportunities for the individual to make sense of the world and herself as part of the same. In this case, the story performed belongs to the literary genre memoir. It is a narrative essay organized around a particular theme using selective aspects of the life history, without the requirements of autobiographical chronology or detailed accuracy (Cohen, 2012). The overall theme – how a daughter grew up with her mentally ill mother who later committed suicide – is of an argumentative kind as the narrator daughter portrays life events from her childhood, departing from a confessional and accusatory stance, in order to “set things right” morally. Ultimately, the daughter’s narrative demands answers to the question of who or what to hold responsible for her mother’s suicide. The audience is positioned as witnesses representing both society and the “moral court of law” at the same time, with an unspoken assignment to judge and preferably “free” the narrator from guilt, through the narrative demonstration of her “case”.

My aim in this article is to analyze how a young woman’s performed memoir in a local theatre might serve as a readmission of the power to challenge dominating notions of suicide in Western society, which create the suicide-stigma, in order to claim her status as “normal”. Three aspects of meaning construction and reconstruction are considered in the analysis. First, the narrator’s meaning-making of *the suicide incident* is analyzed from the question: What individual and/or social circumstances are considered in the story in order to answer the why-question regarding the suicide’s motive(s)? Second, the narrator’s *identity* is analyzed to identify how she constructs and negotiates the meaning of herself as part of her narrated

experiences. Third, *the social context* of the narration is analyzed to assess what meaning “storytelling in a theatre” is attributed in the process of de-stigmatization.

In contrast to existing research on the young suicide-bereaved, which has a tendency to passivize the individual as a victim and ascribe to “medicine” the honorable role of offering cure and restitution (cf. Frank, 1995), this paper highlights the bereaved individual’s own agency as a force to work against stigma through storytelling. The results from this study constitute a call for research and practice to focus on the constructive aspects of bereavement by supporting mourners’ own telling of their experiences, thereby invigorating meaning-making in loss and self-formation (see Neimeyer, 2001). On a general level, the results from the study support ideas on how public storytelling can work to empower and help normalize the stigmatized experiences of others (e.g. Rosenfeld Halverson, 2008; Young, 2009).

Material

The material comprises a one-woman theatre play, *The Self-murderer from Orminge*, which was performed a few times at a small, local theatre housed in a youth recreation center in Orminge, an eastern suburb of Stockholm, in the autumn of 2011. At the time I attended, the audience consisted of about 20 people. There was an intimate atmosphere in the room; only the narrator’s voice broke through the silence, at times accompanied by music, audio applied voices or audience members’ sobbing. Due to its minimalism and intimacy, the performance can be defined as a chamber play. It consists of two main characters: Johanna¹ and her mother, both represented by Johanna. Other characters in the play, such as class mates, male “friends” and the mother’s doctors, are represented using technical means or as invisible and unheard addressees of Johanna’s verbal accounts and actions.

The play is 48 minutes long. I obtained a filmed version from the author who agreed to

¹ The narrator has been given the name Johanna in order not to disclose her identity.

this study. The recording was made from a position behind the audience – picturing their backs and profiles with a main focus on stage. Hence, it lacks the participants’ facial expressions. The recording provides visual narrative material, while my transcription of the play works as textual material. These materials have been analyzed in order to cross-fertilize each other in a “text/context relation” (Langellier, 1998, p. 211). The text offers an opportunity to analyze the narrator’s linguistic telling of her story, while the visual material has been essential to the analysis of contextual details, such as the embodiment of the story (from body language, facial expressions and affective intonations), the editing and scenography, lighting and sound design and the social interaction between the narrator and her audience.

Ethical considerations

The performed memoir is ethically sensitive, since it represents personal, but at the same time public, accounts of a subject that is entrenched in traumatic childhood experiences. Hence, ethical considerations are important. A case in point is that the analysis of the play inevitably constitutes the emergence of a *new* story – one shaped by me as author and the points that I wish to make – rather than the ones intended by the narrator herself (see Snyder Young, 2011). Consequently, I have cautiously tried to balance honoring the authenticity of the narrator’s performed story, by a detailed presentation of the material, and situating the material in a specific research context. In addition, narrative inquiry is always a question of the researcher’s subjective interpretation of the material. Therefore, I make no claims to “truth” or an ambition to find one “right” — as opposed to a “wrong” – interpretation of the play. Instead, my writing serves to guide the reader towards what I have found to be the most probable interpretation from the material itself, and from its location in time and space.

