

Essay

A Two-Self Theory of Suicide and Implications for Counseling Suicidal Clients

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Abstract: Building upon the ideas of Brian Mishara's two tendency model of suicide and Bijou Yang Lester's two component model of decision making, a two-self model of suicide is presented, involving a suicidal self and a nonsuicidal self interacting with each other. A series of postulates and corollaries are presented, along with implications for counseling.

Keywords: subselves; counseling; suicidal clients

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Mishara (1996) proposed the existence of two basic tendencies that vary over time: (i) a suicidal tendency D and (ii) a life tendency L. It could be, of course, that these two tendencies are merely opposite ends of a single dimension, but Mishara opted to view them as two separate tendencies¹. These two tendencies can influence each other through a process of mutual inhibition, and this inhibition can be weak, moderate or strong. There are many experiences that can influence D, the suicidal tendency, such as loss of a partner or a diagnosis of a terminal disease, and there are also many experiences that can affect L, the life tendency, such as falling in love or achieving a goal.

Bijou Yang Lester (2011), a behavioral economist, was interested in explaining the choices made by individuals. She proposed that choices are determined by a two-process model, in which the individual's behavior is affected by a rational component and an irrational component. She noted that one can behave rationally or irrationally. However, when one behaves rationally, there may be irrational components, and, when one behaves

irrationally, there may be rational components. Yang Lester gave the example of credit card use. Carrying a zero balance and getting the cash bonus is rational behavior with a rational component. Carrying a non-zero balance but getting the cash bonus is irrational behavior with a rational component. Having a zero balance but no cash bonus is rational behavior with an irrational component. Carrying a non-zero balance and getting no cash bonus is irrational behavior with an irrational component. Consider an adolescent wrist-cutter. Karl Menninger (1938) would view the wrist-cutting as motivated by an unconscious suicidal impulse. In Yang Lester's model applied to this behavior, the adolescent is behaving rationally by choosing to live, but with an irrational element (self-mutilation).

When individuals plan and stage their suicidal action, they have to make many choices, choices which will affect the likelihood of dying from the method chosen and the likelihood of others intervening and saving the individual (Lester & Stack, 2015). For example, an individual planning suicide using an overdose can choose to take the overdose at home or in a motel away from home, and they can also vary the time of the evening and night when they consume the overdose, decisions that affect the

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¹ There is a parallel here, of course, with Freud's life and death instincts – Eros and Thanatos (Tabachnick & Klugman, 1067).

chances of someone intervening to prevent the suicide. Some of these choices may be more rational than others or, in the present context, have rational and irrational components. For example, taking a lethal overdose (rational for dying by suicide) at home when other residents are likely to arrive home soon (irrational for dying by suicide) has both components.

Yang Lester noted that two process models (and, we might add, two tendency models) have some similarity to two-self models of the mind. In these models, there seem to be two (or more) subelves arguing with each other, struggling to make sense of the situation, and arriving at a decision. Lester (2015) has proposed a subself theory of the mind in which he proposed that the mind is made up of two or more subelves (or subpersonalities). He proposed a theory phrased in terms of a set of 16 formal postulates accompanied by 38 corollaries. He chose this formal form of presentation in order to make the model explicit and empirically testable. Lester did not apply his subself model of the mind to suicide, and the present paper takes some of his postulates and corollaries that seem relevant to a two-self model of suicide and examines their implications for understanding suicide.

There are many theorists who have proposed versions of a subself theory of the mind. For example, Carl Jung (1971) proposed the existence of complexes in the psyche, Eric Berne (1962) proposed ego states, while Abraham Maslow (1970) proposed syndromes.

Therefore, in the following sections, a series of postulates about a two-self theory of suicide will be proposed. In addition, some of the postulates will have accompanying corollaries². First, the question of what is a subself must be answered. For present purposes a subself is defined as a coherent system of thoughts, desires and emotions, organized by a system principle. For this theory of suicide, it is assumed that there are two subelves, a suicidal subself and a non-suicidal subself.

Is a Two-Self Mind Universal?

Postulate 1:

Not every individual has both a suicidal subself and a nonsuicidal subself.

Although the present theory is a two self-theory, we must acknowledge that some individuals may never have a suicidal self while others may never have had a nonsuicidal self. It should be noted in passing that some theorists assert that we do not have any subelves. As Baumeister (1998, p. 682) stated, "The

multiplicity of selfhood is a metaphor. The unit of selfhood is a defining fact." I believe Baumeister to be wrong in this.

Executive Control

Postulate 2:

At any point in time, one subself is in control of the mind. It may be said to have executive power.

Corollary 2a:

When one subself has executive power, the other subself is said to be suspended.

Corollary 2b:

A subself may appear in many situations, or only on rare special occasions. One subself may be domineering while the others is submissive.

The psychotherapist should endeavor to determine how much of the time the suicidal subself has executive control and whether the suicidal subself is domineering.

Corollary 2c:

A subself may have executive power for anywhere from seconds to hours or even longer periods of time.

In the majority of situations, each subself has executive power for a reasonable period, perhaps extending for hours or days. On the other hand, when people have internal dialogues within themselves, debating whether to take some action, each subself has executive power for the time it takes to argue one side of the argument.

Corollary 2d:

Selfhood is whichever subself has executive power at the time.

The issue of who "I" am has long been debated by psychologists interested in the notion of selfhood. In the present theory, selfhood is perceived by the individual to be whichever subself has executive power at the time.

Corollary 2e:

The existence of two subelves accounts for the inconsistency in the behavior of individuals.

Postulate 3:

Individuals can seek to create new subelves for the future.

