

Essay

## An Essay on Loss of Self versus Escape from Self in Suicide: Illustrative Cases from Diaries left by those who died by Suicide

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**Abstract:** Michael Chandler (1994) has described how suicide can result from a loss of a sense of self, while Roy Baumeister (1990) has described how suicide can be an attempt to escape from the self. Their published theories are presented in a very abstract manner, and the present essay presents examples from two individuals who died by suicide who expressed these themes in their diaries. Loss of a sense of self is illustrated by the diary of an 18-year-old, and escape from self is illustrated by the diary of a professor, both of whom died by suicide.

**Keywords:** Loss of Self, Suicide, Case Study

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It is difficult to understand why individuals take their own life. There are risk factors and warning signs, but none of these appear to be necessary or sufficient conditions for suicide to occur. In an effort to *understand* suicide rather than *explain* it, I have been fortunate to obtain the diaries of individuals who have died by suicide. For example, in one case, I recruited colleagues to read the diary of a young woman who died by suicide and to present their insights gained from the diary (Lester, 2004). I have found that diaries provide a rich source of

information about the person that goes far beyond the brief suicide notes that some leave.

The present essay was stimulated by two competing ideas, namely that suicide can result from a loss of self or as an escape from the self, and I realized that two of the diaries in my possession illustrated these two themes. The articles (by Michael Chandler [1994] and by Roy Baumeister [1990]) describing these two themes present the ideas in a very abstract manner, and the reader is left wondering how the themes manifest themselves in suicidal people. The following cases provide concrete examples of these abstract ideas.

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### Loss of Self

In a series of essays, Chandler has proposed that suicide, especially in adolescents, can occur as a result of the loss of self (Chandler, 1994; Ball &

Chandler, 1989; Chandler & Proulx, 2006). At the most abstract level, Chandler noted that, when self-organizing systems try to restructure themselves, typically as an upgrade to a higher and more differentiated level or organization, there can be a system failure. The individuals find themselves bereft of their previous construction of their self as persistent and continuous through time. They lose ownership of their past and any commitment to their own future. At that point, self-destructive behavior loses personal significance and becomes more available as a solution to current problems. If one is stripped of a persistent sense of identity, then one has no investment in one's future well-being.

Chandler noted two tasks involved in achieving a stable sense to selfhood. First, from a cross-sectional perspective, one task is to understand how the different competing facets of oneself that are often in conflict, are part of a "unified self." Second, the sequential dimension requires that one view the current self as a development of previous selves so that one has a sense of continuity over time.

Chandler described five possibilities:

1. For the pre-adolescent, the self is viewed as a figural collection of mosaic of parts, and change is discounted. The events in one life are seen as isolated, and the person turns a blind eye to change.
2. For the 12-16 year-old, the self is viewed a multifaceted topologic structure, and change is denied. There may be a good side and a bad side to the individual, or a shy side and a more forward side, but any conflict here is denied.
3. Later, the person adopts the view that there is an essential unchanging core to the self, and change is trivialized or finessed. However, this core self may be viewed as unknowable and comes to be treated as a "kind of indwelling spirit or ghost in the machine" (p. 382).
4. Then, functional and narrative strategies stitch together the multiple episodes of one's life (p. 382). In this functional strategy, the individual realizes that earlier events caused the present state. In the narrative strategy, the person re-reads and re-edits the past in the light of present circumstances. Both of these provide a sense of continuity for the self over time.
5. The self is regarded as a theoretical construct - like the center of gravity. One's self is an autobiographical story in which one is the actor.

There are three problems that can arise in this development. (i) Movement from one stage to the next can be delayed or the person can become

fixated at one stage. (ii) Regression from a later stage to an earlier stage can occur. (iii) The person may be "thrown into a complete structural tail spin, or otherwise [suffer] a kind of total systems "crash" that left them without any kind of workable means for preserving a sense of identity in the face of change" (p. 383-384).

Suicide becomes an option, according to Chandler, when individuals have lost a sense of connectedness to their own futures. In this state and when confronted with hardships that make life seem intolerable, suicide becomes a possibility.

