



Chapter 13

Suicide or murder? implicit narratives in the Eddie Gilfoyle case

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Raising questions

Often unusual court cases raise important challenges for psychology and, indirectly, for the ways in which psychologists may help police investigations. This overlap -between the evidence a psychological expert may offer in court and the guidance that may be given to a police investigation – is brought into particularly sharp focus in those rare cases when behavioural and psychological issues are at the heart of determining guilt or innocence. Usually court cases revolve around matters of fact, material evidence, or even circumstantial evidence such as who could have been where when. But sometimes the facts of the case are so indeterminate that it is the character of both the victim and the defendant that are the central issue. If psychology has anything to offer the legal process, surely it must at least be able to comment on such matters?

Cases when the jury's decision revolves around judgements about the psychology of the parties involved create special challenges for the legal system. The courts may act as if they are dealing with something that can be tackled as directly as whether a person was present or not at the crime scene, or if the blood on the suspect was from the victim. The barristers will follow similar strategies when the issues are far less clear-cut, debating the character of the defendant, or in some cases, notably murder or rape, the character of the victim, in a way that suggests that personality is a fact that can be established as readily as a fingerprint. But a



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psychological perspective raises considerable doubt as to how fixed a person's personality is and how feasible it is for a jury to come to a firm conclusion about the victim's and perpetrator's characters and the meanings of their actions.

The view that personality can be determined, like any other significant fact in a case, from common sense and general knowledge, leads to the assumption that a barrister can help a jury form a view about the personality of a defendant or victim without the help of an expert. The central legal idea is that the expert is someone who knows things not available to a jury of lay-people. Therefore the trial of cases in which the character of key players is at issue may suffer from the simple-minded view commonly expressed in casual conversations in the pub: 'we're all psychologists aren't we?' The same naiveté is thus also likely to be present among police officers when carrying out their investigations.

A plausible narrative

In these cases where the meaning of people's actions and their inner thoughts are under discussion, the jury is being required to develop or accept a plausible narrative of what went on in an unfolding situation. They are being asked to determine how convincing that story is by considering the people who are the main protagonists of the story. The jury's understanding of the victim and the defendant, the sorts of people they are, has to be built on to give sense to what they are reported to have done.

These problems in court are the same problems that police investigators face when trying to make sense of a crime. Just like the jury, the police try to create a plausible story, a narrative that will help them to see some meaning and sense in a pattern of activity that is often ambiguous. These narratives are based on assumptions of how people typically act under various circumstances and thus are implicit psychological models of what processes influence people's actions. Usually it is believed that police officers and juries have available to them valid psychological models that do not require any input from psychological science. In many cases such beliefs may be appropriate, but in those cases where they are not fundamental questions are raised about the basis of police investigations and the consequent processes that the law follows in putting ideas before a jury. The question can be seen as whether a psychologist can offer alternative, or more plausible, storylines.

These problems are especially significant in cases of murder in which there is only circumstantial evidence to support the prosecution case. In



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such cases inferences about the motive for the murder become crucial. Such inferences are in their turn based on assumptions about the character of the accused.

If the defence is that the deceased committed suicide or detectives are faced with a crime scene which could be interpreted as either suicide or murder, then there is a need to understand what happened. They have to create a convincing account that describes the sorts of people involved, most importantly the prime suspect and the victim. This account has to be integrated into a convincing narrative which accords with popular understanding of how and why people act as they do. The particularities of the main characters in the story being created by investigators, then before the jury, are an integral part of this story. These particularities are difficult enough to establish for the accused who is present for interview and cross-examination. They are even more problematic when the personality in question is that of the dead victim.

Murder or suicide?

On 4 June 1992 at around 6 pm, Police Sergeant Paul Caddick opened his brother-in-law, Eddie Gilfoyle's locked garage door and found Eddie's eight and a half months pregnant wife, Paula, hanging from a ceiling beam, with her feet on the lower rungs of a ladder below the rope. Eddie had a little earlier found a note from Paula that he interpreted as indicating she was leaving him, so he was frantically searching his house and telephoning Paula's friends, after having called in his brother-in-law and his parents to help him.