Analysis

The material was analyzed using a selection of narrative methods designed to encompass both the linguistic and the visual aspects of the performance. The analysis departed from a performance-based pragmatic approach (Bamberg, 1997, p. 335). This means that the main focus of the analysis is the act of *narration* and its significance to the performer, rather than the oral accounts in literal detail, where the narrator's pre-imagined interaction with the audience is presumed to be the decisive factor in the story told. Repeated reading and viewing of the material characterized the first step in the analysis, in order to identify the set of characters and event sequences ordered into a main storyline. Beyond the textual analysis this entails an analysis of the performance's editing – or what Ryan and Lenos (2012) call “the art of selection and combination” (p. 75) – and scenography, which in chorus aim to build up convincing story. This analysis departs from the assumption that the narrator *chooses* certain events to be portrayed, while others are left out, depending on how she wishes to be understood and to fend off moral ambiguities. In the second step, the separate scenes were analyzed more closely to further scrutinize the narrator's identity claims. The subject positions taken and given to others throughout the story were analyzed from three different aspects: how the characters are positioned in relation to one another within the performed events, how the narrator positions herself to the audience and how the narrator positions herself to herself as part of identity construction (see Bamberg, 1997, p. 337).

In addition, the analysis departs from a critical methodology for analysis of visual materials (Rose, 2008). This perspective emphasizes that – in addition to the narrative itself – images should be understood as “powerful” and “seductive” in their own right, and therefore political in the sense that they have effects and *do* something with both the performer and the watchers. Of particular interest is the construction of social and political individuals within this production. In this case, the visual side of the story works to strengthen the narrative

points that are being addressed to the audience (ibid.).

The framing of the story and its implications for “what” and “how” in the narrative inquiry

The play begins with Johanna welcoming the audience. The scenery is stripped; the stage is dressed in white sheets with a black drop curtain as a backdrop. Two white kitchen chairs, almost alike but not quite, are placed next to each other at the center – the only props used throughout the play. Johanna stands in the front. Her red hair curls down to her shoulders and she is dressed all in black (sweater and pants), carrying a guitar on her back.

Hello and welcome everyone! [some in the audience say “thanks”]. I am so happy to see you! Now you have ended up all the way out in *Orminge*! Cool huh?! [The audience laughs]. Well, my name is Johanna [...]. You will now be part of a journey – some snippets of my life – but first and foremost about my relationship with my mother who was mentally ill and committed suicide. [...] People in those chairs [pointing at the audience] usually start crying. That is *good* for the soul, but if you have any questions related to what you are about see, myself, the producer, the technician and the musician are at your disposal [...]. We want to start out this evening by playing a song that I wrote for my mother after she passed, but before this piece was planned. So lets start there to get you in mood.

Intro: Johanna plays the guitar and sings loudly.

Maybe your heart longed for something other than mine.

Maybe that made you choose to end your life and leave *me* here.

I wish so deeply that everything had been another way, another way,
another way.

I have so many questions that I can never ask you... or find the
answers to.

I wish so deeply that I could hug you, only for a last time, only for a
last time.

The pain and the big black hole that you left, I never think you can
imagine...[talks].

A hole of hell without bottom, a darkness that only...[talks] points
back at *me*.

I wish so deeply that I could hold you, only for a last time, only for a
last time – let the endorphins flow.

This is something that I can only dream about, in my inner world.

I wish so deeply that I could hug you, only for a last time, only for a
last time. Yes I wish so...[soft voice].

Johanna gives the audience a nod and a “thanks” and leaves the stage, which dims into
darkness.

When Johanna comes on stage she exudes calmness and energy at the same time, and
she expresses excitement. She is “happy” to meet the audience – perhaps because other
people are taking an interest in listening to her *now*, in contrast to *then* when it all happened.
By her personal approach Johanna opens up a space for dialogue and connectedness with the
audience, even if the premises for a conversation are strictly limited to the theatre setting and
the watchers cannot openly speak their mind. Johanna jokes about the fact that the audience
has ended up “all the way out in Orminge”, thereby ascribing the geographical location a
specific meaning and revealing her ideas about how the audience members – in contrast to her
– might look on Orminge.

Orminge is an eastern suburb of Stockholm, characterized by explosive rental apartment construction from the time of Sweden's "million complex" building project in the 1960s and 1970s. The residential buildings are characteristically unadorned and functionally constructed to house many residents. Its center comprises a few stores and restaurants, a library, a health center and a youth recreation center. The area is known for its lower income households and higher levels of social vulnerability compared to the more exclusive and modern parts of Nacka municipality.

