May 11, 2006

Letter to the editor: Suicide and Mormon culture

Kevin J Black

Available at: https://works.bepress.com/kjb/27/
Your recent series on teenage suicide was an important public service. Suicide is a major cause of death for teenagers throughout America, and teen suicide rates are especially high in Utah. Given its public health importance and the severity of the human catastrophe it represents, public awareness is remarkably low, and series such as this one are desperately needed.

On the other hand, I feel the author, Dennis Romboy, missed a chance in the article "Some say LDS culture is a factor in suicides" (April 28, 2006) to debunk a myth that may hurt people. The title reflects the article’s tone and content, which leave the impression that "LDS culture" may raise the risk of suicide. The hypothesis is presented by anonymous mother, who feels that a "culture of high expectations" in the church leads to guilt and suicide. On its face, this would be a reasonable possibility.

However, as a thoughtful physician pointed out half a century ago, "one good experiment is worth a dozen subtle theories" (Meyerson, 1944). The facts do not at all support the idea that "LDS culture" raises the suicide rate. In fact, the facts suggest that active participation in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints may be a strong preventive factor in the fight against suicide.

The most direct evidence comes from the study Mr. Romboy cites of all suicides in Utah men and boys in the years 1991-1995 (Hilton et al, 2002). With a little arithmetic, one can compute from their data the suicide rates in LDS versus other male Utahns. In every age group studied, the suicide rate in is lower for Latter-day Saints. In the teen and 20-24 age groups, the LDS suicide rate is less than half that of other Utahns of comparable age (28.0 vs. 59.7 per 100,000 for 15- to 19-year-olds, 30.4 vs 70.1 in the 20-24 age group).

Another observation from this study bears on culture, not church membership. If "LDS culture" were a toxic factor leading to suicide, one would expect that those who avoided association with the church would lower their risk for suicide. On the contrary, in 30- to 34-year-old LDS church members who had never been ordained elders -- essentially, men who have not attended LDS meetings for over a decade -- the suicide rate was more than five times higher than that of men who had been ordained (60.6 vs 10.9 per 100,000). Similarly, among BYU students, higher levels of religiosity were associated with lower levels of depression, fewer past suicide attempts, and lower rates of suicidal thoughts (Zhang and Thomas, 1991).

These findings might be suspect if they arose in isolation, but they do not. Of 58 published studies of mental health in Latter-day Saints, only four found any negative associations with higher levels of religiosity; the overwhelming majority were positive (Judd, 1999). Religiously observant people in general have lower mortality from a number of causes, including suicide (Jarvis and Northcott, 1987).

We have to look elsewhere for the answer for the high teen suicide rate in Utah. I am inclined to suspect other factors mentioned in the series, such as the high availability of guns and the routine denial of psychiatric treatment benefits by the state and other insurers.

How do we reconcile the facts noted above with the anonymous mother's impression that suicide in LDS youth comes from high expectations in Mormon culture? A survey of women in Farmington, New Mexico, suggests an answer. Depression scores correlated with perfectionism in Mormon women -- but equally so in Protestant women (Williams, 1999). So suicidal Mormon teens may ruminate over failure to meet Mormon standards, but other suicidal teens simply find other failures to feel guilty about.

True, Latter-day Saints are taught to strive for perfection. However, they also learn that their religion centers on redemption from sin and salvation from imperfection through Christ, that the spirit lives on after death, that suicide is wrong, and that God loves them no matter what they do. Their bishop is told that the youth are his most important concern. Their parents are repeatedly taught that their duty to their family is paramount. As Mr. Romboy's article notes, the adults around them are continually exhorted to reach out
to the youth, to listen to them, and to love them. We cannot definitively conclude from available evidence that conversion or increased contact with "Mormon culture" actually prevents suicide, but at least it is a hypothesis that fits the data.

The article quotes Elder Alexander Morrison as saying that those with suicidal thoughts deserve psychiatric treatment in addition to pastoral counseling. This is an important point. However, the facts would suggest that increased support from church members and leaders may quite possibly help save lives. The article would have been better titled, "LDS culture may reduce the risk of suicide."

Kevin J. Black, M.D.

Dr. Black is [May, 2006] Associate Professor of Psychiatry, Neurology, Radiology and Neurobiology at Washington University School of Medicine in St. Louis, and currently [May, 2006] serves as bishop in the Webster Groves ward of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. The remarks here represent his own views and not necessarily those of the University or the church.

References


