

Addressing the High Spate of Suicide Cases in Today's Nigeria: An Ethical and Philosophical Appraisal

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Abstract: The problem of mental health is a global challenge that has been estimated to be affecting about one billion population presently. The recent appointment of the first Minister for Prevention of Suicide by the government of Britain underscores that Nigerian is not alone in the threat of suicide in our contemporary times. However with the tagging of Nigerian as the poverty capital of the world, the third or the fourth of the world most terrorized nation, it may not be long before the country may also be listed on the global index as the most suicide prone nation, given the rising statistics of suicide cases in recent times. This work is therefore an attempt at addressing the high spate of suicide from ethical and philosophical perspective. It applied a survey approach in data collection while content analysis technique was employed in the analysis of data. The work discovered that stress, poverty, self-medication, bad governance and parenting style are some of the factors that promote suicide in Nigeria. Therefore, recommended for the promotion of compulsory life style education, family life education, Christian education and evangelism as well as the establishment of foster parent for indigent member of the society as a way forward

Keywords: Suicide, ethics, stress, poverty, greed, injustice, life-style/family life Education, Christian Education

1.0 Introduction

According to Dodd and Jack (2018) mental health is increasingly becoming a global challenge deriving from their submission that states that an estimated population of a billion people is its endangered list. They posit that the economic implication of the above trend globally is an economic cost of about \$16tn by 2030. Unfortunately they note that the poor countries of the world to which Nigeria is a microcosm bear the brunt of depressive disorder which often terminates in suicide. Thus they note this is predicated on the fact that while one in 27 mentally endangered individuals are helped in poor countries the reverse is the cases in advanced nations where one in five cases are usually assisted. Moreover they state that as a means of curbing suicide related threats advanced nations have started introducing Mental Health first aid in the work place.

Pardes (2016) collaborates the above view of global threat of suicide when he states that suicide is among the top ten causes of death in the U.S. Besides he avers that while one in four people suffers from some type of mental illness, yet two thirds of them do not get the treatment they need. Put simply he submits that mental illness is the largest single health challenge in the world which he notes calls for urgent need to reach out to the mentally challenged in both the advanced and developing world.

Ramsammy (2017) in his contribution states that though Guyana is among the worst suicide affected nations in the world, the scourge still remains a globally public health crisis. Consequently he makes a case for adoption of language approach as a platform for demystifying and decimating the much dreaded scourge as was used in checkmating HIV stigma. This he notes is predicated on the fact people don't commit suicide the day they die of suicide.

Singh(2017) quoting Young Kim stated pointedly in Berkeley Political Review online magazine when he avers that suicide is everywhere, as predicated on the fact "that people of all classes, ages and genders are committing suicide at exceptionally high rates". Besides he opines that the profound economic growth of the nation which has put South Korea among the 13th largest economy in the world has also brought about stress as a major social change undermining the mental health of many. From the foregoing, suicide can best be described as a modern day global scourge that should not be treated with a wave of hand. This is because suicide has no age, economic, religion, social, political, ethnic or geographic boundary.

The above submission is put more succinctly by World Health Organization (WHO) when it states that "close to 800,000 people die due to suicide every year. Moreover it adds that suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15-29 year old. Besides, it states that while about 79% of global suicides occur in low and middle countries the common methods of suicide globally include ingestion of pesticide, hanging, and the use of firearms. This was why WHO puts it tersely when it states that suicide does not just occur in high income countries, but it is a global threat in all regions of the world. Alabi *et al* (2014) are in agreement to the above view when they opine that suicide is a major cause of death worldwide and furthermore is a deadly factor that

accounts for an estimated one million deaths annually. Putting it very graphically they note that suicide does not only account for one death every forty seconds, but it becomes very worrisome when one notes that for every suicide case there is about more than twenty five times attempted suicide cases. Furthermore they submit that every completed suicide cases impacts on at least six other individuals.