In a study of 40 hospitalized adolescent psychiatric patients and 41 non-patient controls, Chandler found that all of the controls functioned with one of the five levels of self-continuity described above, and none had no sense of self-continuity.<sup>1</sup> In contrast, 13% of the psychiatric patients at low risk of suicide had no sense of self-continuity and 82% of those at high risk of suicide had no sense of continuity.

Chandler did not provide a case study of suicide in this state of mind. The following case is based on the diary of a young man, 18 years old, who died by suicide.<sup>2</sup> Alan had a history of depression, starting when he was twelve years old. In high school, he used drugs and he engaged in casual sex. He had a network of friends who had a similar life style. In the days before he died, there were two stressors in his life. An attempt to move out from his parents' home into an apartment looked increasingly unlikely, and he was anticipating problems from a suspected burglary that he may have been involved in. Alan wrote a brief journal in the last five months of his life, with seven entries. The following are abstracts that illustrate his feeling of loss of self.

4-27

*Well, since I know I'll forget my whole existence in a year, I will give a brief update on my life at this point in time. My life is a haze of pot smoke, fights with my parents, school, and some crazy things I've been up to. Happy one day, despairing the next. I'm high 90% of the time I'm awake. Now including ... I hate a lot, I love a lot, I'm suicidal. I'm happy. I'm fighting myself. I can't think clearly.*

4-30

*My life seems like the lyrics to a DMX song. "I'm slipping, I'm falling, I can't get up, get me back on*

<sup>1</sup> This was assessed using structured interviews concerning how fictional characters went on being themselves despite dramatic changes in their lives, followed by questions about their own continuity in life.

<sup>2</sup> I am indebted to Alan's parents for sharing his diary with me and allowing me to use it in my scholarly work.

*my feet so I can tear shit up.”... I’ve been thinking a lot about my destiny. Is it even there? ... I’ve decided that I will take walks more now. To think. I never get to think. Things can be a lot easier and smoother if you give yourself time to think. I want to be able to think clearly. I want a clearer level of consciousness. Maybe one day. I need sleep. Sleep.*

5-30

*One month later. ... I’m depressed. Confused. Hopeless, maybe I’ll end it all. Sometimes I wonder what keeps me alive.*

8-12

*Depression sets in, slowly, subtle fog that creeps up when I already cannot see, wraps around me, constricts, consumes, leaves me bare. I almost lost my job. I still cannot get my act together ... Not enough of me exists or works right for me to rely on myself completely ... I am growing my hair out. I think long hair means something. It conveys depth of soul. I took a walk tonight in the bad air and the darkness and I looked all around me. North, East, South, Southwest to where my past life was, west. And I see the trees silhouette against the gray and blue night sky, black twisted groping masses just existing. And I thought, what is all this? I have – yet to find the answer, Rain, RAIN!!! Wash me down! Take me with you! Let me drown. My body and mind desire rest so why do I live? WHY THE FUCK DO I LIVE? The force that keeps me alive will soon seduce me. Separate me, make me live joyously, only to be brought together. Brought down again and revealed ... I would like to change this distress. End this slow, changing madness Kill this pressing, living pain, this returning deadly insight. Or do I. Can I. Will I. Not now though.*

8-23

*The latest big thing has been the apt. Instead of going in - on it with Sara; I’m going in on it with TK ... Can’t wait. So many uncertainties though. Money is our main problem. But as of now we seem to have it covered. Will all these major changes make me a different person?*

9-26

*I am writing this to clear some things up and possibly make some things easier. I have decided to kill myself. My life has led to a dead end. I can only be tied to the mast for so long, and instead of ending, the storm has just gotten worse. I had a lot to look forward to, but what I have or had to dread was far, far more. There is no one to blame, because this destructive element that I possess has been with me and growing since the beginning*

*of my existence. ... Now it’s four days before the 3rd and last deadline I have for moving out of my parent’s house. And I will accomplish this and meet the deadline. But I am scared. I am scared to leave and I am not sure that I have the strength of mind and body to do this. I don’t know what’s happening to me. Except that there is no other option.*

