

Perceptions of Death and Recommendations for Suicide Prevention Policies: A Case Study of Suicide Case in Gunung Kidul

Muhammad Abdul Hadi*
Faculty of Science Education
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia

muhammad0723fip2016@student.uny.ac.id*

Rahmatika Kurnia Romadhani
Faculty of Science Education
Universitas Negeri Yogyakarta
 Yogyakarta, Indonesia
 rahmatika@uny.ac.id

Abstract—Death is perceived differently among people from different cultures. These differences in perception stem from the variety of natural and physical context in humans' surroundings. Based on the existing theories, death is perceived as a matter that is difficult to accept. However, there has been an intriguing phenomenon that continuously occurred in Gunungkidul, Indonesia. Official records showed that Gunungkidul has the highest prevalence of suicide in Indonesia. Locals commonly refer to this phenomenon as *pulung gantung*. This phenomenon should be understood using contextual perspective. Existing theories on suicide and death have not been sufficient enough to explain the phenomenon that occurs in Gunungkidul. Therefore, this current research attempted to capture the suicide phenomenon in Gunungkidul using locals' perspective. This study used descriptive qualitative research method and indigenous psychology approach to examine this phenomenon. We used in-depth interviews to obtain data from seven informants. The results showed that locals residing in Gunungkidul perceive death as a form of transition from earth life to the afterlife. There are two attitudes of locals toward death: passive and active. These attitudes are achieved from the internalization of values from the local culture. Therefore, the choice to execute suicide by hanging is a caused a process of social learning. Based on these results, locals' perceptions of death should be considered when drawing suicide prevention policies in Gunungkidul.

Keywords—*gunungkidul, indigenous Psychology, pulung gantung, suicide*

I. INTRODUCTION

Death is the final stage of life that will inevitably be experienced by every human being. Perceptions of death vary depending on the values and cultural world views each may hold [1]. On the other hand, death itself is a taboo subject to converse in [2], let alone death when it occurs in the context of suicide.

Among the factors that influence perceptions of death are an individual's cultural and religious values, as well as spiritual orientation [3]. This is because beliefs that surround death are predominantly taught via spiritual teachings. This transcendental belief is seen as an effective manner of perceiving death as a meaningful experience for human beings [4].

Research on perceptions of death is not a novel topic, yet this is quite the opposite for the case that has and continues to occur in Gunungkidul, making it essential to re-examine the instances. In between 2015 - 2017, Gunungkidul was named the area with the highest suicide rate in Indonesia [5]. Moreover, there exists a myth known as *pulung gantung* which is described as a celestial object that resembles a blue long-tailed fireball. According to the beliefs of the local community, when there is a *pulung gantung* that passes or falls into one of the settlements, then one of the people who reside in the house will die of suicide [6].

It is important to note from the start that researchers of this study do not claim that locals' Gunungkidul perceives death differently. However, the researchers argue that locals who attempt suicide are considered a unique case which calls for further explanation in regards to local perception on the meaning of death.

In this study, cases of death by suicide in Gunungkidul were examined using the indigenous psychology approach which frames the research based on the society and its environment. Indigenous psychology emphasizes descriptive understanding of human function in its cultural context to highlight the problems from the perspective of an insider, based on his or her values and belief systems [7]. The cases of suicide in Gunungkidul is a unique problem that does not occur in other areas. Based on the data collected by Gunungkidul District Police, between 2001 - 2018, there have been 492 suicides in 18 sub-districts of Gunungkidul Regency. Most of the victims executed suicide by hanging themselves. An understanding of Gunungkidul citizens' perceptions of death is considered a necessary foundation to create appropriate interventions for suicide prevention policies in Gunungkidul.

II. METHODS

This research utilized descriptive qualitative methods and indigenous psychology approach to understand and describe the context of death by suicide in Gunungkidul. The indigenous psychology approach emphasizes the formation of meaning both from the side of informants and researchers so that the context of the problem as well as the culture becomes central to the analysis [8].