1.1 Theoretical Framework

This work shall adopt the social exchange theory which according to Bradbury & Kamey (2010) posits that relationship partners focus on the positive outcomes as well as the negative outcomes of their relationships. In other words people may choose to remain or break their relationship with another which may be an individual, a group or the society depending on their actual or perceived rewards or loss. These rewards or loss might be material or social in nature. By implication individual choose to take or sustain their lives depending on their perceived gain or loss in the network of societal relationships. Furthermore this study shall engage the structural conflict theory. According to Marxist dialectical school of thought with supporters like Karl Marx, Engels, Lenin, the structural theory holds that the problems of society is as a result of the particular ways society are structured. (Marx and Engels, in Faleti 2011). What this means is that societal problems to which individuals problems such as suicide are subsumed derives their root from structural underpinnings of society.

1.2 Concept Clarification

Suicide: The term suicide is defined by Chambers Dictionary New Edition as the act of killing oneself intentionally. Etymologically suicide is derived from the Latin word "*Suicidum*" which means the taking of one's life. According to Arua *et al* (2012:158) suicide taken in the stringent sense is not just any type of killing of oneself but is the direct killing of oneself on one's own authority. In other words it is death carried out outside authority of God or the state. It is self-inflicted death voluntarily carried out. It is personal abuse of one's fundamental human right to live which may involve direct termination of one's life or the voluntarily withdrawal from food, drugs and medical care or those things that are necessary to sustain life.

Ethical: The term ethics from which the word ethical is derived according to Daniel & Caroli (2000:319) in popular parlance shares the same meaning with the word morality. However they state that within the academic discipline while morality refers to the concrete manner in which people act and order their lives, ethics on the other relates to the science that gives articulation, explanation and justification of why and how people do what they do. Ethics therefore as used in this context refers to the attempt to give reason to the how and why of human conduct or behavior. It is the philosophical approach to provide guidelines that helps to decide rationally what is good and what is bad. Arua *et al* (2012) are in agreement to the above view when they posit that ethics refers to the normative science that deals with the rightness or wrongness of a specific course of action within the context of a given society. Ethical, therefore refers to that which relates to ethics or morally approvable action when referring to an action that affects others.

2.0 Global Trend of Suicide

The appointment by Theresa May the Prime Minister of Britain of a Minister for suicide prevention underscores the significance being attached to the increasing trend of suicide in the nations. This becomes even more pertinent as the above appointment was made in the eve of her hosting international epoch making event, the global mental health summit. Furthermore, the *tribune online reports* that an estimated 4,500 people take their own lives every year while making the above appointment the minister was charged with evolving "effective plans to stop unnecessary deaths" as well as to look into how technology could help identify those who are at risk.

Besides it notes that her government promised to expand the support in schools by making new mental head support teams available to students in addition to offering them regular health and mental check. Moreover, one million, eight hundred pounds (£1.8m) was pledged by her to the Samaritans who will help to provide free line for the next four years for the endangered persons. What this means is that suicide is a global scourge, that is posing economic, political and social threat to nations.

2.1 Suicide in Nigeria

According the Business day (2019) the number of Nigerian's teenagers and young adult that have taken to suicide as viable options is on the increase yearly. Obinna and Olawale state that the time for engaging National Suicide Prevention Strategy as well as signing of Mental Health Bill into law is now. This he notes is predicated on the fact that there are increasing number of Nigerians that are opting for suicide as the way out of the various harsh economic challenges enveloping the nation arising from some of the following namely:

- Closure of many local industries while many are on the verge of being shut down.

- Increasing turnout of graduate unemployment.
- High level of insecurity leading to the increasing turnover of internally displaced persons in the country.