There is a lack of temporal continuity and competing selves (Lester, 2010). *Happy one day, despairing the next ... I’m fighting myself.* There is a sense that his existence is fragile. *I’m slipping, I’m falling, I can’t get up, get me back on my feet so I can tear shit up ... Not enough of me exists or works right for me to rely on myself completely.* There is doubt about an existence in the future. *I’ve been thinking a lot about my destiny. Is it even there?* There is a search to be a new person. *Will all these major changes make me a different person?*

Chandler noted that this loss of self can arise as an individual moves from one stage to another in the search for selfhood and when, at the same time, they are facing stressors. Clearly there are other suicidal risk factors here, including depression, hopelessness, and psychological pain (psychache [Shneidman, 1996]), but Alan illustrates the role of a loss of self as proposed by Chandler.

### Escape from Self

The proposal that some suicides engage in self-destructive behavior to escape from their self was formulated most clearly by Baumeister (1990). Baumeister noted that the idea of suicide as an escape had been formulated by others. Baechler (1979) proposed a taxonomy of suicide types which included flight-escape as one type. Indeed, we might note that, many years earlier, Menninger (1938) proposed escape (“to die”) as one of the three motivations for suicide.<sup>3</sup> Reynolds and Berman (1995) examined ten typologies that had been proposed for suicide and had judges classify 404 suicides into these typologies. Twenty-eight percent fell into Menninger’s to die type and 64% into Baechler’s escapist type. Reynolds and Berman carried out a cluster analysis to see how many clusters of suicide types could be identified, and they found five. The escape cluster included 90 of the 404 cases (22%). This cluster included Menninger’s (1938) wish to die, Henderson and Williams’s (1978) avoidance factor, Baechler’s (1979) escapist type, Shneidman’s (1968) harm avoidance type and Mintz’s (1968) desire to escape from real or anticipated pain type.

<sup>3</sup> The others were to kill (anger) and to be killed (depression).

Baumeister proposed a formal description of this type, providing six main steps.

1. There is a severe experience that current outcomes fall below the standards one has set for oneself (realistic or not).
2. This setback is attributed to one's own failure so that one blames oneself.
3. An aversive state of self-awareness, seeing oneself as inadequate, incompetent, unattractive or guilty.
4. Negative emotions develop from this awareness.
5. The person tries to escape, unsuccessfully, from meaningful thought into a relatively numb state of cognitive deconstruction.
6. Inhibitions are reduced increasing the ability to engage in suicidal behavior.

There are several cognitive-affective processes that can create a state of mind from which people desire to escape, including perfectionism and shame. The following case is a professor, newly hired by a good university in the mid-west in the 1930s. He suffered from chronic anxiety and began psychoanalytic psychotherapy. Unfortunately, this led to the conviction that he was recapitulating his Oedipal complex (competing with his brother for the love of his mother) with his wife (competing with his son for the love of his wife) and with his academic department (competing for the admiration of the department chairperson with his fellow faculty members). This was a frequent obsession in his diary.

*In other words, I was never mother-weaned. I am fixated at an early stage of development. And I continue to react in infantile ways based on infantile emotions ... I don't want to, but I am going to force myself to say that today I felt ugly and dirty and ashamed. Recognizing, or beginning to recognize my incest (I can't even write it right) tendencies brings down on my Ego the Super-ego wrath (i.e., feelings of dirtiness, filth, scumminess, unworthiness...)*

*... I can never really please her [his wife] really, that she sneers at me behind my back, that she views me as a feminine and weak and helpless character, that she laughs when I fail, and laughs when I succeed because she thinks I'm kidding about my successes, that "again" she tolerates me, that she is "putting up" with me 'til something better comes along, that I'm no good really and I can't prove to her (or anyone else) that I am, that I'm a poor schnook in her eyes, that I'm to be pitied ...*

Equally important to understanding his mental state was his conviction that he was a fraud and did not deserve any of the accolades that he received. He expected, at any moment, to be exposed as an incompetent – by his students and by those who listened to his presentations at conferences. When he gives a talk at a conference that is received well by his audience, he is reassured, but only temporarily.

