



AUTHOR: Tracy Cross

TITLE: Examining Claims About Gifted Children and Suicide

SOURCE: Gifted Child Today Magazine v19 p46-8 Ja/F '96

The magazine publisher is the copyright holder of this article and it is reproduced with permission. Further reproduction of this article in violation of the copyright is prohibited.

Welcome to the GCT column focusing on the social and emotional needs of gifted children. This issue's column deals with a very sobering topic; one too often appearing in the newspapers; one that elicits strong opinions; one that strikes fear in the hearts of parents--the suicides of gifted adolescents. In this column, I will provide an overview of what can and cannot be said on the topic based on actual research conducted. I will focus my comments on gifted adolescents even though preadolescents have died at their own hand. I will limit my comments to adolescents since they constitute by far the greater percentage of suicides (as compared to pre-teens) and since there is more "information" available on this age group. Please note the term "information" rather than data. This distinction foreshadows the paucity of research on the topic that will be discussed in the column.

One characteristic of our culture is the growing rate of its population that commits suicide. Increases over the past decade are seen in virtually every age group with the 15-24 age range showing significant increases. Suicide ranks as the second leading cause of death among young people (Capuzzi and Golden, 1988). One should note that adults older than 70 years show large increases in their suicide rate over the past 20 years. Within the large group of school age children are subgroups which have a much higher rate of suicide than the rate for the entire group. For example, troubled adolescents have been estimated to attempt suicide at a rate of 33 percent (Tomlinson-Keasey & Keasey, 1988). From these studies we can conclude that the rate of adolescent suicide has risen over the past decade, as have the rates of other groups. We can also conclude that subgroups vary in their rate of suicide.

A significant contribution of previous research on adolescent suicide has been the determination that there are significant risk factors. The following is a list of significant risk factors associated with adolescent suicide:

- * psychiatric disorders such as depression and anxiety;
- * drug and alcohol abuse;
- * genetic factors;
- * family loss or disruption;
- * friend or family member of suicide victim;
- * homosexuality;
- * rapid socio-cultural change;
- * media emphasis on suicide;
- * impulsiveness and aggressiveness; and
- * ready access to lethal methods (Davidson & Linnoila, 1991).

One question I am often asked is whether the suicide rates of gifted adolescents differ significantly from the larger population of adolescents. In my own research, colleagues and I have conducted psychological autopsies of three gifted adolescents who committed suicide. In our literature review we found several interesting patterns. Pattern one was the tendency for authors to make conclusions and recommendations about the incidence and nature of gifted suicide without supporting data. Moreover, general findings from marginally related studies were used to support the contention that the rate of suicide among gifted adolescents is the same as or lower than the larger population of adolescents. Again, these statements were based on no direct evidence.

Pattern two was the tendency of authors to cite each others' work based upon speculation. The net effect was the reification of that speculation. This pattern exists throughout research bodies and is not unique to this lore. What makes this research body different is that there is virtually no true research at the foundation of the base, yet truisms abound. A third and more subtle pattern in the lore was the tendency for authors to advocate for gifted children amidst their manuscripts. Some of the pieces seemed less like efforts at research and more like efforts to protecting the image of gifted children.

GIFTED SUICIDE RATES

Let me reiterate what was most often suggested in the literature, that is that the suicide rate of gifted adolescents is the same as or lower than the general population of adolescents. The basis for this claim is conceptual, not empirical. In fact, there is so little evidence available about gifted adolescents on this topic specifically, that nothing should be concluded at this point. In other words, we cannot know.