Several scholars have introduced the concept of possible selves (Hooker & Kaus, 1992). Although their concept appears to be similar to the present focus on subelves, it is not. Hooker and Kaus's concept of possible selves refers to goals and fears for the future. Hooker and Kaus instructed their subjects to think about "the kinds of experiences that are in store for us and the kinds of people we might possibly become...what we hope we will be like" (p.

² The personality theorists who stimulated these ideas are given full credit and cited in Lester (2010, 2015).

395), and they give an example of “*one of my own [possible selves] is to win the lottery and become a millionaire*” (p. 305).

Despite this difference between their concept and the present theory, their discussion raises the possibilities that people might indeed seek to create new subselves as defined in the present theory. When depressed people enter psychotherapy to change their lives, their behavior can be construed as seeking to create a new non-depressed (or nonsuicidal) subself for the future. In this example, the reality is that the depressed or suicidal subself will not disappear or be destroyed, but rather that it will take over the mind for less and less time in the future.

Integration

Postulate 3:

The individual can try to integrate the subselves.

It may be impossible ever to eliminate one subself. In that case, the issue arises as to how the mind might be integrated. It might be that the process of involves breaking down the boundaries between the two subselves and integrating them into a single unified self. This may not be desirable with a suicidal subself and a nonsuicidal subself. Alternatively, it might be that the two subselves coexist with one another, with the individual acquiring tactics to suspend the suicidal self whenever it assumes (or tries to assume) executive power.

The Sources of Subselves

Postulate 4:

The suicidal subself may be a regressive subself developed early in life, formed by the introjection of the desires and thoughts of powerful others (in particular, parental figures) and imitation of their personality and behavioral styles.

In Transactional Analysis (TA), it has been proposed that the suicidal impulse (and in the present theory, the suicidal subself) stems from the parent’s early injunctions that the child should never have been born and that the child should cease to exist (Woollams, et al., 1977). The infant or child can receive a “do not exist” message at any age and in various ways. The infant may be handled stiffly or with distaste. Perhaps a parent actually says, “I wish you’d never been born.” The child may perceive such an injunction even when there is no specific injunction. For example, if the birth was a difficult one, and the child hears about this, the child may decide that he or she deserves punishment for hurting the mother.

This injunction can become part of the person’s script and, in the present theory, part of the suicidal

subself. According to TA, the injunction is received by the child and so becomes part of the Child ego state. In contrast, the nonsuicidal subself is grounded in the Adult ego state. In guidelines for crisis intervention and counseling with suicidal individuals, a TA approach recommends asking questions that will put the patient’s Adult ego state in executive control in order to calm the patient and minimize the influence of the Child ego state for the present time.

Postulate 5:

The suicidal subself may be formed as a result of early experiences.

The suicidal self may be formed by relevant formative processes including traumatic experiences (such as verbal, physical and sexual abuse) or the conditions of worth as described by Carl Rogers (1951).

A Positive Aspect of Two Subselves

Postulate 6:

The possibility of attributing negatively valued aspects (thoughts, desires, emotions, or behaviors) of oneself to the suicidal subself may enable the individual to maintain high self-esteem since the negative aspects of the suicidal subself do not color the nonsuicidal subself.

Enmeshed Subselves

Postulate 7:

The two subselves may become enmeshed, and the psychotherapist must help the client create sufficiently impermeable boundaries so that the nonsuicidal self can withstand pressure from the suicidal self to take over executive power and resist intrusions from the suicidal self into the nonsuicidal self when the nonsuicidal self has executive power.

Implications for Counseling

In a subself model of the human mind, it is critical that the counselor help the client to identify the different subselves. The names given to these subselves need not fit a predetermined set of categories developed by a theorist, and the counselors can let the client label their own subselves as they are identified. Some useful labels for subselves come from the business world, such as chairman of the board and recording secretary. Indeed, the counselor may seek to create new subselves, such as a recording secretary if the client does not have such a subself already, and a mediator, a subself that negotiates between conflicting subselves.

There are several systems of counseling that are based on concepts similar to the subself model proposed by Lester. Transactional Analysis (TA) uses the concepts of ego states, but these are limited to three major ego states, Child, Adult and Parent. However, the TA principles can easily be modified for the proposed two subselves proposed in Lester's model, and Orton (1974) has described the use of TA for crisis intervention. Goulding and Goulding (1979) have proposed Redecision Therapy, based on TA which focuses of helping clients reject injunctions from parents and making decisions to change.

Jeffrey Young (Young & Klosko, 1993) introduced schema therapy in which schemas are organized patterns of thoughts and behaviors, akin to subselves. People's behavior (coping styles) is a result of their schemas, and schemas and coping styles can combine into modes. Psychotherapy involves identifying and examining these schemas, initiating dialogues between competing schemas, and testing their validity. These techniques can be found also in some forms of psychoanalytic therapy. For example, Pizer (1998) discussed the multiply constituted, distributed self, and presented a model for the tolerance of paradox and conflict in this distributed self as a developmental achievement.

For suicidal clients, Firestone (2004, 2005) has illustrated the use of Voice Therapy, a system in which subselves are presented as inner voices that express in words the thoughts and desires of the suicidal self, and she has described how therapy sessions might have proceeded with a young woman (described in Katie's Diary [Lester, 2004]) who died by suicide. Other systems of counseling that utilize a subself model are Polster (1995), Rowan (1990), Schwartz (1995) and Shapiro and Elliott (1976).

In recent years, those counseling suicidal clients have been urged to listen to the pain (psychache [Shneidman, 1996]) experienced by the clients (Pompili, 2018). In attempting this, it may be useful for counselors to recognize that the client may have two (or more) subselves, and to help the client identify and eventually evaluate these subselves.

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