

## SUICIDE AND THE CONFLICTED SOLDIER: A VIEW FROM PSYCHODIAGNOMICS

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### SUMMARY

**Background:** To move beyond the traditional, cross-sectional, ontogenetic, biopsychosocial, diagnostic formulation of suicide.

**Method:** Analysis of media reports, principally via Highbeam Research, of a noted case of a sudden and unexpected military suicide: Jacob Kovco.

**Results:** Ontogenetic diagnostic analysis, centering on the person, was successfully amplified by diagnostic analysis of time and place, in the cultural and historical, phylogenetic domain. It revealed an occult, dissociative depression. This method is called psychodiagnomics.

**Conclusion:** Ontogenetic analysis of suicide, especially biomedical analysis must be complemented by ontogenetic and phylogenetic analysis in the socio-cultural domains.

**Key words:** suicide - conflicted soldier - psychodiagnomics

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### INTRODUCTION

The analysis of suicide in contemporary practice is mostly restricted to its ontogenetic, temporal and spatial dimensions. That is, it combines cross-sectional and developmental data. But suicide is also crucially determined by history and geography in the phylogenetic domain. It is most clearly seen in epidemic suicide. Notably, phylogenetically contingent, epidemic suicide occurred in Jews in the Holocaust (Kwiet 1989, Lester 2005, Brown 2009), and in Germans following the end of World War II (Goeschel 2006, 2007, 2009, Mass suicides 1945 Nazi Germany, Wikipedia, last modified on 13 January 2015). Epidemic suicide also occurred in the Middle Ages in the UK and on the continent of Europe (Murray 1997), and it occurred in ancient Greece and Rome (Masaryk 1881)

Phylogenetic considerations need not only be adduced for epidemic suicide phenomena. They are also prevalent in incidental suicide, but are rarely identified in contemporary suicidological analyses. Typically such suicides belong to the categories of sudden and unexpected suicide, and of unexplained suicide in general. The conventional view in suicidology is that these suicides are impulsive. Like hopelessness, impulsivity has been given the status of an endophenotype, (Gottesman & Gould 2003, Mann 2009) linking suicide phenotype with putative, suicide genotypes. Impulsivity, however, might be necessary, but it is never sufficient to explain suicide.

The phylogenetic, spatial and temporal dimension is constitutive to a novel diagnostic model in psychiatry, termed psychodiagnomics (Brown, submitted for publication). The model is suitable for the analysis of ordinary conduct, and to all forms of psychopathology,

including suicide. It is especially suitable for the analysis of obscure cases in which ontogenetic analysis might benefit from phylogenetic augmentation. This article presents an ontogenetic and phylogenetic analysis of a noted, recent, case of sudden and unexpected suicide in the military: the case of Private Kovco (2006). A post-mortem diagnosis was made of dissociative (occult) depression. The ontogenetic data was entirely abstracted from inquest reports in the news media, especially sourced via High beam. The phylogenetic data was from multiple sources, centering on electronic data.

### Ontogenetic data

On April 21, 2006, in Baghdad, Private Jacob Kovco committed suicide. He was aged 26. He had grown up in Briagolong, Gippsland, in the southern state of Victoria, Australia. Kovco obtained his High School leaving certificate from Maffra Secondary College, in 1998. The region was prone to natural disaster: there were bushfires and floods, in 2006-2007. This was the period when Kovco was performing military service in Iraq.

Kovco hailed from a Bosnian-Australian, immigrant family. The vast majority of Bosnian migrants had begun arriving in Australia during and after the Bosnian War, between April 1992 and December 1995. Most were Muslim, followed by Eastern Orthodox and Catholic. Prominent, mythic archetypes amongst them in Bosniak folklore were the Trickster, and the Hero.

Prior to army service, Kovco worked processing slaughtered livestock. In his free-time, he was a mountain bike rider, and raced motorcycles. He had married and the couple had two children.

During his four years of army service Kovco was attached to the Australian Armed Forces, 3RAR Parachute Infantry Battalion. In October, 2005, he was selected for deployment in Baghdad. There, he was to serve as a member of the Security Detachment (SECDET), protecting Australian officials at the embassy. Following preparatory training in March 2006, Kovco left for Iraq. Within a month he had died by his own hand.

Most of the subsequent cause-celebre centred on three things. The first was whether Kovco's death was a suicide or an accident. The shot was fired while he was handling his gun in his room at the army base. Kovco's mother vehemently rejected suicide. Homicide was not considered. Secondly, there was a scandal regarding a mix up with coffins. Another person was erroneously shipped back to Australia in his name. Thirdly, there had been allegations that he had intimidated military witnesses prior to a military inquiry.

Kovco's personal diary was very revealing. He was experiencing seriously divided loyalties, in several domains of his life. Kovco was caught in a rift between his wife and his mother, ostensibly over the latter's access to the couple's two young children. In a diary entry dated April 16, 2006, Kovco wrote, "What the fuck am I supposed to do? Tell mum to stop fussing over her grandchildren and then she will have the shits with me, or do I tell Shelley to sort it out with her herself, she is getting it wrong? Then she has got the shits with me? It shits me to no end. I don't need and don't want this kind of crap on my mind over here. I have got enough to worry about, like coming home alive."

