

Self-Affirmation through Death: A Contribution to the Sociology of Suicide through Literature

Glenn W. Muschert, *Miami University*

This study contributes to the sociological study of suicide via an exploration of the implications and application of literary texts in sociological analysis. The examination of two pairs of literary texts suggests that some cases of suicide can be self-affirming. When the characters find themselves in circumstances that threaten their perception of who they are in their social contexts, they may choose the possibility of death over life with a change in self-concept. The interpretation of the four selected narrative cases of self-affirmative suicide is nestled in complexities of self-identity: two from *The Iliad* by Homer, and one each from *Andorra* and *I'm Not Stiller* by Max Frisch. Relating the findings to Turner's theory of impulsive versus institutional loci of real self, the article argues that institutionally constituted characters are more likely than impulsive-selves to find self-killing an acceptable resolution to their crises of identity. The findings are discussed in relation to classic theory in the sociology of suicide, concepts of the real self, and the use of literature in social science research.

Introduction

Cooley (1964 [1902]:181) asserted it to be a "palpable absurdity" to disagree with Goethe:

Only in man does man know himself;
Life alone teaches each one what he is.

Ironically, it is perhaps also true that death requires the individual to address the question: What is my true self?

This study contributes to the sociological study of suicide, via an exploration of the implications and application of literary texts in sociological analysis. The examination of two pairs of literary texts suggests that some cases of suicide can be self-affirming. That is, when characters find themselves in circumstances that threaten their perception of who they are in their social contexts, they may choose the possibility of death over life with a change in self-concept. The interpretation of the four selected narrative cases of self-affirmative suicide is nestled in theories of real self (Turner 1976). Through an examination of the characters' points of view concerning self-killing, this study explores self-affirmative suicide as a potential resolution of a crisis of self-identity.

Sociologists have interpreted suicide behavior as one type of individual response to a constellation of causes arising from social structure, a concretization of the presence of cultural values in individual consciousness. Therefore, the study of suicide can tell us not only about those who engage in that behavior, but

it can also reveal something about the society in which it takes place. The examination of the example cases tells us about the changing nature of self in society, which Turner (1976) argued was becoming increasingly constituted in the impulse-driven type of self. In addition, this study assesses the feasibility of using literary narratives to examine cases of self-affirming suicide, in order to fathom what these accounts can tell us about the complexity of this behavior.

Suicide

While there are many varieties of suicide behavior, this study examines narrative accounts of self-affirming suicide for two reasons. First, issues surrounding self-affirming suicide can help to clarify the complex nature of self articulated in many suicidal acts. Examining a type of self-killing might seem an unlikely avenue for the study of selfhood, in that the behavior is an intentional behavior that could lead to the person's annihilation. While the use of suicide to solve an individual crisis of identity might seem paradoxical, there are many cases of self-killing that are self-affirming. "We actually see the individual . . . seek to strip himself of his personal being in order to be engulfed in something which he regards as his true essence" (Durkheim 1951 [1897]:225). Second, the topic of suicide occupies a central position in the history of sociology by virtue of its having been the subject of Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) classic study. In an intellectual climate of increasingly blurred genres, the empirical topic and Durkheim's work serve as starting points for the exploration of the analytical usefulness of transcending disciplinary boundaries, specifically between literature and sociology.

Through the history of suicide studies, there have been numerous sociological ways of thinking about the topic (see Charmaz [1980:241–50] for discussion of the psychological and medical perspectives). The remainder of this section outlines these perspectives, concluding with a clarification of the definition of suicide employed in the present study. Durkheim (1951 [1897]:46–52) approached suicide as a social fact, something to be studied as a phenomenon *sui generis*. Latent in his approach was the assumption that suicide behavior is inherently social in nature, and consequently the micro-social contexts of suicide acts and the individual meanings of suicide behaviors themselves were irrelevant to the empirical study of suicide rates.

Quite differently, Douglas (1966:249–75) argued the importance of understanding the socially situated meaning of suicide behavior. Therefore, he argued for the relevance of understanding suicide behavior from the point of view of the suicidal individual. In this approach, the focus of study should therefore be the interactions and communications that preceded the suicide behavior, because these would offer the greatest insight into the meaning the individuals gave to their suicides. Another scholar also focused on the social contexts of suicidal

acts (Taylor 1978:373–4), arguing that the goal of the sociology of suicide should be to provide descriptive material that would help scholars to understand the real-world phenomenon of suicide. Taylor argued that traditional scholars wrongly concentrated on the outcome of the behavior; namely, whether the suicide attempt was successful. Instead, suicide behavior is a sort of risk-taking behavior, a gamble with death that is simultaneously oriented toward both life and death. In fact, Taylor (1978:373–90) demonstrated that the ordeal type of suicide behaviors is akin to daredevil behavior, because both involve a gamble with death, which if survived, can lead to an affirmation of life. Ordeal suicides are intimately linked to the self, in that individuals learn about their character through exposing themselves to fateful moments.

Similarly, Charmaz (1980:233–79) examines the meanings that suicidal persons construct for their behavior, assuming that these meanings are situated within broader social values. Some forms of suicide are meant to be self-affirming despite the apparent irony that self-killing might appear to lead to the annihilation of the self. Suicide can be a “means of taking control over one’s self. The underlying meaning of suicide in this instance is clearly not self-destruction: it is *self-affirmation*” (Charmaz 1980:258 [emphasis in original]).

Not only are there varying frames for the study of suicide, there are also different ways of defining the behavior itself. When studying suicide rates, sociologists often adopt Durkheim’s definition: “*all cases of death resulting directly or indirectly from a positive or negative act of the victim himself, which he knows will produce this result*” (1951 [1897]:44 [emphasis in original]). Three elements of this conception are noteworthy. First, Durkheim included in his definition both active suicide, taking action in causing one’s own death, and passive suicide, abstaining from action that would prevent one’s own death. Second, although Durkheim was not concerned with the consciousness of the individual exhibiting suicide behavior, his definition nonetheless implied that this behavior requires a conscious and intentional individual. Third, Durkheim was exclusively concerned with the outcome of the behavior, and only those cases that actually resulted in death would be considered suicides.

