

Book Review

A review of Suicide and Agency: Anthropological Perspectives on Self-Destruction, Personhood, and Power

Edited by Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster. Abingdon and New York, NY: Routledge, 2016.
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In this volume, Ludek Broz and Daniel Münster have gathered a series of challenging and insightful chapters that complement recent calls for more attention to be paid by suicidologists to the local context in which suicidal acts take place (White et al., 2016). The volume takes as its starting point a critical view of ‘the powerful and widespread clinical conceptualization of suicide, which presents it as a pathological and individual act, committed with willful intent, full consciousness and unambiguous authorship, whose default subject is arguably a “Western,” male, white, middle-class human’ (p. 3), and its chapters serve as case studies that usefully critique this conceptualization. The editors aim to ‘use ethnography to interrogate the boundaries of the category of suicide itself and to make important points about the discursive uses of suicide in everyday life’ (p. 9).

The historical and social contingency of suicide has been recognized for some time by historians, anthropologists, and critical theorists (see, e.g., Marsh, 2010; Weaver & Wright, 2009). It is this contingency and its ‘diagnostic potential’ that interests Broz and Münster (pp. 6–7), and each of the chapters in this volume use suicide as a lens through which to better understand the social, political, and ontological milieux in which it occurs.

There are a number of themes that consistently appear throughout this volume. Apart from discussions of the clear local, historical, and social contingency of suicide *per se*, one of the most notable of these themes is the ‘tension of agency’. In a Western context this tension is apparent in definitions of suicide such as ‘intentional self-harm’ or as an ‘act’, which are grounded in intentionality, and the psychiatric/scientific and quantitative sociological discourses that seek to explain suicidal behavior by placing its cause outside the agent. Agency is thus simultaneously granted and taken away (pp. 11–14). Beatriz Reyes-Foster (chap. 4) and Broz (chap. 5) find this tension of agency echoed in

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Yukatecan and Siberian contexts. In her chapter, Reyes-Foster argues that the Western 'biomedical model' is readily adaptable to a Yukatecan 'model of health based on equilibrium in time and space' 'in great part [because of] the inherent contradictions in both systems that simultaneously attribute agency and take it away' (p. 69).

In the Ulagan region of the Altai Republic in southwest Siberia, Broz finds that 'soul-double loss' accounts for a loss of agency on the part of the suicidal person. In this construct, where the human person is understood as multiple rather than individual, and where a person may have up to seven different kinds of soul (p. 89), 'soul-double loss can lead to accidents, illness, murders, and indeed suicides' (p. 90). However, the multiplicity of the person and one's relationship with other souls may also serve to prevent premature death. This may happen through, for example, the exchange of one soul with another, in which case a domestic animal might die instead of its master or mistress (pp. 91–93). Broz observes that while the loss of a soul-double may be the fault of the victim, it is not possible to definitively ascribe agency and there is therefore no moral condemnation attributed to acts of suicide in Ulagan (pp. 97–99).

The notion of the multiplicity of the human person is another theme that finds expression throughout this volume. In their introduction, Broz and Münster observe that, while the non-Western, 'dividual', person is often contrasted with the Western 'individual', anthropologists have argued that the latter is 'equally "joined-up," distributed, and relational' (p. 15). James Staples (chap. 2) cautions that the former may also be unduly simplistic, citing multiple examples of the non-Western individual (p. 28). Staples, Janne Flora (chap. 3), Reyes-Foster, Broz, Jocelyn Chua (chap. 8), and Katrina Jaworski (chap. 10) all explore the concepts of dividuality and relationality to some extent. Each of their studies provides critical insights into the importance of understanding agency as 'the socioculturally mediated capacity to act' (pp. 37, 68n3, 73, 79, quoting Laura Ahearn). They read suicide as performative – as Jaworski puts it, 'suicide materializes on the basis of ... particular rituals and

corporeal gestures that bring into existence the taking of one's life' (p. 187). Of course, these rituals and gestures are given meaning through the epistemological and ontological contexts in which they take place. Thus, the diagnostic potential of suicide cannot be realized without paying attention to local epistemologies, ontologies, and the relations through which people understand themselves, each other, and their place in the world.

