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Researching an Unmentionable (Ammbɔdin) among the Akans in Ghana: Suicide taboos, discursive representations and subject positionings

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Abstract

Death and dying are highly emotive, and in some contexts hard to research. However, when a particular mode of death, like suicide, does not fit into a people's notion of 'acceptable' deaths, disclosures on and researching it from the perspectives of persons who are bereaved by such deaths often get complicated with contested discourses and languages. These complications, however, could also present sites for a discursive construction of situated meanings and many ways people's world can be represented. Using critical discourse analysis, this article takes a discursive journey into the linguistic tensions and negotiations that characterized the interviews with persons who had been bereaved by suicide in Ghana. Findings reveal five discourses of censure, denial and contestation, fear and insights, trapped pain and release, and insults and distancing. Underlying these discourses are various subject positionings that discursively construct the suicides, the suicide bereaved, their interviews and the researcher differently.

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Introduction

As a natural phenomenon, death is expected, yet paradoxically, many people do not like to hear about it. Society is not comfortable with death and dying as a topic on the whole (Oats & Maani, 2022). Thinking and talking about death, when, how or under what conditions it will occur provoke intense fear, dread and anxiety (Carr, 2022). From an existentialist perspective, talk about death could threaten and disrupt people's ontological security (Gustafsson & Krickel-Choi, 2020). Though it is a universal phenomenon and a fact of human life, various societies have construed death in different ways and the Akans of Ghana are no exception. The Akans constitute the largest ethnic grouping in Ghana. They are one of the principal tribes in West Africa forming 47.5% of Ghana's population (Ghana Statistical Service, 2021) and constituting about two-thirds of the nation. Principally composed of the Ashantis, Fantis, Bonos, Akyems, Akwamus, Akuapems, Assins, Denkyiras and Wassas, the Akans have common political, economic, social and religious structures (Kumi, 1981). In terms of religion, it is said that no clear distinction exists in the Akan worldview between the sacred and the secular as religion is all-pervasive in Akan society (Eshun, 2011; Korsah & Kuwornu-Adjaottor, 2019). However, the sacred aspects of the social life of the Akans are guarded by taboos and rituals (Gyekye, 2005; Agyekum, 1997)

Life and death among the Akans are sacred and there exist norms guiding both (Assimeng, 1999). Life is seen as a gift from the Supreme God consisting of blood (matrilineally derived), the spirit (patrilineally acquired from conception and determining the disposition and character of a person), and then the soul (believed to be the spark of Supreme God in each person and that is seen to provide the basis for people's destiny) (Gyekye, 2005, De Witte, 2011). Such a view spawns a tripartite notion of life with implication for a continuous life in the other realms upon physical death and continuous bond with the departed relatives.

Death among the Akans

In the Akan worldview, death is like birth and the true contrast of death is birth, not life as argued by Danquah (1944). Thus, the death of an individual within Akan culture makes an extremely big difference to the bereaved and also to whatever association a deceased person had during his or her lifetime (Ankrah, 2002). This is due to the belief that death is only a transition from the corporeal world into the world of ancestors (*nsamansie*) where one can still influence the living. The spirits of the departed are venerated, worshipped and appeased, even while in a transitional state following physical death prior to entry into the *nsamansie* (Hale, 1996). Failure to placate the dead through elaborate funerals poses the risk of the living being haunted by them and becoming victims of their revenge for any injustices done to them before their human bodies died and after death (Hale, 1996). From this rich, nuanced and comprehensive worldview of death come the notion of *good death* and *bad death* (Van der Geest, 2004; Andoh-Arthur,

2024). Good death is normal death, i.e. in an old age, when the elderly deceased person had lived exemplary life, fully fulfilled and survived by children who had been well raised and are doing well in society. Characterizing good deaths are pomp, lavish and elaborate funerals amidst cultural drumming and dancing (Nketia, 1969). As its name suggests in the dominant language of the Akan- *Twi*, funerals (*ayiyɛ*) portray an undertaking intended to "dignify" or "celebrate" and it is an affirmation of the family's prestige and a celebration of its excellence (Van der Geest, 2000). From the belief that one dying a good death is transiting into the ancestral world and to be able to attain powers to protect their survivors, ayiyɛ (funeral) is to celebrate this special transition, to honour and affirm the prestige of the deceased person. These are also placatory events to court favour from the dead while in the spiritual world.