Taylor (1978:375–8) noted that the outcome of self-damaging behavior was seldom certain, and that the same behavior may or may not lead to death, given the numerous contingencies that are outside the control of the individual. Therefore, he defined the suicide act as “*any deliberate act of self damage, or potential self damage, where the individual has to await the outcome, and cannot be sure of survival*” (Taylor 1978:378 [emphasis in original]). Furthermore, the success or failure of suicidal acts often relied on external contingencies, and happenstance often determined the outcome. This uncertainty of the outcome might prompt some to engage in suicide behavior as a type of ordeal designed to bring about a potential resolution of a crisis of self-concept.

This study utilizes Taylor's definition with the clarification that, as in Durkheim's definition, the suicide behavior can be either active or passive. The adoption of the slightly qualified form of Taylor's meaning of suicide introduces some ambiguity to the empirical examination of suicide behavior in the selected cases, as it adds to the uncertainty of outcome. However, it is exactly this doubt regarding the outcome of self-killing behaviors that allows for the examination of the complexity of suicidal acts.

Although there are other types of suicide, this article focuses on suicide behavior that is self-affirming and undertaken in response to a crisis of self-identity. The underlying assumption of the discussion is that individuals can be rational in reaching the decision to commit suicide, something that goes against the dominant psychiatric and lay views that suicide behavior and suicidal ideation are indicative of mental illness (Harrington 2004:1134). The idea of rational suicide has been explored in relation to doctor-assisted suicide (Woodman 1998:198) and cases where death row inmates choose to end the appeals process in order to expedite their own executions (Harrington 2004). Suicide can be rational under the following conditions:

The person considering suicide has an unremitting "hopeless" condition. "Hopeless:" conditions include, but are not necessarily limited to, terminal illness, severe physical and/or psychological pain, physically or mentally debilitating and/or deteriorating conditions, or quality of life no longer acceptable to the individual. The person makes the decision as a free choice (i.e., not pressured by others to choose suicide). The person has engaged in a sound decision-making process. (Werth 1996:62)

For the selected characters, suicide is a rational response to the hopeless psychological pain from crises of self-identity emerging out of social contexts and events in the narratives. While the typical perspective on suicide assumes that the person engaging in that behavior has made a grave mistake, the present research, while not advocating suicide, explores some of the potentially affirmative aspects of the behavior for its victims. In addition, self-affirmative suicide behavior is selected as a topic of inquiry, because it can help us to understand the self as a social object. Ultimately, this article helps to unpack the complex interconnection between self and society present in self-authenticity in social behavior. The example cases examined in this article are assumed to be rational in their decision making, and their suicides are interpreted as a response to their perceived hopeless situation. Thus, the "suicidal crisis is a crisis of the *self* and its meaning" (Charmaz 1980:261 [emphasis in original]), situated within its social context. Self-killing is an emotional experience for the person performing the action, and this experience can lead to an affirmation or redefinition of the self-concept. For the sociologist, understanding the individual decision-making process in such a crisis also reveals something about the society in which it takes place. Therefore, while it may appear to be an ironic channel for studying

suicide behavior, the self, and particularly the study of self-affirming suicide, is inherently connected to the sociological study of suicide.

For understanding issues related to suicide and self, the literary insights are particularly useful. Fictive accounts of suicide occupy a reciprocal position with the social scientific study of the phenomenon (Lenker 1989:1–11), and social science scholars of suicide have referred to literature and autobiographical writings of literary figures (Cooley 1964 [1902]:222ff; Taylor 1978). Another scholar of suicide has called for “the empathy of the novelist” (van Hooff 1990:30).

Self

Just as suicide has been an important topic in the history of our discipline, the sociological study of the self has occupied a prominent position. Many of the primary distinctions concerning the self have remained basically unchanged since the foundational works of James (1890), Cooley (1964 [1902]), and Mead (1934). Subsequent scholars developed concepts of self in numerous permutations, including the symbolic interactions of two dominant strains: the Chicago school’s focus on the emergence of self in social interactions (e.g., Blumer 1969; Goffmann 1967) and the structural schools’ development of sophisticated measures of various aspects of role salience (e.g., Burke 1980; Burke and Tully 1977; Callero 1992; Stryker 1968).

This research engages Turner’s (1976, 1978) research which described the historical interrelation between “real self,” or “true self,” concepts as located within the context of the changing division of labor (1976:989–90). The real self is anchored in institutional behavior or in individual impulsive behavior, and it has been the trend in American culture for the true self to be located increasingly in individual impulse (Turner 1976:991–1000). The crucial difference between the *institutional* and *impulsive* loci of real self has to do with the types of experiences and behaviors in which the individual of these types feels most strongly authentic. Individuals locating their true selves in institutional relations are more likely to experience a sense of authenticity when they adhere to high standards and are in control of their faculties and behaviors; they define hypocrisy as a failure to live according to their own standards. The institutionally constituted person experiences self-authenticity in making and keeping social commitments. They may have difficulty in maintaining their sense of authenticity when these structurally constituted relationships change shape, as in periods of rapid social change. In addition, the institutional self may experience a crisis of identity when faced with the possibility that the future performance of social roles is threatened (Turner 1976:992–5). In comparison, individuals locating their true selves within self experience are most authentic when they engage in self-discovery and active self-creation, often when inhibitions are lowered. For this group, hypocrisy means adhering to standards when those standards are in

conflict with what they want and enjoy. The impulsive-type employs a present-time perspective, and is less concerned with the future performance of role expectations (Turner 1976:992–5).

To date, there has been no significant connection explored between the two types of self-constitution and suicide behaviors; however, Turner implied the crisis of self-identity in the following quote: “Institutionals, who build themselves a real world by making commitments, have difficulty in retaining a vital sense of self when the future perspective is no longer tenable” (1976:994). Rational, self-affirming suicide is a possible solution to such a crisis of identity. Ultimately, this article examines the differing experiences of institutional and impulsive characters experiencing crises of self-concept, and the role that self-affirmative suicide behavior has in the resolution of these crises.

