



Research report

Psychological strains found in the suicides of 72 celebrities

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ABSTRACT

The interpretation of suicide involves theories from many disciplines, and the strain theory of suicide is a social–psychological model that attempts to account for this complicated behavior. We have earlier explored the presence of psychological strains in a number of diverse samples of suicides and in the present study, we identified the strains experienced throughout the lives as documented in the biographies of 72 celebrities. The biographies were systematically identified through a number of requirements and composed by one of the authors of this study years before the strain theory of suicide was proposed. A graduate student coder, who was unaware of the strain theory of suicide, was hired to carry out a content analysis of the biography essays and categorize the life events and the responses of the suicide in terms of the four types of strains. Of the 72 suicides, one had no strains, one had all the four strains, four had only one, 30 had two, and 36 had three strains. The most common strain was aspiration strain (97%), followed by deprivation strain (89%), value strain (54%) and coping deficiency strain (4%). It is also noted that religious celebrities were more likely to experience value strain, while those celebrities who had experienced a downhill path in their careers were more likely to experience deprivation and coping strains. This analysis of the 72 celebrity suicides supported the strain theory of suicide.

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1. Introduction

The strain theory of suicide postulates that a psychological strain usually precedes a suicidal behavior (Zhang et al., 2011). Very different from a simple stress, strain is composed of at least two stresses or two forces that are pushing the individual toward different directions. The frustration resulting from psychological strains may lead to personal violence toward society in the form of deviance and crime or toward the self as suicide (Zhang et al., 2011). Apart from the studies about the effects of psychological strains on deviance and criminal behaviors mostly conducted by Agnew and his colleagues (Agnew, 2001), there is little research into the role of psychological strains in suicide. The present study was designed to test the strain theory of suicide with data obtained from the biographies of 72 celebrities who completed suicide, including such individuals as Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) and Ernest Hemingway (1899–1961).

In accounting for suicide risk, the psychological strain theory of suicide consists of four dimensions. Each of the four types of strain is derived from specific sources. A source of strain must

consist of two, and at least two, conflicting social facts. If the two social facts are not contradictory, there should be no strain. The first source of strain is *Conflicting Values*, which happens when two conflicting social values or beliefs are competing in an individual's daily life, such as mainstream culture versus the religious beliefs experienced by a cult member. Another example is the conflicting values or beliefs experienced by some Chinese rural young women between Confucian, traditional gender roles and modern communist ideology on gender equality. When the two conflicting values are equally important in a person's daily life, the person experiences great strain. When one value is more important than the other, there is then no strain. The second source of strain is found in *Aspiration* versus *Reality*, where there is a discrepancy between an individual's aspiration and the reality that the person has to live with, such as wishing to be rich in life versus an unprivileged social status that blocks the road to be success. If the reality is far from the aspiration, the person experiences strain. The larger the discrepancy between aspiration and reality, the greater the strain will be.

Relative Deprivation, the third source of strain, focuses on deprivation in comparison with a reference, such as the relative poverty in which a poor individual lives, along with the knowledge that other people of the same or similar background are leading a much better life. A person living in absolute poverty, where there is no comparison with others, does not necessarily

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feel bad, miserable, or deprived. Increased perception of deprivation results in relatively greater strain for individuals. *Coping Deficiency*, the fourth source of strain, is a situation in which an individual lacks coping capability when confronting a life crisis. Crises, such as loss of money, loss of status, loss of face, divorce, death of a loved one, etc., may lead to serious strain in the person who does not know how to cope with these negative life events. Less experience in coping results in strain when a crisis takes place. It should be noted that the four types of strain can overlap in many instances, and one individual may experience two or more than two types of strain at a given time, a situation known as *strain clusters* (Agnew, 1992; Stack and Wasserman, 2007).

The strain theory of suicide has been tested and supported with a number of different samples in previous studies. For example, we analyzed the content of accounts of 105 Chinese rural young suicides narrated by the suicides' family members and close friends, and found that each of the suicides experienced at least one type of psychological strain before the suicidal action occurred (Zhang et al., 2009). In our content analysis of a sample of 40 suicide notes obtained in the United States of America from 20 completed suicides and 20 attempted suicides, we found again the relationship between psychological strains and the occurrence of suicide (Zhang and Lester, 2008). In a study to explore the patterns of suicide, we analyzed the 11 suicide cases described in the "Dream of Red Mansions," one of the most famous classical Chinese novels, from the perspective of the strain theory of suicide. We found that the sources of the strain preceding the 11 suicides included (1) discrepancy between aspiration and reality, (2) relative deprivation, and (3) deficient coping skills in front of a crisis, while the value strain from conflicting values was not found among these suicides. It was concluded that the strain theory of suicide is a promising perspective that can be used to analyze the suicide cases in ancient China (Yan et al., 2012).

