Living with Purpose versus Dying for Meaning: Application to Erik Erikson's Adolescent Stage of Development

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Abstract

This article contrasts developmental and clinical axes to the problem of the adolescent stage as developed by Erik Eriksin. We contrast biblical and Graeco-Roman narratives along a two-axis approach of human development to the problem of preventing suicide and promoting life across the lifespan, (i.e., individuation-Deindividuation and attachment-detachment). The present paper applies this approach to adolescence our two-axis view, in contrast, to Erikson, suggests that each stage is entered at the dystonic position (e.g. mistrust) and must be worked though vertically to achieve syntonicity (e.g. trust) necessary to move ahead successfully to the next advanced life stage.

Keywords: Psychology • Adolescent • Suicide • Clinical axes

Introduction

Successful development involves forward regression to the next life stage, (temporarily moving backward in position to move forward in stage). In contrast to this successful congruent developmental advance is potential suicidal crisis engendered by an incongruent resolution of the individuation-attachment challenge at each life stage. This is accentuated by premature pressures to force an individual ahead to a more advanced life-stage that he/she may not yet be able to cope with.

Literature Review

Suicides in Greek tragedy

In his highly original work, Suicide in Greek Tragedy [1], identifies some 16 suicides and self-mutilations among the 223 characters depicted in in the 26 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides yielding a suicide rate of 7.2% (Table 1). Applying Durkheim's typology, most of Sophocles' depicted suicides are egoistic (disconnected from others), while most of the suicides depicted by Euripides' are altruistic (enmeshed with others). Several of each is anomic (confused boundaries with others).

As can be seen in Table 1 suicide in Sophocles is ordinarily an active, aggressive self-murderous act (Ajax, Oedipus, Jocasta, Haemon, Eurydice, Deianeira), an act which expresses anger toward significant others and guilt over the breakdown of the idealized self. The self-destructive behavior of Heracles and Antigone are the only exceptions and tend to be more like the suicides depicted by Euripides. For Euripides, suicide (Alcestis, Polyxena, Evadne, Macaria, Iphigenia, and Menoeceus, all women except the last) is a more passive, acquiescing, self-sacrificial act, an act in which anticipation for and anxiety regarding the future is more conspicuous than anger over loss or guilt for past deeds [1].

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Whatever their motivation, four of Sophocles' eight suicides/self-destructive acts is male and can be classified as egoistic or anomic. Seven of Euripides's eight suicides/suicide threats are women and can be classified either as altruistic or anomic. One additional suicide occurs in the plays of the third great Greek tragedian, Aeschylus (Table 1).

In summary, Faber identifies some 16 suicides and self-mutilations among the 223 characters depicted in in the 26 surviving tragedies of Sophocles and Euripides yielding a suicide rate of 7.2% [1].

Suicides in the Hebrew bible

Table 2 applies Durkheim's terminology to the much smaller number in biblical narratives: Only 6 suicides can be found in the Hebrew scriptures. Three can be classified as egoistic (Ahitophel, Zimri and Abimelech) and three are altruistic (Saul. Saul's armor bearer and Samson). The important point here is the far fewer number of suicides in Hebrew scriptures.

Some 2,855 different people (2,730 men and 1125 women) are mentioned in the 39 books of the Hebrew scriptures spanning a period of 3,330 years (see Zfiffer, 2006). Only six are identified as completed suicides (Table 2), yielding an overall suicide rate of 6/2855 or 0.02%, including none by women. A huge chi-Square statistic emerges when we compare this biblical rate of 0.02 to the 7.2 % suicide rates in the 26 plays of Sophocles and Euripides (chi-Square=141.39 p<.001) (Table 2).

In addition, the Hebrew scriptures present six suicide-prevention narratives absent in Greek writing (Table 3).

Suicide preventions in the Hebrew bible

Three (Ahitophel, Zimri and Abimelech) can be classified as egoistic, one as altruistic (Saul's armor bearer) and two as covenantal, a category we have created as an indicant of a sense of one's duty to a Higher power (Samson and Saul). Let us examine the three egoistic suicides first. Ahitophel, a counselor of King David, has joined Absalom's rebellion against the king. However, when he realizes that Absalom has been tricked into following a foolhardy plan certain to lead to defeat, Ahitophel sets his house in order and strangles himself:" referred at 2 Sam. 17:23.

