The "Self-in-Relation"

Understanding Suicidal Behavior in Women

by Brenda Bettridge

One of the most consistent and puzzling aspects in the field of suicidology concerns the behavior of women. Not only do women report thoughts related to self-destructive impulses more often than men, but two to three times as many women undertake suicidal attempts. Given the well documented evidence that depression is more frequently experienced by women, these suicidal ideations and attempts would seem to naturally reflect the underlying cluster of dynamics clinically associating depression and suicide. But the higher incidents of female depression, self-destructive thoughts and suicide attempts stand in stark contrast to those rates reflecting completed acts — the intentional taking of one's life that many authors in this field have defined as a 'successful' suicide.

Indeed, there is a significant and consistently lower ratio of women who complete suicide as compared to men, or as contrasted to the frequency of female attempts themselves. Such differing behavior on the part of women has been noted to occur in many cultures and throughout the complete course of the life span. For the most part, theoreticians and clinicians working the area of suicide have neglected to provide for an adequate understanding of women's suicidal behavior or, as will be illustrated, have traditionally approached it from a psychological viewpoint that upholds age-old notions regarding women as histrionic, manipulative and dependent.

This paper will develop the position that an understanding of women's suicidal actions, specifically the consistency with which women attempt but do not complete suicide, can be further understood not by analysis based on the male paradigm of experience, but rather through an understanding of the theory of the self-in-relation as it is evolving in work at the Stone Center. As outlined by Miller (1984) and Surrey (1984), the understanding of women's psychological development within the context of the self-in-relation focuses on a number of interrelated aspects; including those of empathy, connectedness and mutuality, as both central to women's core self-structure and as important components of self-enhancement and growth. The differentiation of the self is seen as occurring not through processes of gradual separation and independence from others, but rather is understood as being achieved within the context of an active and relational process; through the mutual confirmation of one's capacities to enter into and sustain affective, empathic connections with others.

These key dimensions of women's psychological development, specifically as they are highlighted in conditions leading to depression and self-destructive acts, can serve to both further our understanding of the dynamics involved in women's suicidal attempts and help to more adequately explain the puzzle underlying women's low ratio of completed suicide. Self-in-relation theory, in conceptualizing women's psychological development from the viewpoint of the centrality of key relational aspects to women's core self-structure, provides an avenue for better understanding why it is that women, who so frequently experience and express a depressive sense of self, do not more often take their own lives.

Women's Suicidal Behavior

Theoretical explanations of the frequency of women's suicidal ideation and self-destructive attempts have historically been understood within the literature as reflecting women's psychological development as a passive, impulsive and dependent individual. Be it stemming from her gender-based intrapsychic configuration or from her socially ascribed and culturally reinforced sex role, these suicidal attempts have been identified as a typically 'feminine' way of expressing otherwise inhibited aggression and anger. Stengel (1974, p. 135) provides a particularly apt description of women's suicidal behavior from this viewpoint:

...Women seem more inclined to use the suicidal act as an aggressive and defensive weapon and as a manipulator of relationships than men probably because other means of exerting pressure, such as muscular power, are not at their disposal to the same degree as they are to men.

Such an approach towards women's suicidal behavior, inheriting as it does prevailing notions of aggression and anger as rooted in the experience of men, continues to provide an understanding of women in terms of inadequacy and failure vis-à-vis this male paradigm. The influence of this androcentric perspective on our understanding of women's psychological development, having been more fully explored in works by Gilligan (1982) and Miller (1976), is widely reflected within the suicidal literature. From such a theoretical perspective, women are understood as attempting suicide because they are more impulsive and hysterical, because alternative forms of manipulatory 'weapons' are not available to them and because women's aggression has fewer culturally sanctioned avenues for expression.

Although it is beyond the scope of this paper to review specific contributions on sex differences in suicide, the inadequacy of such conceptualizations of women's behavior as outlined above is reflected in the limited empirical literature available. The lack of theoretical understanding pertaining to the dynamics of women's suicidal behavior suggests that important questions and new lines of inquiry still need to be formulated. But perhaps most importantly, there exists within the present literature addressing women's suicidal behavior an important and consistent undercurrent which hints at the primacy and the centrality of relationships in these women's lives.