Having found her dead, they read more closely the note Paula had left. They then formed the view it that it was a suicide note. The coroner's officer who arrived at the house agreed it was obviously a suicide and the body was cut down and put on the floor. No photographs or measurements were taken or forensic examination made of the garage. The rope was removed from the beam without taking details of how it had been tied. The mortician's assistant removed a portion of rope from around Paula's neck and the rope was destroyed. He later reported that he was certain that it was not a slipping knot but had two knots, one tied on top of the other.

The post mortem did not indicate anything suspicious: no violence, no alcohol or drugs. The indications were that Paula died about 2 pm.

From the actions of those in the house on the harrowing evening of 4 June it is clear that everyone – Eddie, his parents, Sergeant Caddick and the coroner's assistant – was convinced Paula had hanged herself. The post-mortem did not raise any doubts about this conclusion.



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Everyone was understandably horrified that a woman so close to giving birth should have taken her own life and in the process killed her baby. In the close-knit group of Eddie's and Paula's families and their circle of friends and co-workers, discussion started as to how Paula could have done such a thing. People who worked with her recounted how happy she was about having the baby. They spoke of her buying clothes and equipment for the baby and of arranging to have it christened. A witness emerged who claimed to have talked to Paula at the local post office at 12.40, when she seemed happy. A parcel agent said Eddie signed for a parcel in Paula's name at 5.30. A neighbour also confirms seeing Eddie outside of his house at 5.30. Eddie denied this, saying he had come home from work at 4.30 to take Paula shopping but had not found her. He had found the note and then went to his parents' house, only returning home at around 6 pm.

Against this background of no obvious prior indicators of Paula being depressed, or having mentioned to anyone that she might take her own life, the police began to grow suspicious and to start listening to emerging sceptical accounts of various people who had known Paula. On 23 June a police officer found a 'practice noose' in a cabinet drawer of the garage; although another police officer who searched the garage and very drawer on 8 June had not found such an item.

During this process people came forward to recount to the police a quite remarkable story. They reported that Paula had told them that Eddie had said he was doing some training in his job at the hospital where he worked. This apparently required him to bring to the class an example of a suicide note. They claimed Paula had indicated that she had written a note at his dictation for him to take to the class.

Scenting a subtle plot to kill his wife, the police started exploring further and discovered that Eddie had had a dalliance with a co-worker which Paula had discovered and put a stop to. Here, then, they saw a classic storyline: 'husband kills wife to allow him to run off with lover'. They began to elaborate this story by examining Eddie's character. They decided that he tended to exaggerate his skills and achievements. Among themselves the police described him with reference to an iconic story of a liar and fantasist, saying he was a 'Walter Mitty character'.

To develop the circumstantial evidence for their case they reconstructed the scene in the garage as best they could from the memories of those who had seen Paula hanging. A woman police officer of the same height and build and stage of pregnancy as Paula attempted to climb the ladder and fasten the rope to the beam in the garage. After a few minutes they stopped the re-enactment for fear that the pregnant woman would hurt herself with the struggle to reach the beam. All present at this 're-enactment' were convinced that it would have been impossible for Paula to tie the rope.



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It was therefore proposed that Eddie had somehow tricked his wife into putting her head in the tied rope. Then he had stood behind her and lifted her feet, so causing her to die, thereafter placing her feet on the bottom rung of the ladder. They believed they had uncovered a classic murder story in which the devious Eddie Gilfoyle had created a situation in which it appeared that his wife had killed herself, but in fact he had cajoled or conned her into putting herself at his mercy. Eddie was consequently charged with his wife's murder.

'Stylistics' and authorship

In preparing their evidence for court, the prosecution thought it would be of value to determine if the suicide note could have been dictated by Eddie. They therefore approached me to provide a psycholinguistic examination of that note. There was no doubt that the note was in Paula's handwriting, but could it reveal mental processes that were closer to Eddie's than Paula's? Eddie and Paula had been on different shifts at work and were also redecorating their house, which entailed them staying with their parents from time to time. This had led them to leave notes for each other, often on matters of emotional significance. There therefore was a mixture of texts available for consideration.

