

Clinical Analysis Of Adolescent Suicide In Urban Cameroon: A Case Study

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Abstract:

Background: Taking one's own life suddenly, without a pathological diagnosis or institutionalization of suicide, seems incomprehensible. This article analyses the suicide of a 16-year-old girl after an altercation with her parents.

Material and method: This research does not need a specific material. The clinical method used is to meticulously and deeply examine the situation leading to suicide.

Results: Clinical analysis of the situation revealed the existence of psychic instability in the young girl, underpinned by object loss anxiety or depressive anxiety associated with unresolved oedipal issues.

Conclusion: The girl kills herself to destroy the "bad" object with which she has identified, and above all to punish her parents for depriving her of access to the "good" object.

Keywords: Suicide, object loss, depressive anxiety, oedipal issue

Date of Submission: 08-10-2023

Date of Acceptance: 18-10-2023

I. Introduction

Suicide or "self-murder" is defined as the act by which a person voluntarily takes his own life. In Africa, such a death is considered "wicked" (Thomas, 1982). It's a death that brings a curse to the family. To remove the curse, the family of the deceased must perform rites to appease the spirits. According to the World Health Organization (WHO), the suicide rate in Africa is the highest in the world¹.

Suicide is not a mental pathology. It can be the consequence of a mental pathology such as depression or schizophrenia. It can also appear in a socially accepted (institutionalized) form. In this case, it's a case of death to restore honor, to escape a physically identified aggressor, or to protect one's family². Therefore Suicide also occurs without any diagnosis of mental pathology or institutionalization, and abruptly, without any real understanding of the individual's true motivation for taking his or her own life. It appears as an act of defiance against the visible and the invisible world^{3, 4}. Understanding it becomes problematic. Why take one's life, and thus break oneself, with society and life? This article aims to provide a clinical explanation^{5, 6}. In this particular case, the aim is to uncover the psychic processes that led to an adolescent girl's self-murder following an altercation with her parents.

II. Material and Method

This specific research doesn't need specific material. It was carried out on the story of a young girl who hit the headlines in Cameroon the 20/05/2021. She killed herself by shooting herself in the ground with her father's gun. The clinical method that we use makes a meticulously and deep analysis of that specific situation, to understand what happened in the young girl's psyche, that motivated her to kill herself.

Study design: A case study: 'The case study aims to identify the functioning of an individual or group grappling with complex situations, focusing in particular on suffering, anxieties, defense mechanisms and the relational modalities at play'⁷.

Presentation of the case: She is a 16-year-old schoolgirl from a well-off social environment, living in the city of Douala in Cameroon. She was the eldest of five children, of whom she was the only daughter. Given that she is deceased, it is the events leading up to her death that deciphered to uncover the psychic processes behind this irreversible behavior.

Presentation of the specific situation: “According to family sources, the teenager’s mother went out shopping on May 20, before meeting her daughter at the crossroads on her way home. Asked where [Nadié] was going with a parcel in her hand, the girl told her mother she was going to give the food to her boyfriend, who had told her he was very hungry. “No way, turn around and go home. Why don’t you call your boyfriend to come and eat at home?” Her mother allegedly asked. Forced and annoyed, [Nadié] returned home, where, according to our sources, she was reprimanded by her mother. Madame [...] grabs her daughter’s phone, and discovers that the man her daughter is in love with has even asked her to borrow a motorcycle cab so that he can pay on arrival. This message suggests that the girl didn’t have a penny on her person, but was driven by a strong desire to get her boyfriend out of the wolf hunger that was gripping him.

Scandalized by the content of [Nadié] phone’s WhatsApp messaging, the lady calls [her husband, Nadié’s father] on the phone, and tells him about their daughter’s case. The senior army officer gives instructions over the phone, and the game ends. But [Nadié] just couldn’t stomach the setback. She wanted so much to get her boyfriend, with whom she must have been madly in love, out of the hunger that was gnawing at him. Her mother’s reprimands seemed unbearable, a real humiliation she couldn’t live with. So she decided to end her life. To do so, she discreetly entered her parents’ bedroom and went through it with a fine-tooth comb, looking for her father’s automatic pistol. Everything in the room is turned upside down. His father’s gun is not available to just anyone. The wise [father] always keeps it out of reach, in almost impossible places. But that’s without knowing his daughter, whose temerity is about to pay off. She finds the automatic pistol and shoots herself in the head”⁸.