This study was based on taboo subjects; thus the selection of participants was predominantly based on the accessibility. Only informants who volunteered to participate were involved. The sample of this study consisted of seven residents who were of different ages and in different stages of life. The variation in age and stages of life is an essential factor in exploring possible differences. A sample that is too homogeneous makes it more challenging to discover nuances that could generate new knowledge or questions [9]. The researcher recruited the informants based on the recommendations of *Rumah Sakit Umum Daerah (RSUD), Wonosari (Wonosari State Hospital), Gunungkidul*. There was no relationship between the researcher and informants. The inclusion criteria were that each informant should be able to provide a narrowed focused and depth of experience.

All informants were local Javanese residents who came from Gunungkidul and had interacted with people before they conducted suicide. The seven informants were Javanese who were living in a high-context culture and resided in an area of Gunungkidul where suicide is predominant. The informants received written and oral information about the study and the term of confidentiality. They subsequently provided written consents.

Data were collected via both structured and semi-structured interviews. Data analysis used the Constant Comparative Method from Moleong [10], which comprises of the following steps: (1) reduction of interview data, (2) categorization, (3) synthesizing, and (4) compiling of working hypothesis.

The researcher assembled the data abstraction from the interviews of seven informants into units that would later be categorized in order to ease the data analysis process. Before categorizing, the researcher conducted the reduction of interview data to sort out parts of the interview verbatim that was relevant to the research question. This reduction process was followed by the process of coding to the relevant data. The researcher subsequently performed a synthesis, which was done to find the links between categories until it became incorporated into specific labels, illustrated in the table 1.

Table 1. Categories of Perceptions of Death in Gunungkidul

Code	Death is a Transition to the Afterlife	Passive Attitude of Suicide	Active Attitude of Suicide	Suicide by Hanging	Perception of Pulung Gantung
Er: 43 years old	End of life in the world	Fate	-	Imitating someone who had previously done it in the past	A fictitious story made by locals
Sis: 52 years old	A move to the hereafter	-	Choice	Has heard of a lot of people who have done suicide by hanging	An alarm
Pai: 40 years old	A move to the hereafter	God's secret	-	Quick death	A cue for death
Sir: 36 years old	Return to God	-	Choice	Accuracy of death is high	A fictitious story made by locals
Lan: 83 years old	A beginning of a different life	Fate	-	Imitating someone who had previously done it in the past	Signal of death
Jiw: 30 years old	Death is the separate between the physical and spiritual spirit	The fate that can no longer be prevented	-	Pulung gantung	God's sign
Did: 18 years old	End of human life and the beginning of another life	-	Choice	Easy to do and ropes are available everywhere	Affirmation

III. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

A. *Death is a Transition to the Afterlife*

In general, all informants described death as having two concepts. First, death is interpreted as a time of life transition. In this case, the informants believe that human life is divided into two stages: earthly life and the afterlife. The process of death is a transition between earthly life to the afterlife. Second, death is the point of separation of the spirit from the mortal body. All informants believed that the human body consists of a spirit and a body, while death is the point that separates the two: the physical or mortal body can no longer be used to perform activities, but the spirit will still live in another existence.

The belief that death is the transition to life in the hereafter is rooted in the cultural concept of the individual's dwelling [11]. Someone who grows up and continues to be taught that there is another life (hereafter) will have the belief that death is not the end of human existence. Moreover, a *Selamatan* ceremony (communal feast) is held after a person's death as a form of sending prayers to "those who have died" [12], indicating the belief that individuals will continue to live after death. Lan, 83 years old, said that:

We have (go through) two stages of life. There are the earth life and afterlife. Death is merely the end of earth life but the beginning of the afterlife.

The perception that death is a transition to another life is a belief that is deeply rooted within the Javanese society. Layangkuning states that among Javanese people, death is interpreted as an attempt to return to the beginning of existence (*sangkan paraning dumadi*), hence the symbol of human life (mortal body) is released and abandoned to move to another life (hereafter) [13]. Jiw, 30 years old, expressed his thought that:

Death is a separation between the physical and spiritual spirits. Hence humans are composed of two things: physicality and spirituality. So when a person dies, that is the separation between the physical and spiritual spirits.

