

## Dr. Birthe Loa Knizek

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Birthe Loa Knizek graduated in psychology from Aarhus University, Denmark. She holds a PhD from The Qualitative Methods Center, Psychology, Aarhus University, Denmark. She has worked with culture studies at Aarhus University and with psychology at Aalborg University in Denmark, but has since 1992 been employed at the Department of Psychology at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology in Trondheim, Norway. She there holds a position in community psychology and is responsible for an international Master's Study in human development. Her research interests were originally on psychosomatics and alexithymia, but since 1996 she has conducted research in the field of suicidology. Current interests in this field include theory development, attitudes towards suicidal behaviour and suicide prevention, cultural aspects of suicidal behaviour, methodological (qualitative) challenges as well as the intersection between morality/spirituality in suicidology. She also works clinically with children and adolescents.

### **“What do they say?”**

#### **Understanding suicidal behaviour in the framework of communication**

This year it is 50 years since Farberow and Shneidman advocated for perceiving suicidal behaviour as an act of communication. Furthermore, in 1967 Watzlawick pointed out “the impossibility of not communicating”. Suicidal behaviour thus can be perceived as a specific way of communicating something; as a communicative act. This perspective seems crucial as it is placed at the very intersection between the individual and his/her cultural context. The suicidal act thus cannot be seen isolated from the context where it occurs and the basis for an understanding of suicidal behaviour as communication is systemic. An act might look similar in different contexts, but it will have different communicative content and power dependent on the culture/systems where it occurs and affects others. Self-harm by a poor, young, newly wed female in the countryside in India might have different connotations for both herself and others compared to a similar act by a lonely, old man in Greenland. In order to understand and prevent suicidal behaviour it is crucial to focus on the phenomenon as an act *between* people and not only as something *in* a person. Through a systematic focus on suicidal behaviour as communication we can contribute to target our preventive efforts in general as well as get an individual platform to work with suicidal individuals.

In this plenary the focus will be on what kind of communication suicidal behaviour can be. The theoretical foundation is developed on the background of Qvortrup's pragmatic linguistic four-factor model (1999), which understands suicidal behaviour as different ways of relating to self or others. This will be discussed in relationship to cultural variation. Through this we can understand the individual's positioning in a dynamic system and obtain understanding of the central problems by systematic guided listening to the involved.