This point is clearly borne out by Flora's exploration of suicide and *qivittut* in northwest Greenland. A *qivittoq*, Flora explains, is 'an irreversibly angered or disappointed person, usually male, [who turns] his back on society and permanently walk[s] into the wilderness' (p. 47). 'As a *qivittoq*, he would have lost his name(s), a key marker of human and social personhood, ... [and] will live an unnaturally long ... life in permanent and extreme loneliness' (p. 48). In Greenland, 'almost every person is a partial reincarnation of at least one dead relative or community member, and every dead person, including those who die by suicide can thus usually expect to return' (p. 48). Naming practices are used to identify who it is that has returned, and kinship terminology is used to re-invoke relationships with that person (pp. 56–60). In a society where naming practices are so critical not only to one's individual identity but also to one's relational identity with others, and where a deceased person's presence might be re-invoked through the use of their name, Flora suggests that the loss of one's name(s) renders a *qivittoq* 'a hyper-suicide, much more than a suicide is a suicide, as it is the *qivittoq* who marks the threshold between reversible and irreversible forms of loneliness and absence, and not the suicide' (p. 63).

A third theme that receives significant attention throughout this volume is the notion of power. Münster (chap. 6), Deen Sharp and Natalia Linos (chap.7), Chua, Tom Widger (chap. 9), and Jaworski all explore power and suicide, examining questions of, for example, responsibility and resistance in the context of suicide. In the South Indian context, Staples, Münster, and Chua all point to the globalizing, neoliberal influence on South Indian society, to the shift in power relations that this

entails, and to the role suicidality might play in the context of this shift. In this sense, they each explore, to some extent, the idea of suicide as a form of political communication or resistance. As Reynolds (2016) observes, suicidal acts performed in desperation or in acutely political contexts need to be considered accordingly. If they are not, one risks '[missing] entirely the mark of the [individuals]' autonomy, courage, resistance, and intelligence' (Reynolds, 2016, p. 173). In like vein, Sharp and Linos' exploration of suicide attacks in Palestine considers the agentic nature of these actions, and the possibility that these acts 'carry potent political, social, and spatial messages' (p. 127): 'by conducting suicide attacks in public spaces Palestinians may be employing the polluting power of their bodies in an attempt to disrupt the space of occupation' (p. 134). Of course, power is multiple, and, as Sharp and Linos observe, 'Palestinian agency cannot be considered free from the occupation even in the utilization of agency against the sovereign power' (p. 142).

The themes of the tension of agency, the multiplicity of the human person, and power that find expression throughout this volume highlight the importance of social, political, and ontological milieux in considerations of suicide, and admirably

demonstrate the diagnostic potential that Broz and Münster flag in the introduction. Nevertheless, as Marilyn Strathern observes in the afterword, 'psychiatric and [quantitative] sociological arguments go on being made precisely because, however much one demonstrates that there is no human life that exists in isolation, no self that is not a reflection of other selves, no relative that is not in turn a relative, these realizations do not – outside of the enigma of kinship – furnish a self-contained discourse. They do not provide general discourse with a self-evident language to compel action or reflection' (pp. 207–208). Individually, the chapters collected here offer a counter to mainstream arguments and help to illumine local discourses through which suicidal behavior occurs. In so doing, they provide valuable insights that theorists, policy makers, and activists might consider in their suicide prevention practice. Collectively, these chapters serve as a call to be 'open to suicide as a "cultural production" ... not just to appreciate the place of suicide in social life but the dimensions of social life it in turn illuminates' (p. 211). They are thoughtfully collated and curated, and the volume as a whole is well-edited and comprises a valuable contribution to the field.

References

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