On the contrary, *bad death* occurs if an individual is perceived to have died prematurely, mysteriously or tragically (Van der Geest, 2004). Examples of bad death include death of infants, death from accidents, i.e. drowning, death from thunderstorm, from falling trees, death from giving birth (maternal mortality), death by homicide, death of a childless adult, death in which the corpse cannot be found, death from imprecation and sorcery, death of a renowned criminal, and self-inflicted deaths such as suicide (Andoh-Arthur, 2024; Adinkrah, 2022; Gyekye, 1995). Such bad deaths are generically referred to as '*atɔfowuo*'. Unlike in good deaths, perfunctory mortuary rituals and funerals such as no washing of the corpse, no wake keeping, no farewell, corpse desecration and humiliation, absence of mourning, no memorials for the departed among others, characterize bad deaths (Adinkrah, 2022). The spirit of one who dies through bad death, it is believed, cannot enter the ancestral world due to the belief that the mode of death angers the ancestors who, if not appeased through rituals, can visit disasters on the family and in some cases, the entire community. Violating mortuary rituals associated with bad death such as washing the corpse and according it courtesies associated with good death is said to also incur the wrath of the ancestors who could "summon' the offender into the afterworld to face charges of violating mortuary customs" (Adinkrah, 2022, p.705). Akans call such deaths "*samanfrɛ*" (a call by the ghosts) or "*samantoa*" (following the ghost) (Adinkrah, 2022, p.705.). Suicide is considered in the Akan society as a different kind of bad death due to the role of human agency in the death (self-directed). It is handled with extreme revulsion because it is viewed as an *extraordinary moral evil* that causes social injuries (Gyekye, 2005, Osafo et al., 2011). In the traditional societies, the corpse of the suicide is lashed and buried in shallow graves (Adinkrah, 2016). Harsh retributive and restorative reactions follow suicides generally in Ghana (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2019).

The language of and unmentionability of death and suicide among the Akans

The awful reality of death is known to the Akan as '*owu*' or '*owuo*' (Brookman-Amissah, 1986). Akans believe that a mere mention of the word 'owu' or 'owuo' has great potential

for causing frequent deaths. For these reasons, proscriptive rituals characterize any form of death, including arbitrary mention of death, speaking about death of relatives, and speaking ill of a deceased relative. These rituals make the mention of death a taboo. However, due to the fact that death is normal part of life and must necessarily be talked about, avoidance techniques are deployed to talk about it. Popular among these techniques, according to Agyekum (1997), are euphemisms and idiomatic expressions. Euphemisms and idiomatic expressions are locally termed by Akans as '*Kasakoa*' (literal meaning: *twisted* or *curved language* in *Twi* language) or *Kasambrenyi* (literal meaning: *veiled language* in *Mfantse*, also an Akan language).

In his study, Agyekum (1997) found Akan euphemisms for death of great people (Chiefs) like *Ɔhene kɔ ekuraa* (The Chief has gone to the village), *Nana kɔ ne kra ekyi* (The Chief has gone to the origin of his soul), *Nana kɔ Banso* (The Chief has gone to the mausoleum), *Odupon etutu* (A great oak has fallen), *Efie kesɛɛ abɔ* (The mighty house is deserted). These euphemisms/idiomatic expressions for the death of a great person such as a Chief, characterize death as a *journey*, as a *fall* or a *loss* (Agyekum, 1997). Also found in Agyekum's study are Akan euphemisms/idiomatic expressions for death of an ordinary person. They include *Wafiri mu* (She/He has moved out), *Waka baabi* (She/He is stranded somewhere), and *Waka nkyene egu* (She/He has spilled salt). Others are *Ɔdae a wannsɔre* (She/He slept but could not wake up), *Wadane noho* (She/He has turned around), W*ayɛ onyame dea* (She/He has become the property of God), *Wenya ne beebi kɔ* (She/He has gone where he or she desires to go). The euphemism/idiomatic expressions characterize death of an ordinary person as an *endless sleep*, a *spilt salt*, *motion in an opposite direction*, among others (Agyekum, 1997).