2.2 Causes of Suicide

- i) **Stress:** While all the reasons causing suicide may never be known, Singh (2017) citing the Journal of Royal Society of Medicine states that there is a correlation between economic stress and emotional wellbeing. According to him, South Korea's work and school cultures are lethally toxic. For instance he notes that most children suicide cases are caused by stress relating to education especially when family prestige is tied to getting into the top three universities in the country. The situation often exerts the demand upon the adolescents to put up to sixteen hours of study on a daily basis. Besides he notes that those driven by the philosophy of being rich and never die poor may often become obsessed with their work that in some cases result to suicide cases. Stress when uncontrolled can lead to depression which is an abnormal emotional expression that breeds self-hatred, hopelessness, helplessness, emptiness, isolationalism and in extreme cases violent behavior that may end in suicide. This is corroborated by Prof Micheal Ezenwa, the national President of Nigeria Psychological Association, when he posits that depression arising from stress is a major risk factor of suicide. Furthermore he notes that several factors may create the above stress such as cultural, social or economic forces. Suicide is therefore a product of externally driven variables that exert undue negative influence or pressure on life protecting instinct.
- ii) **Poverty:** Poverty has been implicated as another cause while some adult persons commit suicide. Singh (2017) states that poverty arising from retirement without pension, loss of employment or lack of support from family, breakdown of family structure, loneliness, poor and worried family members often resort to suicide to end the ordeal of protracted life of poverty. According to Akpononu (2019) economic hardship, shame, ignominy as well as disgrace can lead to suicide. For some it is a spontaneous thought, while for others it is a product of protracted hardship resulting in their loss of focus, which may lead to hanging oneself, plunging into a lagoon or taking overdose of drug. However he notes that whatever may be the cause of suicide, the resort to taking one's life is not good and should not be encouraged by the society or individual. Moreover Agbakwuru(2019) is in agreement to the the above submission when he opines that suicide in Nigeria is attributed to unemployment, job loss, high cost of living among others.
- iii) **Self-medication:** People adopt severe methods such as club, pornography, social media, religious activity, sports and alcoholism as a way of filling the gap of the emptiness and finding meaning in life. In many cases, such people engage in abuse of alcohol and send themselves to untimely death.
- iv) **Economic growth:** Singh (2017) states that South Korea is a typical example that economic prosperity is not a passport to happiness. According to him, as the economic success of the nation grew tremendously the suicide rate increased tremendously in the country, thereby contradicting the traditional belief that happiness is related to economic prosperity.
- v) **Bad governance:** Zakariyu (2019) writing on the profound consequences of bad leadership of APC government in Nigeria states that:

APC must face the truism that have divided our people, wrecked our once robust economy, returned our nation to a debtor status and brought so much misery to the extent that our compatriots now resort to suicide and slavery mission abroad as options.

Furthermore, he noted that the above bad government has only succeeded in expanding the cost of insecurity, dependency amongst others of Nigerian people.
- vi) **Terminal diseases:** Furthermore, Akpononu (2019) notes that those who have suffered too long in terminal disease may wish to shorten their further suffering through suicide. This may have been the advise of the wife of Job in the Bible when she counseled him to curse God and die. By implication she may have implied that Job should terminate his life forcefully and thereby put God to shame who has kept him alive even under very dreadful life threatening malady. (Job 2 V 9-10). Job refusal to fast-track his death by cursing God showed his aversion to the idea of one playing a role to end his life by choice.
- vii) **Hard (Bad) parenting lifestyle:** According to Akpunonu (2019) some parents drive their children to suicide due to hard or bad parenting lifestyle that unleash too much criticism, lack of love and over comparison of their children with others, to even cynicism that are expressed in such words as: "You are just in this house eating and getting fat". Furthermore he cites a case of a mother who confided in him over her daughter who told her she was shocked when her daughter hinted to her that she was going to end her life because she was being bullied at home and at school. Hard parenting style or over strictness in child-rearing in many cases breed frustration in children as they strive persistently to develop self- autonomy to

no avail. The sad suicide story of the two Nigerian youths who committed suicide because their parents refused them from marrying each other underscores the ugly consequence of parents being over rigid in issues that bothers on their children development

3.0 Ethical perspective of Suicide

According to Prof Chris Nnadi most of the social ills in our nation today are predicated on “the breach of harmony between the earthly and the spiritual dimension of life.” This breach when present he notes results in the unleashing of divine wraths on the living such as untimely deaths, childlessness, war and suicide. There is an adage that says that no sin goes unpunished. Ethics is the instrument for measuring the goodness or badness of a conduct. There is a complete deviation from normal way of behavior from the top to the bottom in our nation. This section will examine some ethical perspectives fostering suicide in Nigeria.

