

Why white, older men are more likely to die of suicide

January 5 2016

In the United States, older men of European descent (so-called white men) have significantly higher suicide rates than any other demographic group. For example, their suicide rates are significantly higher than those of older men of African, Latino or Indigenous descent, as well as relative to older women across ethnicities.

Behind these facts there is a cultural story, not just individual journeys of psychological pain and despair. Colorado State University's Silvia Sara Canetto has spent a large portion of her research career seeking to uncover cultural stories of [suicide](#).

A professor in the College of Natural Sciences' Department of Psychology, Canetto adds a new chapter to that story in an article recently published in the journal *Men and Masculinities*. Among her findings are that older white men have higher [suicide rates](#), yet fewer burdens associated with aging. For example, they are less likely to experience widowhood and have better physical health and fewer disabilities than older women. They have more economic resources than ethnic minority [older men](#), and than [older women](#) across ethnicities.

White older men, however, may be less psychologically equipped to deal with the normal challenges of aging, likely because of their privilege up until late adulthood, Canetto asserts.

Scripts of masculinity

An important factor in white men's psychological brittleness and vulnerability to suicide once they reach late life, Canetto says, may be dominant scripts of masculinity, aging and suicide. Particularly pernicious for this group may be the belief that suicide is a masculine response to "the indignities of aging." This is a script that implicitly justifies, and even glorifies, suicide among men.

As illustrations, in her article Canetto examines two famous cases. Eastman Kodak founder George Eastman died of suicide in 1932, at [age 77](#). His biographer said Eastman was "unprepared and unwilling to face the indignities of old age." Writer Hunter S. Thompson, who killed himself in 2005 at age 67, was described by friends as having triumphed over "the indignities of aging." Both suicides were explained in the press through scripts of conventional "white" masculinity, Canetto asserts. "The dominant story was that their suicide was a rational, courageous, powerful choice."

New ways of understanding, preventing suicide

Canetto's research challenges the notion that high suicide rates are inevitable among white older men. As additional evidence that suicide in this population is culturally determined, and thus preventable, Canetto points out that older men are not the most suicide-prone group everywhere in the world. For example, in China, women of reproductive age are the [demographic group](#) with the highest suicide mortality.

Among the implications of Canetto's research is that attention to cultural scripts of suicide offers new ways of understanding and preventing suicide. As cultural stories, the "indignities of aging" suicide script as well as the belief that suicide is a white man's powerful response to aging can and should be challenged, and changed, she says.

More information: *Men and Masculinities*,

jmm.sagepub.com/content/early/.../84X15613832.abstract

Provided by Colorado State University

Citation: Why white, older men are more likely to die of suicide (2016, January 5) retrieved 9 April 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2016-01-white-older-men-die-suicide.html>

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