Narratives in Sociology

While other scholars (e.g., Wood and Zurcher 1988) have examined the shift from institutional to impulsive grounding of the self using other sources of data, such as personal diaries, the current research examines two pairs of literary texts. Using narrative fiction as data may seem unusual to many sociologists, and therefore the style of sociology warrants discussion. Sociologists of culture have been labeled *methodological bricoleurs* in that they follow a pragmatic approach to involving cultural objects in sociological analysis (Griswold 2001:327). In interpreting literature, individuals read the meanings of literature as a combined process of the assumptions they socially share and the characteristics of the object they interpret (Griswold 1987). Interpretive communities exist (Fish 1980), and each culture and time brings its own interpretive assumptions to bear on any given narrative (Corse and Westervelt 2002; Griswold 1987). Researchers proceed with the awareness that narratives are intentionally constructed as communicative action (Griswold 1992:465). Meanings “are produced by the interaction of socially located persons and cultural objects, in this case literary texts; people sharing social locations are likely to produce overlapping sets of meanings” (Griswold 1990:1580).

One theorist of human agency suggests that the tools for understanding social action have “been before us all along—embedded in the mental categories of ordinary language” (Porpora 1987:68). Perhaps this is a basic survival skill (Lemert 1993:1–24) and it is “not that we are concerned with chaos, but that we are surrounded by it, and equipped for coexistence with it only by our fictive powers” (Kermode 1967:64). If an understanding of this is present in the language of everyday life, then social scientists might look to literature for insights. Walker Percy writes, “we experience [an] expansion of consciousness, sense of discovery, of affirmation, when the novelist writes of an experience we’ve had and only vaguely recognized but had not had it pointed out until the moment.

The response is an affirmation: ‘Aha! Yes, that’s it! Sure enough that’s the way it is! I never thought of it before but’—and so on” (1991:125).

While literature and sociology as disciplines may participate in divergent *epistemic cultures* (Knorr-Cestina 1999), in many ways they are similar. First, they were not always separate fields, and they have a common history (Weininger 1989) and curiosity (Brown 1977:4). Despite the strong similarities between the two, sociologists often discredit the insights in literary works, possibly because the rules of the literary method are quite different. Nonetheless, “[n]ovels have much to tell about the real world of human behavior and social institutions” (Berger 1977:237). Somers and Gibson (1994:57–71) argue that narrative is the *epistemological other* of social science, and assert the relevance of literature in the development of an expanded narrative theory of self.

One way of looking at the intersection between sociology and literature is to examine the approaches employed by sociologists of literature, and a crucial difference is the unit of analysis selected. Some studies employ the single novel as a unit of analysis in a data set comprised of numerous works from specific nations (Corse 1995; Griswold 1992). Others focus on a single work (Corse and Westervelt 2002) or a body of novels by a single author (Griswold 1987). Another variation is to select the character as unit of analysis (e.g., Wanderer 1994). The present study utilizes a *sociology through literature approach* (suggested in Coser 1963), with individual characters as the unit of analysis. The point is to understand each character’s subjective motivations and interpretations of his or her behavior.

Another way of understanding the current approach is to look at the sampling frame employed. A review of the sociology of literature reveals a great deal of variability in the methods employed in the selection of literary works. Some have selected texts for unspecified (e.g., Wanderer 1994) or arbitrary reasons (e.g., DeVault 1990). Others have employed no sampling technique at all, choosing instead to analyze an entire corpus of texts of a specified country (e.g., Griswold 1992) or author (e.g., Griswold 1987), or opting to concentrate on the sociological import of an individual text (e.g., Corse and Westervelt 2002). This study focuses on two pairs of suicidal characters in literary narratives: Achilles and Hector in *The Iliad* by Homer (1990), and Andri in the play *Andorra* (1961) and Stiller in the novel *I’m Not Stiller* (1958), both by the Swiss author Max Frisch. The characters in these pairs allow the comparison in the writings of the same authors of cases in which characters found a radical shift in self-concept intolerable to the point of engaging in ordeal-type suicide behavior. The selection of these four cases by two authors provides an analytical economy in that it allows for variability in the cases while limiting the number of authors from whom the texts are drawn.

Four literary cases are included in order to highlight the connections between self-affirming suicide behavior, institutional versus impulsive loci of self, and

the use of literature in sociological analysis. The four cases are intended heuristically to illustrate the analytical point of the article, that is, suicide may be self-affirming and in the case of the institutional personality types, it might be a rational response to a crisis of self-concept. The cases are intentionally selected to contrast one another in order to drive home the conceptual point. In applying the distinction between institutionals and impulsives, I do not claim that Turner's (1976) distinctions are universal, nor is there an assumption that Homer or Frisch intended these distinctions. Using a consumption of culture approach to understanding my interpretive reading of the selected texts, I see myself as a creative agent rather than as a passive recipient of what these authors have written (Griswold 1993:457). The interpretive moment of analysis occurs in the present, releasing the analyst from the need to assert the universality or the distinctions employed or knowledge of Homer's and Frisch's intentions. In short, given my social situation, my understanding of the motivations of the characters is derived from my reading of the texts and the characters' stated motivations. People sharing similar social situations are likely to produce overlapping interpretations (Griswold 1990:1580).

Examination of the Four Literary Cases

The article now turns to the examination of the four selected cases. For each, there is a brief description of the context and events concerning the character's suicide ordeal. Following the discussion of the example cases, steps are taken to highlight the distinction between the effects of the self-killing, or attempted suicide, when undertaken by characters constituted in institutional versus impulsive notions of real self.