*This experience has left me with less of the feeling that I am a useless cog in society, that I don't count, that no one cares what I do, that my actions are fruitless, that I'm stupid and incapable, that I should have entered another profession, that my case is hopeless... that I'm not a blot on the societal world, a misfit, a cancer, a sponger, a misnomer, etc... If you tell me in whatever way that I am not worthless, you are fooling me – you are kidding – you don't really mean it.*

*... I was brought to [the university] as a joke ... A great joke, he's nothing but a small town jerk. And it's time he found it out.*

Paranoid distrust of his wife and his colleagues often appears in his thinking.

*... she wants intercourse, she wants me to kowtow, to take advantage of me, so that she can laugh behind my back at my ineptitude ... And, best of all, she wants to humiliate me, to make me appear ridiculous ... And so I'll have to be circumspect and very careful – else ... she will report my ludicrous behavior to "him" – others – and they will have gay sport over it.*

In the final entry, he reports that he is still having panic attacks and that he has a foreboding that disaster is just around the corner. He is afraid of his wife and his colleagues. He is spending hours in bed, smoking, and drinking. He mentions that he is on his fourth quart at the time of writing this entry. He looks at his hands, and the last words in his diary are:

*They are currently non-productive. This is just about as discouraging to me as my "idea" mal-productions! Ambition is present – with no real outlet. Please give me, guide me to the outlet!!!*

He killed himself six weeks later.

His diary expresses powerfully the psychological torment he was experiencing, almost continually throughout the 76 entries spread over the five years of the diary. Psychotherapy and, eventually, medication did little if anything to ameliorate this torment. He experienced feelings of

*dirty, filthy, scummy, unworthiness* and viewed himself as a *misfit, a cancer, a sponger*. There was nothing about his self that he could admire or even like. Suicide provided an escape from this self. As with Alan, his psychache (Shneidman, 1996) was intense.

### Comment

Theories of suicide are typically phrased in abstract terms, and the interpretation of the motives of individual cases often relies on the personal opinions of the clinician. It is rare to find diaries left by those who died by suicide, but these diaries enable us to see the individuals in their own eyes. What is going through their minds as they get closer to the point at which they will take their own lives? The two diaries that are the basis for the present essay illustrate the role that the self can play in the decision to die by suicide. Michael Chandler focused on the loss of self in adolescents while Roy Baumeister focused on the desire to escape from the self. Although a complete understanding of the two individuals presented here requires a more complex analysis than the presence of single themes, their diaries illustrate the role that loss of self and escape from self played in their decisions.

An argument could be made that Alan, the 18-year-old discussed as illustrating loss of self, might also have chosen to die by suicide to escape from a painful self-awareness. Motives for suicide may not always (or even usually) be one versus another. There may be several motives involved. For example, as noted above, Menninger (1938) described three motives for suicide: (i) to die (escape), (ii) to kill (anger directed outwards), and (iii) to be killed (depression, guilt and self-punishment). Studies of suicide notes typically find two or more of these motives in any single note. Thus, Alan's suicide may be construed in more than one way. However, Alan clearly shows a loss of a sense of self as proposed by Chandler.

A study such as this has the limitation of all case studies in that the individuals may not be representative of suicides in general or even a subgroup of suicidal individuals. Samples of suicide diaries are much more difficult to collect than, for example, suicide notes and psychological autopsies of those who have died by suicide. I have collected only three unpublished diaries and four published diaries so far in my research. In contrast, I have published analyses of a sample of 261 suicide notes. However, analyses of diaries may provide hypothesis for future

quantitative research and, as argued here, may illustrate the ideas proposed in abstract theories. If the collection of diaries produces a sufficient number, it may become possible to apply historiometric techniques of analysis as Simonton has done for the study of geniuses (Simonton, 1984).

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