By her initial statement, and by performing the play at Orminge Youth Recreation Center where she spent most of her teens, Johanna is positioning herself as belonging to this place – it is a part of who she perceives herself to be. Hence, by inviting the audience to this location she is inviting them to her life – so that they can get to know *her*. At the same time, Johanna positions the audience as "other people", that is, as *not* belonging to this location, since she assumes that coming to Orminge is something out of the ordinary – "cool" even. The question is who the intended audience is, that is, who Johanna expects the audience to be. Perhaps it is made up of social workers and psychologists specializing in mental illness and suicide, schoolteachers and "cultural aunties" whom Johanna associates with other social, economic and cultural places far from Orminge. In fact, the small but committed audience, from their responses to Johanna's story, mainly consists of women in their mid- to late middle age.

Johanna briefly informs the audience of the story's focus and prepares them for an emotional experience from their position as witnesses. She then takes on herself and her co-workers the responsibility for offering support. This is the framing of the story, in which Johanna talks *about* the play and marks out that what the audience will witness is simply a story. It has been created solely for this purpose, with fictional elements – in contrast to "life itself" – even if the story is built on Johanna's earlier life experiences.

With the song, Johanna clarifies her intention to mediate emotions. Hence, feeling something is not only a possible consequence of participation, but also a desirable one – possibly with the aim of letting the audience emotionally *share* the story. The song is distinguished from other material since Johanna wrote it to her mother without an audience in mind. Thus, it might be expected to symbolize Johanna’s meaning construction in the immediate aftermath of her mother’s suicide, as part of her ongoing communication with her. Johanna tentatively interprets the suicide as her mother’s active *choice* for something else – a change for the better. She differentiates herself from her mother by assuming that her mother might have longed for something other than her. Through the song Johanna expresses that she longs for closeness to her mother.

Johanna announces her position as the one who is “left behind” and questions her mother’s decision to “leave” her. However, an underlying assumption is that her mother did not fully consider the consequences of her suicide for Johanna. She informs her mother that being left behind is a position filled with pain – it is like a “big black hole of hell” that “points back” at *her*. Through her writing, Johanna implies that her mother’s suicide reflects on her, in that she as a socially and morally “normal person” has been put under scrutiny.

Taken together, the opening implies that as long as Johanna does not have legitimate answers to this why-question, she could herself be questioned. Accordingly, constructing a reasonable meaning for her mother’s suicide could potentially “liberate” her from the suicide. From this outline, two parallel processes emerge. The first is one in which Johanna retrospectively constructs and negotiates meaning regarding the suicide (and incidents described adjacent to it) and her own identity – where Johanna’s relationship with her mother is a central piece of the puzzle and represents a main theme in the content of the story, the “what is talked about?”. The second is a corresponding process of resistance to the stigmatic

position that Johanna asserts keeps her from a claim to normalcy, which lies in the form of the public telling – the “how is it told?”.

The main storyline: “A love story with hindrances”

The performed memoir departs from the idea that in order to make meaning of the suicide Johanna needs to review her shared life history with her mother. Accordingly, the main storyline follows Johanna’s view of this relationship in what turns out to be a love story with hindrances. An underlying storyline is a moral tale about other people (those outside the mother-child relationship) ignoring their adverse life circumstances. However, this meaning does not epitomize itself into *a single* cause. Instead, the memoir, through a selective chronology of events, from Johanna’s birth to her mother’s mental illness, her suicide and beyond, cumulatively demonstrates the conceivable reasons for the suicide. Johanna’s life is described in fragments in the shadow of her mother’s malfunctioning and their unattainable, yet symbiotic, relationship. The story is performed not only from a stigmatized position, but also from the position of a “wounded storyteller” (Frank, 1995), as Johanna illustrates repeated experiences of abandonment and loss in relation to her mother. Nonetheless, by her obvious power accumulation and search for meaning Johanna resists not only the suicide stigma, but also the expected victimization from dominant “expert” narratives on the negative consequences from lack of mothering (see Andrews, 2004b) and the modern ideal of restitution narratives on how grief can be “cured”.

A mother and her daughter: a symbiosis of hope and despair

The first scene introduces the audience to the initial meeting between Johanna and her mother, as the mother is welcoming “baby Johanna” to the world in a hospital ward. From the

framing, however, the audience is aware that there is not a good outlook for their relationship as the mother will eventually commit suicide.

