

## The Value of Human Life in the Light of Suicide Tendencies among Students in Nigerian Tertiary Institutions: Implications for Education

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examined the value of human life in the light of suicide tendencies among students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Being an act of taking or terminating one's own life, suicide remains an enigma to all pro-life humans. In the distant past, cases of suicide were not so ubiquitous in Nigeria. Its occurrence was very rare; and where it happened, it was seen as an abomination of a high order, since life was considered sacred by the people, and which no human has the right to terminate. In those days of yore, suicide was alien to the people of Nigeria and their culture. Of recent, however, suicide has become a major leading cause of mortality among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Inherent difficulty in predicting and ascertaining its warning signs has made accurate and specific prediction of the occurrence of suicide most elusive. Over and above this, suicide is based on personal conviction of the individual that this is the best solution to his/her problem. On that note, the effort to prevent suicide should not focus more on predictions and signs, but on certain values and implications that would convince the individual (and the society) to jettison the idea of suicide as the best solution to a perceived problem. One of such values is human life, which has some implications for education. In this direction, the paper adopted a critical analysis of concepts and literature review to explore some risk factors for suicide, its implications for education and possible solutions to suicide tendencies amongst students, especially in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria. It was discovered that suicide tendencies among tertiary institution students in Nigeria is largely due to little knowledge of the value of human life and its implications. It was therefore recommended, among others, that premium emphasis be placed on the value of human life as sacred, both in the family and formal education settings.

**Keywords:** *Education; Human Life; Implications; Nigeria; Students; Suicide.*

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### INTRODUCTION

This Most cases of suicide in Nigeria are mainly reported among the students of tertiary institutions. Olufemi (2019) has observed that between January and August

2019, over thirteen suicide cases among students in various tertiary institutions were reported. For instance, in March 2019, a suicide case was reported of a National Diploma 1 student of Civil Engineering Department, Federal Polytechnic, Offa, Kwara State. It also happened in the Delta State University, in April 15, 2019, among other tertiary institutions. These students are invariably at their adolescent stage of life. Adolescence can be a turbulent time, for it is a transition stage. Adolescents deal with a vast array of experiences during this transitional period, which is a gateway to adulthood. For students, such experiences usually border on relationships (male-male, female-female, male-female, students-lecturers, children-parents), academic challenges, examinations, financial issues, peer group influence, decisions about the future, and physical changes that are taking place in their bodies. Improper and immature handling of such experiences can lead to suicide among students. Suicide can be defined as intentional self-inflicted death. It is an act of taking one's own life (Legg, 2019). It is a serious cause of mortality worldwide. It is the act of intentionally causing one's own death. According to Psych Central Staff (2018), suicide is an irrational desire to die.

The concept of suicide is derived from the Latin word *suicidium*, which means the act of terminating one's own life, or the words *mors voluntaria*, meaning a willful or voluntary death. Most people who have the tendency to commit suicide, and those who actually commit it, do so out of frustration, and usually see it as a way of providing a permanent solution to their problems. Schneidman (1985) defines suicide as the conscious act of self-induced annihilation, best understood as multidimensional malaise in a needful individual who defines an issue for which the suicide act is perceived as the best solution. According to Psych Central Staff (2018), suicide is an irrational desire to die. The term "irrational" is used here because no matter how bad a person's life is, suicide should not be considered a permanent solution to what is nearly always a temporary problem. It looks like using a harmer to kill a fly. Nevertheless, suicide is a significant cause of death worldwide, and so it is a global phenomenon. According to World Health Organization (2019), close to 800,000 people die yearly due to suicide. It accounts for about 30,000 deaths annually in the United States of America (USA) and more than 5000 deaths annually in South Africa. In Nigeria it is about 15 percent per 100,000. According to Masango (2018), the prevalence of suicide in our society is on the increase.

