THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THREE RELIGIOUS COPING STYLES AND SUICIDAL IDEATION AND POSITIVE IDEATION IN YOUNG ADULTS

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As one stands face to face with the ultimate realities of life and death, religion and theology tend to come alive. Meaning tends to outstrip symbol and we have to seek for new words to express the new ideas which come surging in. Among these ideas we frequently find the sense of contact with that ultimate reality to which we give the name of 'God'.

Psychiatrist Anton Boisen (1955), quoted in

Pargament (1997, p. 155).

A few weeks after I nearly died from a suicide attempt, I went to the Episcopal church across the street from the UCLA campus. I was a parishioner there, however occasional, and in light of being able to walk in through the door instead of being carried in by six, I thought I would see what was left of my relationship with God … I went to the church early; my mind was still dull, and everything in it and in my heart was frayed and exhausted. But I knelt anyway, in spite or because of this, and spoke into my hands the only prayer I really know or care very much about. The beginning was rote and easy: "God be in my head, and in my understanding," I said to myself or God, "God be in mine eyes, and in my looking." Somehow, despite the thickening of my mind, I got through most of the rest of it. But then I blanked out entirely as I got to the end, struggling to get through what had started as an act of reconciliation with God. The words were nowhere to be found.

I imagined for a while that my forgetting was due to the remnants of the poisonous quantities of lithium I had taken, but suddenly the final lines came up into my consciousness: "God be at mine end, and at my departing". I felt a convulsive sense of shame and sadness, a kind I had not known before, nor have I known it since. Where had God been? I could not answer the question then, nor can I answer it now. I do know however, that I should have been dead but was not – and that I was fortunate enough to be given another chance at life, which many others were not.

Kay Redfield Jamison, Professor of Psychiatry at John Hopkins University School of Medicine (2001, p. 310).

21st – Slept horribly. Prayed in sorrow, and got up in agitation.

22nd – God forgive me. Amen

Finis
Of
B.R. Haydon

Stretch me no longer on this rough world. – Lear.

Last entry in the journal of nineteenth century painter Benjamin Haydon before he slashed his throat and shot himself (quoted in Redfield Jamison, 2001, p. 82).

The book of Ecclesiastes states that there is a time to die. If God knows this time, how is man told? … Suicide serves notice on theology by showing that one does not dread its ancient weapons: the hereafter and the last judgment. But it does not follow that suicide because it is anti-theological must be ungodly or irreligious. Cannot suicide prompted from within also be a way for God to announce the time to die?

(Hillman, 1997, p. 32)

ABSTRACT

Internationally, suicide is highly prevalent among adolescents and young adults, and South African data suggest that suicide is a serious problem that is increasingly affecting the Black population and young men in particular. This study aimed firstly to investigate the prevalence of suicidal behaviour among young adults, and, in a sample of 85 young people (aged 19-30), one in seven had previously attempted suicide, and almost one in three had recently thought about killing themselves. Sociological research has shown that religion has a predominantly protective effect with regard to suicide, however psychological research, while providing evidence for a similar relationship, has also shown that religious strain may contribute to suicidality. This study sought to establish whether a relationship exists between suicidal ideation (and positive ideation), and various indicators of religiosity. Unexpectedly, given the research trends, suicidal ideation was significantly positively associated with self-reported religious salience (r = .297, p = .006), and with the collaborative/deferring religious coping style (r = .301, p = .005), characterized by higher levels of religiosity. Suicidal ideation was significantly negatively associated with the self-directing style (r = -.331, p = .002), favoured by less religious participants. Positive ideation was unrelated to religious salience, participation, and both religious coping approaches. Various explanations were proposed for these results. Cognition is a central pathway for suicidality, and insecure religious attachment, when triggered by stressors, may set in motion a cognitive process involving negative religious attributions and harmful religious coping strategies – typical symptoms of religious strain which has been associated with suicidal behaviour. Maladaptive religious beliefs and behaviours may also have a negative impact on depression, hopelessness and helplessness, all vulnerability factors for suicidal behaviour in young people. It is also possible that, when faced by life challenges that exceed coping capacity, individuals may be more likely to turn to God, while simultaneously experiencing hopelessness, depression and suicidal ideation. Finally, the gender skew in the sample may have resulted in the high levels of suicidal behaviour and religiosity, and the positive relationship between them. Vulnerability to suicidal behaviour in young adults is a multifaceted problem, and religion, itself a multidimensional concept, is one of many factors that may provide protection against or contribute to suicidal behaviour. In order to understand the complex problem of vulnerability to suicidal behaviour in young adults, there is a need for further multivariate research.

KEYWORDS

Suicide
Suicidal ideation
Suicidal behaviour
Religion
Religious coping
Religious strain
Religious attributions
Hopelessness
Depression
Helplessness
Coping
Problem-solving
Guilt
South Africa
Young adults

DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own, unaided work. It is being submitted for the degree of Master of Arts (Clinical Psychology) at the University of the Witwatersrand, Johannesburg. It has not been submitted before for any degree or examination in any other University.

_____

D.A.E. SMITH

_____ day of _____ 2005

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