



All the Bright Places – The Reality of Male Teenage Suicide Ideation brought to Life

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“But it’s only when I’m awake that I think of dying” - Theodore Finch
(Jennifer Niven, 2015)

Suicide is the second leading cause of death in young men globally and since the first leading cause is accidental death, a grey area of statistics, a proportion of this can be claimed to be suicide-related as well (Pitman et al., 2012). In addition to this, the general population of young men have a suicide rate of 15.3 per 100,000 (ONS, 2020). Émile Durkheim’s theory of suicide states that suicide is the result of societal actions that cannot be solved or modified on an individual level.

Durkheim proposes that ‘social facts’ - external institutions that constrain the individual – are responsible for suicidal ideation and completion in the general population (Durkheim, 2005). Many parallels can be drawn between Durkheim’s ideas around suicide and the experience of the main character, Theodore Finch, in Jennifer Niven’s (2015) novel *All the Bright Places* (adapted by Netflix as a film 2020).

According to Durkheim, modern society shuns ritualistic behaviour and in doing so, denies the members of society what he claims to be an ‘elementary form of social cohesion’ (Durkheim, 2005). The result of the absence of social cohesion is obvious – disengagement and anomie, which may lead to

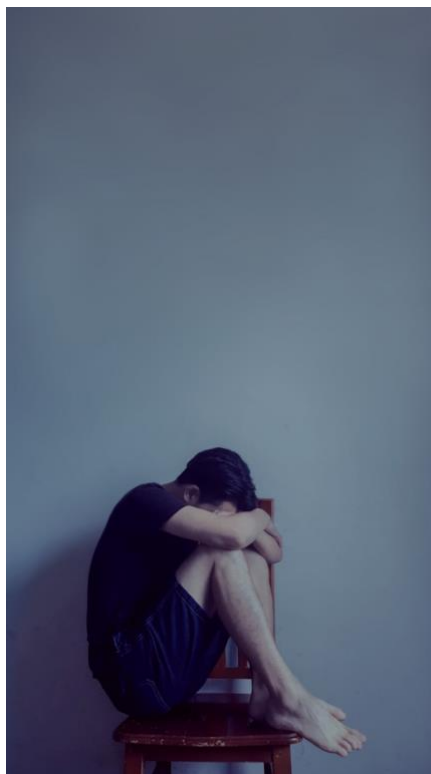
suicidal ideation and completion. Defined by Durkheim as a ‘state of deregulation’ (Durkheim, 2005), anomie is ruled by normlessness, detachment and instability.

Durkheim states that the individual does not necessarily wish for death to be the result of their actions, but that they are nonetheless aware of it (Durkheim, 2005). Drawing from this definition, Theodore Finch’s character states multiple times throughout the book that he does not wish to die - ‘I am fighting to be here in this messed-up world.

Standing on the ledge of the bell tower is not about dying. It is about having control’ - and that suicide is his only option to escape the life that he perceives he is forced to live.

The idea of control as a factor in an individual’s decision to commit suicide ties in with the theory of learned helplessness, where a loss of control may lead to defense mechanisms such as self-harm and suicidal ideation that only serve to harm the individual even further (Barzilay et al., 2015). While this also suggests that fatalistic suicidal ideation may play a role in Finch’s obsession with death, the state of disconnectedness the character feels at many points

throughout the course of the novel suggests that anomic suicide may better encapsulate his experience.

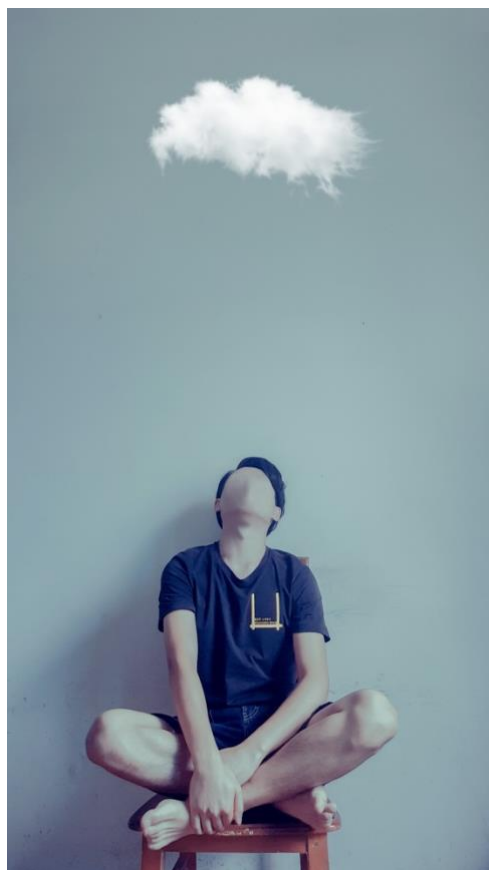




Attempting to conform to traditional norms of masculinity has been associated with higher levels of suicide in men in the general population (Pirkis et al., 2017). In addition to this, men who resort to self-reliance in general or in times of crises have also been found to experience higher levels of suicidal thinking – this could be linked to ideas of traditional masculinity that require men to ‘tough it out’ in times of difficulty (Brod and Kaufman, 1994).