Homer's Characters: Achilles and Hector

Homer's *The Iliad* centers on numerous characters in the Trojan War, two of which are at direct odds with each other: Achilles, the most powerful Greek warrior, and Hector, the strongest warrior in Troy. The general context for the story is the Greek siege of Troy. At the start of the narrative, *The Iliad* describes a quarrel among the Greek leaders, particularly between Agamemnon and Achilles. In an effort to appease the god Apollo, Agamemnon is required to release his favorite concubine. In compensation, Agamemnon suggests that he will take concubines from the other Greek leaders, including Achilles' concubine, Briseis. Outraged at this development, Achilles refuses to fight against the Trojans, thereby weakening the Greek forces.

Later, the other Greeks do wish to appease Achilles' anger. Agamemnon offers a large treasure, and the return of Briseis. Odysseus urges Achilles to accept the offer, if not for his interest in the treasure, then out of a sense of duty for his comrades: "Here is your last chance to save a demoralized Greek army

from the triumphant Trojans. Fail us, and you will always regret it! A disaster on such a scale can never be undone; take my warning and rescue us in the nick of time” (Graves 1959:129). Nonetheless, Achilles refuses to help the Greeks, pointing to his continued resentment toward Agamemnon, and his knowledge that he is fated to die in battle at Troy. Achilles says, “And another thing: I value my life far more than I covet wealth” (Graves 1959:132).

In a subsequent battle, Hector kills Achilles’ friend, Patroclus, and news of his death causes Achilles to experience such a deep sense of loss that he regrets having stayed out of the battle. He laments, “My beloved friend died far from his native land, and I failed him in his hour of need, as I failed my other comrades. Here I sat, a useless encumbrance to the earth, while Hector slaughtered them; though nobody fights better than I” (Graves 1959:266). Achilles is so grieved that he rolls in the dirt and the other Greeks hold his arms as he grabs for his sword, because they are afraid that he will cut his own throat. Achilles returns to battle, specifically to face Hector, because he wants to avenge Patroclus. Through his vulnerable heel, Achilles is fated to die in battle, but his death occurs outside of *The Iliad*.

The case of Achilles is one of 960 cases of self-killing in classical antiquity examined by Van Hoof (1990:198–232). The behavior is classified as an attempted suicide because of grief, explaining that in classical antiquity, suicide was an acceptable, even honorable, response to the death of a close friend (1990:99–105, 198). Following his attempted suicide, Achilles accepts his duty to fight alongside the other Greeks, and his crisis of self-identity is resolved, and Achilles subsequently challenges Hector to mortal single combat.

Hector is the strongest warrior in Troy, leader of the defending army. Although his mother pleads with him to avoid combat with Achilles, Hector feels that he has to fight Achilles. He explains, “Now that so many are slain because of my rashness, I fear the men and the women of Troy will some day say of me: ‘Hector trusted his strength and in so doing delivered up his people!’ Better that I win or die in fighting terrible Achilles” (Schwab 1946:476). When Hector meets Achilles outside the city walls, Hector flees, but his escape is short lived, as Achilles soon overtakes and kills him. Hector chooses the suicide ordeal of combat with Achilles, over-shirking his duty as Trojan leader.

Achilles mortally wounds Hector, spearing him through the neck. Hector’s last words are an appeal to Achilles, “I beseech you by everything that you hold dearest—your life, your strength, your parents—spare my corpse . . . grant me a decent burial among my people” (Graves 1959:318). To remain consistent with his status as the principal warrior of Troy, Hector chooses to fight Achilles, and his last request was that his parents would be able to bury him properly.

The two cases of Achilles and Hector offer an interesting comparison. Achilles is capable of initially declining to go to battle, while Hector is unable to

do so. I argue that each of the characters remains authentic to his perceived real self. The distinction is that Hector's real self is more anchored in institutional locus of self-concept, while Achilles' although ultimately institutional, entertains more impulsive-type thoughts. Hector's role as a Trojan warrior is so strongly constitutive of what he feels as his authentic self that there is no way that Hector could avoid this role without feeling hypocritical to his true self. This is not to say that Hector wants to die, but it is significant to realize that Hector's choice clearly was the option he preferred, that is, to remain true to his institutional locus of self, even though it meant that he might die.

In contrast, Achilles is able to withdraw from social relations because his self-concept is comparatively more anchored in impulse. He experiences his self more inclined toward intensity of feelings: anger toward Agamemnon, indignation at the loss of Briseis, and grief about the death of Patroclus. While Achilles is not without an impulsive sense of self-concept, he also strongly identifies with his institutional role. It is Achilles' sense of duty, and regret for the consequences of having shirked his role, that leads him back onto the battlefield. A premodern character, Achilles was more distinctly impulsive than Hector is, but he still feels an obligation to fulfill his role.

Frisch's Characters: Andri and Stiller

The Swiss author Max Frisch wrote two literary pieces whose primary characters experience crises of self-concept: Andri in *Andorra* (1961) and Stiller in *I'm Not Stiller* (1958). In the play *Andorra*, the character Andri finds himself in a crisis of self-concept in that he is offered evidence and encouragement to alter his self-identity. At the beginning of the drama, the characters Teacher and Mother have raised Andri to age 20, apparently as their adopted son. Many years before the story takes place, Teacher had returned to Andorra from abroad, bringing a young boy with him, claiming that the child was a Jew, rescued from an unnamed anti-Semitic country. All characters in the drama assume the truth of the story, and that Andri is Jewish.

A foreign country invades, bringing a regime that persecutes Jews. Afraid that the foreign soldiers will kill Andri, Teacher confesses that he concocted the story about Andri's being Jewish to cover the fact Andri is really his illegitimate child. It is the Priest who tells Andri the truth:

Priest: I have come to redeem you.

Andri: I'm listening.

Priest: I knew nothing of it either, Andri, when we last talked together. For years the story has always been that [the Teacher] rescued a Jewish child, a Christian deed, so why shouldn't I have believed it? . . . Andri—you're not a Jew. [*Silence*] Don't you believe what I say?

Andri: No.

Priest: So you think I'm lying?

Andri: Father, one feels a thing like that.

Priest: What does one feel?