Suicide is not a random or accidental act. On the contrary, it is a premeditated action which the actor saw as a way out of a problem. Suicide is often a result of serious depression. Depression is a treatable condition, but often the treatment takes time, energy and effort on the side of the depressed. Sometimes, as a person who is depressed feels the energizing effects of an antidepressant medication, they will still feel depressed, but have more energy. It is during this time in treatment that many people turn to suicide and suicidal acts. Some considerable numbers of adolescents (mainly students in tertiary institutions) are dealing with depression, which is an illness with significant long-term consequences, including an increased risk for suicide. Some of them are simply frustrated and overwhelmed by the uncertainties of both the moment

and the future, and feel they have nowhere to turn to. Their search for answers may lead them to begin self-medication, thereby involving themselves in drug abuse. Or they might express their rage and frustration by engaging in acts of violence. They don't want to talk about their emotions or problems because they may think that will make them a burden to others, or that others will make fun of them. Most often, these troubled adolescents opt instead to take their own lives.

The risk of suicide increases greatly when adolescents have access to firearms. Also, drug overdose, using over-the-counter prescription, and non-prescription medicine constitute a very common risk for attempting and carrying out suicide. Some students also trade different prescription medicines at school and carry them (or store them) in their lockers or backpack. For this reason, vigilance over the adolescents, both at home and in the school, is of great importance.

Understanding human life is very central to the issue of suicide in particular, and events and activities of the world in general. Human beings are "regarded the most important aspect of creation. He is also superior to created beings in this world" (Ekeh, 2020:90). Human life is therefore the most highly valued of all lives on earth. In most cultures and religions of the world, there is a strong belief in the sacredness of human life. This is predicated on the belief that life is a gift from God, the Supreme Being. In the African culture, for instance, the world-view is strongly anchored in life. Hence whatever gives, supports, enhances, reveals, saves, protects and enriches life is highly valued and cherished by the African (Ekeh, 2020).

In Igbo nation and culture, the high premium placed on life is manifested in some names given to persons as well as proverbs and idioms. For instance, the name Ndubuisi (life is the ultimate), points to the supremacy of life over every other value. Another name, Ndukaku (Life is superior to wealth), means that life is preferred to wealth. The wisdom here is that it is the one who lives that can accumulate or enjoy wealth. By implication, it shows that the purpose of wealth is to serve human life, otherwise wealth is meaningless. It is a common proverb in Igbo that *A ghara ndu kpaa aku, onyeiro erie ya* (If one neglects one's life in pursuit of wealth, then one is risking losing one's life and leaving the wealth for the enemy).

The above examples show that human life is an inestimable value which should not be toyed with. Although human life, its origin and purpose are understood and interpreted differently by different individuals, there is a common belief that human life is a datum (given). It is given to humans, not by the humans themselves but by an Authority beyond human capabilities. For this reason, it is impossible for one to buy life or to extend it beyond the will of the Giver. For the same reason, it is wrong to toy with one's or another's life. Being a gift, life is given for a purpose, and that purpose is designed by the Giver Himself. Many philosophies, religions, cultures and sciences have supplied lots of answers as to what the purpose of human life is. For instance, from the philosophical perspective, Metz (2013) is of the view that life is conceptualized as something that is good for its own sake. In Judaism, the meaning of life is to heal, restore and improve the world through good deeds. For Christianity, life means loving God with one's whole being, and loving one's neighbor as oneself.

(Resch, 2020). However, it is difficult to pinpoint the answer that is definitively the right one. In spite of this apparent dilemma, there is always something in every human which teaches him/her about the purpose of life, the summary of which is to do good and avoid evil, to the best of one's knowledge and ability. This entails a lot of things, especially the duty to protect life, not to destroy it; to enhance, not to hinder its well-being and progress, be it one's own life or someone else's. Ultimately, this raises a question regarding the rationale for acts suicide, especially among youth.