The belief that the act of suicide is an individual choice is an epistemological fallacy – a false conclusion drawn based on misinformed beliefs - when taking into consideration Durkheim’s theory of suicide. Durkheim argues that suicide is the result of social choices and actions, and that societal factors are the root cause of suicidal ideation and completion (Durkheim, 2005).

This can be linked back to the internalisation of mental health struggles being an issue because the individual may not be responsible for feeling the way they do in the first place; therefore, trying to suppress and bury it within their psyche is the most damaging way to deal with it, if external factors are the cause (Sadler, 2002). Durkheim states, ‘Unsatisfied tendencies atrophy, and as the impulse to live is merely the result of all other motivations, it is bound to weaken as the others lose hold’ (Durkheim, 2005).



During a period of liquid modernity where tensions are high, competition plays a significant role and society is increasingly individualized (Bauman, 2013), there is almost no place for the expression of mental health struggles. The fast pace at which societal transformation takes place may be the root cause of individuals resorting to suicide, but since it is not met at the level in which it is created and is instead internalised, the epistemological fallacy of ‘suicide is a result of the individual’s actions’ ends up securing a superior position (Jaworski, 2010).

Finch’s character states: ‘It’s my experience that people are a lot more sympathetic if they can see you hurting’. This sums up the overarching theme of the book: the neglect of psychological distress and health. The statement that general society fails to, or chooses not to, notice mental health as an essential aspect of an individual’s wellbeing is testament to the prejudices and doubts held towards the role of good mental health in an individual’s life (Sadler, 2002).

According to Sadler (2002), even physical marks of self-harm in young adults and teenagers are ignored and not viewed as a cry for help by health authorities. ‘Disrespecting, negative and patronising’ attitudes were found to be most predominant in the way health authorities approached young adults (Sadler, 2002), and this may go some way to explaining why much of the youth population, especially males, are reluctant to seek help with managing mental health issues (Lester and Gunn, 2012).

Zygmunt Bauman’s theory of liquid modernity illustrates a postmodern society that is built around uncertainty, where the only permanent aspect is impermanence (Bauman, 2013). Liquid modernity leads to higher levels of instability where identities, structures, and definitions are subject to constant change and



transformation (Bauman, 2013). Applying this to the thinking patterns and thought processes of Finch's character in the novel, it is evident that a state of liquid modernity may be one of the causes of his anxiety. This anxiety is shown to manifest in many ways throughout the book, with references to a feeling of 'not fitting in' and the character struggling to feel like he 'belongs'.

The concept of belongingness, particularly that of 'thwarted belongingness' that makes individuals feel as if they have been deserted and socially isolated (Lester and Gunn, 2012), is heavily referenced and suggests that when constantly faced with situations they are unable to control, characters may resort to learned helplessness - this could manifest and exhibit itself in the form of self-harm as a way of dealing with feelings of isolation (Barzilay et al., 2015).

Learned helplessness is a model of depression that men are more susceptible to than women, according to Dalla et al (2008). The constant bombardment of situations where control of the individual is removed, where characters are increasingly required to exhibit their vulnerabilities and surrender themselves to negative experiences and loneliness may eventually lead to suicidal ideation and completion (Lester and Gunn, 2012).

Toxic masculinity as a defining trait of postmodern society is alarming but is an accurate depiction of a system that obsesses over rigid, definitive categories and fails to give thought to individuals who may not traditionally fit in (Harrington, 2021). Finch's character is constantly on the receiving end of being reduced to categories and having those around him attempt to attach labels onto his identity. Being called a 'freak' and being manipulated into believing that he is weak for

having mental health problems is a direct reflection of an ugly side of postmodernity that, with all its progressive movements and calls for inclusivity, still fails individuals at their most vulnerable (Coleman, 2015). It is stated that Finch's mother - a single parent - is disappointed in him for not stepping up as 'man of the household'.

The entire concept of a 'man of the household' and the idea that 'boys don't cry' is fundamentally flawed as it perpetuates damaging stereotypes of the male identity (Kimmel, 2017), in addition to establishing a binary that affects women as well by pushing them into equally gendered roles (Coleman, 2015).



Betty Friedman finds men to be 'fellow victims, suffering from an outmoded masculine mystique that made them feel unnecessarily inadequate when there were no bears to kill' (Friedman cited in Kimmel, 2017). Reflecting on how enforced

gendered roles do not serve to improve the life experience of the common individual, whether male or female, must result in a call for definitive action. The restructuring of a system as deep-rooted as gender expectations requires radical change. The idealised version of a man who manages to balance being a hardworking breadwinner while also representing the resilient, never-back-down attitude of a swashbuckling hero (Kimmel, 2017) must be demolished in order to allow men to live lives of authenticity where they do not feel pressured to play the part of 'Tough Guy' in society's twisted play.



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