

Social and Emotional Development of Gifted Students

The Role of Contagion in Suicidal Behavior Among Students With Gifts and Talents

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Over the past year or so, two reputable universities and public schools experienced multiple suicides. The Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), The College of William and Mary (W&M), two high schools in Palo Alto California, and one high school in Northern Virginia have faced the deaths of several of their students. I am including this particular list of schools as they are well known for having extraordinarily strong student populations, academically speaking, and because they are well known within the gifted education community. In the cases of MIT and W&M, only the top 5% to 10% of the high-achieving students who apply get admitted. For those of us who work on behalf of very high-achieving students, these schools have longstanding histories of cultures of extraordinary performance among their students.

I should be clear that I have not studied the specific suicides of the students from these schools at this time. This column is to offer a perspective on suicidal behavior among gifted students that moves away from a wholly psychological perspective to more of a community-based perspective. This model does not undervalue the role of the field of psychology in explaining suicidal behavior, but speaks instead to the importance of the salient influences of culture, context, and community on suicidal behavior among this group. In this column, I will discuss one specific aspect of this suicidal phenomenon: contagion.

The Meaning of Suicide

On the surface, suicide seems easy to define (e.g., the act of killing oneself) and understand; it seems timeless and not culturally specific. However, under closer scrutiny, we find that, in fact, suicidal behavior varies quite significantly. Some of the approaches to killing oneself have existed for millennia (i.e.,

poisoning, hanging), whereas others are more contemporary (e.g., death by cop—instigating an interaction with a police officer to be killed). Of course, derivations of these methods exist widely.

The actual meaning a person holds for his or her own suicide varies by culture, religion, and—I would argue—age. In some cultures, suicide is to atone for embarrassment, failure, or humiliation, and is seen as an honorable act. In other cultures, it is seen as a final step toward receiving a form of religious reward. In yet another culture, suicide is seen as a manifestation of mental health problems that will prevent the individual from being able to get into heaven. These three examples (and many others) co-exist across the world.

The etiology of suicide for the youngest and oldest groups in America reflects a similar but differing phenomenon. When persons younger than 21 years of age or so die by suicide, there are concerns about developmental issues of maturity, perspective, temporality, and so forth. Their decisions to die are often seen as somewhat impulsive and may be associated with depression and relationship issues. In essence, their limited life experiences do not allow them the capacity to make the decision about dying that includes experiences with recovery from illness or emotional pain, and, as a consequence, few coping skills have been formulated. In essence, these young people lack the experience base to contextualize lived experience, and they have not developed the coping skills needed to survive.

On the other hand, when elderly persons choose suicide, the factors are informed by long-term and myriad of experiences that allow for perspective. Plus, ample opportunity for social and emotional coping skills has enabled them to weather previous bouts with depression and loss, emotional pain, and so forth. Quite often, their calculus of living or dying becomes more about quality of life issues related to escaping chronic physical pain and not about transitory emotional pain often associated with relationship difficulties. The behavior of suicide

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is similar between these groups, but the underlying factors are different, wherein the younger group has many years yet to live and develop the coping repertoire needed to exist in the world, while the older group has a wealth of experiences that allow for a much more informed decision.

Suicide Contagion

Through the demographic lens, those who die by suicide vary by gender, race, region, and age. Groups are studied and followed over time. Unfortunately for our community, giftedness is not a characteristic that is collected in national statistics and consequently, not followed by suicidologists or thanatologists (those who engage in the scientific study of death). Over the past 21 years, I have conducted studies on suicide relative to gifted students and have published numerous articles, book chapters, and a book. In this column, I want to share one aspect of the suicide process that has a contextual basis that is stronger than others: the phenomenon of suicide contagion. Contagion is described as the influence of one suicide on the likelihood of another suicide. This phenomenon is typically thought of in the context of high profile suicides on others, particularly youth. An often-cited example is the influence of the suicide of Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the popular 1990s band Nirvana, on disenfranchised youth. His suicide is believed to have served as a catalyst for other suicides and is, therefore, reflective of a contagion. The issue at hand includes the effects of public media messaging on large groups of people. Groups associated with suicide prevention have advocated a more thoughtful and somewhat controlled use of language when reporting the deaths of high profile people. Progress has clearly been made in this area over the past 20 years.