In every society, human life is considered as the greatest gift every human being can value and cherish, and for which every other thing can be sacrificed. It therefore becomes baffling when some people decide to take their own lives, especially when it is among students of tertiary institutions who are a step forward to becoming somebodies in the society. One wonders whether such people have a good understanding of human life, its origin and purpose, as well as the implications of suicide. It also seems that the inculcation of values through education is falling apart. Does one have the right to terminate one's own life? Why are the cases of suicide more rampant among students of tertiary institutions? What are the causes of these acts of suicide? What implications has this tendency for education in tertiary institutions, and what are the strategies to be adopted to stop or curb this tendency among the students of tertiary institutions?

A lot has been written on the issue of suicide world-wide to depict its seriousness. Humphrey (2018) is of the view that suicide originated at some stage of evolution when humans discovered (about 100,000 years ago), that death brings to an end a person's bodily and mental presence in the world to an end. He further stated that the devastating consequence was that individuals seeking to escape mental or physical pain would choose to kill themselves. According to World Health Organisation (2019:6), "Suicide is a serious global public health issue. It is among the top twenty leading causes of death world-wide", and "close to 800,000 people die by suicide every year". From the point of view of religion, Musisi and Kinyanda (2017) note that concerning suicide rates, religious nations fare better than secular nations. The idea here is that virtually those from religious backgrounds usually believe that God, or the Supreme Being, or whatever name used to substitute that, is the giver of human life; hence it is wrong for any one, apart from God, to terminate it. For this reason, even cooperation in terminating life through euthanasia or assisted suicide is considered a heinous act. In this regard, Ekeke and Ikeagu (2010:12) argue that "the heartless and heinous destruction of human life in the name of euthanasia and assisted suicide is a great threat to the sanctity of human life which great books of religion enjoin".

Suicide effects are tragic and deeply felt, even long after the individual has taken his or her own life. It is usually the second or third leading cause of death among adolescents, and remains one of the top ten leading causes of death well into middle age. A person who dies by suicide leaves behind them a tangled confusion of family members and friends who try to make sense of a senseless and purposeless act. In this perspective, Sandler (2018) maintains that those most dramatically impacted when someone commits suicide are those closest to the deceased, such as the family members, friends, classmates, co-workers and members of the community. For every

attempted suicide, there is thought to be one or more people where the thought of suicide has never translated into an actual attempt. With over a half a million people making a suicidal attempt each year (WHO, 2019), this translates into a huge problem that society largely ignores or tries to sweep under the rug. Prevention efforts largely target adolescents, but few professionals feel comfortable dealing with people who are actively suicidal.

In most communities, the health care system also is not well equipped to deal with the magnitude of the problem or the specific needs of a person who is suicidal. Suicidal behavior is complex. Some risk factors vary with age, gender and ethnic group and may even change over time. The risk factors for suicidal frequency occur in combination. Research has shown that 90 percent of people who kill themselves have depression or another diagnosable mental and substance abuse disorder. While depression is one of the most treatable mental disorders, it is also one of the most under-diagnosed and under-recognised. Many people still carry the misconception that suicidal thoughts and behaviours are deserved - that when a person has reached this point in their lives, there is no turning back. Today, much more is known about the causes and treatment of this mental health problem. There are biological and psychological components to every depression and that the best form of treatment is a combination of medication and psychotherapy. It has also been observed that males are statistically more likely to commit suicide than females, and people who perceive themselves as a burden to others are most likely to end their own lives (Weaver, 2019).

Suicide is a pathetic event, especially when it involves students and youths. This is all the more worrisome in Nigeria, where human life has been traditionally highly cherished and respected. It is in this regard that Nyorere, James and Udom (2020:) argue that suicidal behaviour among students is considered as the most serious problem associated with public health in Nigerian society. As noted by Omigbodun, Dogra, Esan, & Adedokun (2008), in their studies, Nigerian students have one of the highest rates of suicidal ideations and attempts, comparable to other developing nations.