There also exists, among the Akans, the notion of the universality of death which is expressed in several metaphorical maxims such as *Owu adar nndɔw baako* (Death's cutlass does not weed or clear only one individual) and *Owu atwer baako mmfow* (Death's ladder is not climbed by only one individual) (Annobil, 1955). For the Akan, death is therefore "a concrete, tangible, and personified being which is revered and sometimes referred to as *Egya wu* (Father death) (Brookman-Amissah, 1986, p. 77). Such nuanced understandings of death and language of death thus makes suicidal death something requiring extreme censorship. As illustrated above, suicide falls within a category of bad deaths that is tabooed. The Akan language for taboo is 'ekyiwade' (forbidden). That which is forbidden is usually an 'abomination' (mbusuo) and it is not supposed to be allowed to find its way in everyday discourses. Proscriptive norms taught through socialization processes ensure that people learn the use of avoidance techniques against the mention of forbidden words. Suicide originally translates into *Ahokum* (self-killing) in Akan. However, due to the popularity of the method choice of hanging in accomplishment of most suicides in Ghana, (Ossei, Niako, Ayibor et al., 2022; Der, Edmund, Derkyi-Kwarteng et al., 2016), suicide is locally termed "Akɔmfohyɛ" (etymologically meaning suicide by hanging). It is a bad death (atɔfowuo) and falls within the category of forbidden words locally called 'ammbɔdin' (unmentionables) (Agyekum, 1997) or what Norrick (2005) describes as 'untellable'.

Stigma and taboo of suicide in Ghana

Ghana faces a problem of lack of reliable suicide statistics. Crude suicide figures usually emanate from police records and the news media for suicide cases that get reported (Andoh-Arthur & Quarshie, 2021). The implication is that there is gross underestimation of suicide prevalence in Ghana. One of the reasons for the underestimation of suicides in Ghana is due to lack of suicide reporting (Adinkrah, 2012). Lack of suicide reporting itself is due to stigma that is associated with the taboo of suicide in Ghana and among the Akans in particular (Andoh-Arthur et al., 2018). Until recently, there was criminalization of suicide attempt in Ghana (Andoh-Arthur & Quarshie, 2021). However, through sustained research and advocacy on suicide and suicide prevention over the years in Ghana, the law criminalizing suicide attempt in Ghana has been repealed even though cultural taboos around suicide still persist (Quarshie & Oppong Asante, 2024).

Suicide research

The imperative to study and understand suicide in cultural contexts is well documented in the literature (Hjelmeland, 2011) and scholars have argued the importance of studying reactions to suicides as a means of gauging meanings of suicide within different contexts (Domino & Leenaars, 1995; Lester, 2012). Within contexts such as in Akan societies and Ghana where there are nuanced understandings of death, suicide and language of both, it is not far-fetched to assume that researching suicides in particular is full of complexities as the act of suicide itself is tabooed, and the language of suicide is also forbidden (ammbɔdin, i.e., unmentionable/untellable). The next section draws from suicide research in Ghana with the bereaved as the main participants. This is to highlight some of the complexities encountered, emerging discourses, suicide representations and varied subject positions adopted by participants during the process

Researching suicide in Ghana

The suicide research in question was a qualitative study into meanings of suicide in Ghana and it was undertaken between 2014 and 2019. Adapting the qualitative psychological autopsy approach, (Hjelmeland et al., 2012), the study interviewed bereaved relations of persons who had taken their lives. The study aimed to uncover the meanings of suicide and psychosocial challenges related to the suicides. The study had voluntary consent from relatives of 14 men who took their own lives. For a female decedent, voluntary consent was not given and hence, the case was excluded. However, field experiences that culminated in the exclusion of the case and were captured in the field notes is replete with insights that are worth highlighting as far as the objective of this paper is concerned. After negotiating access to certified and recorded suicide cases from the Ghana Police, the author engaged the police to gain access to the bereaved relations of the deceased who consented to be interviewed for the study (see Andoh-Arthur et al., 2018 for

detailed reflection on the ethics of the procedure). Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is adopted in this article to sketch discourses constructed around the issue of suicide and the language of suicide prior to and during the actual interviews. Before that there will be a brief description of critical discourse analysis.