A formal female voice is heard through the speakers: “I am pleased to tell you that you have just given birth to a wonderful little girl. Her weight is 3314 grams. Congratulations!”. Another female voice (the mother) is heard through the speakers: “Oh thank you, you are so kind, God I am so happy, this is fantastic! My precious little friend, you and I will have a wonderful time together. I love you with *all* my heart!” The background screen displays a blurry black and white picture of a symbolic womb carrying two small girls juxtaposed to each other. Johanna performs as her mother (wearing a green morning gown), while talking to herself as the new-born daughter:

Hi! Hello! [soft voice] This is mum. Oh how *wonderful* that you are *finally* here. Imagine that you have been tossed around in my belly for almost *nine months*. Well not only tossed, all that life, all the kicks, all the morning sickness, this wonder called pregnancy. But now you are *here*! *You* and *me*! We will have a *wonderful* time together. What are we going to do? Do you want to travel? Where? Big cities? No. Europe? No. We would rather... have a summer house in the countryside. Of course we will get a summer house, just *you* and *I*, huh? It will be just *wonderful*, like a *real* family life – a *real* family summer. I wonder what you would like to do when you grow up. Get married? Have children? Yes! No wait a minute now! And then I will be a grandmother. No, but I have my hands full already just being a mother, *becoming* a mother – a *good* mother. Oh I will document it all, everything that you do, your first little baby steps and your first words. I will photograph you, your first tiny steps in your development – marvelous threads on the path of evolution!”

Piano music plays and photographs of Johanna from a baby to a growing child succeed each other in the background. Suddenly, the harmonious tones are drowned out by loud church bells, and photographs of empty hospital corridors replace the family album before the lights go out.

“The birth” is described as society “handing over” baby Johanna to her mother with full responsibility. There is no father in the picture. The mother’s reactions allow the audience to understand that she is overwhelmingly grateful for “the gift”. The audience gets to follow the aspiring “dialogue” between the mother and her new-born, but is gradually led to suspect that the mother is uncertain about how to meet the basic needs of her daughter. Instead, she floats into distant and idealistic dreams of the future. With broad strokes she draws promising prospects colored by materialistic middle class stereotypes as reassuring attributes – travel and a summer house. Even though her oration demonstrates strong and dizzying emotions for the arrival of her daughter and for herself becoming a mother, the audience is alarmed by the uncertainty of a situation that is in need of repeated reassurances. Later on, the audience gets to know the mother as a woman completely isolated from social relationships, suffering severely from mental illness and utterly dependent on her daughter for her daily functioning.

It is clear that Johanna’s meaning-making regarding her mother’s suicide departs from an understanding that her mother was warm-hearted and affectionate – that Johanna was long-awaited and loved – but that she lacked the resources to care for a child. Thus, society is ultimately to blame for leaving Johanna in the care of a fragile single mother. The story conjures up unavoidable questions: Did nobody understand the situation? Are midwives or doctors not responsible for ensuring that parents can cope with their new role? Is it that easy to end up with a parent who does not have a clue? Johanna’s main question throughout the story, as it continues with new oversights of her family situation, yells “is this all right?!”. At

the same time, she compels the audience to witness the consequences of the involuntary omissions of others.

Johanna: a girl on the glide as the whole world goes blind

The next time the audience meets Johanna is in her adolescence. She is now portrayed as a frustrated and abandoned girl who takes on herself the burdensome responsibility for managing the problems at home. Loud electronic rap plays as Johanna dances in a grey hooded jacket. She wags her arms jerkily in front of her and makes angry facial expressions before turning to the audience.

Come on now! I get so damn tired of all fucking adults. Shit, no one gets it. I can do anything [pretends to strangle herself] ... or die or something. Well it doesn't matter anyway. But what if someone, kind of *adult* one, you know these "adults" [makes quotes with her fingers] just approached me and asked how I was doing. Just to check how *I* am doing. That would be something. But probably [laughs] that would feel totally weird. Shit those fuckers don't see shit! Everything is crappy, the doctors and the teachers [...] Hell, they can just *go away*! But I don't get it, that they don't see *nothing*. It's nothing but a disgusting and ugly fucking surface. Still, I don't know if I would dare tell how it is, well *if* they asked. I don't know if I would have the guts. Mum certainly wouldn't approve. She would get crazy as hell – like she always gets. Shit, it's just about *her* all the fucking time, me, me, me, huh? But what about *me*, huh?

In the scene, Johanna positions her teachers and her mother's doctors as belonging to "the adults" who are described as blind to Johanna's exposed position. However, she has an

ambivalent stance since she tells of her efforts to conceal her family problems at the same time as she bodily illustrates how she is crying for help by harming herself – or even close to dying. These actions get no response, which raises the question: Does anyone really care? All in all, Johanna shows herself as invisible and powerless in relation to the adults in her vicinity. In order to balance this position and to claim authority she takes on a dismissive and trivializing attitude towards them. Johanna continues to confide in the audience.