Andri: Whether one is a Jew or not. (Frisch 1961:59)

Andri continues speaking about his self-identity:

Andri: Ever since I have been able to hear, people have told me I'm different, and I watched to see if what they said was true. And it is true, Father. I am different. People told me my kind have a certain way of moving, and I looked at myself in the mirror almost every evening. They were right. I do have a certain way of moving. I can't help it. And I watched to see whether it was true that I'm always thinking of money, when the Andorrans watched me and thought: now he's thinking of money—and they were right again. I am always thinking of money. It's true. I have no backbone. I've tried, it's no use. I have no backbone, only fear. And people told me that my kind are cowards. I watched out for this too. Many of them are cowards, but I know when I'm being a coward. I didn't want to admit what they told me, but it's true. They kicked me with their boots, and it's true what they say. I don't feel like they do. And I have no country. You told me, Father, that one must accept that, and I have accepted it. Now it's up to you, Father, to accept your Jew. (Frisch 1961:60)

Despite the fact that the invaders persecute Jews, Andri cannot deny his authentic self. At the end of the narrative, soldiers force all the people in Andorra to line up for a "Jew Inspection" in which a "Jew Detector" (in German, *Judenschauer*) will find any Jews among the Andorrans. The people of Andorra are made to place black cloths over their heads, remove and carry their shoes, then march across the Andorran town square. Although the Andorrans are generally anxious about the situation, Teacher does not expect that the Jew Detector will identify Andri as a Jew. When confronted, however, Andri will not deny his Jewishness, and therefore is taken away, and presumably executed.

Andri's refusal to deny his true self is a passive type of self-affirmative suicide. Socially constituted through his institutional relations with the other Andorrans, Andri says that one can feel "whether one is a Jew or not" (Frisch 1961:59), that one knows his own true self. Also interesting is that Andri's basic being was Jewish, although he was not in fact a Jew in the legalistic sense of being born to a Jewish mother. This suggests that for Andri the source of self was not his blood descent, but rather that it was created in the process of social life. Andri was a Jew, because the Andorrans treated him as a Jew, something that the Jew Detector confirms. Andri was incapable of tolerating a radical shift in his self-concept, even though his life depended upon it.

In Frisch's (1958) novel *I'm Not Stiller*, the Swiss character Anatol Stiller, denies his identity, claiming that he is Sam White, an American of German descent. Stopped at the Swiss border trying to reenter the country, he is arrested and held in jail. Stiller insists that he is not who people say he is, that he does not know Stiller. What emerges is a narrative about a man who confronts a crisis of self-concept, by attempting to continue life under another identity. Beginning

with the novel's first line and repeatedly through the text, Stiller repeatedly denies his identity, claiming, "I'm not Stiller" (Frisch 1958:9).

Stiller's crisis of self emerges through his sense of inauthenticity brought on by his apparent failure as a husband, artist, and soldier. He was unable to accept himself and his failures, and this formed the basis of the crisis Stiller felt toward his outward presentation of self: "As long as a person does not accept himself, he will always have this fear of being misunderstood and misconstrued by his environment; he attaches much too much importance to how [others] see him . . . precisely because of his own obtuse fear of being pushed by [them] into the wrong role" (1958:334). From Stiller's point of view, his primary crisis of self-identity is that he does not accept himself, and therefore remains overly sensitive to the expectations others have for him. This posture runs contrary to Stiller's impulse-centered locus of real self, because it impedes his authentic experience of self.

Ironically, Stiller initially experiences self-acceptance in his denial of his identity. He wonders what makes life real (Frisch 1958:56), and claims that he has no words to describe himself (p. 61), asserting that there is no way to know the inner life of oneself and others (p. 141). In the narrative, Stiller's friend Rolf describes this sort of crisis of self-concept: "The overwhelming majority of human lives are ruined by the fact that people make excessive demands on themselves" (Frisch 1958:254), and that the frequent result is disconnection with one's own personality. Despite the fact that Rolf considers Stiller's simple denial of identity to be a childish solution to the crisis of self-concept, he nonetheless describes Stiller as courageous and advanced in his quest for self-actualization.

In the course of the novel, Stiller tries numerous ways to resolve his crisis of self-concept. First, he tries running away, but decides that it did not resolve his problems. Second, Stiller attempts unsuccessfully to shoot himself in the head. Although he claims to have been absolutely certain that his suicide attempt would be successful, he was troubled by how ineffective his suicide was as a solution his crisis of self-identity. As he describes,

Put prosaically, I felt tremendously perplexed, rather as though I had jumped over a high wall in order to dash myself in pieces, but the ground didn't come, it never came, there was nothing but falling, a falling that was actually no falling, a state of powerlessness accompanied by total wakefulness, only time had disappeared, as I said, time as a medium within which we normally act; everything remained like that once and for all. (Frisch 1958:308)

Stiller becomes certain that suicide does not change anything, and his resolution is that "it is no use flinging myself into the street, suicide is an illusion" (Frisch 1958:68).

Toward the end of the narrative, Stiller touches upon the solution that he hopes will resolve his crisis of self-concept: self-acceptance, which requires relinquishing concern that others will misconstrue who one is and how others

will evaluate his actions. Stiller, a character with an impulse-centered locus of real self, feels that his self-authenticity is affirmed as he increasingly accepts his personal shortcomings. He describes, "I was free from the fear of doing the wrong thing, and once more myself" (Frisch 1958:305). This self-acceptance makes Stiller feel that he is beginning a new life. He decides to cease denying that he is Stiller and in the process becomes a new person. In his words, "I had the distinct sensation that I was now being born for the first time, and with a certainty that need not fear even ridicule. I felt ready to be nobody but the person as whom I had just been born and to seek no other life than this" (Frisch 1958:310).