Zimri is also an egoistic suicide, with no obvious redeeming qualities. King Elah of Israel passes his days drinking in his palace while his warriors battle the Philistines. Zimri, a high-ranking officer, takes advantage of this situation, assassinates Elah, and mounts the throne. His reign, however, lasts only seven days. As soon as the news of King Elah's murder reaches the army on the battlefield, they pronounce General Omri to be king and lay siege to the palace. When Zimri sees that he is unable to hold out against the siege, he

sets fire to the palace and perishes in the flames: "And it came to pass, when Zimri saw that the city was taken that he went into the castle of the king's house, and burnt the king's house over him with fire, and he died" referred at 1 Kings. 16:18.

Abimelech's suicide is also egoistic. After carving out a principality for

Philistines. Faced with torture and death, Samson asked God for the strength to take as many Philistines with him as possible; when granted his request, he pulled down the central pillars of the temple of Dagon, killing thousands in one last blow: And Samson called to the Lord, saying, "O Lord God, remember me, I pray! Strengthen me, I pray, just this once."... And Samson took hold of the two middle pillars which supported the temple, and braced himself against them, one on his right and the other on his left. Then Samson said, "Let me die with the Philistines!" And he pushed with all his might and the temple fell on the lords and on all the people who were in it referred at Judg. 16:28–30.

A second covenantal suicide is that of King Saul. Rabbinic literature has regarded King Saul as a man of great stature, the anointed of the Lord. Yet, his reign was marked by series of mistakes, ending with his own suicide during a losing battle against the Philistines on Mount Gilboa. Saul has seen three of his sons and many of his fighters slain, and he himself is severely wounded. Surrounded by enemies and not wishing to be taken prisoner and exposed to the mockery and brutality of the Philistines, King Saul entreats his armor-bearer to kill him. The latter refuses, and Saul falls on his own sword: "Then

Table 5. Job against Zeno.

Stage	Zeno	Job
1. Precipitating stressor	Zeno the Stoic trips and stubs/breaks a toe on the way back from giving a lecture at the Stoa.	Job suddenly and unexpectedly loses his property, his children and his health
2. Reaction	Zeno interprets this as a sign from the gods he should depart.	Though Job complains, he maintains his innocence faith in God despite his misfortunes.
3. Response of others	No mention made of reaction of others	Job's friends tell him that he must be guilty, and his wife tells him to curse God and die.
4. Effect	Zeno immediately holds his breath until he dies.	Job steadfastly maintains his faith in God while proclaiming his innocence and he is restored.

Stage	Coriolanus	David
1. Precipitating stressor	Coriolanus, a Roman military hero, antagonizes his countrymen and is exiled from Rome.	

her. The box contained all the evils in the world, which fly out. Pandora closes the lid as quickly as she could, but too late; only hope remains locked in the box, and unavailable to people [41-50].

Hebrew scriptures portray a very different picture. In contrast to the Greek portrayal of Zeus as withholding fire from man, rabbinic sages portray the biblical God as teaching Adam after his expulsion from Eden how to exist in the dark world by making fire by rubbing together two flints God is portrayed as doing this because He is portrayed as having compassion for man referred at Babylonian Talmud, Midrash Genesis Rabbah 11:2) [51-60]. There is of course the biblical story of God sending a great flood in response to human wickedness. However, at the same time, the biblical God gives Noah a blueprint to build a saving ark [61-70]. After the great flood ceases albeit in response to man's wicked behavior, all living creatures, male and female come out from the ark built by Noah and repopulate the earth through their sexual union. God places a rainbow in the heavens as a sign of His covenant with man that he will not send another flood referred at Genesis 9: 13. The bow becomes the very symbol of hope [71-75].

Conclusion

Nowhere is this contrast more relevant than in the prevention of suicide. Biblical narratives provide a stopper to suicidal crises unavailable in the tragic Greek myths so ingrained in psycho-logical thinking. We had better be careful which humanities and humanians we pine for. In the biblical narratives, you can't lose for winning, while in classical narratives you can't win for losing… And lives are on the line! Ultimately our lives and those near and dear to us.

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