

Religious Leader's Perceptions of the Suicide Phenomenon in Kupang City

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Abstract. This study aims to understand the perceptions of religious leaders in Kupang City towards suicide to see how religious values influence their perspectives and handling of the issue. The participants in the study numbered three people, consisting of three religions with a majority in Kupang City, namely Catholic, Protestant, and Islam. Using qualitative research methods, data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using thematic analysis. The results of this study indicate that religious leaders in Kupang City understand suicide as an act that does not follow religious teachings and generally occurs due to severe life pressures. They show deep concern and want to be directly involved in suicide prevention efforts, such as providing spiritual support and encouragement, helping emotionally, and educating the community to be more aware of the importance of maintaining mental health.

Keywords: *Perception, Religious Leader, Suicide*

Abstrak. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk memahami persepsi pemuka agama di Kota Kupang terhadap bunuh diri, guna melihat bagaimana nilai-nilai keagamaan mempengaruhi cara pandang dan penanganan terhadap isu tersebut. Partisipan dalam penelitian berjumlah tiga orang, yang terdiri dari tiga agama dengan mayoritas di Kota Kupang yakni, Katolik, Protestan, dan Islam. Dengan menggunakan metode penelitian kualitatif, data dikumpulkan melalui wawancara semi terstruktur dan dianalisis menggunakan analisis tematik. Hasil penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa para pemuka agama di Kota Kupang memahami bunuh diri sebagai tindakan yang tidak sesuai dengan ajaran agama dan umumnya terjadi karena tekanan hidup yang berat. Mereka menunjukkan kepedulian yang tinggi dan ingin terlibat langsung dalam upaya pencegahan bunuh diri, seperti memberi dukungan secara spiritual dan semangat, membantu secara emosional, serta mengedukasi masyarakat agar lebih sadar akan pentingnya menjaga kesehatan mental.

Kata kunci: *Persepsi, Pemuka Agama, Bunuh Diri*

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Introduction

The current suicide phenomenon in Indonesia is very worrying. Even though Indonesia is the 7th most religious country, with a percentage of 98.7% in the world (Muhamad, 2024), high number of suicide cases is still news that creates a dilemma. Suicide perpetrators create the easiest way to leave problems behind by taking their own lives as if they have no hope of life or the desire to continue the struggle for life (Asih & Hiryanto, 2020). *American Psychological Association* (APA, 2018) on its official website, defines suicidal behaviour as a form of action by an individual to kill themselves and most often occurs due to depression or other mental illnesses.

According to the *World Health Organization* (WHO, 2023), suicide is a global public health problem; every year, more than 700,000 people die from suicide. The majority of these deaths (77%) occur in low and middle-income countries (WHO, 2023). In Southeast Asia, the highest suicide rates are in Thailand, namely 12.9 (per 100,000 population), Singapore (7.9), Vietnam (7.0), Malaysia (6.2), Indonesia (3.7), and the Philippines (3.7). Based on Databoks, as of October 18, 2023, there were 971 cases of suicide recorded in Indonesia; where this suicide figure has exceeded the suicide cases that occurred throughout 2022, which amounted to 900 cases, so there needs to be more awareness of mental health. (Pusiknas, 2023).

Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS, 2023), East Nusa Tenggara (NTT) province in 2021, there were 145 cases of suicide recorded. Of the 22 city districts in East Nusa Tenggara, the districts with the highest number of suicide cases are East Flores with 21 cases, Southwest Sumba with 20 cases, Sikka with 16 cases, Ende with 12 cases, South Central Timor with 11 cases, East Manggarai with 11 cases, East Sumba with 6 cases, then Kupang City with 6 cases.

Religion has a major contribution to mental health (Sidoarjo, 2019). Religion is a guide to life for every human being as a calmer and support for humans in facing

life's problems. In this case, the role of religious leaders is very important as spiritual figures in helping to deal with the issue of suicide (Sulistianingsih et al., 2022).