There is a strong contrast between Frisch's two characters. While Andri is incapable of denying the Jewish aspect of his self-concept, Stiller chooses the exact opposite approach to resolving his crisis of self: denying that he is Stiller. Like Homer's characters, both Andri and Stiller remain faithful to their perceived real self, and the difference in their behaviors lies in Andri's anchoring of self in the institutional and Stiller's being strongly impulse-centered. Andri feels that he cannot deny his Jewishness, because such a denial might cause him a loss of connection with his self-concept. In contrast, it is precisely these constraints that impede Stiller from authentically experiencing his real self. Having outlined the key details of the four narrative cases, I now begin a comparative discussion of the meanings behind the four suicide events.

Discussion

Ordeal-type suicide behavior apparently resolves Hector's and Andri's crises of self-concept, but is not entirely effective in resolving the corollary crises experienced by Achilles and Stiller. In the example cases, characters whose real self is anchored more strongly in the institutional locus find self-affirmative suicide to be an adequate resolution of their crises of self-concept than do the impulse-centered characters. The effectiveness of the ordeal for institutionals seems counterintuitive, because engaging in suicide behavior seems impulsive in its own right. However, the institutionals feel more constrained by their social contexts, and therefore engage in suicidal behaviors as a self-affirmative means of taking control of their perceived self-concepts.

Rather than choosing life with a radically redefined self-concept, Hector and Andri choose the real possibility of death. As Turner explains, "The self as impulse means a present time perspective, while the self as institution means a future time perspective. Institutionals, who build themselves a real world by making commitments, have difficulty retaining a vital sense of self when the future perspective is no longer tenable" (1976:994). The impulse-centered characters, Achilles and Stiller, are less constituted in social relations, and therefore are able to continue their sense of true self when situations change. While

Achilles initially denies his role as warrior for the Greeks, his attempted suicide is a normative grief response, and ultimately his crisis of self-concept was resolved when he agreed to join the other Greeks on the battlefield. While Achilles demonstrated impulsive tendencies, his constitution of self remained institutional, whereas it is Stiller who was the true impulsive. Even though Stiller early on in the narrative attempts suicide as a solution to his crisis of self-concept, in his own words he describes suicide as an “illusion” that does not solve anything. Resolution of his crisis of self comes in his refusal to concern himself with other people’s expectations.

Another important dimension of the institutional/impulsive dichotomy involves the concern that the characters have for authenticity, or the aversion of hypocrisy. That is, the example characters are concerned that their behaviors remain consistent with what they feel to be their real self. For institutionals, hypocrisy is failing to live up to one’s standards, and authenticity is a correspondence between “*prescription and behavior*” (Turner 1976:994 [emphasis in original]). Hector and Andri respond to social expectations, and in an ultimate example of authenticity, affirm their true selves in self-killing. In comparison, hypocrisy for impulsives consists of setting standards and sticking to them, even if it is not what the individual prefers. Authenticity involves a correspondence between “*impulse and behavior*” (Turner 1976:994 [emphasis in original]). Achilles and Stiller are capable of withdrawing from social life: Achilles by refusing to go to battle and Stiller by denying his identity.

The distinction between the two senses of self and their divergent feelings of authenticity are clear when we compare the characters as matched pairs. In our mythological cases, Achilles is able temporarily to tolerate shirking his responsibilities as warrior, while Hector is not. In the context of this study, Hector’s death is a self-affirmative suicide, because his choice to risk likely death on the battlefield is an attempt to resolve a crisis of identity. Hector’s concern about what others think of him, and whether he will receive a proper burial, are evidence that Hector’s perceived true self is constituted in institutional relations. While Achilles has impulsive leanings, the constitution of his real self rests in institutional relations, demonstrated when Achilles ultimately gave in to social pressures and his own sense of responsibility to others. Achilles draws criticism from his peers, most notably Odysseus who criticizes him for thinking only of himself while other Greeks are dying on the battlefield.

In our modern examples, Stiller is able to deny his identity, while Andri finds the similar impulse impossible. In the context of this study, Andri’s death is a self-affirmative suicide, because his refusal to deny he is a Jew is an attempt to resolve a crisis of identity. In his soliloquy, Andri clarifies that in his experiences with the other Andorrans, that they made him a Jew. In contrast, Stiller’s is so strongly constituted in the impulsive locus of real self that admonitions

from others fail to influence him to cease his self-denial. Stiller is so strongly impulsive that the only thing that influences him away from his self-denial and toward self-acceptance is the realization that he needs to do so in order to resolve his crisis of self-concept. In the end, we observe that ordeal suicide did not serve as a solution to the crisis of identity in the case of the impulsives, while it appeared adequately to resolve a similar crisis experienced by the institutionals.

Concluding Reflections

The use of literary narratives to examine ordeal-type self-affirmative suicide behavior as a crisis of real self has revealed some promising channels for future research. In this section, I discuss avenues for the future study of the intersection between suicide and self-identity, as well as the use of literature in social science analysis. While this study is admittedly limited because it has examined a limited number of literary characters from three sources written by two authors, it has nonetheless produced some interesting interpretations.

First, my own interpretations diverge from those of Durkheim (1951 [1897]). The interpretation of the example cases in this study help to clarify the complex relationship between aspects of self in suicide, related to the constitution of the self in institution and impulse. The increased division of labor (Durkheim 1933 [1893]) arguably leads to increased differentiation of roles, a phenomenon that contributes to an increasingly broad range of individual experiences. As experience is strongly influential in the formation of self-concept, an increased division of labor broadens variability in individual experiences, contributing to a general condition in which true self can become increasingly based in the impulse locus of real self. Therefore, individuals are becoming increasingly oriented toward the impulse locus of real self, a process that originated in the seventeenth century (Turner 1976:991–1001). The institutional characters explored in this article offer provisional support for the idea that some persons might engage in suicide behaviors because they are unwilling to the point of death to relinquish their commitment to their future fulfillment of their respective social roles. On the other hand, it is apparently the impulsive characters that are better able to orient themselves toward their personal experiences.