Discourse and critical discourse analysis

Peoples' accounts and explanations on issues depend somewhat on the discursive contexts within which their views are produced (Willig, 2008). Through different kinds of semiotic resources, and different modes, discourses are communicated and realized through different genres (Machin, 2013). Discourse analysis thus theorises language and focuses more on analysis of texts and/or utterances within specific socio-cultural context. The method involves analysis of transcripts of data from open-ended multimodal sources: interviews, focus group discussions, field observations, etc. and where research protocols do not constrain talk (Adjei, 2013; Potter, 2003). Foregrounding discourses as meaning making sites are the concepts of positioning and intertextuality. It is assumed from the positioning theory (Davies & Harre, 1990) that "people discursively construct their versions of social reality from their personally taken positions informed by discursive practices that are embedded in their socio-cultural environment" (Adjei, 2013, p. 2). Grounded in various subject positions, discourses function such that people see and interpret the world from and through their strategic positions when they take specific positions during social interactions (Adjei, 2013, p.2). Accordingly, once a determined position has been taken, the individual perceives and interprets the world from and through that strategic position in terms of images, symbols, metaphors, values, story lines and the socio-cultural concepts available to them within a given discursive environment in which they are positioned" (Adjei, 2013; Tirado & Galvez, 2007).

The concept of intertextuality in discourse analysis, on the other hand, implies that meaning and intelligibility in discourse and textual analysis are dependent on a network of prior and concurrent discourses and texts (Metapedia, 2010). Impliedly, language production and meaning in social interactions shape and get shaped by the socio-cultural experiences of speakers in their given contexts through dialogical processes (Bakhtin, 1981). Given the proscriptive context within which the study is situated in terms of the taboos surrounding death, suicide and their respective languages, and the fact that the participants shared different subject positions with the deceased as friends, spouses, parents, relatives, this article examines the language of suicide rather from a more critical perspective using Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). CDA examines language as a lens that potentially give us insights into social phenomena. According to Zappettini (2020), CDA "does not believe in a linear causality or linguistic determinism, but rather that language has an active social role along social constructivist and Critical realist (Bhaksar) models" (p.1). From such a perspective, and in line with Fairclough (2004, p. 13), meanings are gleaned from various discourses on suicide language at intra/inter/extra-textual levels of contextualization" (Zappettini, 2020, p.1).

Discourses around the language of suicide

Five main discourses were identified around the issue of language regarding suicide: *censure, denial and contestation, insults and distancing, fear and insight, and trapped emotions and release.* These are illustrated below with their various representations and subject positionings.

Censure: This issue concerned the female suicide that was recorded by the police within the study period but was excluded in the study due to lack of consent. The deceased was in her late 20s, a trader, single and lived with a grandmother. She killed herself by hanging and reasons for taking her life was recorded as unknown. Contact was made to the grandmother who initially agreed to meet the researcher. However, after the researcher met her physically to introduce the purpose of the study, she censured discussions and blocked access completely when the researcher mentioned that the study was about the suicide. Her reasons for declining were as interesting as how she articulated those reasons. Field notes captured it as follows:

> I visited… …. (venue withheld) today. On reaching there to introduce the purpose of the study, the grandmother of a female deceased questioned why I was researching into suicides, a taboo topic. To her, it is against the customs to talk about these matters and that when they happen, even if families talk about it, they do not do so to strangers. She cautioned me not to spend my productive life studying a taboo subject and that I had to learn to respect customs. Several attempts emphasizing the social utility of the research proved futile, and the case was consequently excluded. (Field note, 23rd June, 2015).

The elderly in Ghanaian societies particularly within Akan settings occupy an important social position as guardians of customs and fount of wisdom. According to Sjaak van der Geest (1998), elderly people are ancestors "in waiting". They hope to be remembered as honourable ancestors after their death. This social position appears to impose on them an obligation to preserve customs and family secrets. The grandmother, by this positioning, acted as a gatekeeper to information that is important to research but at the same time perceived as having negative effects for the family. She thus perceived the researcher also as an unqualified outsider to access such information on something deemed unmentionable.