This underlying theme can be discerned throughout the literature in that a

woman's suicidal behavior is most often identified as a reaction to various aspects concerning her relational self. In contrast to men, these women are reported as responding, through the expression of self-destructive behavior, to what has alternatively been characterized as interpersonal conflict (Weissman, 1974), intense interpersonal involvement (Rosenthal, 1981) or interpersonal stress (Bancroft et al., 1979). Young girls and women who attempt suicide identify a lack of parental support and a feeling of estrangement from these significant relationships (Simons & Murphy, 1985) as being of central importance to them. For many suicidal women the focus of their concern is reported as involving severe interpersonal friction, including conflicts identified as relating to unhappy love affairs or marital discord (Lester & Lester, 1971). These relational aspects figure prominently throughout the literature on women's suicidal behavior and self-in-relation theory, specifically as it addresses women's experience of depression, provides for new interpretations of the dynamics which they reflect.

Kaplan (1984), in discussing the implications of self-in-relation theory for depression in women, explores four vital aspects which play a part in women's normative development and which relate, in their more heightened form, to the development of depression. These key elements include the vulnerability to loss, the inhibition of anger, the inhibition of assertiveness and a sense of low self-esteem. As would be expected, these aspects are frequently discussed in the literature on suicide and are identified as implicit in such self-destructive behavior. But while traditional interpretations of suicidal behavior identify these elements as a cluster of dynamics experienced similarly by men and women, Kaplan shows how they are strongly related to the normative experience of being a woman in our society. In re-examining these parameters of the suicidal process within the framework that Kaplan has proposed, we can further understand how it is that depression and suicidal attempts occur with such frequency in women.

1. Vulnerability to loss. A sense of emotional loss figures prominently in the suicide literature as a key element in the affective life of suicide attempters. As self-in-relation interprets it, a felt sense of loss often occurs for women not from a diminished supply of narcissistic gratification from others to the self but rather results from real or emotional disconnec-

tion from others — the availability to participate in mutually-fostering relationships. Loss through death presents a real ending of such affecting relatedness for some suicidal women. The death of a parent, so frequently noted within the literature as an important component in the history of some suicides, disrupts both the actual relationship and the inner construction of women's core self-structure. But most frequently, these women experience a loss of confirmation of their self through having lived in a prolonged state of disconnection within such important relationships. This failure in relational mutuality, especially when it occurs within the parent-child relationship, greatly contributes to a deep and pervasive sense of felt loss for women and can contribute to the profound sense of depression which finds expression through suicidal behavior.

2. Inhibition of anger and aggression. Self-in-relation theory understands the inhibition of anger and the turning of it "onto the self" as a reflection of the ways in which society has constricted its expression. Miller (1976, 1983) argues that women in turn come to believe that their anger is destructive and fear that its expression will disrupt relational ties. Rather than seeing anger as an emotional state which confirms feelings of hurt and thus provides for the validity of a woman's experience, it is instead associated with an inner feeling of worthlessness. Attempts to contain this anger can lead to an increased sense of powerlessness which, in cyclical form, only leads to more feelings of anger. Following Kaplan's formulations of how such anger may be experienced in depressed women, suicidal behavior may then serve as a means by which the destructiveness associated with such built-up anger can express itself while, at the same time, serving to protect others from what is construed as harmful to such relationships.

3. Inhibition of action and assertion. As Kaplan again illustrates, the fear of disconnection of relational ties and the resulting threat to the core self-structure can result in a depressed woman's constriction of selected areas of action. While such a woman may strongly inhibit activities which support her own goals, the felt failure in relationships will provoke further attempts to achieve connectedness with others. In such a context, a woman's suicidal attempt can be viewed not as a narcissistic and manipulatory 'weapon'; but rather as an activity aimed at commu-

nicating and further evoking affective dialogue with others. It is in this way that such actions are aimed principally towards enhancing relational ties. The individual's attempts may be thus understood as signifying a frustrated need for increased mutuality and a verification of her core self-structure.

4. Low self-esteem. As self-in-relation theory understands it, the resulting sense of failure to enhance connectedness and to create an active role in the relational process increases a depressed woman's doubts as to the value of her relational worth. The devaluing of these relational attributes and capacities and the constriction of avenues for their positive expression further contributes to a culturally-supported sense of inadequacy in women. The resulting spiral effect of this pattern for depressed women, in which their felt sense of inner 'badness' and their deep feelings of responsibility for relational failures causes them to search for ways to re-connect with others, is clearly reflected in the frequency of their suicidal attempts.