Kovco had had a brief affair in Sydney, before he shipped to Iraq. He told his transitional partner that he had been sexually molested as a child, by a 17-year-old neighbour. The molester had interfered with him over a nine-month period. Kovco confided that he wanted to find the perpetrator and kill him, adding, "Not that that would have happened; that was a general term. I could have killed him." The abuse had apparently so depressed him, that he had contemplated shooting himself in the head with a shotgun. Kovco told his lover that once, when drunk, he had tried to shoot himself with a shotgun at the back of his father's yard, and that his father had intervened. Kovco had previously confided to his wife, about the molestation, and she feared he, "might at one time have caused himself harm." Kovco had also told his mother that he put a gun in his mouth when he was 14, because he felt, "so depressed about being molested at the age of seven." Kovco's mother said that her son then fired over his shoulder, saying that he couldn't do it because it would have killed her. Kovco was encouraged by his family to seek professional help, but he had demurred.

At the inquest in the Coroner's Court, Professor Robert Goldney, the doyenne of Australian suicido-

logists, concluded it was "more likely than not" a case of suicide. He found that the soldier was a "flamboyant" personality who engaged in escalating acts of risk-taking culminating in his death.

The sources of Goldney's data included informants, and Kovco's diary entries. Goldney informed the court, that on March 21, 2006, Private Kovco had written about a dream, which the jury, "might find strangely foreboding in its depiction of his death by his own hand." Kovco wrote, "I dreamt I was sitting in our room (here) by myself and for some unknown reason I pulled out my 9 mm pistol and shot myself in the head?! I have no idea why, but it seemed I wanted to see what it felt like." Kovco described hearing, "the click of the hammer" as he shot himself, but he wrote, instead of a loud crack, "The sound went dull as the bullet entered my skull. It was like I could feel the bullet inside... a few seconds later I went limp and started gushing blood from the wounds, nose, ears and mouth. That's when I woke bolt upright, and said, fuck, that hurts ... very weird ... I have no idea why, but it seemed I wanted to see what it felt like ... I didn't die, but it felt like I did, but didn't (if that makes sense?)."

Kovco went on to write that same night that he was not suicidal, but believed the dream was a premonition. He wrote, "I have no intention of shooting myself ... I know it wasn't about killing myself so I'm a bit worried that it might be a premonition about a bullet hitting me in the head but not killing me."

Kovco's roommate reported that Kovco was known to, "fool around with weapons," like gun-slinging cowboys in western movies, including practicing the quick draw. Kovco's former section commander said that Kovco was "cocky" in handling his pistol around others. Kovco was twice reprimanded for his blasé gun-handling, including pointing his weapon at others in his barracks.

On the day of his demise, Kovco was, "his usual happy self". Professor of psychiatry at the University of NSW, Philip Mitchell, said he did not believe Kovco was suicidal when he succumbed to the shooting. In his testimony, Mitchell averred, "Those who suicide normally do so on their own... Kovco was aware that he would have time on his own that afternoon. If he had been intending to shoot himself he would have waited until his fellow soldiers had left the room. It makes it highly, extremely unlikely to be suicide because it occurred in the presence of others." Professor Mitchell downplayed the dream data.

University of Adelaide Professor of Psychiatry, Sandy McFarlane, told the coronial inquiry that Kovco had, "few risk factors for committing suicide." Just before he died, Kovco was reported mimicking the song *Dreams* by The Cranberries (appended). McFarlane suggested that the song triggered a recollection of his dream, "At this moment he may have drawn his 9mm pistol and ... re-enacted his dream."

## Ontogenetic analysis

Kovco resisted referral for psychiatric evaluation. Army screening did not identify the distal risk factors, not only for psychiatric illness, but also for suicide. Presumably, if he did not lie, then they didn't ask, and he dissimulated normality. Kovco's past history of childhood sexual abuse and its depressive, posttraumatic after-effects, centering on suicidality, was known, at the very least, to his parents, and his wife. Mostly it must have remained hidden, or in psychopathological terms, dissociated. It is generally not recognised that chronic, especially untreated depression can act as a stressor in its own right, causing its own dissociative reactions. Proximal stress factors included family disharmony, and an extra-marital affair manifested in nightmares, identity diffusion, and in regression. His conduct at the army base was erratic. He was a depressed and stressed soldier. His psychopathology was concealed beneath play-acting and jocularity. But, that did not fool his fellow soldiers, or his commanders, who noted his risk-taking, and sensed that he was troubled. However, it did not alert them to the suicide risk.

Linking ontogenesis with phylogenesis were the bushfires and floods concurrent with Kovco's tour of duty. He might well have had concerns for the safety of his family and the rural, Victorian community back home. More than 500 fires broke out across the state of Victoria between New Year's Eve 2005, and the end of January 2006 (Bushfire history). The greatest impact was felt in Gippsland. There were four fatalities; fifty-seven houses were destroyed; and, 359 farm buildings were lost. Stock losses totalled more than 64,000. The fires burned about 160,000 hectares of land. About 60 per cent of the area was public land, and 40 per cent private property. There was a powerful psychiatric impact (McFarlane & Raphael 2009).

