

# The Predicaments of People Whose Suicide was Captured on Film

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Submitted: 29 Apr 2013

Accepted: 20 May 2013

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## Abstract

**Background:** Although suicide is commonly linked with mental disorder, the notion that suicide may occur in response to predicaments has been the subject of much recent study and attention. A predicament in this context refers to an uncomfortable situation from which escape is difficult. We aimed to examine the predicaments of people whose suicide was captured on film and displayed on the public record.

**Methods:** The authors' extensive private library and the web were explored for examples of suicide on film. The authors viewed the films and associated records, and extracted and listed details of the suicides.

**Results:** Six individual cases and two groups (totalling 2200 plus individuals) were identified. The individual cases were Thich Quang Duc (1963), Christine Chubbuck (1974), Budd Dwyer (1987), Daniel Victor Jones (1998), Michael Marin (2012) and Jordon Romero (2012). The two groups were the Japanese Kamikaze pilots of 1944/1995, and those who jumped from the burning "Twin Towers" on September 11, 2001. One of the six individuals has evidence of a mental disorder, and all (individual and group cases) were in potent social/environmental predicaments.

**Conclusion:** Both psychological autopsies and our clinical experience suggest that suicide is often associated with mental disorder. Nevertheless, social/environmental predicaments may lead to suicide. This study suggests that individuals whose suicide is captured on film are often seeking public exposure of their fatal act.

**Keywords:** film, mass media, predicament, suicide, internet

## Introduction

Suicide is the result of "intolerable psychological pain" (1). The concept of 'predicament suicide' has been recently advanced (2). A predicament is an uncomfortable situation from which escape is difficult. Two predicaments are considered, (i) painful untreated or unresponsive mental disorder, and (ii) painful social circumstances. Of course, both of the predicaments may torment the individual simultaneously.

Our group has used the public record (newspapers, ancient texts, and web-based material) to examine cases of suicide (3,4). While lay writers may lack certain clinical knowledge, this is off-set by the potential bias of clinically informed individuals who 'medicalise' the human condition (5).

Our aim is to examine the public record

for details of the predicaments of people whose suicide was preserved on film. Although our interest in this study is in real suicide, we do note previous work on suicide in American feature films, and the finding that the majority of 1377 suicides in those feature films stem from social causes such as divorce, death of a loved one, unemployment, and bankruptcy; in several suicides in US films, a cornered psychopath ended his life to avoid severe punishment (6).

## Methods

We examined a wide range of texts, including a library we have been maintaining for over three decades, and explored the web for examples of suicides, which had been captured on film. Whenever possible, we viewed these films and associated records. We extracted and listed the details of these events.

The results are presented first as vignettes, and then summarised with a view to characterisation of the predicaments.

Ethics approval was not required as the study entailed no involvement of patients and all material examined was on the public record.

## Results

### *Vignettes*

#### Thich Quang Duc (1963)

Thich Quang Duc (66 years old), a Buddhist monk, self-immolated at a busy intersection in Saigon. In the weeks before his death, he had explained his motivation in writing to other monks and South Vietnam government officials. He described his death as a protest against government repression of Buddhism. The event was filmed and can be viewed (7). Self-immolation is common in protest suicide (both public and private).

Duc's predicament was clearly expressed; he believed that he and his colleagues were being repressed and his act was to draw attention to this predicament.

#### Christine Chubbuck (1974)

Christine Chubbuck (29 years) was an unmarried journalist working for a small television station in Florida (8). She lived with her divorced mother and brother. Chubbuck spoke to her family about feelings of 'depression' and suicidal thoughts. She had made a previous suicide attempt (overdose, 1970) and was seeing a psychiatrist until several weeks before her death.

Chubbuck was the hostess of a community affairs talk show, "Suncoast Digest". On the morning of her death, unannounced, she changed the format of the show, stating that she would first recap the news. She covered three national news stories and then a shoot-out in a local restaurant. Next, she said, "In keeping with Channel 40's policy of bringing you the latest in blood and guts, and in living colour, you are going to see another first-attempted suicide". She then took out a revolver and shot herself in the head. The script she had written predicted that she would be conveyed to the Sarasota Memorial Hospital, which is what happened. The suicide was broadcast live. However, the tape was given to the Chubbuck family and may no longer exist. Unlike the other cases mentioned in this paper, this suicide is not currently on the web (8).