Denial and contestation: The second issue concerned a man in his early 20s who, according to the police, took his life by hanging. He was married with children but was unemployed. He lived with his brothers. One of the brothers denied that the deceased brother's death was suicide. He inquired where the author got the information and it was explained that the police coroner's report said so and that the police had earlier spoken with his elder brother about it, who also confirmed the suicide and subsequently gave permission to the researcher/author to talk to him (the participant). The participant admitted that his elder brother talked to him about the interview, though, he (elder brother) knew from day one that the he (participant) didn't believe that the death was

suicide. The participant insisted that the deceased brother was so minded about life that he (participant) could not imagine that his deceased brother could (in the participant words) "do such an "evil thing" as killing himself. Seeing the apparent contestation between biological siblings over the mode of death of the deceased sibling, the case was no longer pursued and was subsequently excluded.

Fear and insight: This discourse concerns the suicide of a man in his early 40s, unemployed who took his life. He lived with his wife and children. The researcher interviewed the spouse, who allowed the interview. However, a day after the interview, she called the researcher, and this conversation ensued.

> Hello Sir. I am sorry to tell you this. Actually, when you came to interview me on this topic, I was afraid because I thought my late husband's ghost will come and haunt me, I was warned by my husband's relatives not to tell anyone about how he died and what influenced his death. Because of these fears, I could not tell you more about the real issues. The word suicide should not even come out of my lips; so when you came and requested we talk about it, I was afraid and I hid some of the information. However, as we finished the interview and you left, I realized that you are a genuine person and that your research will benefit the society. I felt worried and cannot live with this guilt of denying you information that can help educate the public. I am sorry. Can you come back again so that we can have another interview in which I can disclose fully?

The researcher/author went back, and the participant shared much deeper information about the suicide that was corroborated by the biological sister of the deceased person in another interview. The discourse in this case is grounded in a cosmology of death that regards the ghost of suicide deceased as a malevolent spirit. According to the Akans, the soul of the one who dies a bad death is not allowed entry into the ancestral world. It is therefore consigned to the earth becoming a malevolent spirit that hovers around to taunt the living particularly at the site of the death (Adinkrah, 2016, 2022). The participant might have feared possible consequences of violating norms against bad death, such as disclosure. The interview appears to have challenged some of the participants prior assumptions leading to new insights that could have impelled her to disclose more.

Trapped emotions and release: This discourse concerns the experience of the majority of participants, who were spouses, siblings, and one parent. They consented and allowed access to be interviewed. However, as the interview went on, they shed tears intermittently in the course of the interview especially each time suicide was mentioned. They interestingly declined the researcher's request to pause or suspend the interview to allow them ample time to cry. One of them mentioned,

> Participant: I have long overcome the death. My problem has been the tag suicide that has now come to be associated with me and the children. The last time I was selling at the market, and someone came to look for me. Can you guess how he came to identify me?(asking the Researcher/Author).

> Researcher/Author: No, tell me.
>
> Participant: This lady was directed by someone to come and buy some vegetables from me. Whoever sent her asked her to look for the lady whose son recently committed suicide (sic). I really wept that day when I came back home that evening.

This discourse appears to liberate participants from a lived oppression that has contributed to reputational loss due to suicide stigma. The participant in the above narration, just like majority of them, had endured some emotional pain from the stigma of suicide yet appeared to have had no avenue to ventilate the pain. The language of suicide prior to the interview was one that scripted for them a negative identity. In contrast, the language of suicide during the interview scripted a non-judgmental discourse thus offering a space to release from a contrived painful identity imposed on them by society.

Insults and distancing: Three participants who were good friends of two deceased persons actually started raining insults on the deceased persons upon hearing that the research was about suicides and that the researcher was seeking to interview them to know about the circumstances surrounding the suicide of their deceased friends. One of the participants illustratively mentioned:

> Thank you for taking time to come and talk to us. Since my friend died, no one has come to talk to us, so I am happy you are here. Honestly sir, I must say my friend is a big disappointment. He is stupid and coward and everyone knows that I can say even worse to him if he were to hear me. How could he have done that when he had a wife and little children? In fact, if truly there is something like punishment after death, I think he should be severely punished to teach him a lesson so when he is lucky to come back to life, he can learn sense. He is stupidly coward.

Discourses such as the one above shows distancing from what is considered an abominable act in the normative context. The participants distance themselves from the act and also from the actor, notwithstanding the fact that the participants had been good friends with the deceased persons when the latter were alive. The participants adhered to the normative context in their handling of what is perceived as a bad death. They did so by deploying insults to suggest that the deceased had acted selfishly and not considered possible consequences of his actions on his immediate family within a setting that is intensely communitarian (Gyekye, 2005).