Well, now I am going home to the asshole. I will just sit down and squeeze and put the TV on [simulates being on the toilet and makes a compressive sound]. I can't stand listening to mum's non-stop complaining... if she has even been out of bed today.

Through Johanna's disclosures she positions the onlooker as a different kind of adult – one who might actually care, at least by taking the time and effort to listen to her. In this confidence she lays the ground for motivating her actions, and thereby ascribes them meaning also to herself. The scene reveals that there is no place for a sense of belonging and trust either at home or at school. Consequently, Johanna must search elsewhere. The scene ends with Johanna's claim for control as she is setting her own agenda and “dancing on” in life. She swings cheerfully across stage, declaring that she will go to the city this weekend to get wasted.

Silencing rooms and the desperate voice of a caring daughter

The audience's first meeting with Johanna and her mother as two individuals sharing their lives together takes place in their home. Johanna appears in the doorway and turns to her mother at the kitchen table [a chair holding the green morning gown].

Morning mum. Mum? [She walks over and sits down next to her mother]. Mum? Okay. Do you want some coffee mum? You like [it]. Ah I'll get it [gets the coffee and pours it up]. Here mum! Do you want to taste? [Offers her the cup]. No? I will do gymnastics today mum. Did you do the laundry? Oh it doesn't matter. I washed the gym bag in the sink and the cloths are going to be sweaty and disgusting anyway so it's all right. Do we have any food at home mum? Ah I'll check [opens the fridge]. Juice and noodles, wow! No, I was only joking mum... Butter and an onion, great! Then I can make noodles and onion and we'll have the juice with it. It'll be tasty, right? [Returns to sit down]. Mm yummy... Well, I'm off to school now mum. Are you doing all right? Okay, I'm leaving now anyway. Bye mum [kisses and hugs her mother and starts walking towards the door]. I love you mum! Bye [Johanna leaves and the lights fade].

In contrast to the earlier scene – where Johanna described herself as fleeing the home or resigned to sitting in front of the TV – she is now positioning herself as a caring daughter. She is active in her attempts to make contact with her mother: she provides for her, poses questions in order to initiate conversations, jokes and shows affection (kisses and hugs), but her efforts are not reciprocated and she is left unnoticed. Johanna tries to compensate for her mother's muteness, and she illustrates a relationship occasionally reduced to her own monologues. A painful message is sent to the audience: that Johanna found herself in a position of extreme abandonment and loneliness a long time before the suicide occurred.

In a subsequent scene, Johanna portrays her mother as she lays drained on stage and confesses to the audience that she sees herself as the “living dead” – with a mind that deeply

cares for her daughter located in a body that is “frozen” and “packaged”. She is uncertain about how long she will manage to stay alive.

An abandoned daughter’s agony: Exposing her body to shock her mother to life

While Johanna describes her mother as caught in a dead body and so prevented from being an agent in her own life, she underlines her own agency regarding her “choice” to prostitute herself in the community of her male network. A creaking sound is heard as the lights come up. Johanna is on the floor with her legs spread and her hips pumping. She turns her face to the audience.

Always, *always* when I end up in a position like this, I feel how my whole body and my whole heart screams a big NO! But by then it’s usually too late. So I turn my body off. Well from here down [points to her chest and down] and then I usually dream away. I think about a life without this shit. Well, you know this “Svensson life” with a house and a *big* car and children, probably a dog too [laughs]. That’s how I’m thinking. [...] How that kind of life would be for me. Then I hear a big groan “ehhh”... Well it’s the guy on top of me. If I’m lucky I can get up and put my clothes back on, well if there’s no one else in line.

Johanna claims payment: “give it to me!”; and adds that she usually gets a drink too. She then tells how she and the “boys” use to do something afterwards. Like go to the woods and look for stolen cars. She imitates herself driving them wildly while laughing and throwing back her hair. Johanna stops and gets serious as she confides how hard it is to get out of bed

in the middle of night – when they call for her. She concludes by stating that her mother does not mind – since she is knocked out by her pills.