Discourse on suicide is still considered taboo in Indonesian society. This refers to the understanding that death, as the cessation of all biological functions of the body, is seen as something frightening and threatening to human life. Suicide is often considered irrational or ridiculous behaviour, and the perpetrators are often labelled as individuals with weak faith. This view cannot be separated from the central position of religion in the life of the nation and state in Indonesia, as reflected in the first principle of Pancasila, namely "Belief in the One Almighty God." Consequently, suicide is often associated with weak religious faith. Unfortunately, stigmatization and misunderstanding of individuals who are psychologically vulnerable or who experience mental health disorders are still widespread in society. Therefore, it is essential to eliminate the stigma in society that suicide is something taboo or needs to be hidden, namely by thinking more openly about the issue of suicide (Pratiwi, 2020).

Based on the results of the initial interview, HN said that suicide is an act of taking one's own life before the time, the person should die when it is time for God to call. The main reason a person commits suicide is because he is lonely and feels that no one cares and can be trusted to talk to him. Therefore, the emotional turmoil he endured was too great to exceed his capacity, and trust issues and feeling worthless strengthened the idea of committing suicide. HN also said that in responding to suicide, we must remain calm, understand the situation, find out why this person committed suicide, use it as a lesson, and the most important thing is to educate the public so that it doesn't happen again. Likewise, AM said that suicide should be studied more; suicide also occurs because the blood of his descendants is still flowing within him. Therefore, there is such a thing as a prayer of deliverance. However, regarding suicide, several causes must be considered, namely, technology, mental illness (schizophrenia, bipolar), hereditary factors (genetics), mental health (talking about generations), and spirituality. The statement above is related to Allport's 3 aspects of perception, namely cognitive (knowledge, views, beliefs),

affective (attitude towards suicide), conative (behavior/action to be taken) (Allport, 2005).

Seeing that suicide cases are a phenomenon that still occurs in Kupang City, namely with 6 suicide cases, therefore the researcher is interested in studying "Religious Leader's Perceptions of the Suicide Phenomenon in Kupang City."

Method

The type of research used in this study is qualitative research. Qualitative research is a research method that aims to gain an understanding of reality through an inductive thinking process (Adlini et al., 2022). Qualitative research seeks to discover and narratively describe the activities carried out by research subjects and the impact of these actions on their lives. Participants in this study were three people from three different religions, with the majority of religious adherents in Kupang City, namely Catholic, Protestant, and Islam. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis, which involved understanding the data, coding, identifying themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and writing a report (Braun and Clarke in Heriyanto, 2018).

Result

After conducting the interview, the recording or audio data results are converted by the author into written form, namely verbatim. From this verbatim, data was then analyzed by the author manually using thematic analysis.

1. Suicide is contrary to religious values

This theme explains the understanding and views of religious leaders when they see and hear news of suicide. The participants consider that suicide is contrary to religious values, this understanding and view can be explained in several sub-themes as follows.

a. Life is a gift from God

This sub-theme explains the understanding and views of participants who consider that life is a gift from God. It was expressed by participants as follows:

"What is certain is that the Catholic Church strongly disapproves of suicide. In the concept of the Catholic Church, it is clear that suicide is the same as cutting off our relationship with God.... " end severing your relationship with God himself." (YL)

"God has given us life, we were born into this world." (AM)

Religious leaders believe life is a gift from God that must be protected. In religious teachings, suicide is considered an act that severs the connection with God. Therefore, the belief that life comes from God makes a person feel that he should not end his life.

b. Man Faces with Faith

Faith is an attitude of heart and obedience to God in any situation. This sub-theme explains the understanding and views of participants who assume that humans face things with faith. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"The word of the Lord says, come to me, you who are weary, yes, you who are heavy laden, I will give you rest, but why don't you believe it?." (HN)

"In the Catholic Church there is something called devotional for 10 minutes" (YL)

"Worship, prayer, fasting, reciting the Koran, deepening religion, carrying out religious guidance, these are part of the spiritual needs that strengthen faith." (AM)

Faith helps a person to stay strong when facing the pressures of life. Belief in God and religious activities such as prayer, worship, and meditation can provide peace and a sense of security. With faith, a person feels calmer and not alone in going through difficult times.