Many factors are believed to have played a part. Chubbuck was thought to want friends, but co-workers found her to be brusque and defensive to friendly overtures. The station news director stated, "She would, well, throw tantrums a lot" (9). Her mother later suggested "her suicide was simply because her personal life was not enough". She pointed out that Chubbuck was about to have her 30th birthday and that she had never had an intimate relationship. Her brother Greg stated that she had trouble connecting socially and that being constantly "dateless" contributed to her ongoing depression. Chubbuck had a romantic interest in a man who turned out to be in a relationship with her closest colleague, and this colleague had been offered a job in another city. One year before, she had her right ovary removed and was advised that if she did not conceive in the following year she may not be able to conceive thereafter. A month earlier, one of Chubbuck's stories was cut to make space for a "shootout" story, and the station owner had asked his staff to concentrate on "blood and guts" (8,9).

Chubbuck's apparent predicament was complicated. Summarizing the above, there was evidence of maladaptive personality features and depressed mood. She is believed to have been lonely, and may have had concerns about her fertility. She was resentful that her conscientious work had been rejected by her employer in favour of sensationalist material.

#### Budd Dwyer (1987)

Robert 'Budd' Dwyer (47 years old) held a Master's Degree in education and had been a social science teacher and high school football coach (10). He was married with children. He served as a member of the Pennsylvania House of Representatives for five years and then served in the Pennsylvania Senate for a decade. When his tenure in the Senate ended (in 1980), he accepted the post of treasurer of Pennsylvania. In 1987, he was convicted in a bribery scandal, and was facing a maximum of 55 years in prison and a fine of \$ 300 000 (said to be the equivalent of the bribes he had accepted). On the day before his sentence was handed down, he called a press conference to "provide an update on the situation". It was expected that he would resign his post.

Instead, he declared his innocence, and handed out a number of envelopes. One of these contained a suicide note intended for his wife, another was a signed organ donor card and related documents. Then, while the cameras were rolling, he then took a revolver out of a paper bag and shot

himself in the mouth.

This was not a live-to-air broadcast, but nevertheless the film was instantaneously released and widely dispersed. It remains widely available on the web (10,11).

Dwyer's apparent predicament was that he was facing disgrace, a fine and very long prison sentence. However, as he died before sentencing, his family was entitled to, and received, benefits of more than \$ 1280 000 (his family had been financially ruined by his legal expenses).

### **Daniel Victor Jones (1998)**

Daniel Jones (40 years old) was a single man who lived alone and had been a maintenance worker at a Los Angeles hotel for three years. He had recently found a lump in his neck, and had been reliably informed this was cancer. He was also HIV positive. He believed that he was being poorly served by his Health Maintenance Organization (HMO, known elsewhere as a health insurer).

At 1530 on a working day, Jones parked his pick-up truck on the Harbor Freeway (Los Angeles) and pointed a shotgun at passing vehicles. The police were alerted, traffic was stopped and police and TV helicopters arrived. Jones rang emergency services and was transferred to the Police dispatcher, who said, "He was just rambling. He mentioned he was unhappy about HMOs". Jones then threw a knapsack over the freeway wall – this was later found to contain a videotape on which he complained about his HMO and predicted his suicide. Next, he unfurled a home-made banner which he placed on the highway: "HMOs are in it for the money. Live free, love safe or die". Jones then got back into his truck, which erupted in flames (the truck contained many Molotov cocktails and one exploded—it is not known if this was purposeful or accidental). Jones rushed from the truck with his hair and clothes on fire. He extinguished the flames and removed his socks, pants and underpants. He then stood on the railing of the freeway, as if considering jumping, and made rude gestures to the helicopters. Next, he then got down from the rail, took a shotgun from his truck, placed the butt on the median wall and shot himself in the head. All was displayed on TV (12).

Jones' neighbours and fellow workers did not know that he had any health problems. His sister had not known he was HIV-positive. A friend stated that the lump in the neck had been identified some three weeks earlier, and in the preceding week doctors had confirmed it was

cancer (13). Jones was not known to have had mental health problems.

Jones' apparent predicament included his poor health (carcinoma of the neck and HIV-positive status). In addition, he was angry, believing he was not being given appropriate treatment by his HMO.

### **Michael Marin (2012)**

Michael Marin (53 years old) was an attorney who lived in Phoenix (USA). He was a former investment banker and art collector (the collection including 18 etchings by Picasso), owned and flew a Cessna 310, wrote and self-published books, had climbed to the top of Mount Everest and 5 of the other 6 highest mountains in the world, and had worked as a Mormon missionary in Japan. He was a divorced father of four.