What drew the police to consider such a possibility is the emergence of a branch of linguistic analysis that attempts to provide mathematical calculations of the components of text that will demonstrate the authorship of that text (e.g. Ellegard, 1962). This activity is sometimes graced with the term 'stylistics' (cf. McMenamin, 1993). It goes back over more than a century and comes into popular awareness with attempts to determine if all the plays attributed to Shakespeare were actually written by him. Such studies typically look at the vocabulary used in plays by various authors and seek to establish whether there is a similar or different mix of words that could be taken to indicate who wrote what.

There is however, a fundamental problem with virtually all of these studies. They never establish that the aspect of style or word use that they are measuring is incontrovertibly, consistently typical of the author in question and clearly distinct from other authors. In other words, there is no *a priori* proof that any aspect of a person's style of verbal expression is unique to that person. Psychologists recognize this as the classic experimental, or 'analysis of variance', problem. Is the variation within an individual's utterances greater than the variation between the utterances of different people? If any given person uses a broader mix of words, varying from one piece of writing to another more than the differences he



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has from another person, then it will not be possible to use his mix of words to distinguish the writing of the two people.

The approach of identifying unique aspects of the writings of a famous author is rather different from approaches that claim there is some aspect of all utterances that are unique to people, like fingerprints. From time to time, there have been claims that there are general features of what people say or write that will be unique to each person. For example, there have been claims that the proportion of short words to long words is a distinct figure unique to each person. But systematic study has always shown these claims to have established general distinguishing features to be unfounded (Canter, 1992).

Sadly, linguistics is a fundamentally descriptive discipline, not an experimental science. So the people carrying out studies of authorship are usually happy to propose that they have found some distinction that allows them to claim they have identified the actual author of a piece of text, even though they have no proof that they are correct, other than the distinction they claim provides the proof. This form of circular argument does not seem to raise too many questions within linguistic circles.

Challenges to these procedures and demonstration of their lack of scientific validity do not stop the search for such general features because of the popular belief that we have unique ways of expressing ourselves. Indeed, many of us are confident that we can identify the writing of particular students or colleagues. However, such a personal conviction is rarely tested. It also does not have the precision that would have the clarity and proven validity to enable it to be used in court.

I was somewhat ignorant of these complications when the police first asked me, 12 years ago, to examine the suicide note that Paula had written. It seemed to me at least worthwhile to explore a number of Paula's letters and a number that Eddie had written, in order to determine if there was anything about their different writing styles that could be drawn upon to form a view about the authorship of the significant suicide note. Could it be claimed at all that the suicide note was not the words or thoughts of Paula even though it was in her handwriting?

Psychological autopsy

In order to understand how I tackled this task of comparison it is necessary to be aware of how the material was presented to me. I was approached by the senior investigating officer and presented with the intriguing story outlined above. Eddie, the 'Walter Mitty character', had invented a story to convince his wife to write a suicide note, then tricked her into putting her head in a noose. I was not allowed to talk to anyone about this,



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neither Eddie nor Paula's family, but was asked to examine some notes that Eddie and Paula had written to each other and prepare a report on the likelihood that Paula had written the suicide note with the intention of killing herself.

Although with hindsight I was probably naïve in accepting with too little question the account that the police had given to me, and was far too optimistic about the possibilities for linguistic analysis, I was at least experienced and professional enough to insist that I reviewed the case in general, not looking only at the written material I had been given. For my report I considered the facts of Paula's circumstances as they were presented to me. This included reviewing what the commonly held view was in the published literature on the precursors to suicide.

This report drew on procedures that sit under the title of 'psychological autopsy'. In essence this is an attempt to identify the characteristics of a deceased person from all the information available. It is not a strict process in any very formal sense. There is just a set of ideas and recommendations that provide guidelines on what may be considered. However, as I have discussed in more detail in other places (e.g. Canter, 1999), the published literature rather underplays the considerable difficulties there are in preparing an account of the deceased in a case such as that of the death of Paula Gilfoyle. Not only was I not allowed to talk to anyone, but by the time I was called in the dominant narratives of the various parties – the police investigators, the families of the accused and deceased – had taken hold and were having an influence over all the information being presented.

