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**Revising the Escape Theory of Suicide: An Examination of Avoidance and Suicide
Ideation**

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Dissertation

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May 2004

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Acknowledgements

Thank you to my supervisors: Dr. Jenny Promnitz, for support and acceptance and Dr. Chris Cantor for inspiration and encouragement.

Thank you to those individuals who shared their time and willingness to participate.

Most of all thank you to my dear husband, Steven

*“...the snow falling into the dark water
part upon rock, part in the dry weeds
and part into the water where it
vanishes- it's form no longer what it was...”*

William Carlos Williams

Abstract

A two phase investigation was undertaken to examine and develop a comprehensive understanding of a potential indicator of suicide, *Fear of Negative Evaluation*, and support and expand Baumeister's (1990) escape theory of suicide as one possible model for the events leading to suicidal behaviour.

This investigation addressed the questions: 1) what is the relationship between fear of negative evaluation, depression, hopelessness, and coping (specifically avoidant-oriented coping) in participants demonstrating suicidal thoughts, and do these factors support a revised, interactional escape theory? and 2) how do the factors of fear of negative evaluation and depression interact along the pathways identified through a revised escape theory, and can these factors be identified through the experiences of those

who have had incidents of suicidal ideation and/or engaged in deliberate self-harm?

Two separate studies involved a combination of face to face interviews and the use of psychometric instruments as the methodologies for examining: coping styles, causal explanations for life events, the presence of self-aversive thoughts, depression, fear of negative evaluation, and hopelessness for those at risk of suicide. Risk of suicide, for the purpose of this study, was defined as the self reported presence or demonstration of thoughts of suicide. The target populations for this two phase study were 1) participants who had been identified as demonstrating thoughts of suicide and /or depression, and 2) participants who self reported an incident of deliberate self-harm.

Phase 1 involved a purposive sample of 132 participants who were identified by local community health and counselling services to be experiencing symptoms of depression. Participants completed a series of questionnaires measuring the following factors: fear of negative evaluation, depression, hopelessness, suicidal ideation, and coping styles. Participant responses were separated with the qualifying criteria of the presence of suicidal ideation. A path analysis of these results from 121 participants was

conducted. The analyses of these results identified a significant relationship between fear of negative evaluation, and maladaptive coping. However limited support for fear of negative evaluation as a direct relationship to suicidal ideation prevailed.

Phase 2 involved a qualitative approach to interpreting the dynamics of phase 1 results. Phase 2 consisted of 27 interviews with participants who had engaged in suicidal behaviour, specifically deliberate self-harm. The interview framework mirrored Baumeister's theoretical framework with an additional focus on participant's perceptions of others during the events leading to an incident of deliberate self-harm. Results of phase 2 were discussed in relation to Baumeister's framework. Negative life events emerged as a significant factor, specifically a history of sexual abuse. Considerations for intervention, prevention and treatment approaches related to suicide were reviewed in specific reference to the results of this investigation. This included the applications for the identification, intervention, and the prevention of suicide. Results supported a focus on feminist issues related to suicide research, the role of social supports for intervention and treatment, and the relevance of developing a framework for participants to conceptualise suicidal experiences. Through an increased understanding of how suicidal participants attribute life events,

cope with stress, and develop a state of self-awareness and self-aversion,
clinicians would be in a better position to effectively intervene.

Revising the Escape Theory of Suicide: An Examination of
Avoidance and Suicide Ideation

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