2. Life Stress

This theme explains the understanding and views of religious leaders when they see and hear news about suicide. The participants thought that the factors causing suicide were life stress. Life pressure is a condition that occurs when someone faces excessive life challenges. This can be explained in several sub-themes as follows.

a. Future Claims

Future demands are someone's needs or hopes that must be fulfilled. This sub-theme explains the understanding and views of religious leaders who consider that future demands are a factor in someone committing suicide. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"Trying to commit suicide due to family pressure, demands such as a target that must be achieved... an example like this is that he was still in college but was then forced by his family to finish this year with such grades..." (YL)

"Such as unmet needs, unattainable goals." (AM)

Demands for the future, especially from family demanding specific achievements, can burden someone. The person can feel hopeless and helpless if the demands are too heavy and difficult to achieve. This feeling can drive someone to think about committing suicide.

b. Not able to manage emotions/psychic

The inability to manage emotions/psychism is a condition where a person is unable to maintain his mental condition and thoughts so that he remains calm and peaceful. This sub-theme explains the understanding and views of participants who consider that not being able to manage their souls is a factor that causes suicide. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"He is not able to manage his feelings well." (HN)

"Unable to cultivate the soul when experiencing the pressures of life." (AM)

Someone who cannot manage their emotions and thoughts well will have a harder time dealing with the pressures of life. The person can feel overwhelmed when unable to calm down or regulate their feelings. This can make them more susceptible

to thinking about ending their life. Difficulty in managing emotions is one of the crucial causes of serious psychological problems.

3. Caring Foundation

This theme explains the feelings of religious leaders in responding to news about suicide. Feelings of concern are the emotional response of religious leaders when they see and hear news about suicide. This theme is explained in sub-themes as follows.

a. Sympathy and Empathy

Sympathy and empathy are emotional responses shown by religious leaders to help alleviate someone's suffering. This sub-theme explains the response of religious leaders to news about suicide. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"If you hear that, it's a pity...trying to position himself with what he experienced." (HN)

"What's certain is that it's sad, it's sad because you're so weak when there are challenges...Father felt very sad and also felt horrified when he committed suicide." (YL)

"Sad, while Istigfar." (AM)

When hearing news of suicide, religious leaders show sadness and concern. They try to understand the feelings of the suffering person and share their sadness.

b. Care

Caring is a proactive attitude and action shown by religious leaders when responding to news about suicide. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"If I met directly, the mother would think that this child should be helped." (HN)

"Try, assuming there is a reaction from us, how to help them, the sons need to be perfect, but at least help them." (YL)

"Carrying out direct awareness, providing education." (AM)

Religious leaders show concern and take active action in responding to news of suicide. They try to assist in simple ways, such as providing emotional support and

helpful information. Although not always perfect, their efforts are still crucial in helping people in need and preventing suicide

4. Survivors Need Help and Prayers

This theme explains the actions of religious leaders when they see and hear news about suicide. Participants responded with actions to help survivors. This theme is explained in several sub-themes as follows.

a. Psychological First Aid (PFA)

Psychological first aid (PFA) is a humane and supportive response to individuals suffering from psychological distress. This sub-theme describes actions to help survivors. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"... I don't think about anything else other than wanting to help. Whatever help I have, I will give it, because I really understand the feelings of people who have reached that point... So I understand the position of people who want to commit suicide." (HN)

"...they came to bring the victim or the perpetrator came to the priest to meet the priest." (YL)

"Put aside sadness, help first, and provide heart-to-heart education to make people aware of it. Please first, whoever it is, whatever it is, just help first." (AM)

Psychological First Aid (PFA) is an important and caring response to help individuals experiencing psychological distress, especially those at risk of suicide. Participants explained that the support provided should be unconditional, focusing on providing immediate relief and emotional support. They emphasized the importance of providing education and genuine care to raise awareness of the person in need. This approach is done by putting personal feelings aside and prioritizing the distressed person.

b. Motivation

Motivation is a form of support from religious leaders to help survivors face life's problems. This was expressed by participants as follows:

"Someone still loves you." (HN)

"If Father said his usual words like this... there are those who walk and then they will go slowly, but there are also those who run and run until they fall in the middle of the road, but because their leg is injured they can't continue le, but he is ahead of those who are walking, maybe you are part of those who are walking..." (YL)

"Life is if we solve problems, we don't solve them all, there will definitely be new problems... people who are able to solve problems will actually be raised in rank. God also tests humans with various trials... Glory is not only worldly problems, peace of mind, mental readiness, economic goodness, a way out." AM)

Motivation from religious leaders is essential in providing support to survivors in facing life's problems. Phrases such as "There are still those who love you" (HN) give a sense of hope and attention. The analogy from YL shows that everyone has a different life journey, with steps that are sometimes fast or slow but still valuable. AM also emphasized that overcoming problems does not mean that problems will be solved forever, because there will always be new challenges. However, through this process, a person can become stronger mentally and spiritually. Overall, this motivation encourages survivors to continue fighting, seeing life's trials as part of the process of becoming better.

c. Education

This sub-theme explains the educational actions of religious leaders in helping survivors. As expressed by participants as follows:

"... mother will provide this for the child who hears this, for example, if you hear... the child wants to commit suicide, the mother will provide him with... So mother gives him education... so that he can handle this child, not to the point of committing suicide." (HN)

"The church is even stricter for the constructions of you young people like this." (YL)

"First educate the public, education, understanding." (AM)

Education is essential in helping survivors cope with psychological distress and prevent suicide. Religious leaders provide knowledge to individuals in crisis to cope better. In addition, places of worship also offer more rigorous coaching, especially for the younger generation, so they are better prepared to face life's difficulties. This emphasizes the importance of education in increasing public understanding of this issue. Overall, this education aims to provide understanding and support so survivors can deal with their problems more wisely.

Discussion

This research aims to determine the perceptions of religious leaders regarding the phenomenon of suicide in the city of Kupang, using the thematic analysis method. Based on the results of the analysis, four main themes were found, namely suicide contrary to religious values, life pressure, feelings of concern, survivors needing help, and prayer.

In dealing with the issue of suicide, religious leaders tend to defend it from a religious perspective. Suicide is seen as an act that is contrary to religious values because it is considered to damage the image of God inherent in humans. This view is in line with the argument put forward by Gulo & Batawi (2024), who stated that suicide reflects a disregard for divine dignity in the individual. A person with no concern or fear for God tends to ignore his body as a manifestation of His creation. Most of the motives behind committing suicide are feeling that they no longer have a purpose in life, so they choose shortcuts to resolve conflicts within themselves. This is in line with what was expressed by the participants. According to Yanti et al. (2023) religious values become a person's outlook and guide to life and make them a valuable creation of God. Participants also revealed that religion teaches that every human being has meaning when they enter the world and has their own role, including in facing the pressures of life, so that humans can realize that life is a gift from God. Every human being born into the world is a great pleasure from God.

Participants also expressed that life is a gift from God to humans to live, always care for themselves, and make it more meaningful. Every difficulty faced is part of a test that will bring goodness if it is lived with patience and gratitude.

Humans face life's problems with faith. According to Gea (2020), faith is an attitude of the heart and complete obedience to God in all situations. With faith, every individual can face challenges and struggles both from within and without. Individuals who believe and have a good understanding of God will not give up on facing life's challenges. A person will be successful in getting through the pressures of life depending on how they view these pressures (Rannu & Sari, 2023). If you view them positively, there will be a solution from God as expressed by the participants.