This study offers interpretations contrary to Durkheim's (1951 [1897]) findings developed by using macro-level data. One interpretation advanced in this study is that institutional-oriented characters are more likely to experience in self-affirmative suicide as a resolution to their identity crises than are impulsives. If we connect Durkheim's typologies of suicide rates to the two types of real self, the impulsives would connect most readily with the state of egoism, or the insufficient integration of the individual into social norms. For Durkheim (1951 [1897]:152–216), egoism had the typical effect of increasing

the rate of egoistic suicide, but in this study the contraindicated interpretation is that the characters that are more egoistic (impulsives) are less likely to affirm themselves in self-killing.

Durkheim argued that the weakened social solidarity expressed itself in very tangible ways. The condition of anomie made social expectations less certain for many members of society and had the effect of increasing suicide rates (1951 [1897]:241–76). Ironically, this study suggests the possibility that the contemporary trend toward the impulsive locus of self could make individuals feel less constrained, and therefore might reduce incidence of suicide. Also contrary to Durkheim's view of egoism, if the impulsive real self is indeed becoming more prevalent in society, perhaps it is not necessarily the case that impulsives are more egoistic, as Durkheim argued that egoists are insufficiently integrated. Impulsives may be integrated into society in different ways than through role performance, just as they may be subject to different forms of social control (Turner 1976). The examination of micro-social data has yielded very different results than would a macro-level analysis, "because people are not just miniature reproductions of their societies" (Turner 1976:989).

Second, this literary approach to social science research might be useful in studying real-life cases of suicide behavior, because persons may engage in suicide behavior to cope with crises of self-identity. Two contemporary examples include physician-assisted suicide and death row volunteering. Throughout the last decade there has been a significant public discourse surrounding the ethics and legality of doctors prescribing lethal doses of medication for the terminally ill, brought to the forefront by the high profile case of Jack Kevorkian. In 1997, the State of Oregon legislated the Death with Dignity Act which allowed doctor-assisted suicide in cases where there is a "decision by a qualified patient, to request and obtain a prescription to end his or her life in a humane and dignified manner, that is based on an appreciation of the relevant facts" (Quoted in Humphrey and Clement 1998:349–56). A related issue is a subject of relatively less notoriety: death row volunteering, in which prisoners sentenced to death voluntarily end their legal appeals process, thereby hastening their own executions. Between January 1976 and March 2003, 97 (12 percent) of those executed in the United States were volunteers. In the limited number of sociological studies of this topic, Harrington (2000, 2004) discusses the role that death row prisoners have in choosing and speeding up the timing of their executions. In both physician-assisted suicide and death row volunteering cases, the concept of self-affirmative suicide may be applied to cases in which persons competently and rationally end their own lives.

Self-affirming suicide is a promising area for future study, because of its relationship to the self and its seemingly paradoxical nature. Ironically, the sociological theory of the self might be enhanced through the study of those

whose self-concept is materially nonexistent or destroyed. In addition to categories of suicides, the following empirical cases might yield fruitful insights: the development of prenatal and postmortem identities (Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge 1986:92–114, 117–18), and cases where individuals have lost active participation in the process of maintaining their self-concepts, including persons with brain diseases, amnesia, and Alzheimer’s disease (Hallam, Hockey, and Howarth 1999).

Self-killing does not necessarily mean the end of the self, because identities can exist without bodies. For example, demographers have tended to conflate biologically living persons with social persons. When a person physically dies, the “demographer will subtract one person from the population; but, again, because of the failure to see people as social objects, he will overlook the fact that *the deceased person’s identity remains in the population*” (Maines 1978:243 [emphasis in original]). Durkheim (1951 [1897]) argued that society preexists the individual, it follows that the social self can exist beyond the individual. Because the self is a social construct, it exists both before and after its individual bearer is physically present in its social context. Sociologists have argued for the existence of both prenatal and postmortem identity (Weigert, Teitge, and Teitge 1986:92–114). It is an apparent irony that death, more than life in general, asks us to address questions of identity, and self-affirming suicide behavior is, therefore, a personal attempt to resolve some problems of self. Regardless of whether the outcome is physical life or death, the person’s social identity persists in practice or postmortem, respectively. The examination of narrative texts offers one way of unraveling the complexity of these issues.

Finally, this study suggests that literature can be productively applied in social science research agendas, and that it is not always necessary to differentiate between literary and other types of texts. Regardless of the story being interpreted, the researcher engages the text, including its contexts and antecedents, in an interpretive moment, which can be as fruitful as the interpretation of other narratives. The use of literature in social science remains a vast untapped reservoir that warrants continued formal application.

ENDNOTE

*The author would like to thank Tracy Crosby, Ray Cuzzort, Carrie E. Foote-Ardah, Patrick F. Gillham, Martha E. Gimenez, C. Lee Harrington, Priya Jha, Gary T. Marx, Tom Mayer, Richa Nagar, Joyce Nielsen, Doug Porpora, Ted Wagenaar, Jay Watterworth, T. R. Young, and peer reviewers for their valuable comments, suggestions, and insights.

Please direct all correspondence to Glenn W. Muschert, Miami University, Department of Sociology and Gerontology, 375 Upham Hall, Oxford, Ohio 45056-1879. E-mail: muschegw@muohio.edu.