This paper is an attempt to provide answers to the above questions and suggest some ways forward in terms of strategies to be adopted in order to curb suicide tendencies among students in Nigerian tertiary institutions. Many research works have dealt with cases of suicide among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria, including their causes, effects and remedies. However, most of the works rarely linked their findings to the value of human life, and the implications for education. Against this backdrop, this paper focuses on the value of human life in connection with suicide tendencies among the students of tertiary institutions, as well as the educational implications. The method adopted is that of critical analysis of concepts and literature review. The aim is to make room for a deeper understanding of human life and grave implications of suicide. It is hoped that this understanding will have positive impacts on the students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria so as to dissuade them from inclinations towards suicide.

## **METHOD**

This research adopted a critical analysis of concepts and literature review to explore some risk factors for suicide, its implications for education and possible solutions to suicide tendencies amongst students, especially in the tertiary institutions in Nigeria.

## **FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION**

### **Warning Signs of Suicide**

Suicide among adolescent students often happens after a stressful life event, such as problems at school, break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, the death of a loved one, or a major family conflict. In dealings with adolescents, especially students, it is pertinent to watch out for some warning signs of suicide tendencies in their utterances, particularly when they are going through some difficult experiences. Those who are tending towards suicide often talk about death in general, or with reference to themselves, at any slightest provocation or minimal sad experience. They can also give hints that they might not be around anymore, without being explicit about their statements.

Talks about feelings of hopelessness and feelings guilty without appropriate steps to remedy the situation or atone for the perceived misdeeds are also indications of suicide tendencies. Sometimes such people pull away from friends, peers and family members without any good reason. They often write, or are usually captivated by, songs, poems, or letters about death, separation, and loss. Such people can engage in strange acts of generosity, such as giving away their treasured possessions to siblings and friends, even when not solicited.

Signs of suicide tendencies among students can manifest in their sudden loss of the desire to take part in their favorite activities. In such situations, they usually isolate themselves from their peers, playmates, study groups and best of friends. At the latent level of the tendency, the affected individuals can have troubles concentrating or thinking clearly, or speaking with coherence and coordination. As time goes on, changes can occur in their eating and sleeping habits. Risk-taking behaviours can occur, as well as loss of interest in school activities.

These warning signs, if not detected and properly handled, would culminate in an attitude of indifference or outright disregard towards all educational programmes and values.

### **Implications for Education**

At the surface level, one may see education as having nothing to do with suicide. However, it is worthy of note that suicide is a result of mental disorder, triggered by a number of issues and their effects. Any occurrence of suicide is an indictment on the mental health of the victim. The relationship between education and mental health has drawn a considerable interest and has been examined from a number of different perspectives. For instance, socio-economic status is frequently operationally defined as

level of education and/or level of education of family members. Low level of education has been identified by a number of studies to significantly increase the risk of suicide, suicidal ideation, and depression. (Giri, 2019). According to Ekeh (2019: 415), “education is a process of teaching and learning, the aim of which is to bring about a holistic formation of the individuals through the inculcation of values, skills and attitudes to be put into practice for the purpose of individual and social transformation and development”. Without sound mental health free of suicidal ideations and tendencies, it would be impossible for education to achieve the above stated aims.

Educational achievement usually brings a sense of worth, fulfilment and joy to the achiever, with its attendant opportunities for upward social mobility. Conversely, educational underachievement has been observed to be significantly correlated with major depression, and that students with poor reading skills experience significantly higher level of suicidal ideation (Fergusson and Woodward, 2012). While abject poverty and unemployment are risk factors for suicide, these can be attributed to lack of or poor educational achievement. This poor performance is more rampant among the undergraduate students, irrespective of sex or race, resulting to low self-esteem, thwarted sense of belonging and difficulty in social integration on the part of the students in question (Kinyanda, Hoskins, Nakku, Nawaz, Patel, 2012). The damaging effects of failure to socially integrate with others may be mitigated by the individual having a mindset - an established set of attitudes - conducive to successful integration (Dwerk, 2018).