In the journey of human life, it is never free from the pressures of life. Humans will always encounter various kinds of pressures, such as demands of the future and not a few humans when they are in this phase find it very difficult to manage their feelings/psyche. According to Shafira et al. (2023), individuals who have difficulty and are unable to manage their emotions/psyche can cause individuals to experience severe stress that refers to depression and even suicidal behavior as when faced with demands of the future. Demands of the future are a factor of someone committing suicide, demands where someone must complete their studies within a specific period with a particular value, and compare the individual with individuals who are more established. Therefore, having a sense of concern for suicide survivors is very important. When someone survives a suicide attempt, they not only face physical and mental pain but also struggle against loneliness and shame from the surrounding environment. Therefore, this sense of concern reminds us as humans to be able to provide attention, support, and recovery. The feeling of concern is related to the affective component of Allport (2005), which focuses on feelings or emotions, which states that when we feel concerned about suicide survivors, this feeling will encourage someone to care and want to help them. This feeling of concern is also inseparable from the sympathy and empathy felt by the participants themselves when hearing or witnessing suicide directly. Sympathy makes participants feel sorry

for the suffering experienced by survivors and empathy also encourages participants not only to feel sorry, but to be able to understand the feelings of suicide survivors. Participants also admitted that the sympathy and empathy they received made the participant's hearts continue to be moved not only to feel sorry and understand the feelings of suicide survivors, but to have a caring attitude and provide assistance, namely direct support such as support from the mental aspect, namely providing individual counseling, providing education and praying for individuals.

Help and prayer are needed by survivors when they are at a low point. With this help, they can successfully survive the pain, even though the emotional wounds they feel have not fully recovered. Survivors often struggle with pain, loss of hope, and deep despair. On their journey to get back on their feet, support from those around them is very crucial, both emotionally and spiritually. This is related to the conative component of Allport (2005), namely how a person's attitude is to act in helping survivors where the form of service provided by religious leaders is counseling. Several participants stated that they had undergone counseling with the PFA (Psychological First Aid) approach for survivors by seeing what they needed then listening to each of their stories. Participants also connected survivors to various more professional parties to help. For survivors, PFA helps them manage their emotions and understand their feelings. This approach can be done by listening to participants without judging, providing a sense of security for them, and bringing them to professionals if necessary. According to Hannan et al. (2024), support can help survivors by making them feel loved and no longer alone, thereby reducing the risk of suicidal behavior.

In addition to the initial psychological support given to survivors, of course, motivation and education are provided, motivation such as the meaning of one's life even when facing life's challenges, because challenges are not to make someone even more depressed but to bring someone to a higher level of life and become a better and stronger person than before. Motivation plays a huge role in self-recovery and encourages individuals to achieve goals and quality of life that contribute to the

psychological and emotional well-being of survivors. They need to be given an understanding of the importance of having meaning and value in everyone's life. This is in line with what was stated by Mardiyah & Widodo (2024) namely, providing motivation can help individuals face the challenges of life that they experience, and providing motivation from someone personally can help find a way out when an individual experiences a problem so that it can be resolved.

Providing education for survivors such as mindfulness to trains their awareness of how to view and realize that every difficulty they face is part of a test from the creator that will bring goodness that restores and brings change into their lives so that the survivors will achieve spiritual well-being (Ulliya & Nurmenasari, 2022). Public education is also no less important, such as providing education about the importance of having a healthy mentality, positive thinking and also the community not being quick to judge survivors. Leaders also give supplies to the community on how to help survivors and prevent suicidal behavior. According to Veda et al. (2023), the community needs awareness of knowledge and understanding of mental health, with high knowledge and understanding the community can increase their tolerance towards people with mental disorders or problems. Furthermore, participants also expressed that places of worship have a huge role in fostering individuals by deepening moral values.

Conclusion

This research reveals that religious leaders in Kupang City have a deep and complex understanding of the phenomenon of suicide. They view that suicide is an act that is contrary to religious values and that pressures of life are a factor in causing suicide. And religious leaders also showed strong emotional reactions, such as feelings of concern for survivors. Furthermore, they show a willingness to take an active role in preventing suicide by providing spiritual, motivational, emotional, and educational support to increase public awareness about the importance of mental health.

Suggestions

a. For participants

Religious leaders need to learn several psychological techniques, such as PFA (Psychological First Aid) to help with suicide prevention interventions.

b. For further researchers

Further researchers need to develop psychological interventions and training techniques, such as basic psychological techniques for suicide prevention for religious leaders.

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