Analysis technique: Clinical analysis: That is to come out with all the psychic process that leads to suicide.

III. Result

Three (3) essential moments emerge in the process leading to suicide. The first corresponds to the situation that gives rise to displeasure and frustration; the second to the activation of object loss anguish; and the third to the punishment of the “bad” object (destruction of the “bad” object) by the effectiveness of its disintegration.

First moment (quality of mother/daughter relationship): Displeasure-Frustration

The mother’s order to return home was the cause of the young teenager’s displeasure. The ban on going to meet her “hungry lover” and the search on her WhatsApp messaging helped transform a simple displeasure into a rather disturbing frustration. Metapsychologically speaking, the id’s drive to visit the boyfriend was blocked by the mother’s prohibition. The impossibility of satisfying this drive sets the psyche in a state of tension known as displeasure. This displeasure is accentuated by the mother’s attitude, who not only forbids him to go out but also intrudes on his privacy (telephone) and incriminates her with the father. The mother’s reprimand all of which were supported and affirmed by the father, helped consolidate the frustration which, by its force, actualized the adolescent’s existing object loss anguish (the actualization of an unresolved infantile problem). It’s now acknowledged that the quality of the relationship between the mother and the child generates displeasure and late frustration. That relationship is very insecure and conflicting.

Second moment (anguish): Activation of object loss anguish (original depressive anguish)

The anguish of object loss, the original depressive anguish, is brought to light. This greatly disturbs the adolescent psyche. Its destructive force drives the psyche to seek solutions to relieve itself. In the depressive position, the child destroys the part of the mother that has become evil; but in this case, the object put to death is the subject itself.

The depressive position “was defined by Melanie Klein as the phase of development in which the infant recognizes the full object and situates himself about it”⁹. This is a phantasmatic

situation in which the young child experiences the loss of the mother. How the young child manages to overcome this loss, determines how he or she will react to any situations of loss (death, separation, rejection) that present themselves later on¹⁰. The child's mourning process requires a prior cleavage of the object; there must be a "good" mother and a "bad" mother in the child's psyche.

The "good" and the "bad" object

When the mother is present, through the effectiveness and quality of the care (Holding and Handling) she provides for the child, she contributes to the establishment of a secure psychic environment¹¹. In other words, she helps create an inner (psychic world in which the child feels protected and secure). The mother is thus seen as the "good" object, one that reassures and protects: the "good" mother. The repeated experience of the mothers' gratifying presence helps to create an imprint of the "good" object in the psyche. When the mother is absent, either because of her actual absence or because of a lack of quality care, she gives rise to persecutory anguish in the child's psyche⁹. In this new internal environment, the child feels insecure and exposed to danger. The mother is thus seen as the "bad" object, an anguished, persecuting object. She is now a "bad" mother. In the child's psyche, a struggle is waged to get rid of this "bad" object, the bearer of suffering.

Destroying the "bad" object

The deleterious climate linked to the presence of the "bad" object in the psyche leads the child to think about destroying it⁵. In other words, the child sets up techniques and means to destroy the "bad" object. So, by screaming, crying, and biting, the child achieves his goal. He succeeds in destroying this tormenting "bad" object in his fantasies. But only the "bad" object, like the "good" object, represents the same person: the mother. Destroying the "bad" object is equivalent to destroying the "good" object, and thus destroying the mother. In his drive to escape anguish, the young child has destroyed the mother, the "good" mother. The memory of her plunges him into deep nostalgia and regret⁹. He's overcome by an intense sense of guilt that strongly drives him to think about repairing the destroyed object¹².

