

Essay

Suicide and our SubSelves: Understanding Celebrity Suicides

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Abstract: This note proposes that a subself theory of the mind can help us understand the seemingly puzzling suicides of apparently happy and successful celebrities such as the recent suicides of Kate Spade (fashion designer) and Anthony Bourdain (CNN reporter). The public sees the façade self that these celebrities present to the world, and to their “friends,” but we rarely, if ever, see the other subselves that constitute their mind.

Keywords: façade self, celebrity suicides, subselves

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Recent cases of suicide by famous people (Kate Spade, fashion designer, and Anthony Bourdain, CNN reporter) have led many commentators to contrast the public persona (façade selves) of these individuals with their unexpected suicide. In public, they seem happy and successful, and this makes their suicides appear to be inexplicable. Lester (2010, 2015) proposed a subself theory of personality (or a multiple self theory of personality) which is relevant to these suicides and makes them less puzzling.

Some people, at some points in their lives, say that they need to take some time “to find themselves.” This means that, along the way, they lost the sense of who they really *are*, which implies that they do not like or accept who they *are*. In a recent essay Lester (2013) wrote on the motivations for suicide and discussed suicide resulting from *loss of self*. Lester quoted from the diary of a young man who killed himself who wrote: “Not enough of me exists or works right for me right now.” His existence felt fragile to him: “I’m slipping. I’m falling.”

Palmer (1972) proposed a theory of suicide based on the tension between the roles that we have. Palmer’s concept of tension is relevant to our subselves, for we have different subselves in operation in our different roles. There is often tension between the many internalized roles that we


have, and the ideal is to have just the right amount of tension. If the tension is too little, and people perceive little interference between the roles, they begin to feel an inexplicable and severe frustration. The lack of tension seems as if the personality is disintegrated, and the personality collapses. This is made worse if people have fewer roles, for then there will be less interference.

When inner tension grows very low, the foundations of inner belief are drastically shaken. That seeming inner peace and harmony which the individual has held as an ideal, turn out in practice to be extremely disturbing. If tension in the inner system has been consistently low, the individual suffers continually a collapsed internal state, an inner nothingness.

(Palmer, 1972, pp. 127-128)

This state increases the risk of suicide.

Lester (2013) also discussed suicide as an *escape from the self*, an idea proposed by Baumeister (1990). Lester quoted from the diary of a man in his 30s who died by suicide and who earlier had written: “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’m not a blot on the societal world, a misfit, a cancer, a sponger, a misnomer...” Although that experience seems to have helped a little, he did not live much longer. Other experiences confirmed to him that he

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was a misfit and a cancer, and his death by suicide allowed him to escape from his mental pain.

Apart from those who have lost their self and those who want to escape from their self, most people believe subjectively that there is a “real me,” a core self that is partially hidden by the façade selves that we erect in different social situations. In viewing the suicides of Kate Spade and Anthony Bourdain, it seems that commentators have taken the façade self to be the real self.

Individuals present various images on a daily basis as a result of the different roles and corresponding functions that they perform. We are used to switching from one subself to another and choosing a subself to fit the occasion. In modern times, the popularity of online activities such as *Twitter* and *Facebook* have allowed people to craft the narrative of their lives and to present themselves to friends and family, and to the world, in a particular light. This fits a popular television message – “Image is everything.”

This may be true even of suicide notes. Yang and Lester (2011) noted that, typically, suicide notes are viewed as providing insights into the psychodynamics of the suicidal individual. Yang and Lester proposed, in contrast, that some suicidal individuals use their suicide note to present a picture of themselves that they want others to remember. Suicide notes may sometimes present a façade self rather than a real self.

Lester and George (2000) suggested that there may be individuals who are driven to take their own lives while wishing that they were free of this desire. Their first-order preference is to die by suicide, but their second-order preference is to choose life over death. The converse could also be true - individuals who choose to live but who wish that they were the kind of person who could die by suicide. A subself theory of the mind provides a way of resolving this conflict, for example, by permitting each subself to have executive power (be in control of the mind) for some periods of time and in some settings. It is possible, therefore, that the person may choose to die by suicide when the subself with the first-order preference (to die by suicide) is in control of the mind.