The report I eventually submitted to the police investigation reflected the fact that there were no strong, overt indicators that Paula had been depressed or not wanting to have her baby. The linguistic analysis concentrated on the vocabulary and themes in the notes between Paula and Eddie. The report came to the conclusion that the suicide note used themes and vocabulary more or less typical of both Paula and Eddie. It raised the possibility that any suicidal thoughts Paula might have had may have been hidden from others, but drew the overall conclusion that Paula had probably not written the note with the intention of killing herself. In total this was taken as lending support to the prosecution case.

My report, though, was not presented to the court. That I am sure was a sensible decision given how little systematic background research there was for me to make use of. However, the report itself bolstered the determination of the prosecution. More importantly, probably, in the curious ways in which the courts work, it encouraged the defence not to bring any parallel linguistic or psychological evidence for fear of opening a way for my evidence. Thus, although it was clearly not directly a



consequence of my report, I must carry at least some little responsibility for Eddie Gilfoyle being convicted of his wife's murder and being given the inevitable consequence – a life sentence.

Developments

In the real world, as opposed to the scientific laboratory, coincidences of time and place can have considerable significance. At the time I was approached to contribute to the investigation into Paula's death I was living in Surrey, about 200 miles South of the Wirral peninsula where she had lived with Eddie. A couple of years after Eddie was sentenced I took a job at Liverpool University, a short ferry ride 'across the water' from the Wirral.

Still curious about how a husband could convince his wife into putting her neck in a noose in a garage, especially when there had been a recent contretemps over an extramarital friendship, I was therefore more than ready to talk with members of Paula's and Eddie's extended family when I was contacted by them on arriving in Liverpool. This provided me with new insights into the whole saga and eventually a meeting with Eddie, as well as a written account from him of the circumstances, as he saw them, which gave rise to Paula's death. Let me emphasize the significance of this information. For what might be called 'legal reasons', none of this was available to me when I wrote my original report.

What emerged from all this was a situation that threw into high relief the profound difficulties of carrying out an objective psychological autopsy in a situation where there is a debate over whether a death is caused by murder or suicide. The people who knew Paula best, Eddie and his family on the one hand and Paula's family on the other, each had a psychological investment in totally opposing stories. Her immediate family were reluctant to talk to me, believing that I 'just wanted to show that Paula was mad' and 'get Eddie off the hook'. Most people associated with suicide feel some guilt, thinking that they should have done something to prevent it and therefore would prefer to take the view that there was some other cause for death. Coroners are often sensitive to these feelings by giving an open verdict even when there is a suicide note present.

Eddie and his family clearly had a vested interest in demonstrating that Paula was mentally disturbed in some way, or at the very least deeply unhappy about having a baby. Any view they offered would therefore be extremely difficult to rely on in any court of law. A report based solely on information gleaned from them would be open to strong challenge in cross-examination.



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To complicate matters further, by the time that I was involved in these discussions with the various people who had information about Paula, there had been an official enquiry into the initial investigation and even an enquiry into that enquiry. Any details of the actual situation, such as Paula and Eddie's house and the fateful garage, would have been changed beyond recognition. All that could be done was to review the shelf loads of case files that carried details of the interviews collected during the original investigation and later enquiries.

All of these matters brought to the surface a range of psychological questions to which answers were desperately needed: questions that the court should have had answers to in the original case; issues of which the police officers who carried out the original investigation should have been aware.

'Experience of life'

Eddie claimed in his discussions with me that Paula never showed what she was feeling to other people. He described how she frequently presented one face in private and a quite different face in public. He said there had been some indicators that she had been upset the day or two before she died and that this was in accord with other mood swings she had had in the past. His sister and her husband also insisted that Paula was not always the bubbly, carefree person that had been presented to the court. Through these discussions my attention was drawn to considering many aspects of the case. All of these connect with aspects of psychology that are open to scientific study and professional opinion. Yet the courts in the original case and two later appeals have steadfastly refused to acknowledge that these matters are beyond the experience or expertise of a jury. The judge in his summing up of the original murder trial made it clear that he thought the jury could make a decision about Eddie's guilt, and whether Paula was likely to have committed suicide, based on the jury's 'own experience of life'.