Object repair

Reparation is a psychic process that consists of reconstructing an object previously destroyed in fantasy¹³. For it to be effective, the "good" object must have previously existed in the psyche. It is the memory of the "good" object, confirmed by its imprint in the psyche, which constitutes the main material necessary for the reconstruction of the "good" mother⁹. Once the repair is complete, the child regains all the serenity and joy associated with the presence of the mother, the 'good' mother, the "good" object. He's reassured that, even if the mother is physically absent, she continues to be present in him, in his psyche. It is through this process of reparation that self-esteem and self-confidence are established: the ability to overcome the difficulties one faces throughout life¹⁴.

If the child is unable to reconstruct the "good" object due to a lack of related memory, or reconstructs it in a distorted way, the psyche will remain prey to the "bad" object and will be highly unstable as we saw in the case of this study. The psychic is unstable because the subject is insecure about himself, making him vulnerable to the slightest displeasure. In this way, a simple ban on going out can be transformed into a dramatic situation through introjection, identification, and destruction of the "bad" object. The adolescent has introjected the 'bad object whiting which she identified herself. In this way, it became possible for her to kill her person.

Third moment (defense mechanism): Introjection-Identification and destroy the "bad" object by killing herself

Indeed, failure to reconstruct the "good" total object leads to introjection of the "bad" object and the child's identification with it. In this case, object loss anguish or depressive anguish is overwhelming in the psyche and guides the child's cognitions and behavior.

Introjection is the act of introducing something into one self¹³, as opposed to the projection, which consists of putting something outside oneself. The introjected element is either assimilated to the psyche or regarded as an entity foreign to it. In a suicidal subject, the "bad" object introjected has invaded the ego and the subject's psychic functioning. The subject has identified with the introjected

“bad” object. Identification “is a psychological process by which a subject assimilates an aspect, a property, an attribute and a psychological process by which a subject assimilates an aspect, a property, an attribute and transforms himself, totally or partially, on the model of it”¹³. It “is not a defense mechanism but an activity of the ego indispensable to its development (...). Like all other ego activities, identification can, of course, also be used for defensive purposes”¹⁵. In the suicidal process, identification is a defensive modality designed to protect the subject from anguish. In an unconscious game, the subject attributes to himself the characteristics of the “bad” object previously introjected. It’s a form of identification with the aggressor, where, in a desperate search for appeasement, “you become the one you were once afraid of”¹⁵. In reality, the “bad” object in the subject’s psyche acts exactly like an external aggressor: it is threatening and overwhelming. In the search for appeasement, the person himself becomes this “bad” object, the internal aggressor. Depending on external or internal events, the subject thus identified with the aggressor may in turn attack his aggressor, often going so far as to kill the latter. But since in the suicidal subject, the aggressor and the aggressed are the same object, the death of the subject is inevitable.

Destroying the bad object and murdering her person

The destruction of the bad object is an ultimate defense, as is the disintegration of the psyche in the psychotic subject. Psychosis is the result of a psychic self-disintegration that occurs when the subject has exhausted all these defensive modalities without achieving homeostasis. His disintegration is thus offered as a last resort toward appeasement. It’s the same process as suicide. Except that in this case, it’s not the psyche that disintegrates, but the person itself. It disintegrated by putting an end to its own life. The purpose of destroying the “bad” object is to free oneself from the persecutory anguish. Only, as the “bad” object and the self-subject become through identification, this destruction with no possibility of reconstruction, will sound the death knell of the object-subject.

IV. Discussion

Suicide is the ultimate defense for a subject whose defense mechanisms have reached total exhaustion¹⁴. Just as a psychotic drowns himself in a total split of his ego to escape the anguish of fragmentation, the subject who resorts to suicide is invaded and overwhelmed by the anguish of object loss (depressive anguish), which he tries to escape by taking his own life. In this case, this loss of object problem is associated with an unresolved oedipal issue, supported by the active presence of the tyrannical superego.