To them, the action of the deceased required harsh retribution in the afterworld.

Subject positioning and discursive constructions and representations

It was very evident from the experiences that participants had extreme difficulties disclosing on a subject widely perceived in the context as an unmentionable. This had

implications for the researcher, the research and the participants' positioning. For the researcher, the mention of suicide created *researcher-participant distance* possibly due to what participants might have perceived as a lack of sensitivity to the context. The effect of this might have possibly worked to constrain trust building before and early on in the interviews (see Andoh-Arthur et al. 2018). The participant in the discourse of *censure* and a sibling in the discourse of *denial and contestation* especially might have taken an extreme action of blocked access that could be construed to mean *protestation* due to collided meaning of the death between the researcher and the participants in question. By this, the researcher was positioned as an *outsider* who had no legitimacy to access, what some scholars will describe as information located at the *back region* (i.e. very sensitive and private matters) of the family or the participants themselves (Lee, 1993). By their actions, they seemed to be constructing a subject position as *insiders* who felt obliged to preserve and defend the image and memories of their deceased relatives even if it meant deliberately challenging the mode of death of their deceased relative. They sought to re-make the story of the death possibly to deny or dilute the agency in the suicide with the view to preserving the image of the deceased relative, the family and themselves as the bereaved.

On the contrary, the participants in the *discourses of insults and distancing, and trapped pain and release* substantiated suicide agency in their relation's death, and by that, they positioned the deceased as *blameworthy* and themselves *blameless (victims)* needing help to ventilate distresses occasioned by their relative's choice of death and reactions from society. The deceased person in the *insult and distancing* discourse, in particular, is herein being construed as one lacking the necessary socially sanctioned attributes of facing up to the responsibilities in life and is perceived as having socially injured the relations left behind, including the participants. He was being seen as a failure and his suicide- a cheap escape from one's responsibility. The researcher in the entire *insult and distancing, trapped pain and release* discourses could be positioned as a *receptacle* into which trapped emotional pain and anger from extreme disappointment and pain are being poured. The interview could possibly be construed as, *cathartic* with *immense therapeutic potentials.*

The action of the participant in the discourse of *fear and insights*, positioned herself as an *oppressed*. The oppressor in this instance was discursively constructed as both the deceased husband (by his choice of death) and his close family members (by disenfranchising her grief). Though the interviewer appeared to have been initially discursively constructed as being another potential oppressor (agent to induce the violation of 'anti-talk rule' with consequences), the interview itself, with its perceived therapeutic potential, from the perspective of the participant, allowed a discursive shift from *fear* to *insight.* The interviewer thus began as a perceived potential oppressor and ended up as a mediator of knowledge and through this a "therapist"

Negotiating practical, ethical and epistemological quandaries of language of suicide

The researcher/author is a Ghanaian and thus had a deep understanding of the context. He was aware of the use of local euphemisms to characterize deaths. However, he initially perceived an epistemological conundrum concerning the use of euphemisms to denote suicides in this study. The meanings of suicide and other deaths are contextually different, so it was important, in the research, not to lose focus on the essence of suicide, the object of inquiry. However, the encounters in the field as they related to the subject and language of suicide deepened awareness of the local context and inspired a re-look at the study protocol. It was evident that suicide, it's meanings, and understanding in the context of Ghana, and among the Akans in particular, are much more nuanced and complex requiring the researcher to engage more flexibly and innovatively than being tied to standardized protocols. The researcher decided to be intensely culturally sensitive in adopting some local euphemisms when talking about suicide with the participants (though emphasis was still on the self-directed nature of the death). For instance, *Weyi ne nkwa (She or He has taken His or Her life)* was used regularly alongside other euphemisms for death instead of the *Ahomku* (Self killing) or the popular *Akɔmfohyɛ* (Suicide by hanging). Even with the adopted *Weyi ne nkwa*, it was realized that participants were initially not too comfortable but accepted it after the interview had lasted for some time and they had settled in very well into it. Normal euphemisms for death were used as the ice breakers mostly in the typical funnel shaped interviewing style.