Assessing personality

The fact that personality can be a substantive issue in a murder case is shown by the fact that in his summing up the judge at the trial draws attention to discussions of what he calls Paula's 'personality and behaviour', equating personality with behaviour. This does indicate a lack of the learned judge's understanding of professional psychological perspectives. Those who carry out systematic, scientific study of human



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actions and experiences make a very considerable distinction between 'personality' and 'behaviour'. Personality is the enduring characteristics a person has, behaviour is her actions at particular points in time. To accept that what Paula had done and said to others was a clear reflection of her personality and thus her inner mental state is, at the very least, an assumption open to test. In the trial, as far as I can tell, no detailed accounts of Paula's personality, as a psychologist might talk about it, were presented in evidence.

The discussions about Paula were all at what might be termed surface level, how she was seen by those around her. For example in reviewing the case the Criminal Case Review Commission drew attention to the following from the trial record:

Mrs Gilfoyle left work three weeks before the baby was due. Family and friends described her as happy and, despite misgivings about the birth itself, looking forward to the arrival of the baby. Mrs Gilfoyle had bought two sets of baby equipment so that one set could be left with her mother who was going to look after the baby when Mrs Gilfoyle returned to work ... 2 days before her death, she went to the library and borrowed 6 books on childcare and names.

However, in my original report, before I had met Eddie and heard his account, I did note that:

She very much wanted the approval of others and would distort accounts of herself and her activities in order to present herself in a good light. She dealt with difficulties and challenges either by presenting a less than accurate account of herself or by hiding away from the stressful situation. This probably did not make her especially vulnerable to suicide but did mean that any suicidal ideation she might have had would have been difficult for others to recognise.

There had also been hints in an earlier witness statement, from a work colleague that Paula's delight at having the baby was not unconditional: 'she used to say at work that she was worried about having the baby, mainly because she was an older mother and she wouldn't know what to do'.

The judge at the original murder trial did acknowledge that there were contrary indications to the generally positive picture of Paula's delight in having the baby, but brushed them aside:



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In October 1991 she wrote to her husband and referred to the baby coming, 'when I am at the lowest ever in my life', and to being undecided whether to bring the baby up herself or to give it up for adoption. The notes, according to numerous witnesses, did not reflect her demeanour and behaviour; she appeared happy and looking forward to the birth of her child.

The judge is thus claiming that what Paula wrote to her husband should be discounted in favour of what she portrayed to less close acquaintances.

Closer consideration of the personality literature could put these ambiguities in another light. Hewitt and Flett (1991) argued that 'perfectionist' people are less likely to look forward to positive events because each event offers an opportunity for failure. They suggest that this trait has three dimensions: self-oriented perfectionism (when the person places unrealistic demands on herself); socially prescribed perfectionism (where the person thinks that significant other people demand perfection); and other-oriented perfectionism (where it is believed that other people make unrealistic and exaggerated demands). This view of 'perfectionism' provides a framework within which a pathway can exist from socially prescribed perfectionism to depression and subsequent suicide ideation.

These ideas have been developed more recently to show a direct association between the cognitive attribute of the 'perfectionist' trait and suicide (Hunter and O'Connor, 2003; O'Connor and O'Connor, 2003; O'Connor *et al.*, 2004). Could Paula be thought of as having this 'perfectionist' trait, which could have contributed to her thinking about suicide? Certainly in my conversations with Eddie and his sister, they mentioned a number of aspects of Paula's behaviour, such as her approach to housekeeping, even putting tins in alphabetical order on the kitchen shelves, which take on a different significance in the light of these recently published studies.

It is, of course, extremely difficult at this remove to determine the extent to which Paula did hide her feelings from other people and also had traits that could have made her especially vulnerable to fears of failure. Can the fact, for example, that Paula took as many six books out of the library on childcare three weeks before the expected date of delivery, and had baby equipment already stored both at her own and her mother's house, be seen as an indication of anxiety, or form of tension, rather than enthusiasm for having the baby? It may be typical of many mothers expecting their first baby. Were there other aspects of her life that might have indicated the plausibility of a different narrative to the one that Paula was reported to have revealed to the world? Most fundamentally, where there ways in which the police investigation, and subsequently the courts, could have looked at these matters that go beyond a jury's 'experience of life'? Could



it have been possible to establish Paula's enduring characteristics, which could have been tested through cross-examination before the jury, and their implications for possible hidden suicidal tendencies explored?