## Phylogenetic analysis

Kovco was raised a Muslim Australian. He was sent to police a Muslim country. These phylogenetic, stress factors may well have impacted ontogenetically on his psychopathology, and so, on his suicidality.

High levels of anti-Muslim feeling in Australia were an accumulation of international political events, poorly-informed public debates and sensationalist media treatment" (Dunn 2013, Mounster & Barry 2011). In the 12-year, Challenging Racism Project, the biggest survey done on racism in Australia (12,512 people) nearly half the respondents believed, "Australia is weakened by people of different ethnic origins sticking to their old ways."

Victoria is regarded as one of the most tolerant Australian states, but it is the exception that often proves the rule. There have always been racist hotspots especially in areas of economic hardship, recent immigration and below-average education levels. The Victorian, Baw Baw halal program in which local businesses become halal accredited, elicited threatening letters to Baw Baw Shire (Pitt 2013).

Muslims, like Kovco, serving in Western military services in Muslim countries, are especially vulnerable to stress (Elliot 2009). At the very least they face racial taunts for being Muslim, such as "camel jockey," "haaji" and "raghead." More destructive than ethno-phaulism is the ambivalence that many encounter in fighting fellow Muslims. A US marine said, "It's kind of like the Civil War, where brothers fought each other across the Mason-Dixon line ... I don't want to stain my faith, I don't want to stain my fellow Muslims, and I also don't want to stain my country's flag."

When veterans return home, their communities often regard them as traitors to the Muslim cause. They are unwelcome at their local mosques, and are told they will go to hell for killing Muslims. These indignities are in addition to any service or combat trauma. As a Muslim Australian, Kovco may well have had to face these stresses in Baghdad. His reckless conduct, culminating in self-destruction, could have been a defensive posture, a sublimation of the Bosniak archetype, the trickster. Today, that ambivalence is resolved, not while serving the allies, but by serving in Muslim forces waging war against them. More than twice as many British Muslims have travelled to Syria to fight for extremists including the Islamic State than are serving in the British Armed Forces (Farmer 2014).

## DISCUSSION

Amongst completed suicides the sudden and unexplained form is not infrequent. The example of Private Kovco is continuously echoed in the media by comparable exemplars. In the immediate aftermath of 9/11, when 16-year old Charles Bishop committed suicide by crashing his training Cessna into the 28th floor of the Bank of America tower in Tampa, Florida, (2002 Tampa plane crash, Wikipedia, last modified on 16 November, 2014) he carried the distal phylogenetic burden of stress of parental refugeism, involving migration to America from Syria, and the proximal phylogenetic burden of stress of the local aftermath of the Gulf War. In ontogeny, the distal burden was the personal impact of his parents' failed suicide pact, and their marital failure. The proximal ontogenetic burden was the psychological dissonance between being dux of the class, and his desire to wage terror. He left a suicide note cursing America. The family and the media blamed Roacutane for Bishop's death, a drug prescribed for the treatment of acne, which at that time had attracted a class action regarding its putative causation of suicide.

From the point of view of the anamnesis, proximal and distal, ontogenetic and phylogenetic factors have been combined in a diagnostic model called psychodiagnomics. It has ready application to suicide. But diagnosis is more than aetiology and phenomenology. Mediating stress, genotype and phenotype are psychogenetic mechanisms which cannot be reduced to mere endophenotypes. The dissociative model holds much promise in this regard. Its weakest point is in genotypes. Stress genes, or rather the genetics of stress, are at a very early stage. It

does not yet extend much beyond, heat and oxidative stress, corticoids, glutamate and glia. Dissociation applies both to phenotypes and to underlying psychogenetic mechanisms. It can be primary, a direct response to stress, or secondary, mediated by other mental disorder, notably by depression. Both Kovco and Bishop probably suffered from dissociative and so occult forms of depression.

In his article, 'Theoretical psychiatry,' Miro Jakovljević sought to bridge the gap between academic and clinical psychiatry. This study seeks to bridge that gap by reformulating diagnostic psychiatry. It combines evidence from ontogeny and phylogeny. The model, entitled psycho-diagnomics is exemplified.

## CONCLUSION

Ontogenetic analysis of suicide, especially biomedical analysis must be complemented by ontogenetic and phylogenetic analysis in the socio-cultural domains.

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## Appendix

Oh my life is changing everyday  
Every possible way  
Though my dreams, it's never quite as it seems  
Never quite as it seems

I know I felt like this before  
But now I'm feeling it even more  
Because it came from you

Then I open up and see  
The person fumbling here is me  
A different way to be

I want more, impossible to ignore  
Impossible to ignore

They'll come true, impossible not to do  
Impossible not to do

Now I tell you openly  
You have my heart so don't hurt me  
For what I couldn't find

Talk to me amazing mind  
So understanding and so kind  
You're everything to me

Oh my life is changing everyday  
Every possible way  
Though my dreams, it's never quite as it seems  
'cause you're a dream to me

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