Greed: Lack of proper home upbringing arising from inordinate quest for wealth has led many parents to throw off the responsibility of the moral development of their wards to the winds thereby in most cases unleashing children into the society who are denied of primary or fundamental coping mechanism for effective living. The result is that such children grow up without the foundational remote control or cautionary attitudes needed to restrain them emotionally when they encounter head-on collision with the society that is not ready to succumb to their brute approach to life. Confronted with the above dilemma of stubborn society that demands all to conform in order to succeed or be crushed some folks see the option of suicide as solution to overcoming their recurring decimal of failure in life. Greed therefore should be as an ethical aberration that serves as a precursor to suicide. Greed according to The Chambers Dictionary is defined as an attitude characterized by quest to increase, or to obtain or keep more than ones share, excessive desire for more, gluttony, covetousness. According to Wikipedia online greed or avarice is an inordinate or insatiable longing for material gain, be it food, money, status, or power. Moreover it defines same as an inordinate desire to acquire or possess more than one need. Greed therefore is the culture of unrestrained appetite for multiplying wealth be it material or non-material. When parents or individuals become obsessed with the drive to make money at the expense of building strong families they lay foundation for distorted society that could unleash termination of one’s life as a norm rather than misnomer. Greed is an evil that does no one any good and as such individuals and society must guide against it. This is aptly captured by Erich Fromm in his work American Psychologist Escape from Freedom and cited by Wikiquote *inter alia*

“Greed is a bottomless pit which exhausts the person in an endless effort to satisfy the need without ever reaching satisfaction. The Holy Scriptures is in agreement to the above philosophy when it states that whoever loves money never has enough. (Ecclesiastes 5:10). Moreover, it counsels all to guard against all kinds of greed as one’s life is not dependent on the abundance of his material possessions.

Injustice: Justice as an ethical dimension is grossly an endangered component in our national life. According to Arua et al (2012:286) justice as one of the four cardinal virtues serves as the great regulator of relations between persons, persons and institutions, and institutions with one another. Structural injustices arising from greedy politician and the very powerful in the society who appropriate for themselves what rightly belongs to everyone promote a society of discontent citizenry. Those who refuse to feed the hungry, shelter the destitute, clothe the naked when they have been made stewards over men by man or the divine, exhibit an unjust demeanor that engender social discontent and conflict. Schroeder (2009) as cited from Basil of Caesarea puts it more pointedly when it states as follows: "The bread you are holding back is for the hungry, the clothes you keep put away are for the naked, the shoes that are rotting away with disuse are for those who have none, and the silver you keep buried in the earth is for the needy".

3.1 The Philosophical Perspective of Suicide: Suicide remains one of the complex unresolved philosophical problems. Philosophers have differed in their perception of the act. The moral issues around it has remained contentious, with some insisting it is unacceptable and should attract sanctions, while some contend that suicide is a choice and people should be free to choose when and how they wish to die. Camus observes that judging whether life is or not worth living amounts to answering the fundamental question of philosophy (Murad & Ayesha,2010). This underscores why the issue is contentious.

One of the major arguments against suicide has been on moral grounds. Most ancient philosophers as well some contemporary thinkers contend that suicide is morally unacceptable. Socrates, one the ancient philosophers, according to Plato had argued that it is not lawful for someone to take his own life. He contends that it is “exceptional due to the fact that when it is better dead, he is allowed to be his own benefactor and must wait for the hand of another. This is due to the fact that a man is a prisoner who doesn’t have any right to open the door and run away”. (Obasola & Omomia, 2014). The gods he contends are our shield. This being the case, a man must take his own life but patiently wait for god to call him home.

Aristotle contends that suicide is disgraceful and is an offence against human society (Murad & Ayesha, 2010). And this is the reason why society is against it and regards it as an unacceptable conduct. It follows that the state therefore, can outlaw any act that is offensive to it. This is one of the duties of the state and by implication has a right to outlaw suicide. On the other hand, since it is the duty of every member of the society to obey the laws of the state, everyone is bound to obey that law. Any one that takes his own life has disobeyed the law of the state and has committed an illegal act. This view is equally shared by some other philosophers like Hegel and Thomas Aquinas. They contend life is a property of the state and no one has right to dispose of it since the state has the legal and divine duty to protect life (Obasola ,Kehinde & Omomia, 2014). The major duty of the state is to protect life and property and if the state fails in this, it has failed one its cardinal duties.