Around 2009, Marin lost much of his personal fortune, and was unable to continue the mortgage payments on his lavish \$ 2550 000 mansion. Unable to find a buyer, he burned it down. Marin emerged from the smoke, climbing down a portable ladder wearing scuba-breathing apparatus. In 2012, he was charged with and found guilty of arson of an occupied structure. As the verdict was read in the Maricopa Superior Court, Marin was seen putting something into his mouth and swallowing. Shortly afterwards, he died on film (14). He was facing a 16 years prison sentence.

An autopsy found he died of cyanide poisoning. He was otherwise in good health for his age (15). Marin's apparent predicament was that he was in financial trouble, had lost status, and was facing a lengthy period in prison.

### **Jordon Romero (2012)**

Jordon F Romero (33 years) had a long criminal history of violent acts, and was wanted for violating parole for a weapons conviction. He stole a car at gunpoint in Phoenix and was pursued at high speed by police cars and helicopter and a Fox News helicopter. He then drove into the desert west of Phoenix.

During the chase, Romero fired on police cars, hitting a vehicle but not hitting people. He also fired on, but failed to hit, the police helicopter.

After the chase, while running in the desert, Romero stumbled. He was carrying a pistol which he then raised to his head and shot himself. This event was shown on live television and continues to be available on the web (16).

Romero's apparent predicament was that he

was a wanted man, before the current incident in which he stole a car, broke speed limits, resisted arrest, and fired at police and civilians (and perhaps had other violations). He was being closely pursued and escape was impossible. He was facing serious charges. Romero may have been mentally ill and may have been under the influence of substances, but no such information is currently available (16).

### Kamikaze pilots (1944/5)

In 1944, Japan appeared to be losing the war and in desperation the leadership decided that pilots would henceforth fly planes loaded with bombs into enemy ships. Lieutenant Youkio Seki was the first successful Kamikaze pilot when he flew his Zero into, and sank, the US carrier *St Lo*. Two, thousand Japanese pilots died in this manner, sinking 56 Allied ships. While there were more applicants than opportunities to fly these missions (an example of what Durkheim termed “altruistic suicide”), many “volunteers” were under extreme authoritarian pressure from the Japanese military to do so (17). Many films were made and are available (18).

The Kamikaze pilots’ apparent predicament included that their country was losing the war, and they were ordered to fly fatal missions for the benefit of their country and families. They were instructed that this would be “a beautiful” and honourable death.

### “The jumpers” of 9/11

On September 11, 2001, between 190 and 220 people jumped from the burning Twin Towers: “They began jumping not long after the first plane hit the North Tower, not long after the fire started. They kept jumping until the tower fell” (19). Vision of these events remains available on the web (20).

These peoples’ apparent predicament was that they could wait and in all likelihood burn to death, or jump. It is probable that some people hoped to survive the fall, in which case their death was not attributable to suicide. However, many would have been aware that jumping meant death, and thus completed suicide.

### Summary

We present details of six individuals whose suicide was preserved on film (Table 1). One individual (Chubbuck) appears to have suffered maladaptive personality traits and mood issues. Another (Romero) may have suffered maladaptive

personality traits and mental disorder—he had a long history of violence and other forensic problems; however, relatively little about the man is available on the public record. One (Duc) was a monk who was making a political statement. Another (Jones) had serious health issues and was angry with his HMO. Two (Dwyer and Marin) were disgraced, financially challenged and facing prison; one of them (Dwyer) ensured his family’s financial well-being by dying before commencing his sentence.

We also located and present details of two groups of people whose suicide was preserved on film (Table 2). These were the 2000 Kamikaze Pilots who performed altruistic suicide and 200 “jumpers” of 9/11, who died by jumping rather than burning.

In one case (Chubbuck) the predicaments probably included mental disorder (8). This may have been the case in some others (possibly Romero). In all, the predicaments included identifiable social factors.

### Discussion

This study is not without limitations. Any submission is only as strong as the material on which it is based. While material on the public record is usually provided by journalists with modest, at best, clinical experience, it must be understood that journalists take every opportunity to bolster their reports with expert opinion, and that their work is widely examined and quickly criticised if found to be inaccurate. Thus, the reports on the public record are generally the work of experienced, sensible, unbiased people.

We also do not suggest that we have presented all available examples of suicides that have been captured on film. For example, the documentary, “The Bridge” (21) includes footage of several suicides by people who leapt from San Francisco’s “Golden Gate Bridge” in 2004. Of the 24 people who, according to the film, completed suicide by jumping from the bridge that year, the nature of the triggering “predicament” is not always clear.