REFERENCES

- Berger, Morroe. 1977. *Real and Imagined Worlds*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Blumer, Herbert. 1969. *Symbolic Interactionism: Perspective and Method*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Brown, Richard Harvey. 1977. *A Poetic for Sociology: Toward a Logic of Discovery for the Social Sciences*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Burke, Peter J. 1980. "The Self: Measurement Requirements from an Interactionist Perspective." *Social Psychological Quarterly* 43(1):18–29.
- Burke, Peter J. and Judith C. Tully. 1977. "The Measurement of Role Identity." *Social Forces* 55(4):881–97.
- Callero, Peter L. 1992. "The Meaning of Self-in-Role: A Modified Measure of Role-Identity." *Social Forces* 71(2):485–501.
- Charmaz, Kathy. 1980. *The Social Reality of Death: Death in Contemporary America*. Menlo Park, CA: Addison-Wesley.
- Cooley, Charles Horton. 1964 [1902]. *Human Nature and the Social Order*. New York: Schocken Books.
- Corse, Sarah M. 1995. "Nations and Novels: Cultural Politics and Literary Use." *Social Forces* 73(4):1279–308.
- Corse, Sarah M. and Sandra Davis Westervelt. 2002. "Gender and Literary Valorization: *The Awakening* of a Canonical Novel." *Sociological Perspectives* 45(2):139–61.
- Coser, Lewis (ed.). 1963. *Sociology through Literature*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- DeVault, Marjorie L. 1990. "Novel Readings: The Social Organization of Interpretation." *American Journal of Sociology* 95(4):887–921.
- Douglas, Jack D. 1966. "The Sociological Analysis of the Social Meanings of Suicide." *European Journal of Sociology* 7:249–75.
- Durkheim, Emile. 1933 [1893]. *The Division of Labor in Society*. New York: Macmillan.
- . 1951 [1897]. *Suicide: A Study in Sociology*. New York: Free Press.
- Fish, Stanley. 1980. *Is There a Text in This Class?* Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Frisch, Max. 1958. *I'm Not Stiller*. New York: Abelard-Schuman.
- . 1961. *Andorra*. New York: Hill and Wang.
- Goffman, Erving. 1967. *Interaction Ritual*. New York: Doubleday.
- Graves, Robert (trans.). 1959. *The Anger of Achilles: Homer's Iliad*. London: Cassell.
- Griswold, Wendy. 1987. "The Fabrication of Meaning: Literary Interpretation in the United States, Great Britain, and the West Indies." *American Journal of Sociology* 92(5):1077–117.
- . 1990. "Provisional, Provincial Positivism: Reply to Denzin." *American Journal of Sociology* 95(6):1580–3.
- . 1992. "Writing on the Mud Wall: Nigerian Novels and the Imaginary Village." *American Sociological Review* 57(6):709–24.
- . 1993. "Recent Moves in the Sociology of Literature." *Annual Review of Sociology* 19:455–67.
- . 2001. "The Sociology of Culture: Four Good Arguments (and One Bad One)." *Acta Sociologica* 35:323–8.
- Hallam, Elizabeth, Jenny Hockey, and Glennys Howarth. 1999. *Beyond the Body: Death and Social Identity*. New York: Routledge.
- Harrington, C. Lee. 2000. "A Community Divided: Defense Attorneys and the Ethics of Death Row Volunteering." *Law and Social Inquiry* 25:849–81.

- Harrington, C. Lee. 2004. "Mental Competence and End-of-Life Decision Making: Death Row Volunteering and Euthanasia." *Journal of Health Politics, Policy and Law* 29(6):1109–51.
- Homer. 1990. *The Iliad*. New York: Viking.
- Humphrey, Derek and Mary Clement. 1998. *Freedom to Die: People, Politics, and the Right-to-Die Movement*. New York: St. Martin's.
- James, William. 1890. *Principles of Psychology*. New York: Holt.
- Kermode, Frank. 1967. *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Knorr-Cestina, Karin. 1999. *Epistemic Cultures: How the Sciences Make Knowledge*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Lemert, Charles (ed.). 1993. *Social Theory: The Multicultural and Classic Readings*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Lenker, Lagretta Tallent. 1989. "Introduction." Pp. 1–11 in *Youth Suicide Prevention: Lessons from Literature*, edited by Sara Munson Deats and Lagretta Tallent Lenker. New York: Plenum.
- Maines, David R. 1978. "Bodies and Selves: Notes on a Fundamental Dilemma in Demography." Pp. 241–65 in *Studies in Symbolic Interactionism*, Vol. 1, edited by Norman K. Denzin. Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.
- Mead, George Herbert. 1934. *Mind, Self, and Society*. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Percy, Walker. 1991. *Signposts in a Strange Land*. New York: Noonday Press.
- Porpora, Douglas. V. 1987. *The Concept of Social Structure*. Westport, CT: Greenwood Press.
- Schwab, Gustav. 1946. *Gods & Heroes*. New York: Pantheon.
- Somers, Margaret R. and Gloria D. Gibson. 1994. "Reclaiming the Epistemological 'Other': Narrative and the Social Constitution of Identity." Pp. 37–99 in *Social Theory and the Politics of Identity*, edited by Craig Calhoun. Cambridge, MA: Blackwell.
- Stryker, Sheldon. 1968. "Identity Salience and Role Performance: The Relevance of Symbolic Interaction Theory for Family Research." *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 30(4):558–64.
- Taylor, Steve. 1978. "Suicide and the Renewal of Life." *Sociological Review* 26:373–90.
- Turner, Ralph H. 1976. "The Real Self: From Institution to Impulse." *American Journal of Sociology* 81(5):989–1016.
- . 1978. "The Role and the Person." *American Journal of Sociology* 84(1):1–23.
- van Hooff, Anton J. L. 1990. *From Autothanasia to Suicide: Self-Killing in Classical Antiquity*. New York: Routledge.
- Wanderer, Jules J. 1994. "Nature's a Joker: Self and Reality Worlds for Simmel, Ibsen, Dick, and Durkheim." *Studies in Symbolic Interaction* 16:275–94.
- Weigert, Andrew J., J. Smith Teitge, and Dennis W. Teitge. 1986. *Society and Identity: Toward a Social Psychology*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Weininger, Stephen J. 1989. "Introduction." Pp. xiii–xxiii in *Literature and Science as Modes of Expression*, edited by F. Amrine. Boston, MA: Kluwer Academic Press.
- Werth, James L. 1996. *Rational Suicide? Implications for Mental Health Professionals*. Washington, DC: Taylor & Francis.
- Wood, Michael R. and Louis A. Zurcher, Jr. 1988. *The Document of Postmodern Self: A Computer Assisted Comparative Analysis of Personal Documents*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Woodman, Sue. 1998. *Last Rights: The Struggle over the Right to Die*. New York: Plenum Trade.