Most Stoic philosophers do not see anything morally or legally wrong with suicide. They contend that rather than suffer endlessly or go through protracted pain, it is ethically right if the one decides to take one's own life. Their reason might be that since the person bears the pain alone and the society has no way of helping him out of the pain or even share the pain and suffering with him, it has no power to restrict the persons' decision to end the pain and suffering by ending life itself. In this instance the only thing that can bring the pain to end is the self-termination of life. It then implies that the stoics do not recognize any higher sovereign power over life, it perceives life as a property of the individual person for which he is at liberty to dispose of any time and any way it seems right to him. Epictetus, a stoic philosopher, as cited in (Obasola & Omomia, 2014) contends that death is not wrong, neither is it evil. The implication is that death as long as it's choice was freely made by a person is not wrong. It then follows that one is at liberty to choose to live or choose to die, if he no longer finds pleasure in living.

The sanctity of human life is a doctrine which has been canvassed for centuries. There is a common understanding that the human species is superior specie when compared to other animate things on earth. This is a value which man has conferred on itself as the ruler and manager of every other creature and asset on earth. It is also on record that since we are social animals, with friends, relatives and relatives, it appears the loss of a life conveys pain across many people. Though the dead may seize from pain, the others affected by the loss as a result close association and attachment are thrown into great pain. So in considering the rationality of suicide, it is not only the interest of the victim that should count. The interest of other concerned members of the society and family must come into play. This is the reason why humans mourn their dead. Therefore, my death does not belong to me alone. Just as my life affects other people positively, my death equally affects them negatively and since my right stops where others started, it implies no man has absolute right to dispose his life without encroaching on the right of happiness of others.

4.0 Conclusion:

This work has observed that suicide though a global concern has assumed an unprecedented level in Nigeria in recent times. The situation is made more pathetic as the nation continues to drift from bad to worse in all frontiers of socio-political and economic indices that are fundamental for human survival and development. Several factors were highlighted as causes for rising trend of suicide such as stress, poverty, poor parenting style, bad governance, and unconverted life. Furthermore it identified the ethical and philosophical underpinnings of suicide.

5.0 Recommendations:

The following recommendations were suggested as some of the means of reducing the increasing rate of suicide in Nigeria.

- 1) Introduction of compulsory life style education in our educational curriculum from primary to tertiary levels of education by the government with a view to helping the citizenry develop life coping attitudes early.
- 2) Promotion of quality parenting as well as family life education by both religious community, universities and the government so as to create a sustainable gap bridging in the rising trend of dysfunctional families.
- 3) Eradication of poverty, unemployment, and marginalization through a restructured Nigerian nation that guarantees equity, social justice, equality before the law, demonetization of political office that dehumanizes and confines majority of Nigerians to extreme poverty and misery.
- 4) Establishment of foundation for prevention of suicide that would be charged with sponsoring and funding research, mental health awareness campaign in homes, schools and offices as well as development of new ways of treating mentally challenged persons.
- 5) Promotion of Christian education and evangelism by religious community, media, schools and parents with a view to leading our citizenry to personal faith in the Lord Jesus Christ which is the basis for

becoming spiritually converted to a life of intrinsic and extrinsic harmony __harmony with oneself, others and God.

- 6) According to World Health Organization, every suicide leaves behind a train of tragedy that affects families, communities, and entire countries. It notes that suicide though a serious public problem, it is preventable given timely and evidence based intervention. Individuals should therefore partner with parents and government to serve as volunteer force for giving prompt intervention to people who by their actions or inaction show signs of potential suicide embracers through love in action, notification of critical agencies of government or even serve as foster parents
- 7) Government should promote foster parent education experts with a view to engaging them officially or on part time as special aids in the rural and urban areas to the susceptible suicide prone individuals.

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