Self-in-relation theory's reinterpretation of these key dynamics in women's experience of depression provides for a new understanding of the processes underlying women's suicidal attempts. In particular, the concepts of vulnerability to loss, inhibition of anger, inhibition of action and low self-esteem are understood as reflecting potential sources of strength rather than of psychopathology. That these women's suicidal attempts are more often interpreted as expressions of weakness and immaturity within the suicide literature may reflect a perception of normality based more in the dominant, male experience.

The devaluing of these relational qualities and of an understanding of the motivational thrust behind them to grow within relationships is illustrated in an often-cited work by Marks & Haller (1977) on adolescent suicide attempters. The girls in this study were most often reported by their therapists as being "despondent, resentful, weak and unstable" (p. 398) and were found to be much more representative than boys of the general portrait of young attempters found within the suicide literature. Though these girls report having experienced both parents as passive while they were young and as having felt estranged from these vital relationships, the authors do not further explore the effects of such disconnection on these young women's core self-structure. In addition, the au-

thors observe that even within a profound state of distress these girls have the capacity to "almost always anticipate the emotional reactions of their mothers..." (p. 399). In interpreting women's psychological development from within a self-in-relation perspective, such affective attunement on the part of these suicidal girls can be understood as reflecting their need to attend to this important relationship while, at the same time, protecting it from their inner sense of 'badness' and felt destructiveness. By directing such empathic attentiveness towards this vital relationship, these young women express what Surrey has outlined as a key element in the formation of mutual empathy. Such suicidal attempts may then be understood, in part, as further actions aimed at encouraging previously thwarted mutuality in the daughter-mother relationship.

Attempted and completed suicide

While more traditional theories describe the depressive process underlying suicidal behavior as one generic to both men and women, self-in-relation theory, by illuminating the overlap between women's normative experience and the depressive state, offers new formulations regarding the dynamics of women's suicidal actions. In particular, women's psychological development as a self-in-relation — as one who experiences growth as occurring within mutuality and connectedness with others — clearly provides further understanding as to how it is that females might attempt suicide more frequently than men. We are now in a position to once again ask how it is, given the frequency of depression and suicidal attempts in the female population, that more of these same women don't go on to kill themselves.

Traditionally, theories of suicide have explained women's lower rate of completion as being due to the use of more 'passive' methods, such as analgesics and sedatives. More recently, it has been proposed that gender-based cultural expectations, while increasing women's vulnerability to depression and suicidal preoccupation, may also condition women to reject completed suicide as being that of a more masculine behavior. Thus Lester (1984) notes that choice of method, although continuing to reflect a lower rate of mortality for women when held constant, and societal expectations are the two best explanations for understanding women's less serious suicidal attempts.

While such theories continue to reflect a comparative understanding of women's behavior in terms of such concepts as "passive versus active" and "feminine versus masculine," self-in-relation theory, by emphasizing women's psychological development as one rooted in a relational process, suggests that a different interpretation of these depressive expressions is needed. In this regard, there are some hints within the literature that a woman's relational self may decrease her likelihood of committing suicide.

As mentioned previously, women who express a depressive sense of self through their suicidal actions have repeatedly been noted as being involved in and responding to aspects they identify as relational in context. Pokorny (1965, p. 490), in distinguishing the differing motivational thrusts behind attempted and completed suicides, offers an observation which is in line with self-in-relation theory:

> Suicide is intended to terminate life whereas suicide attempts, in the majority of cases, are aimed at improving one's life...Frequently, suicide attempt cases are 'moving towards others' in the course of the act, in contrast to suicides who are withdrawing.

Rosenthal, in addition, notes that a young woman's suicidal attempts more often stem from feelings of disappointment in herself and her relationships and states that intense interpersonal involvement, even when such relationships are strained or severed, may be truer for women than men. He then theorizes that women attempt suicide more frequently because of the stresses from these significant relationships and, at the same time, fail to kill themselves more often because these relationships per se provide some sort of safeguard against consummation of the act. As reflected in Kaplan's interpretation of the dynamics underlying women's depressive experience, such safeguards may be understood as reflecting women's repeated attempts to move towards engagement and mutuality within a relational process.