The notion of two selves that arises in discussions of the issues of “why can’t I do what I truly want to do?” and in self-deception (which appears to involve two selves, the subject and the object of deception) is also relevant to suicide. As Petrov (2013) has noted, suicide implies a similar duality, a dissociation between the one who performs the act and the one who is affected by it. Petrov noted that St. Augustine viewed the suicide of Lucretia (who had been raped by the son of an Etruscan king) as the guilty Lucretia killing the innocent Lucretia. In psychoanalytic

theory, the suicide is killing an introjected object rather than the self, a murder of the “hated other.” Suicide is sometimes referred to as self-murder, *felo de se* (a felony of oneself) and, in German, *selbstmord* (or *selbstmörder* [self-murder]), and the word *suicide* contains this duality (sui-cide).

Subselves and Psychotherapy

The proposal of that each individual’s mind is composed two (or more) subselves has been used in psychotherapy for suicidal individuals. For example, in a case reported by Goulding and Goulding (1978) of a psychiatrist who had made several suicide attempts, they asked him in one session to split his self into two parts. In one chair he played the subself that has not allowed him to kill himself in the past - the part of him (subself) that did not take quite enough pills, that allowed him to be found, and that survived after his heart stopped beating. In the other chair he put the other subself - the one that wanted to die. He then created a dialogue between the two parts of himself.

I will not let you kill me. I want to be alive and stay alive. I will not let you kill me.

I hear you; you really want to live, don’t you. I won’t kill you. I won’t kill myself.

I am the most powerful part of me and I will not let anything happen to me that ends in my death.

(Goulding & Goulding, 1978, pp. 181-182).

Firestone (1986) presented clinical evidence that suicidal people are often tortured by thoughts or “voices” which degrade and criticize the self. These thoughts can grow in intensity until they take precedence over the normal rational thoughts. Suicide is the result of acting upon these negative thoughts. Firestone’s concept of inner voices can easily be construed as thoughts coming from another subself. Firestone (2004) discussed how voice therapy could have helped a young woman who committed suicide at the age of 21, leaving a diary covering the final year of her life.

Katie had been sexually abused by her alcoholic father. After he left the home, her mother became psychotic, and Katie and her younger sister were placed separately in a series of foster homes. Katie developed an eating disorder which had required hospitalization on several occasions. At college, Katie had a boy-friend, but her relationship with him raised many problems for her. In a hypothetical therapy session, Firestone speculated how Katie could have helped to explore her inner voice and to shout the words out loud.

Therapist: It sounds like you have a lot of negative thoughts about yourself. Try saying that again. "I'm a pig and a weak person and I don't deserve anything good" – only this time, say it as if another person was saying it to you about you.....

Katie: (Louder voice) "What is wrong with you? You can't even stick to a diet for one week. You should starve yourself! Eat nothing, you don't deserve anything. You're a loser! Not worth ANYTHING! (screaming) No one is ever going to care about you. (cries deeply, for a long time) (Firestone, 2004, pp. 180-181).

Katie realizes that her mother said similar things to her, and then, in this hypothetical therapy session, Katie says:

Katie: It's like there's this other person living inside my head. Sometimes it feels like Mom, sometimes though it's like my Dad. Maybe it's both of them, ganged up, trying to kill me.

(Firestone, 2004, p. 182)

Discussion

We are often surprised when a seemingly happy and successful celebrity chooses to die by suicide. From the perspective of a subself theory of the mind, we have taken one subself of the person (a façade self) to be the whole person.

A subself theory of the mind reminds us to be aware that the individual may have many subselves and that the façade self we see in the media may be adopted for a role that the person plays in public. In his obituary for Anthony Bourdain, Redzepi (2018) noted that "Everyone felt like they knew him." Of course not. The Bourdain that Redzepi and others felt that they knew was simply one façade self that Bourdain presented to them.

The person may have many different roles in different situations and, therefore, many other subselves that accompany these roles. Anon (2018), in an obituary in *The Economist*, noted that Bourdain rose from dishwasher in restaurants to head chef. As head chef, he was frenetic, chewing aspirins continually. As a teenager, he "dropped acid," later for seven years he used heroin and, after he stopped using heroin, he took to cocaine. The façade selves that Bourdain presented were different on acid, on heroin and on cocaine. He had several marriages and a child, and the façade selves he presented to these individuals were, in all likelihood, different from one another. We must remember that people are complex.

However, it is the subself that has executive power over the mind when the person is *alone* that may be the subself that is at high risk for suicide, and this is the subself that we, and even counselors, never get to witness.

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