In this column, I want to emphasize a type of contagion that is less about the suicides of famous people and vast numbers of interested people, and more about specific contexts (schools) and suicides of students; in this case, high school and college campuses. More specifically, I will focus on the phenomenon of contagion in schools that have reputations of being composed of very strong students. For the field of gifted education/gifted studies/talent development, it is imperative that we understand the suicidal behavior of students with gifts and talents (SWGTS). In some cases, looking at suicide ideation, prevalence rates, correlates, and factors associated with suicidal behavior is the most helpful, but, in this case, and for educators, counselors, and parents of SWGTS, considering contagion in the suicidal process can be more helpful.

By definition, for contagion to exist, an initial suicide must occur. Once it does, then an increased risk for subsequent suicides in the same context is produced. It is important that this possibility be understood not as something wholly generated by the original suicide per se, but more like a fire breaking out during dry weather that has created kindling prone to catch fire once it is prompted by a

spark. In other words, suicide contagion is kinetic and not created by an initial suicide. Because this type of risk assessment is quite difficult to determine with precision, we must understand what preceded the initial death, and the status of other SWGTS are relative to possibly engaging in suicidal behavior themselves. The fire metaphor is a good example because it reveals that there are actually many aspects to the ecosystem of a forest that precipitate forest fires. A single fire or lightning strike has differing degrees of effects based on the totality of the ecosystem. Relative to suicidal behavior of SWGTS in schools, we need to be cognizant of these factors within its ecosystem.

To understand the ecosystem of individual schools, it is helpful to begin with the largest influences. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) model provides a useful lens to study the ecosystem, with its nested levels of influence on the individual, from the most distant, yet pervasive macrosystem to the local microsystem with which the individual interacts regularly. In the macrosystem of the United States, cultural aspects are ever-changing, with permeating technologies such as the Internet, smart phones, and television. What are the messages SWGTS receive within the United States relative to giftedness, intellectualism, and so forth? I would argue that the messages are at best mixed, often with strong currents of anti-intellectualism. Headlines demonstrating contempt for science and the use of evidence to underpin policy decisions are ever present in the media.

Regional Variation

Within the United States, there were many similarities and some differences affecting SWGTS across the various regions. One lens to use in considering regional differences is suicidal patterns. Generally speaking, in 2010, the highest prevalence rates of completed suicides among all age groups are in the Western states (i.e., 13.9 deaths per 100,000 people), whereas the lowest rates are in the Northeastern states (8.9 per 100,000). The Midwest and South are in between the other regions, with the average of all regions of the United States being 12.4 per 100,000.

When one looks at the five states with the highest suicide prevalence and compares them with the five states with the lowest prevalence, one factor stands out: the corresponding percentage of gun ownership. This means that Wyoming, Alaska, Montana, Nevada, and New Mexico had the highest prevalence rates of both suicides and gun ownership. In the same time frame, the District of Columbia, New York, New Jersey, Maryland, and Massachusetts had the lowest prevalence rates of both suicide and gun ownership (Cross, 2013; Hoyert & Xu, 2012). These are merely correlations, so causality cannot be determined in this manner; however, because access to lethal means is a primary risk factor for suicide, it stands to reason that there is likely a connection.

Changes Within Our Time

Well known among Americans are the suicides of some of the best-known artists (e.g., Ernest Hemingway, Sylvia Plath, Robin Williams), and in some cases, widely respected young artists (e.g., Stuart Adamson, Kurt Cobain, Ian Curtis, Brad Davis, Michael Hutchence). These deaths and a myriad of others, along with contemporary literature, movies, and music, have made suicide seem like a viable solution (Cross, Cook, & Dixon, 1996). Moreover, changes in ethical positions and an increasing sophistication of suicide as a reflection of mental health issues, rather than focusing on it as an illegal act, have combined to affect the longstanding taboo against suicidal behavior in the United States (Cross, 2013; Cross et al., 1996). These changes reflect how many people in the United States understand suicide.