For one to have a conducive mindset for social integration implies that there is need for the transformation of one’s mind-set. This is where the role of education becomes glaring. Education goes with teaching and learning, and learning has been defined as a relatively permanent change in behavior as a result of practice or experience (Prachi, 2015). The change can be better or worse, depending on the contents and objectives of learning. Since this is the case, education is expected to focus on the learning contents and objectives that bring about a better change.

Through higher education, people are expected to be and do relatively better in terms of character, quality of life, career choice and social position. They are also greatly afflicted when they stumble upon failures or disappointments, damaging their self-confidence and self-trust, and so are more prone to suicide when they experience failures and public shame (Pompili et al, 2013). This is in contrast to religious people who place a stigma on self-killing to escape self-helplessness. People who have received secular education without a strong religious background are more prone to consider suicide as an escape option when confronted with a crisis or catastrophe. Also, studies have shown that bullying aggravates depression and increases suicide risk for both the victim and the perpetrator. Because bullying can be a catalyst for suicide, its significance should not be overlooked. When adolescents who are at risk for suicide because of depression or other mental health issues are bullied, the results can be disastrous. An increased risk of suicide must be considered when a child is bullied.

## **Strategies to Curb Suicide Tendencies among Students in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria**

### *Inculcation of Family Values*

In addition to value of human life as sacred, especially in Nigerian context, every family has some values which every member is expected to imbibe and uphold with pride. Such values can include “safeguarding the good name of the family, team spirit, discipline, resourcefulness, parental love and care, filial obedience, respect and love. Also essential are honesty, truthfulness, security, ... good prayer life, code of conduct and education” (Ekeh, 2007:32). If children are brought up in these values, they can hardly get frustrated in life, or become so confused and misguided to the extent of taking their own life.

### *Detection of Warning Signs*

Many adolescents who die by or attempt suicide invariably give some type of warnings to loved ones or those around them ahead of time. These can be through their behaviours, utterances or body language. So it is important for parents to know the warning signs so adolescents who might be suicidal can get the help before it becomes late. Right from home, parents should monitor the behaviours and attitudes of their children and wards and guide them appropriately.

### *Proper Formal Education*

Education is indispensable, not only in the development of a nation, but fundamentally in the inculcation of values and character molding of the individual citizens. Some of the values to be inculcated through Nigerian education include “respect for the worth and dignity of the individual, faith in man’s ability to make rational decisions, and moral and spiritual principle in inter-personal and human relations” (Federal Republic of Nigeria, 2004:8). Human person has worth and dignity above other earthly creatures because he/she is believed to be created by the Supreme Being, and that human life is sacred, since its origin is the Supreme Being. All the other values to be inculcated as indicated in the National policy on education are for the purpose of enhancing human life. Proper inculcation of values through formal education can lead to a better understanding of human life as well as other values, and this can discourage suicide tendencies among students.

### *Cultivating Religious Attitude*

Naturally, Africans are religious in thoughts, words and deeds. There is always the belief that there is a Supreme Being watching over everyone on earth, to whom all life belongs, and to whom all must render an account of their earthly life. Imparting religious education to children is therefore very necessary as a strategy for curbing suicide tendencies among the students.

## **CONCLUSION**

Suicide remains a serious cause of mortality worldwide. From the critical



analysis and examination of key issues in this discourse, it can be seen that suicide tendencies among students of tertiary institutions in Nigeria are largely due to little or lack of proper understanding of the value of human life and implications of suicide, especially in the context of education, both in the family and formal education settings. A re-orientation on human life and related values in both family and school can effect a positive change. Not all suicides are preventable, but a methodological approach to suicide risk assessment can enable parents, educators and healthcare providers to manage those who are at risk of committing suicide. It is therefore pertinent that they monitor students who perform poorly academically, for signs of depression and suicidal ideation, and offer appropriate supports when necessary. This is very important, in the light of the value of human life as sacred and the most precious gift from God to humanity, which only the Giver has the right to terminate.s

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