According to Samad [14], Jiw's view that human beings have both a body and a spirit relates to an individual's spiritual beliefs. Death is considered a separation between the mortal body and the eternal spirit towards another existence [15]. Informants' perception of death cannot be separated from the concept of Eastern culture which emphasizes the mutual coexistence and interdependence of life and death [16]. Therefore, death is not perceived as the end of life but as mutually intact and related to human existence.

B. *Attitudes of Suicide in Gunungkidul*

In connection with the suicide deaths that occurred in Gunungkidul, informants had two different attitudes. First, a passive attitude which interprets that death is God's predetermined fate, thus there is no human intervention in the process of dying. Suicide is believed to be the will and destiny that God has set for human beings. Second, an active attitude, which assumes that death is a human's choice. Suicide is considered as a route to death that is deliberately chosen by suicide perpetrator.

The notion of the passive attitude of suicide was based on one characteristic of negative religious coping. Smith, Pargament, Koenig, and Perez [17] pointed out that the person who used deferring religious coping will passively wait for God to control the situation. When the pattern of "negative religious coping" appear, persons who consider religion significant might experience an increase in suicide risk [18].

On the other side, the active attitude of suicide comes from the libertarian perspective. This perspective states that suicide can be a carefully contemplated decision, often rationalized as a reasonable response to avoid pain or suffering [19]. Libertarians value freedom of choice and the decision to die by suicide is a right and rational choice. However, if the informants look at suicide with an active attitude, then this perspective related to the illusion of conscious choice. Active attitude needs decision making, which requires a balance between deliberative and effective processes. Active attitude toward suicide negates that if individuals are unable to consider the emotional aspects and cognitive biases that occur, their decisions will be impaired, especially in the case of suicide [20], for instance, depression is a significant factor in suicide in Gunungkidul [21]. Depression decreases cognitive flexibility and distorts the affective abilities of sufferers [22], which leads the decision-making of depression sufferers to become biased and unbalanced. Based on this view, suicide under depression is no longer considered an individual's conscious choice.

1) *Passive Attitude of Suicide*

In this study, four informants perceived death with a passive attitude. The passive attitude here means that the individual has no power over death. A passive attitude is born from the Javanese culture, which believes that human life is defined by fate. Everything that happens is a provision of fate that must be humbly accepted or *legawa* [23], including acceptance of death as Jiw said:

Death has always been God's secret. Besides that, indeed, living humans must die. That has always been (one of the) connection between God and humans. We live because there is (God) who gives life, then we will return (to God) again. We cannot know about death, we don't even know when we will die, in what way - we also don't know, that includes what we previously mentioned about (the case of) self-hanging in Gunungkidul. (It is) also one of those things we don't know - what will cause us to face sudden death, suddenly die.

Another informant, Pai (40) considers suicide as fate and predetermined provision of God so that humans should not interfere with it. This perspective makes self-hanging behavior in line with Javanese cultural logic of resignation and acceptance of all the situations. The people of Gunungkidul accept this way of death and consider it natural because it is fate that is outside their intervention [24].

The view that suicide is God's destiny is related to one characteristic of negative religious beliefs. Xie, Chen, Pan, Tao, Li, Zhang, and Ye [25] found that hospital patients in

China who have religious beliefs are at a higher risk of having suicidal thoughts relative to patients who are not religious. Religious belief related to negative coping sees that tragedies experienced by individuals are considered as a form of God's punishment and blame, which leads to feelings of being abandoned [26]. Those who consider religion very important and use "negative religious coping" are riskier to have suicidal attempts [27].

According to Karim [23], the concept of resignation to fate is a form of the tools of surrendering to God. This resignation and attitude of surrender are characterized by a person's manner of acceptance when facing difficulties. The concept of resignation contradicts with Western assumptions of self-defense mechanisms in the form of self-serving bias mentioned by Myers [28]. Myers stated that individuals tend to attribute distress to external factors outside of themselves while attributing success to themselves. However, this is different from assumptions of the Eastern culture, where Ratih and Tobing [29] found that suicide offenders resign themselves and try to accept their life as is.