Just these examples (the facts that suicides exist, they receive media attention, many famous people have died by suicide, there are regional differences in suicide, the relative access to lethal means vary) are important parts of the suicide contagion ecosystem of the United States. To make more sense of this for SWGT, we move into the highest performing schools and their cultures. Suicide is not a SWGT phenomenon; it is a human phenomenon. Our efforts to date to establish prevalence rates of suicide for SWGT have largely been unsuccessful. Therefore, the most judicious position to take at this time is that the prevalence rate of suicide for SWGT is very similar to their same-age peers (Cross, 2013). How then, do we make sense out of these four examples of multiple suicides among the students in these very academically able student populations?

Contagion in Highly Competitive Environments

Although suicide is not specifically a SWGT phenomenon, there are suicides among this group. It has also been shown that their lives in school are quite different in some important ways than their non-gifted peers. For example, many SWGT deal with a stigma of giftedness (Coleman, 1985; Coleman & Cross, 1988), mixed messages about giftedness (Cross, Coleman & Terhaar-Yonkers, 1991), asynchronous development, multipotentiality, perfectionism, and social status issues (Cross, 2011) to name a few. Add to these experiences differential expectations by gender and multiple exceptionalities, and it is easy to imagine how complicated are the lives of SWGT. To create social latitude, SWGT engage in many social coping behaviors. Moreover, as they get older in school, increasingly, they must specialize in a talent domain. There are many difficulties associated with becoming a high achiever within specific talent domains about which they are passionate. Combined, these factors make the lives of gifted students very complicated and stressful. As the former school head of a residential academy for intellectually gifted adolescents who experienced suicide contagion, I came to believe after working with a team that

conducted three psychological autopsies that these types of school environments tend to create cultures of highest performance that the students experience as having constant expectations with virtually no down time. The nature of the stress experienced by the students was most often described as being chronic, inescapable (Cross et al., 1996). More recently, we found that even with the chronic stress, the students found positive ways to adapt and were resolute that the benefits of attending the school and living in the community outweighed the stress (Rollins & Cross, 2014a, 2014b).

Unique to SWGT is the two-decade-long expectation that they should do very well in school. Some internalize this; some become perfectionistic; some withdraw by underachieving; some get depressed; many feel anxiety. The chronic nature of the stress, in combination with all of the aforementioned examples, makes their lives very difficult. Once they attend schools that are made up of other outstanding students, although there may be some very positive experiences, it can exacerbate the chronic nature of the stress and anxiety.

Making the representation of the lives of SWGT more complete, add ingredients from the following list: depression, substance abuse, relationship problems, being homosexual, while having access to lethal means. The result of this toxic equation may be the emergence of suicidal ideation, especially when depression exists. Schools are chock full of students with these experiences and characteristics. The spark that ignites a possible contagion is when these variables and factors exist in the ecosystem and a student, peer, colleague, or even a friend dies by suicide. For the first time in their lives, SWGT assess the possibility to alleviate all of their psychological pain as truly viable. Shneidman (1996) noted that the state of hopelessness is the last state that precedes the attempt to take one's life. It is the accumulation of factors, characteristics, states, and experiences in the life of an individual SWGT that makes suicide possible. The added struggles and suicide correlates increase the chances of making a suicide attempt. And finally, once a suicide occurs, the confluence of factors spring forward to lead to other suicides. Because very few of these students are known as struggling to the extent they actually are, families and school employees are often not prepared to intervene in time.

To prevent suicide contagion, we must understand what makes our schools' ecosystems easy to spark. Then we should design, with all the stakeholder groups, intervention strategies that serve to reduce or eliminate the many aspects of living life as a SWGT more complicated than other students. By training educators, parents, and students about how to reduce stress, how to cope with the mixed messages associated with being a SWGT, how to self-counsel, how to recognize in oneself and other students' feelings of distress, and how and when to refer, the conditions that allow a spark to turn into suicide contagion can be minimized.

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Bio

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