

# The Difficulties of Collecting a Corpus of Genuine and Simulated Suicide Notes

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## **Abstract**

Collecting a corpus of genuine and simulated suicide notes would appear to be a relatively straight-forward issue: in order to be able to compare real and fake notes, it would seem to be a simple matter of merely collecting a corpus of each. However, it seems that this has rarely been done; and it turns out that there are very good reasons for this.

There are problematic definitions of what a suicide note is, and indeed of what a suicide is, and what a note is. Additionally, there is the physical difficulty of getting hold of any genuine notes. Further, if simulated notes are required there are even more difficulties. Effecting the latter would involve: either collecting notes that have been fabricated or forged, or have been written under duress - of which there are very few available; or persuading people to write them. There are good reasons why asking people to pretend to write suicide notes cannot normally be done.

Most researchers who have worked with a corpus of genuine and simulated suicide notes have used the one collected by Edwin S. Shneidman in the 1940s (Shneidman and Farberow, 1957). Some of the problems with this corpus are that it is small, all the note writers are male, born in the U.S.A. and middle-aged. Although this paper is mainly concerned with the problems of data collection, it also considers some alternatives to working with the Shneidman notes.

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