Suicide without precursors

In his summing up at the original trial the judge drew attention to the fact that 17 different people gave no indication that Paula would kill herself. In doing this he is making a fundamental assumption, and one that my original report fostered, that suicide never occurs without some prior indication that would be available to people who had day to day contact with Paula.

A large number of precursors to suicide are identified in the literature. These are the main pointers that are the basis for consideration in conducting a psychological autopsy (Canter, 1999). They include depression, mental illness, previous attempts at suicide, alcoholism and drug addiction, isolation and changes in mood and behaviour, leading up to the time of death.

Yet all these indicators assume that the person who takes their own life gives some sort of indication that their thoughts are moving in that direction. This literature is also based on the premise that others notice whatever cues may be available to the mental state of the intending suicide. Impulsive suicide is not catered for in this framework, as a sudden unplanned event. Nor is a state of secret despair allowed for, in which the person goes to trouble to hide their thoughts and feelings.

Eddie's claims, fervently denied by Paula's family, was that there were indicators, the significance of which he was only aware of with hindsight, that Paula had been nursing a private disquiet with her relationship with him and with the coming baby. This claim and counter-claim therefore raises in stark significance whether such secret despair is possible or at all likely. Establishing that it is possible would not prove that it was the case here, but at least it is an issue that might have influenced the initial police investigation and then the jury if they had been aware of it.

To explore these possibilities I therefore set about trying to see what the likelihood was of suicide without precursors. This study gave rise to a recent paper (Canter *et al.*, 2004). The paper supports the growing evidence that suicide can occur without overt, explicit precursors. Our study looked for the presence or absence of 14 known suicide indicators in 128 case histories (as presented at inquest) of completed suicides. From the co-occurrence of these 14 indicators a model was developed of three suicide pathways; distinct routes to suicide relating to: a) life



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circumstances (including stressful life events, e.g. financial hardship, relationship crises), b) psychiatric/physical history, and c) suicidal history.

The 128 cases we examined showed considerable variation in the number of overt precursors prior to death. Individuals exhibited between two and ten precursors. Sixteen per cent exhibited less than four. This would suggest that not only are there a limited number of psychological processes that lead to people taking their own lives, but that there are also variations in how intentions are expressed, either directly or indirectly. Most importantly, there is a small but significant proportion of cases for which the coroner comes to a conclusion of suicide yet for which there are only minimal prior indicators. It is possible that these individuals are suffering from a state of 'secret despair' in which they feel trapped by negative experiences, and lose hope for the future, but keep such feelings hidden from those around them. This would seem to support the possibility in my original report, that Paula might have exhibited a pathway to suicide related to her life circumstances that were not so clearly expressed to those around her.

Determining authenticity in suicide notes

The idea that a hospital porter, like Eddie, with minimal first-aid training and no counselling or therapeutic experience could dictate a convincing suicide note was never tested in court, or even explored. This therefore raises questions about what the contents of a suicide note are likely to be and the psychological processes that are most probably expressed in such a note. The identification of distinct pathways to suicide would also add a focus to these considerations, because the existence of a limited number of pathways would indicate that a genuine suicide note should reflect one dominant pathway rather than a mixture of processes.

Hopelessness

One dominant factor that has been found consistently in suicide is hopelessness – the degree to which an individual is pessimistic about the future. This is cited as the main component of the depression that is most often associated with suicidal thoughts (Nekanda-Trepka *et al.*, 1983) and completed suicide (Beck *et al.*, 1989). MacLeod *et al.* (1993, 1997) found that parasuicidal individuals are impaired in their ability to generate positive future thoughts compared with controls. The different pathways we have identified thus are all, in their different ways, routes to the abyss of despair that sees no acceptable future.



