

buying, but also worth reading, particularly in order to understand better those often difficult to help patients who have experienced traumatic relationships as children.

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Understanding suicidal behaviour: The suicidal process approach to research, treatment and prevention

Edited by Kees van Heeringen

Chichester, UK: Wiley, 2001. Pp 336. Hardback, \$64.95. Pp 320. ISBN 0 47198 803 0

This book, part of the Wiley Series in Clinical Psychology, warrants a place on the shelf of any suicidologist, clinician or researcher with an interest in suicidal behaviour. The subtitle of this volume, *The Suicidal Process Approach to Research, Treatment and Prevention*, promotes its all-encompassing scope. However, the obvious question is, does this volume meet the expectations suggested by the title? In short, yes, it certainly does. Kees van Heeringen, Director of the Unit for Suicide Research at the University of Gent (Belgium), is an international authority on suicidology, particularly with respect to the relationship between the biological and psychological characteristics of suicidal behaviour. He has delivered a truly international perspective on understanding suicidal behaviour, with contributors from Britain, Europe, North America, the Middle East and Australia.

The book is divided into two parts. Part I addresses the suicidal process via an overview of research findings (Chapters 1–8), and Part II focuses on implications for the understanding and treatment of suicidal behaviour (Chapters 9–15). Van Heeringen sets the scene in the opening chapter in which he outlines key concepts and themes pertinent to suicide research (e.g. definitions, suicidal career, suicidal process). This is built upon in the following chapter, wherein Kerkhof and Arensman illuminate 'the who, the how and the where' of the suicidal process. In Chapters 3 and 4 (Traskman-Bendz and Westrin and van Praag), there are excellent reviews of the possible biological bases of suicidal behaviour (e.g. HPA axis, serotonin levels) and the interaction between stress and physiology.

Within Part I, Williams and Pollock's chapter (Chapter 5) is probably most pertinent to clinical psychologists and is eminently readable. They summarize the current state of knowledge on the psychological aspects of the suicidal process (e.g. autobiographical memory, prospective cognitions) and put forward their 'cry of pain' explanation of suicidal behaviour. The authors of Chapter 6 (Apter and Ofek) offer a different slant again, adopting a case-study format to describe three suicidal subtypes in which personality dimensions are thought to play a central role. The next contributor, Goldney, draws on ethological concepts and applies them to the suicidal process (Chapter 7). He outlines their relationship with examples from neurobiology and animal studies. In the final chapter of Part I, van Heeringen succeeds in tying together the findings outlined in the preceding chapters within a diathesis–stress framework and argues for a psychobiological model of the suicidal process.

Chapter 9 (Part II) reminds the reader of the difficulties with the prediction and assessment of suicide risk. Specifically, Amsel and Mann review the literature from a statistical perspective and identify useful insights. The sociological perspective is not overlooked either, and Bille-Brahe (Chapter 10), using Denmark as a case example, relates the changes in societal development to the frequency of suicidal behaviour. Parasuicides, suicide attempters or deliberate self-harm patients (whatever one's chosen nomenclature!) are the focus of Chapter 11. Therein, Hawton draws on his considerable research and clinical experience to highlight excellently the problems and possible solutions for use with this population. He calls for urgent research, to identify the treatment needs of specific patient subgroups, if treatment is to be effective. Chapter 12 is an extremely welcome breath of fresh air. Michel and Valach describe an alternative framework, based on action theory (goal-directed action), to understand suicidal behaviour and to establish a better therapeutic alliance between suicidal patient and healthcare professional. This is an extremely interesting chapter that should be of particular utility to clinicians. The two

penultimate chapters (Malone and Moran, and Kienhorst and van Heeringen) describe the psychopharmacological and psychotherapeutic approaches to the suicidal process, respectively. The plethora of research in these fields is summarized, with limitations and suggestions for future endeavours usefully proffered. To outline just two; Malone and Moran call for well-designed clinical intervention studies, whereas Kienhorst and van Heeringen complain of a dearth of studies on the efficacy of psychotherapy. In the final chapter, van Heeringen summarizes the key themes put forward in Part II and remarks positively on the shift in perspective in suicidology; from a psychiatric disorders standpoint to stress-diathesis and process models. The editor and contributors ought to be commended on a comprehensive and lucid volume.

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Comprehending suicide: Landmarks in 20th century suicidology

By Edward S. Shneidman

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2001. Pp 214. \$39.95. ISBN 1 55798 743 2

This is an unusual book. It is intriguing and insightful and provides the reader with a window into Edwin Shneidman's thinking on suicide. Few, if any other, authors could have succeeded in the task Shneidman set himself: to present and reflect upon a twentieth century 'panoply of important books representing various aspects of the current suicidological scene' (p. 9). Shneidman draws on his 60 or so years of studying suicidology to bring together 13 books including historical, sociological, psychological, psychiatric, biological and survivor perspectives. The 13 chapters are divided into four sections: Historical and Literary Insights; Sociological Insights; Biological Insights; Psychiatric and Psychological Insights; and Insights on Survivors and Volunteers. Each chapter begins with a review of that book and twenty-first century perspective followed by a reproduction of the title page and contents. The final part of each chapter contains approximately six pages of the original text reproduced verbatim.

Many of the classics are there; for example, Al Alvarez's *The Savage God: A Study of Suicide* (1972), Durkheim's *Le Suicide* (1897) and Karl Menninger's *Man Against Himself* (1938). More recent contributions have not been overlooked, however. Shneidman muses that there is no single authored book of note on the biology of suicide, so instead presents Stoff and Mann's 1997 edited text *The Neurobiology of Suicide: From the Bench to the Clinic*. *Comprehending Suicide* has introduced me to one or two texts which I would not otherwise have been drawn to read. For example, Mamoru Iga's *The Thorn in the Chrysanthemum: Suicide and Economic Success in Modern Japan* (1986) receives the highest praise from Shneidman and sounds intriguing. Another surprising, and perhaps controversial, inclusion is *The Inman Diary: A Public and Private Confession* (Aaron, 1985). It is an edited text of the diary of Arthur Inman, who committed suicide at the age of 69 years, and recounts aspects of cultural and intellectual history in USA in the 1930s. Chad Varah's considerable contribution to crisis intervention and suicide prevention is also recognized by the inclusion of his text on *The Samaritans* (1985).

The book ends with an epilogue, Shneidman's swansong entitled 'This I Believe'. Here, he summarizes his perspective, his comprehension of suicide: it is not a Kraepelinian category, not a disease, not a special physiological state, and it cannot be answered using DSM. Rather, it is an escape, from unbearable psychological pain, the pain of feeling pain. Reading this volume yields many more questions than answers. As ever, Shneidman succeeds in stimulating the reader, spurring them on, to understand further the enigma of suicide, or, in the words of the author, to better understand psychache; to his mind, no psychache, no suicide. All those with an interest in suicide will benefit from reading this book, it contains something for the researcher, the clinician, the volunteer and the survivor. It is not a clinical handbook; rather, it is an excellent critique and historical commentary on many of the most influential books in the field of suicidology.

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