While little time has transpired since the suicides of Michael Marin and Jordon Romero, decades have passed since the deaths of Christine Chubbuck, Budd Dwyer and Daniel Jones. Over these years, relatives and others have examined the stories and have not contradicted the original reports. For example, a recent documentary about Budd Dwyer (22) added no new material.

There can be little criticism of what has been written here regarding Kamikaze pilots and

“The jumpers” of 9/11. Of course, these reports involve over 2200 individuals and there will be many individual differences. However, all we are saying is that mental disorder was probably not present in the majority of individuals but that environmental/cultural predicaments were probably the main suicide drivers. It has been conceded that some of “The jumpers” may have hoped to survive the fall and should not, therefore, be considered to have suicided.

In the case of Christine Chubbuck, maladaptive personality traits and mood disturbance may have been the major driver. Nevertheless, her final words indicated enmity toward her employer. Anger toward the social environment also appears to have played a role in the deaths of Budd Dwyer and Daniel Jones.

The reasons these suicides were captured on film may be different in each case. The Kamikaze pilots were probably filmed for news, historical and military reasons. “The jumpers” were filmed almost coincidentally, when a horrendous terrorist action was being reported.

Michael Marin was perhaps unaware that his suicide would be recorded on film. He would have been aware that the court proceedings were being filmed, and he attempted to hide that he was

placing cyanide in his mouth. He knew he would die publicly in court and that this would have a strong impact.

Christine Chubbuck and Bud Dwyer were filmed because they themselves orchestrated the filming. This may have been to give the greatest possible expression to anger, or a desire to be noticed or recorded in history. Thich Quang Duc widely publicised his decision to self-immolate, and while he may not have planned on being filmed, he aimed for a public event which would draw attention to his statement.

Daniel Jones also planned to have his death noticed. In fact, it seems he planned to have his suicide filmed from the air. He pointed his shotgun at passing cars with the inevitable result that the police cordoned off the area. He then spread out his home-made sign on the highway, such that it could only be read from above.

Of the six individuals, probably only one was not seeking public exposure. It is reasonable to suppose that when Jordon Romero stole a car, he had hoped to slip away unnoticed. However, after a high speed car chase began and firearms were discharged, he found himself in a difficult predicament.

**Table 1:** Details of six individuals whose suicide was preserved on film

Name/Age/Year	Mental Disorder	Social factors
Duc (66) 1963	None mentioned	Buddhist monk protesting repression
Chubbuck (29) 1974	Personality and mood issues	No significant relationships outside nuclear family. Angered by employers focus on ‘blood and guts’
Dwyer (47) 1987	None mentioned	Convicted and facing 55 years in prison plus fine. Death left family financially secure
Jones (40) 1998	None mentioned	Neck cancer, HIV-positive. Angered by service of HMO
Marin (53) 2012	None mentioned	Disgraced. Financial problems. Sentenced to 16 years prison
Romero (33) 2012	None mentioned	History of violence and firearm offences. Wanted. Pursued by police committing serious offences in the process

**Table 2:** Details of two groups of people whose suicide was preserved on film

Group/Age/Year	Social factors
2000 Kamikaze pilots/ various/1944-5	Japan was losing the war. These pilots were ordered to fly fatal missions for the benefit of their country and families
200‘9/11 Jumpers’/various/2012	Faced with burning to death or jumping. Many would have been aware they would not survive the fall

## Conclusion

Psychological autopsies (23) and our clinical experience suggest that suicide is often associated with mental disorder. However, much recent attention has focused on the often important role of social/environmental stressors (24,25). This paper has provided examples, on the public record, of predicaments which have led to suicide. It considered a special group of people, those whose suicide has for one reason or another been captured on film. In the majority of the individual cases, there were strong social/environmental predicaments and seeking public exposure of the fatal act. Interestingly, there are some similarities between our findings and the analysis of suicide in US feature films (6) – in the latter, social stressors or avoiding punishment appears to contribute to suicide in many individuals.

## Acknowledgements

We thank Professor Andres Martin for his advice and Dr Nerissa Soh for her assistance in preparing the manuscript.

## Conflict of Interest

None.

## Fund(s)

None.

## Authors' Contributions

Conception and design, analysis and interpretation of the data, drafting of the article, critical revision of the article for the important intellectual content, final approval of the article, provision of study materials or patient, statistical expertise, obtaining of funding, administrative, technical or logistic support, collection and assembly of data: SP, GW

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