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Certainly the note to Eddie written by Paula expresses hopelessness very clearly:

'this is just too much I can't face up to my problems anymore'

The note implies that Paula cannot face the thought of having the baby, although the full reasons are not expressed in detail in this note. Nonetheless, the pain of a future life is strongly expressed.

The forms of thought of people contemplating suicide have also been elaborated further in studies of depression by Beck (1976). He draws attention to negative patterns of thinking regarding the person's sense of self, their future, and their environment. They are more likely to blame themselves for negative events. They think that the causes will always be present, and will interfere with all aspects of their lives in the future. According to O'Connor and Sheehy (2001), this pattern of thinking is more potent when it is applied to explaining negative interpersonal events (e.g. relationship crises). This thinking pattern sustains the individual's negative state of mind and impairs their ability to problem-solve and deal with an interpersonal crisis. A suicidal person, cognitively rigid with tunnel vision, is less likely to consider alternative solutions to problems, and is more likely to view suicide as an option.

In Paula's note the view that she has never done anything right in her life is strongly expressed in the almost ironic comment:

'maybe it will be the one thing I will do right in life'

The pregnancy is recorded as the epitome of all that she has done wrong:

'I don't want to have this baby that I'm carrying. I wish now that I had got rid of it.'

The feeling of total inability to influence future prospects is also stated. No other alternatives are open for exploration.

'I can't change or alter what I've done.'

A narrative of despair

For these strong declarations of a lack of any acceptable future to carry conviction, they have to be embedded in a plausible narrative. This is where the inventiveness of a fictional letter-writer would be tested. The feelings of utter doom must be expressed strongly if they are to accord with the psychological literature, as they clearly are in Paula's note,



but there would have to be some context that makes such a view feasible.

In the case of the Gilfoyles this is hinted at through the earlier documents that I eventually started to consider. In brief, a marital conflict is discussed in which Paula claims that her baby is not Eddie's. The postmortem showed this to be untrue, but of course does not indicate whether Paula thought it was false. This is therefore portrayed as a suicide emerging out of a view that a relationship was being destroyed by the unborn child. The notes build up a rich narrative around this of a lover named as 'Nigel' who in one letter is described as having decided to leave the country and not take Paula with him. This would add further to the proposal of a 'failed relationship' pathway. It certainly requires considerable inventive detail from Eddie if he were the primary author of it as fiction.

Justification

Studies of suicide notes also draw attention to the purpose of writing a note at all. This takes a perspective that owes more to consideration of suicide notes as a form of 'discourse', in the sense that Potter and Wetherell (1987) use the term, examining how people construct themselves and other people through what they say and write. Much of this construction is seen as creating and defending particular views of the self, typically offering, implicitly or explicitly, justifications for actions that might be expected to be outside of what is socially acceptable. Within this paradigm, according to McClelland *et al.* (2000), the function of suicide notes is to negotiate the potential blame attributable to the deceased and the note recipient. Because suicide violates powerful social norms to keep oneself alive, and further implies that others may have failed in their own social obligations towards the person contemplating suicide, the function of suicide notes is to legitimate a normally illegitimate act.

Thus, individuals will typically be expected to provide some form of explanation for their actions in suicide notes. Whether this is widely known, or would have been known to Eddie, is a moot point. Our studies of suicide notes indicate that explanations or justifications are often not very overt or detailed. Most people seem unable to elaborate on their reasons, but rather indicate that there are reasons and justifications. In one sample of 98 suicide notes we studied, 47% gave only general or constricted comments, e.g. not wanting to continue. The most frequently occurring elements that addressed the social norms against suicide were apologies to note recipients and expressions of love for those left behind.

Again Paula's note is a 'textbook' example of this type of justification. It also relates to comments I made in my original report that genuine suicide



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notes are more likely to express positive emotions than are simulated ones. An inexperienced writer might assume that the primary purpose of a suicide note is to blame or seek revenge.

Paula wrote:

'no-one is to blame except myself'

and later

'I apologise for all the pain and suffering I have caused by taking my own life. I don't mean to cause any problems for anyone'.

Paradoxically, this natural and common inclusion in suicide notes of apology and self-blame may have been part of the reason the police and jury had convinced themselves that Eddie had written the note. If he was as devious as the police believed then it would be expected that he would make sure the note exonerated himself. The possibility that Paula, intelligently, understood some of the trauma that her death would cause, is a quite different explanation for the purpose of the letter she wrote to Eddie.