Everything about the young teenager’s attitude suggests that she was intolerant of frustration. This attitude is the direct consequence of an unelaborated object loss problem. Indeed, during the depressive position, the child experiences lack, the emptiness caused by the mother’s absence. The child’s ability to resolve this problem essentially depends on the mother’s capacity to be a “good” mother, or, as Winnicott¹ put it, a “good enough mother”. The mother who responds adequately to the child’s various demands. This quality of mother will contribute to the establishment of a secure psychic environment for the child. In fact; a “good enough mother” gives rise to a secure attachment¹⁶ that contributes to the effectiveness of the child’s self-esteem and self-confidence. All this is the result of a positive resolution of the object loss problem (the depressive position). The child learns to better manage her absences by remembering the mother’s gratifying presence. In other words, to be able to manage moments of absence and frustration, the child must have experienced the mother’s pleasurable, reassuring presence.

The young teenager’s behavior suggests a lack of genuine enjoyment of her mother’s presence, which has caused a block in her post-weaning experience. In addition to this problem, it seems clear that the oedipal problem intervened to support her decision to take her own life, in line with a desire to punish her parents. The search of her parents’ room shows how determined she was to punish them so that they too could suffer as she suffered not being able to go to her boyfriend’s house. A form of emotional blackmail whose sole aim is to hurt the person who is supposed to be the source of her unhappiness (destruction of the “bad” object). As in the depressive position, there are good parents on one side and bad parents on the other (cleavage of the object). The “good” parents are those who would have allowed her to go to her boyfriend’s house, and the bad parents are those who refused. At this precise moment, the anguish linked to the bad parents invaded the teenager’s psychic

sphere. It was so powerful that it led her to seek a way not to kill the bad parents but to punish them for their affront.

Having forbidden her daughter to go to her boyfriend's house and discovered his WhatsApp conversations, the mother kept the father informed, who supported her without a ban decision. It's no coincidence that she took is undoubtedly what prompted the young girl's fatal decision. It's no coincidence that she took her own life with her father's gun (in the parent room), which she took the trouble to search for in a frenzied, impulsive move.

In the oedipal situation, a daughter who feels betrayed by her mother develops a castration complex^{5, 16}. This is compounded by the abandonment anguish associated with weaning. This crisis between the mother and the daughter directs the latter towards the father. Close and with him, the little girl seeks comfort and the restoration of the "god" object. In this case, it's not enough for the mother alone to be "good enough". The parental couple must be "good enough" to restore and maintain the child's psychic equilibrium. The father supported the mother's prohibition, and the young teenager must have felt betrayed (again) by the man she regarded as her savior, the one who should rehabilitate her missing "good" object. The father's rigorous attitude, no doubt accentuated by his status as a military, and the fact that the young girl is his firstborn child, failed to re-establish homeostasis in Nadié's psyche, which was already highly unstable due to the quality of her relationship with her mother (an unresolved depressive position). She thus found herself in a situation of double betrayal, which inevitably led to her suicide. This was not a suicide to escape reality, but a suicide to punish all those who had contributed to denying her access to the "good" object. For her, the fact that she used her father's weapon means that he was the one who killed her, with the connivance of her mother. Emotional blackmail to foment guilt in the father and strew disorder in the parental couple. The tyrannical superego (archaic superego) is what allows such action.

"Cruel, [the tyrannical superego] is the cause of much human distress and man's absurd infernal actions (suicide, murder, destruction, war). The 'good' that this savage superego commands us to find is not the moral good (i.e., what is good from society's point of view), but absolute enjoyment itself; it orders us to break all limits and achieve the impossible of enjoyment that is constantly being stolen"¹⁶.

V. Conclusion

Several problems can thus exist in one individual. The case we are looking at presents both a late-onset oral problem and an oedipal problem. Object loss anguish or depressive anguish is accompanied by an active oedipal situation problem. In a borderline psychic organization, several issues may coexist, but the central issue remains the depressive one. It is an abortive attempt to resolve the latter that the subject engages the Oedipus complex, without having the necessary modalities to confront it. This is how the oedipal problem contributes to transforming depressive anguish into something even more perverse than destructive. The father's attitude could have given this situation a different twist, but the failure of the parental couple seems to run very deep. In the end, with his suicide, the daughter wants everyone to know that her parents are "bad" parents so that they will feel oppressed (like her) and guilty of his murder (the ultimate in emotional blackmail).

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