Conclusion

Suicide is a problem of enduring human interest (Staples & Widger, 2012), with some philosophers like Albert Camus (1995) describing it as the only truly serious philosophical problem. Being an emotionally laden term, the mention of suicide provokes pain, anger, and fear in people in many societies due to how the phenomenon has been construed historically, legally, religiously as deviance, crime, and sin. Ghana is no exception as suicide is stigmatized due to its construing as an *extra ordinary moral evil* that is tabooed by all ethnic groups, including the Akans. It is seen as a sin by all the religious groupings in Ghana, and suicide attempt, until recently, remained a crime under Ghana's penal system (Adinkrah, 2012; Andoh-Arthur et al., 2018).

Research is increasingly grounding suicide within sociocultural contexts leading to much deeper awareness and understanding of suicide as a mental health problem or life crisis that needs care and attention rather than punishments. Such understandings, within the field of suicide research and prevention, are shaping accurate and sensitive language use. There is now a campaign against the use of "commit" as in commit suicide (Beaton et al., 2013; Nielsen et al., 2016). This is inspired by overwhelming evidence of the roles of social, economic, cultural and some health factors in suicides. Proponents are of the view that the continued use of commit is value-laden, engenders stigma, and

reinforces the understanding of suicide as a crime that needs to be punished. They rather suggest the use of neutral words like, *kill him or herself*, *take his or her life,* etc. Even though some practitioners are 'committing' to this change, some are still struggling to go with it. Research has for instance found that of the articles published in the three leading journals on suicide: *Crisis, Archives of Suicide Research* (ASR) and *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* (SLTB) between 2000 and 2015, one third (34%) used the word 'commit' when describing an act of self-harm or suicide. The study also found over half of these articles (57%) using the phrase on more than one occasion, with 6% using it more than 10 times in the same manuscript (Nielsen et al., 2016). The implication is that a lot will have to be done to get people to be mindful of language use in suicide matters since the subject continues to be defined morally in many societies.

Researching suicide thus fits all the qualities of a sensitive research. Cornejo and colleagues (2019) describe sensitive research as one that examines "potentially delicate issues, since they focus on experiences that are painful or emotional for participants" (p.2). The authors further posit that "research on sensitive topics can also be regarded as that which, given the nature of what is examined, involves research processes in which each stage must be carefully designed and implemented, so that the methods employed in sampling, data production and analysis, and results generation take into account the sensitive nature of the research object" (p.2). The complexity of sensitive research such as suicide in a proscriptive context places responsibility on the researcher to navigate language use carefully. This article has shown that underneath the complexities of suicide language use in research lies rich sites for discursive representations and understandings of suicides as well as subject positionings of participants, around the topic.

The discursive representations of suicide as seen through the discourses illustrated above reveal lay beliefs and meanings of suicide that are grounded intensely in morality, and in which suicide is seen as evil, the deceased person as blameworthy, and suicidal bereaved persons as socially injured and needing care, empathy and avenue to ventilate their trapped distresses. These lay beliefs are consistent with qualitative studies in Ghana and Uganda that have also revealed evidence of intense moralization of suicide within African settings (Osafo et al., 2011; Mugisha et al., Kizza, 2012). Suicides within the African settings and among the Akans are still taboo subjects despite progress made through research to deepen understanding of the subject as life crises. According to Agyekum, (1997)," the theory behind taboo is that whatever is a taboo is a focus not only of special interest but also of anxiety" (p.44). Taboos are "sacred, valuable, important, powerful, dangerous, filthy, unmentionables, etc. (Leach, cited in Agyekum, 1997). Such words as suicide, considered "unmentionables" (Agyekum, 1997) or "untellables" (Norrick, 2005) are in the words of Semino and colleagues (2014) untellable', "not because they are too mundane to reach the minimum threshold for tellability, but because they are 'too personal, too embarrassing or obscene (Norrick, 2005, p.323), and therefore exceed the maximum threshold for tellability in most contexts" (Semino, 2014, 670). The characterisation of taboos as captured in the preceding sentence thus implies

that taboos have an important social function as a behavioural regulation and control measure. The implication is that researching taboo topics such as suicide requires utmost sensitivity to context, including even the language of the object of inquiry itself: suicide.

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