In the Javanese context, there exists a term called *mawas diri*, which means that individuals should introspect what they have done [30], which includes looking closely at their situation to find out the cause of their suffering. Suffering and distress experienced by an individual are considered to be a gift from God that must be acknowledged with acceptance, thus if the problem one faces feel burdensome and is beyond one's capacity, suicide is then seen as an alternative solution of accepting (*nrima*) God's trials. Jiw, 30 years old, stated that:

If indeed the problem is burdensome and there is no way out, (I think) it is not a problem if (a person sees) suicide as a solution.

Jiw's views on suicide as an alternative solution is a form of helplessness. Wenzel, Brown, and Beck [31] stated that helplessness is a belief that the future looks scary and the problems a person faces no longer have a way out. A meta-analysis study conducted by Valentina and Helmi [32] showed that there is a strong correlation between helplessness and suicidal behavior.

2) Active Attitude of Suicide

Three informants of this study perceived death with an active attitude. The active attitude comes from informants' view that everything humans experience is a result of their freedom of choices. Thus a person is free to want and accept the consequences of their choices, including death. Death by suicide is seen as a free will that is the conscious decision of the suicide perpetrators [33], as well as a form of escapism from the real problem at hand [34]. Sis (52 y.o) stated that:

Death is a certainty, but the manner of death is a choice. Whether that choice is a success or not, part of it is our will which I mentioned earlier.

Sis's belief that every human being has a freedom of action is in line with the foundation of Jean-Paul Sartre's existentialism, which states that the human self has a healthy and rational mind in determining decisions, including in suicide decisions [35].

This philosophical view which states that suicide is a conscious and rational decision excludes other factors such

as the victim's mood, circumstances, and individual differences. A study by Deisenhammer, Schmid, Kemmler, Moser, and Delazer [36] found that patients who commit suicide attempts often make risky decisions. Shanker and Bachle [37] added that the absence of consideration of other aspects makes the decisions taken by suicide perpetrators unbalanced and biased.

C. Hanging as a Suicide Method in Gunungkidul

Among the methods of suicide that took place in Gunungkidul, the choice of death by hanging was the most frequently used. Between 2015-2017, Andari [5] stated that 91% of the victims chose the method of death by hanging. One of the informants, Sis (52) considered that death by hanging was a very successful method so it was likely to be chosen as he said:

(Suicide by) hanging, in my opinion, is the easiest way to die. It is the cheapest too and that may also be, because, maybe (the perpetrator) had wishful thinking, then hang him or herself in the manner that is common in Gunungkidul, and there are also many who say, say the success rate is high.

The almost uniform method of death shows the pattern of death that Sis believed is easy and successful in claiming individual lives. The success of this suicide method can spread and lead to suicidal thoughts for others who are at similar risks of suicide [38]. This is related to cultural mechanisms that underlie the outspread of suicide. The similarity of methods can serve as a "guide" for individuals who want to end their lives. A particular type of suicide stories triggers one type of suicide [39], including information of hanging one's self as a choice of death.

The idea of suicide by hanging may be obtained from social learning. Practical information about how to commit suicide (for example, using slap straps to hang one-self, commit crimes, or complete suicide) is acquired through social learning [40]. Detailed and repeated information related to suicide can normalize this behavior. The effects of spreading suicide information can then be imitated, leading to ideas regarding suicide [41], including the use of hanging methods. Pai (40 y.o) said that:

So, indeed, hanging (yourself) is the most potent way to die in Gunungkidul. Besides, it seems like taking medicine and so on, it seems like it does not necessarily (guarantee) death, so just copy (what has been done successfully in the past) if you want to die quickly, that is, by hanging yourself.

Darmaningtyas [42] states that a large proportion of the population of Gunungkidul who work as farmers and fishermen are familiar with rigging, thus hanging is a method of death that is easy to imitate. Slap straps that are often used as suicide tools are readily available, thus suicide by hanging is an easy and economical death choice for the people of Gunungkidul as Did (18 y.o) told:

Those who hang themselves work as farmers, gardeners, (and) fishermen use rope because I think it is part of the equipments they use daily. It is used in their (line of) work. You don't have to buy poisons, or any other tools.