Conclusion

In understanding the self as one which is experienced and empowered from within a process of mutual relational ties, self-in-relation theory proposes that women's psychological development must be understood from a vantage point which takes into account women's needs for mutual empathy and engagement with others. In doing so, the dynamics which underline women's experience of depression and the expression of such felt despair through such acts as suicide can be more fully understood. While such revisions in women's psychology offer major refinements in our theoretical and clinical understanding of women's experience and expression of depression, self-in-relation theory may also provide for new theoretical perspectives underlying the strengths that safeguard both women's relational capacities and her hope for future connectedness.

Bibliography

Bancroft, J. et al. (1979) "The reasons people give for taking overdoses: a further inquiry," *British Journal of Medical Psychology* 52(4):353-65.

Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a Different Voice.* Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.

Kaplan, A.G. (1984) The 'self-in-relation': implications for depression in women, *Work in Progress* No. 14. Wellesley, Mass: Stone Center Working Paper Series.

Lester, D. (1984) Suicide in C.P. Widom (ed.). *Sex Roles and Psychopathology.* New York: Plenum Press pp. 145-156.

Lester, G. & Lester, D. (1971) *Suicide — The Gamble With Death.* Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice Hall.

Marks, P. & Haller, D. (1977) Now I lay me down for keeps: a study of adolescent suicide attempts, *Journal of Clinical Psychology* 33(2):391-400.

Miller, J.B. (1983) The construction of anger in women and men, *Work In Progress* No. 4. Wellesley, Mass: Stone Center Working Papers Series.

Miller, J.B. (1984) The development of women's sense of self, *Work in Progress* No. 12. Wellesley, Mass: Stone Center Working Papers Series.

Miller, J.B. (1976) *Towards a New Psychology of Women.* Boston: Beacon Press.

Pokorny, A.D. (1965) "On suicide and other forms of deviant behavior," *Journal of Criminal Law, Criminology & Police Science* 56:488-97.

Rosenthal, M.J.(1981) "Sexual differences in the suicidal behavior of young people," *Adolescent Psychiatry* 9:422-42.

Simons, R. & Murphy, P. (1985) "Sex differences in the causes of adolescent suicide ideation," *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 14(5):423-33.

Stengel, E. (1974) *Suicide and Attempted Suicide.* New York: Aronson.

Surrey, J. (1984) The 'self-in-relation': A theory of women's development, *Work in Progress* No. 13 Wellesley, Mass: Stone Center Working Papers Series.

Weissman, M. (1974) "The epidemiology of suicide attempts, 1960-1971," *Archives of General Psychiatry* 30:737-46.

Brenda Bettridge is a doctoral student in counselling psychology at the Université de Montréal; she completed her Masters in this field in 1983 at the University of Oregon. Her areas of interest include women's psychological development, adolescent psychology and psychotherapy and the philosophy of language. Her clinical and research interests have resulted in a combination of these two populations; thus adolescent female development is an area of special interest to her.

Five poems by DRAGICA TORIC-DRENOVAC

Translated from Serbo-Croatian by Slobodan Drenovac

Green Lovemaking

Silence and a street
Air, twilight-swathed

Someone pierced the silence
and on the piano of this picture
played totally wrong notes

*****

To be wise
at least in the first instance
the second is much tougher

*****

So you think you've sucked up
all my blues
Bear in mind that I'm only half beat
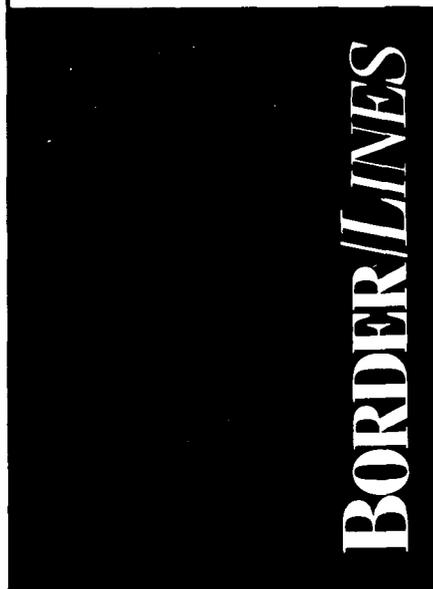and that in such a semi-swinging state
I anticipate a smile break

*****

Of all colours
I love most
the colour of your touch

*****

You and I
Two improbabilities
reconciled by an embrace