The prostitution scene undoubtedly shocks the audience, due to its unexpectedness in Johanna's life as a teenage girl. In addition, its details could work to provoke or create dismay among the audience in order ultimately to awaken a political decisiveness. However, from Johanna's editing of the play the scene is not all that illogical. In a previous scene, Johanna describes her limited options for the future, in contrast to her classmates of the middle-class who are positioned as being better off in the future due to their presumed belonging to competent and supportive families. Johanna bemoans the absence of both parental support and sufficient grades. To oppose the victimization of her disadvantaged position, she disdains the norm of continuing schooling and invites the audience to her secret fantasy – to take off somewhere and work “maybe as a prostitute”. This is said in a playful manner with her “shocked-to-life” mother in mind. However, on arriving at this point, the audience is made aware that this idea was not far-fetched at all.

Johanna does not primarily position herself as a victim, but instead as someone in control of the situation – she claims her compensation and socializes with her “customers” as “friends”. Hence, their relationship appears more equal than at first sight and can thus be interpreted as solidarity due to difference. In this context, Johanna is recognized as one among the others – all of whom most likely originate from marginal positions in society – and where the identification with “the other” is the unifying cause and not necessarily something bad. However, Johanna's choices for belonging are limited to her local context of deprivation and lack of acknowledgment, and this group membership certainly comes with a bigger price as Johanna's excluded position in society is reinforced through her actions.

A mother's violent act as a turning point for hopelessness

The first time the audience witnesses Johanna and her mother in dialogue is in what builds up to be a confrontation over her mother's mental illness, and ends in a rift in their relationship. Johanna wakes up with a start to the sound of glass clinking, and becomes alert. She gets up, calls her mother and exclaims when she finally finds her: "What the hell? Have you been drinking too?!" Johanna then acts as her mother.

Oh ralallala hello my darling! [Runs in and starts talking very fast].

How nice to see you! Did you have fun in school today? Did you meet any friends? You know what? I got the brilliant idea of taking all the cups and putting them through the washing machine. I even bought softener, but it was on sale so not to worry! Now lets look at the cups!

Johanna questions her mother's actions, whereupon her mother becomes angry and turns on her:

Stop, stop I said. Why, why, why? What a fucking stupid question!

Why *not*?! To make them *clean* of course and then I don't have to do the dishes, because I *hate* to do the dishes ha, ha.

When Johanna keeps insisting that she must stop her mother shouts: "Shut up you fucking kid!". She points at Johanna and hits her hard with a swinging fist. Everything becomes silent as Johanna falls to the floor. She cries out in pain: "That hurt mum, *mum*?!", before she gets to her feet in anger, "Die your bitch, fucking *die*!". Johanna slowly walks backwards into a corner and makes the evil sign with two stretched fingers, before she starts going berserk across the stage.

The mother is now portrayed as a lunatic exuberantly pushing her own agenda, in comparison to her earlier isolated stance at the kitchen table. This behavior is explained by her mental illness. She is apparently suffering from a manic episode of bipolar disorder and she could be intoxicated too. The mother rattles off questions about Johanna's day – attention that Johanna has portrayed herself as aching for. Now, Johanna is prevented from answering as her mother has orchestrated a chaotic symphony revolving around her new discoveries in the laundry. Johanna positions herself as the one in her right mind who tries to reason with her mother without success. The violent act represents a turning point in the story – from that moment Johanna seems furious with frustration and pain. Her long time loyalty and patience now turns into antipathy and deprecation. In a desperate attempt to end their immutable and dysfunctional relationship she expresses a wish that her mother will die. The scene ends with Johanna urging her mother to be hospitalized, while insisting on her independence – she does not need her anymore. Johanna claims indifference and yells at her mother that she is much stronger; she is *not* a person who becomes a victim of circumstance – she takes control. The audience is left with an understanding that Johanna's hope for a brighter future at her mother's side has at least temporarily run out.

The dreaded news of a mother's suicide

The inescapable moment arrives for Johanna to receive the notification of her mother's suicide. She is suddenly called to the hospital where her mother has been admitted to meet with her mother's doctor. Johanna sits opposite an empty chair and a formal male voice from the speakers informs her that her mother had been "feeling bad for a long time" and had "not gotten any better". He then announces that: "Unfortunately, we must tell you that your mother was found in her room this afternoon. We couldn't revive her". "Couldn't revive her" echoes through the speakers. In shock, Johanna looks at the doctor, rises, sets the chair and leaves.

She walks towards the audience. A photograph of an empty hospital corridor is shown in the background and unbearably loud tones play. Johanna runs across stage while striking her forehead and crying out: “mother!”. Her continued calling is drowned out by the noise as the scene fades out.