The choice of tools one uses for suicide is related to one's accessibility to dangerous objects. Pardede [43] conducted a study of tools that are often used for suicide and found that dangerous objects or substances that are affordable are often used to end lives. Therefore, the affordability of rigging for the Gunungkidul community makes it a common tool for suicide. Moreover, according to Paiman's statement, hanging is the deadliest way to deliver one to their death.

D. Perception towards Pulung Galung

Pulung gantung is a cultural belief in Gunungkidul that has always been associated with suicide. According to Fahrudin [44] pulung gantung is a bluish red ray at night that swiftly flashes through the sky. In any case, where the object appears and falls somewhere, there will soon be a suicide.

The belief that pulung gantung is a sign of death is still believed by some residents of Gunungkidul. Three informants of this study perceived that pulung gantung plays a role in causing suicide as Did said:

Pulung gantung is a contributing factor to suicide, (but) there (already) exists severe problems and suicidal thoughts. Then comes pulung gantung, it's a sign that the solution to the problem is just hanging him or herself.

Didi's attribution of pulung gantung as one of the causes of suicide can be seen as a form of external locus of control. External locus of control is the belief that there are specific reinforcers that control life or a person's behavior which may take the form of luck, fate, destiny, and things that are beyond the control of individuals [45, 46, 47, 48]. Saied, Aal, and Mahmoud [49] also stated that there is a strong correlation between external locus of control and suicide.

Pulung gantung is a mythical cultural belief which continues to be believed by some residents of Gunungkidul as something that has control over someone committing suicide. According to Suwena [50], pulung gantung is considered a legitimacy of suicide in Gunungkidul.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUICIDE PREVENTION POLICIES

The result of this study facilitates a deeper understanding of the different perceptions of death in an environment where suicide cases have taken place. There are two recommendations for suicide prevention that can be considered. First, positive assistance and counseling on religious coping. Second, the postulation of standards for suicide coverage in the mass media.

Positive understanding of religious coping may be associated with less psychological distress [51], including a decrease in the risk of having suicidal ideas. At present, the government of Gunungkidul has issued Decree Number 121/KPTS/TIM/2017 concerning the Establishment of a Suicide Prevention Team (*Tim Penanggulangan dan Pencegahan Bunuh Diri*) to reduce the number of suicides in Gunungkidul.

This research found that some religious characteristics related to individual perceptions of death may increase the risk of suicide. Therefore, several teachings related to fate,

self-submission, and feelings of guilt must be reinterpreted into positive religious coping. This understanding can contribute through the assistance and outreach carried out by the Suicide Prevention Team of Gunungkidul.

Suicide in Gunungkidul has also occurred through the process of social learning. One of the most accessible social learning tools that the government should utilize is mass media. Detailed mass media coverage regarding suicide in Gunungkidul may shape a person's mindset and lead to modeling if he or she finds that the person who attempted suicide was in a similar condition and had the same problems [52]. So far, World Health Organization has published guidelines for the media in regards to suicide broadcast [53], but until now, there has been no specific guide on suicide reporting for Indonesian journalists. Researchers of this study also have not found any studies on the effects of excessive suicide reporting and suicides that have occurred in Indonesia. However, Sisask and Varnik [54] stated about the possibility of a relationship between the types of media reports on suicide and forms of suicide imitation. Therefore, it is necessary to formulate a policy on mass media coverage related to suicide, especially for suicide cases in Gunungkidul.

V. CONCLUSION

This study aimed to gain a deeper understanding and knowledge about the perceptions of death in the environment where suicide cases have taken place, as well as people's belief in pulung gantung in Gunungkidul. The results of this study indicate that the informants' perception of death is a transition between earth life towards the afterlife. For all informants, human existence consists of both a body and spirit in which death is a separation between the two.

Regarding cases of death by suicide, informants have two different attitudes: passive and active. The passive attitude is related to negative religious coping, which leads to resignation and helplessness, while active attitudes are related to unbalanced and biased decision making. Pulung gantung is seen as an external locus of control, meaning that an external factor controls the action of suicide. Suicide by hanging is chosen based on social learning from the environment as well as through over-exposure from past suicide cases that occurred in one's community. The results of this study should be considered to recommendations for suicide prevention policies in Gunungkidul.

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