Although seemingly an innocuous difference in assessments, the ramifications can vary significantly. For example, there is a growing number of academics considering the population of gifted adolescents in smaller more representative subgroups than in an omnibus fashion. In this case, students with differing characteristics might have markedly different incidents of suicide during adolescence. Some evidence for this claim can be found in research that has studied the lives of a large group of eminent people in the artistic and literary world. Among this subgroup, a higher incidence of suicide by the age of 30 was found (Ludwig, 1995). He also found that "investigative types" (e.g., scientists) committed suicide at a

higher rate than the general population after the age of 60 (Ludwig, 1995). I must interject a serious caution here. These data were drawn from a much older population and given the nature of the risk factors often associated with suicide, there may be a limited ability to generalize the findings. So, even though it stands to reason that subgroups of adolescents are at greater risks of committing suicide than other groups, there is not enough evidence to conclude whether gifted adolescents per se have a higher than average risk.

SOME REASONS THERE ARE FEW STUDIES TO DRAW ON

There are several reasons why there have been few studies conducted on the suicides of gifted students. A few include:

- * The current data collected nationally about adolescent suicide do not include whether the child was gifted;
- * The varying definitions of gifted and talented used across the United States make it difficult to know whether a child who committed suicide was gifted;
- * Issues of confidentiality limit access to data;
- * Conducting psychological autopsies of suicide victims is an expensive endeavor in terms of time and money;
- * Since more adolescent aged students than preadolescents commit suicide combined with the fact that secondary schools are not as actively engaged in identifying gifted students makes conducting research on this topic more difficult; and
- * The fact that the terminal nature of suicide requires certain types of information to be garnered after the event.

PROMISING STUDIES

I am aware of a handful of studies that show promise of contributing to the research lore in significant ways. Two are looking specifically at suicide ideation, one at the secondary level and one among honors students in college. A third study showing promise is the psychological autopsies previously noted. Combined, they will add significantly to the current level of understanding.

One interesting question that recognizes human variation within the gifted population deals with a topic of considerable debate among academics. That is, "What specific role, if any, do the qualities that some gifted adolescents possess play in their suicides?" For example, possible connections between gifted children's unusual sensitivities and perfectionism (Delisle, 1986) and isolationism and introversion (Kaiser & Berndt, 1985) with suicidal behavior have been raised. In the psychological autopsies being conducted, we have found that Piechowski's treatment of Drabrowski's theories have been helpful in interpreting the data collected. Some of the characteristics we have found beneficial in the data analysis phase include: intellectual-introspection, avid reading, curiosity, imaginational-fantasy, animistic and magical thinking, mixing truth and fiction, illusions, emotional, strong affective memory, concern with death, depressive and suicidal moods, sensitivity in relationships, and feelings of inadequacy and inferiority (Piechowski, 1979).

What can we say about the suicides of gifted adolescents?

- * Adolescents are committing suicide;
- * Gifted adolescents are committing suicide;
- * The rate of suicide has increased over the past decade for the general population of adolescents within the context of an overall increase across all age groups;
- * It is reasonable to conclude that the incidence of suicide of gifted adolescents has increased over the past decade, keeping in mind that there are no definitive data on the subject; and
- * Given the limited data available, we cannot ascertain whether the incidence of suicide among gifted adolescents is different than in the general population of adolescents.

More studies must be conducted before answers to these questions can be provided.

Added material

Tracy Cross, Ph.D.

REFERENCES

- Davidson, L. & Linnoila, M. (1991). Risk factors for youth suicide. Washington, D.C.: NIMH.
- Delisle, J. (1986). Death with honors: Suicide and the gifted adolescent. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64, 558-560.
- Ludwig, A.L. (1995). *The price of greatness: Resolving the creativity and madness controversy*. New York: Guilford.
- Kaiser, C.F. & Berndt, D.J. (1985). Predictors of loneliness in the gifted adolescent. *Gifted Child Quarterly*, 29, 74-77.
- Piechowski, M. (1979). Developmental potential. In N. Colangelo & T. Zaffran (Eds.), *New voices in counseling the gifted*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt.
- Tomlinson-Keasey, C. & Keasey, B. (1988). "Signatures" of suicide. In D. Capuzzi & Golden (Eds.), *Preventing Adolescent Suicide* (pp. 213-245). Muncie, IN: Accelerated Development.

WBN: 9600104914009