Johanna is faced with the landmark announcement of her mother’s suicide – and so is the audience who has witnessed Johanna’s relentless battle to try to reach and get close to her mother. In a previous scene, the audience was made aware that the mother’s hospitalizations were just another part of everyday life. Then, Johanna arrived home to find a letter from her mother’s doctor on the kitchen table informing her that her mother had been admitted at her own request, and that she did not want to be disturbed by Johanna telephoning. In this abandoned position, Johanna reveals that she has never got used to the solitude and the uncertainty over *when* her mother will return home. Johanna reassures herself with conviction that the professionals will help her mother to get better. Now, the audience in concert with Johanna is faced with a *fait accompli* – that the professionals were unable to help, even in the hospital.

In the play, the speakers help to emphasize the distanced and one-sided communication between Johanna and her mother’s doctors. They are positioned to take on an informative rather than supportive role: first, by leaving money for food next to the letter, without recognizing her orphaned existence, reaching out to her or contacting social services; and, second, by informing Johanna of her mother’s condition and suicide, insensitive to the fact that Johanna breathes this circumstance in her everyday life and must therefore be considered deeply affected by the outcome.

Reconciliation with a mother’s unwilling suicide and the questions that remain

A gentle light falls on stage. Johanna performs as her mother. She acts seemingly confused about her status as dead and claims that her suicide was a way to escape her “killing anxiety”. She then changes her surprised stance in order to explain to Johanna why she could not find another way.

My precious beloved daughter: I have lived a long time only for you. I really don't know if I could have coped this long if it wasn't for you. I can hardly grasp it myself. I just know that it hurts so badly. I can't live with my inner wound that never heals. I am no use by your side [she cries]. I can't live with myself and constantly feel that I have failed as a mother [sighs]. I have failed to be the mother that you really need. I am sorry.

In the scene, Johanna's articulation of her mother's thoughts is addressed to her, and she thereby provides the answers that she has been searching for. Hence, this speech represents Johanna's meaning-making of the suicide addressed to the audience. In contrast to the introductory song, the mother is now positioned as deprived of control – she could not contemplate the consequences of her suicide, and Johanna was her mother's main reason to stay alive, rather than a bad daughter and contributor to her death. Again, Johanna pictures her mother as a caring nature who suffers from the insight into Johanna's abandoned position and her failure as a mother. This, together with her unimproving mental state, adds up to Johanna's conceivable motives for her mother's suicide. Through this meaning Johanna gives herself temporary “permission” to rest from self-blame. The scene offers reconciliation as the mother asks for forgiveness and Johanna later responds with reassurance: “Everything will be all right mum!” (yelled towards the sky). However, this brief interlude is soon interrupted by a backlash into *who* or *what* is to be held responsible, as Johanna bursts out:

What the hell *I* should have been stronger. Shit I should have helped mum with her things [turns to the audience]. I should have done something [cries]. What if I hadn't taken her to the hospital? Then she might still be alive today. Why didn't the doctors do anything? Why didn't they help my mum?

Johanna ends the story where she began. She lacks the answers to these gnawing questions, but she takes it on herself to lay them open to the audience to dwell on and decide. By doing so, she positions the audience as the moral court of law. Since the audience has witnessed Johanna and her mother as they have struggled side by side to achieve recognition and get help, it is most likely that it will “free” Johanna from the yoke on her shoulders of having failed to rescue her mother. In fact, the questions raised in the birth scene seem more relevant than ever, and the audience is left with an uncomfortable awareness of all the failed opportunities for society to intervene. Ultimately, Johanna gives voice to the fact that the problems that caused her mother's suicide at their core must be understood as structural rather than individual.

The ending: The suicide as a turning point for closeness

The play ends with a dialogue between Johanna and her mother that is depicted as possible for the first time. Johanna picks up her mother's tossed morning gown, slowly straightens it out and folds it. She walks around sniffing it. A black and white photograph of her mother appears above her and the mother's voice is heard through the speakers:

I can see you through the clouds. I can see you through the sun. I
caress your cheek with rays of the moon. I lift you up when the

ground beneath your feet is shaky. I will love you for all eternity [...]
Now I will do everything for you that I couldn't do *then*. I am with
you in *every step* that you take, even if you don't believe it or feel it.
I curl at your feet. We will meet very soon and then I will hug you
and *never* let you go. Until then – my wonderful angel – I will
always be here for you. You can count on that! We will meet again!

Johanna glances at the sky while slowly waving long arms towards her mother. The stage falls into darkness. Only the photograph of her mother is lit until it finally fades out and the audience applauds.