Surprise suicides

At the heart of the narrative that the police and jury explored was the idea that people do not commit suicide suddenly, by surprise. Again this is an issue that was not explored in any detail or with any sophistication in either the original court case or in the subsequent appeals. Yet there is a growing literature, not just on the secret despair mentioned above, but also on the awareness in the population at large of the possibility of 'surprise suicides'.

Two studies have examined directly the extent to which individuals believe that 'A suicide attempt occurs with little warning', and 'Usually, relatives of a suicide victim had no idea of what was about to happen' (Domino, 1990; Cruikshank and Slavick, 1994). In a sample of 643 US residents, aged between 21 and 83 years, Domino (1990) found that 76% agreed that relatives might be unaware of a victim's intentions. Conversely, only 23% agreed that suicide happens without warning. A greater proportion of older respondents and those from minority groups endorsed both items. This discrepancy of endorsement is an interesting one, since it may reflect the idea that individuals present themselves differently to different people, and that it may be the ones closest to them who know the least.



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In a replication of Domino's study, Cruikshank and Slavick (1994) found 57% and 19% endorsement of these respective items. In addition, they found no differences between individuals who had known someone to commit suicide and those who had not. By contrast, in Alston and Robinson's (1992) study of nurses' attitudes towards suicide, they found that 88% endorsed the view that suicide happens without warning. Nurses have unique access to medical investigation of and a family's reactions to suicide. So it is interesting that their views so contrast with the public at large, for whom only around 20% hold this view. Clearly this is an area in which guidance to a jury could be productive.

An alternative narrative

The story that convicted Eddie Gilfoyle and still keeps him in prison is that he schemed to kill his wife by tricking her into putting her head in a noose, having already prepared the ground by dictating a suicide note for her to write. In addition, his deception had been so thought through that over weeks and months beforehand he had got his wife to concoct an account of an illicit affair and an unwanted pregnancy. There are subtle variations possible on this central theme; for example, that Eddie had built upon some genuine disquiet his wife had about giving birth to create a much more fatalistic scenario. From a psychological point of view, the great invention necessary in this is the note Paula left – a note that all who read it initially saw as a genuine cry of pain. The note has to be regarded as a plausible invention that contrasted with the way Paula was seen by many of those around her, 17 people that the judge counted as disagreeing with the version of events reflected in that note.

I have tried to indicate some of the fascinating assumptions about human behaviour and personality that are enshrined in the gripping narrative that the jury must have accepted when they found Eddie guilty. By unpacking these assumptions it is possible to see how a psychological perspective could have generated a different storyline that may have influenced the original investigation. In this different account the suicide note is genuine and Paula is seen as a person who had secretly harboured despair. The reasons for this related to her perception of her child's father and the consequences of giving birth to it. Within this narrative it has to be assumed that the account Paula is quoted as giving of writing suicide notes dictated by Eddie has either been misunderstood or was part of a convoluted deceit on the part of Paula.

In legal terms, without the alternative narrative being considered by a court of appeal its validity cannot be tested. In psychological terms this case has generated a number of lines of research, including the exploration

of what genuine suicide notes consist of, the possibility for determining authorship objectively for written material, the evidence for a 'secret despair syndrome', the knowledge which juries may be assumed to have of the conditions under which suicide happens, and the ways in which plausible narratives shape investigations and jury decisions. The sad fact is that research takes many years to reach conclusions and until such conclusions are clearly available Eddie Gilfoyle may remain wrongfully incarcerated.

Acknowledgements

I am extremely grateful, first and foremost to Eddie Gilfoyle, his family and solicitor Campbell Malone, for allowing me to quote the material in this chapter and for providing me with considerable background information. I am also very pleased to record the considerable contribution made to the preparation of this chapter by Susan Giles. Her PhD work has illuminated much of what I have written.

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Details of the Gilfoyle case are available on the following websites:
www.mojuk.org.uk/eddie/ed.html
www.portia.org/chapter02/gilfoyl5.html