Using data from 392 suicides and 416 community controls collected in a psychological autopsy case control study for Chinese rural young population aged 15–34 years, we found that prevalence of mental disorders as measured by the Chinese version of SCID was higher among the young Chinese suicides than among the living controls, but was lower than among suicides in the West. Relevant to this current study, psychological strains in the forms of relative deprivation, unrealized aspiration, and lack of coping skills were significantly associated with suicide, even after accounting for the role of mental illness. It concluded that the strain theory of suicide challenges the psychiatric model popular in the West as an explanation of Chinese suicide (Zhang et al., 2011).

An investigation of a suicide's personal history, social background, economic status, previous life events, mental health, interpersonal relations, and events on the day of the suicide may help us understand the causal factors of suicide. More importantly, it allows us to identify the strains experienced by the suicides. The present study, by analyzing the biographies composed by others about the suicides, explores to what extent strains as defined in the theory exist in the suicides, thereby testing the applicability of the strain theory of suicide beyond the studies of Chinese suicides.

2. Methods

Research into the lives of those who die by suicide is made difficult by the lack of information about them. A small proportion of them leave suicide notes which are usually quite brief (Leenaars, 1988), and even fewer leave diaries (Lester, 2004). Occasionally, a sample of suicides who have been administered the same psychological test, such as the MMPI, can be studied (Clopton and Jones, 1975). The most common technique is a

psychological autopsy study in which a standardized interview or questionnaire is given to those who have experienced the loss of a close relative, friend or colleague to suicide (Beskow et al., 1990; Hawton et al., 1998; Zhang et al., 2010), but the information gathered in this way is often biased by the relationship of the person interviewed to the suicidal individual and by the emotions felt as a result of the suicidal death (Brent et al., 1988). In all of these methods, the information is limited.

A rich trove of information is known about famous individuals who have died by suicide and for whom a detailed biography has been written. Over the last 20 years, Lester (2012) has read a large number of biographies of those who have died by suicide, some briefer accounts and some autobiographies. He has summarized the lives of each of these individuals in individual essays and made them available online (www.drdaavidlester.net). A biography of a person typically runs into hundreds of printed pages and covers the life of the person from birth until death, uncovering a wealth of data on the person. The present study is based on these biographies (Lester, 2012).

For the present study, we selected from www.drdaavidlester.net those essays based on a full-length biography. Essays based on shorter essays or articles were not included. Seventy-two biographies met the criteria for inclusion in the study, and they are listed in the Appendix.

One graduate student was trained to read each of the 72 biographies, code the demographic information, and identify the psychological strains found in the biographical essays, if any. The graduate student reader, who did not know the strain theory of suicide at the time of reading the essays, was asked to categorize the life events of each of the 72 celebrities prior to the suicide into any of the four types of psychological strains.

3. Findings

Table 1 shows the frequencies and corresponding percentages for the 72 suicides on each of the four strains: Value, Aspiration, Deprivation, and Coping. Overall for the sample, the celebrity suicides were more likely to be male, married, non-religious, on a downhill path in their career, mentally disordered, using poison, and non-poet/writers. There were no differences for any of the four strains by gender, marital status, mental disorder, suicidal method, and profession.

Of the 72 suicides, one had no strains, one had all the four strains, 4 had only one, 30 had two, and 36 had three. The most common strain was found to be aspiration strain (97%), followed by deprivation strain (89%), value strain (54%) and coping deficiency strain (4%). Celebrities who were religious were more likely to be affected by value strain, and those suicides whose careers were going downhill were more likely to be impacted by deprivation and coping strains.

4. Discussion and conclusion

The strain theory of suicide was supported by the 72 famous suicides using the content analysis of the biographies of the selected celebrities. All but one suicide had at least one psychological strain in the life before suicide. It is also easy to understand aspiration strain being the most common strain among the sampled celebrities. Celebrities are usually more ambitious than most people in the general population, often aspire to higher goals in life and career, and therefore, when reality is held constant for everyone, it is more likely for them to be impacted by the discrepancy between the reality and aspiration. Once way to reduce the aspiration strain so as to bring down the suicide risk

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