In Johanna's performed inner dialogue with her mother, the mother finally becomes emotionally available to her. Johanna communicates a sense of being loved and protected by her mother – a circumstance that seems to bring comfort and peace. The message is clear: Johanna has finally gained access to her mother in a relationship where she is allowed to be the child, and her mother represents the adult caring parent that Johanna always longed for.

Discussion

The analyzed story is a visual and embodied memoir about suicide bereavement, and as such it illustrates Johanna's meaning-making of her mother's suicide in relation to herself. The theatre format allows Johanna to invite the audience to partake in and react to the emotional and relational aspects of her grief, which first foremost is achieved through the story's performative characteristics – in which affective and bodily expressions play a natural part. This evocative circumstance proved to be an important ingredient in Johanna's process of de-stigmatization, since the onlookers were positioned as significant witnesses representing society and the moral court of law at the same time, with the power to liberate Johanna from self-blame.

Like written or filmed documentary memoirs on suicide bereavement (e.g. Lukas, 2008; Rappaport, 2009; Rice, 2000), Johanna's story revolves around the "why-question", which is paired with the question of her own identity. Thus, the audience gets to follow Johanna's detective-like approach to trying to formulate the individual, relational and societal preconditions for the suicide – which overall are shaped into a love story with hindrances. However, this communicated meaning does not provide a crystal clear answer. Rather, Johanna highlights a multitude of factors, where her mothers perceived burdensomeness (as a failure mom) and sense of low belongingness (due to her mental illness) are articulated as probable causes, in line with Joiner's (2010) idea of why suicides occur. Johanna's conclusions, however, are to be found in the structural conditions of society, as she claims her mother's and her own positions to be a result of their marginalization. Even if there is no definite answer, the meaning construction that this memoir format offers can have a releasing effect through its intermediated multiplicity – that is, in contrast to the singular causal logic of self-blame, which Johanna initially highlighted.

In the story, Johanna is portrayed as a victim of her mother's mental illness and as powerless to change their situation, in what is described as a suffocating and dysfunctional relationship. Even if Johanna tries to "break free" and take control as an agent in her own life, her efforts will fall short as long as her mother's condition does not improve. In addition, Johanna illustrates her experiences of "double stigma" from two identity spaces (Mishler, 2004). First, where the story is located in a *historical past* – where Johanna describes herself as socially affected by being the daughter of a mentally ill mother whose existence she tries to safeguard. Second, in a *telling moment*, from her declared otherness in relation to the audience and to society at large due to her mother's suicide. Consequently, the suicide is described as a stigma amplifier rather than a stigma trigger.

Johanna's positioning of herself as "the other" – in contrast to the audience as "the normal" – seems to operate from a projected ideal of a sheltered middle class life, since Johanna cannot know for sure who will be in the audience. This claimed difference sends a contradictory message to the audience, but it also sets the stage for a political message to be sent. Johanna emphasizes the audience members' importance as empathic witnesses, with an obligation to emotionally share the story with her. At the same time, from her positioning in a current socialist identity critical to gender and class inequalities, the audience is not expected to fully understand her past experiences since they are rooted in disadvantage linked to being "working class" and the daughter of a "mentally ill suicide". From their presumed position, however, the audience members can relieve Johanna from guilt and live to tell her story to the more fortunate – and thereby reduce suicide stigma in society. In addition, they receive knowledge about an issue they might encounter in their capacity as professionals. Interestingly, Johanna's claim to uniqueness is tuned down towards the end. Her message changes to the issue of suicide-bereaved children or children who grow up with mentally ill parents in general – and Johanna positions herself as spokesperson for this group.

This performed story "rescues" Johanna in two ways: first, from the dysfunctional relationship with her mother, as Johanna alters her mother's position in her life from a forced affliction into a loving guardian; and, second, from her stigmatized position – by voicing a convincing case and her transformation from an outlier to a "normal person" with her own particularities. Accordingly, Johanna's performed self changes through the story from a girl who is exposed to deprivation and neglect by others, and who perceives herself as abandoned and fundamentally deviant, into a young woman who courageously tells a story of survivorship and who advocates the normalcy in mental illness, suicide and suicide bereavement from its extensive presence in society.

The case of Johanna illustrates how a performed memoir can contribute positively to a process of de-stigmatization and to the construction of a manageable meaning and sense of self in the wake of a loss by suicide. From the general occurrence of, mostly written, suicide bereavement memoirs in society, this narrative genre must be considered a natural and often used way to express and process grief following a suicide. In addition, such public storytelling might work to empower and to help to normalize the stigmatized experiences of others, similarly to the construction of alternative stories that resist stigma through self-help group narration (see Kitamura 2014).

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