SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIORS

EXPERIMENTAL RESEARCH,
CLINICAL IMPRESSIONS, AND
PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

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SELF-DEFEATING BEHAVIORS

Experimental Research, Clinical Impressions, and Practical Implications

Edited by Rebecca C. Curtis

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EDITED BY
REBECCA C. CURTIS

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This volume is dedicated to those who have taken care of my children while I worked, especially Cellina Shaw, Joan Baker, Lorna Stiles, the Adelphi Child Activity Center, the Hunter-Lenox Creative Center, and, of course, my husband. I would also like to express my appreciation to my colleagues in psychology at Adelphi, especially Michael Leippe, Janice Steil, and George Stricker, for their encouragement; to my colleagues from other disciplines, especially Eugene Roth, for their contributions to my thinking; and to Eleanor Shaw and Pat Carey, for their assistance and support.

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PREFACE

*In the desert
I saw a creature, naked, bestial,
Who, squatting upon the ground,
Held his heart in his hands,
And ate of it.
I said: "Is it good, friend?"
"It is bitter—bitter," he answered;
But I like it
Because it is bitter,
And because it is my heart."*

Stephen Crane
The Black Riders and Other Lines

"It is the function of great art to purge and give meaning to human suffering," wrote Bernard Knox (1982, p. 149) in his introduction to *Oedipus Rex*. This is done by showing some causal connection between the hero's free will and his suffering, by bringing to the fore the interplay of the forces of destiny and human freedom. Knox states that Freud was wrong when he suggested that it was "the particular nature of the material" in *Oedipus* that makes the play so deeply moving, and not the contrast between destiny and human will. Knox believes that this play has an overpowering effect upon us, not only because we share the tendency of *Oedipus* to direct "our first sexual impulse towards our mother" and "our first murderous wish against our father," as Freud tells us, but also because the theological modification of the legend introduced by Sophocles calls into question the sacred beliefs of our time (Knox, 1982, pp. 133–137). It is the juxtaposition of the forces of fate and free will that creates the tension in *Oedipus* and in our most powerful dramas, as Knox points out. So it is also in the interplay of these forces that tension is created in all of our lives. It is in our behaviors emanating out of these moments of conflict that we create meaning in our lives, and that we create our identities. Feeling the pull of opposing forces, we perpetuate or transform our ways of acting and our way of being. In so doing we defeat or enhance our "self."

In Stephen Crane's poem we have the powerful image of a creature eating his heart out. In *Oedipus*, we have not only the image of a man who gouges his eyes out, but also a tragedy that begins in the belief in prophecies and in the belief in the power of forces greater than human ones to control a person's fate—a tragedy that might have been avoidable. Knox suggests that the "theological purpose" of Sophocles is to illumine the tragedy of the sacred belief of many people in his time in divine foreknowledge and preordination. If the belief in divine foreknowledge were eliminated, the rest of their religious worldview would also fall apart. "If the gods did not know the future, they did not know any more than man," Knox writes (p. 137). Prophecy was thus one of the great controversial questions of Sophocles' day.

In our century, the rise of knowledge in the social sciences, especially psychology, has brought again into question the accepted ideas regarding free will, destiny, and what happens when people attempt their best to overcome the forces bearing down upon the courses of their lives. Like Oedipus, when we see the truth about the plight we are condemned to suffer, in terror we may engage in behavior that makes us even more miserable or on reflection gain the strength to make our lives more meaningful and perhaps alleviate some of the conditions leading to the pain surrounding us.

In the drama *Oedipus*, there are two types of suffering: suffering imposed by the gods and suffering self-imposed by Oedipus. Although his destiny was predetermined, according to legend Oedipus might have chosen to escape the prophecy—and the realities of existence in a world of sexual and aggressive impulses—by becoming a priest. Instead, he chose to seek his fate. Had he and his parents not believed in the power of prophecies, they would not have engaged in the actions leading to Oedipus's ignorance of his own identity. Believing that he likely would be unable to control his impulses, Oedipus attempted to avoid what he feared most, thus bringing about the fate he dreaded. The only freedom remaining to Oedipus was to search for the truth. In this way he is responsible for what happened to him. Without this causal link between free will and suffering, the play would lose its meaning and its drama.

In this volume on *Self-Defeating Behaviors*, there are also two types of suffering. There is, first, suffering caused by behaviors difficult for people to avoid due to forces beyond their power, e.g., behaviors determined from an early age, and second, suffering caused by behaviors that are experienced as freely chosen in seeking to attain some desired goal such as a sense of identity.

As in Sophocles' day, we still wish to believe that the world is predictable and ordered and, simultaneously, that we have freedom of choice (that human agency can triumph over the forces of destiny). In *Oedipus Rex*, the tragedy was brought about by the forces of the gods, by belief in the enormous power of these forces, by ignorance, and by human action growing out of these beliefs and ignorance of what was most important in life—who one is and from whence one comes. Oedipus was a free agent responsible not for his ignorance but for his triumph over it. "But no person has the power to force the gods to act against his own desires," declares Oedipus. "May I then mention," states the chorus, "what

is to me, the next best thing" (ll. 280–283). "Ignorance can be remedied," Knox notes (p. 151). Therein lies our greatest freedom.

As a graduate student, Morton Deutsch asked me to design an experiment in which the participants would destroy some asset they possessed if they were treated unfavorably or exploited in some way. I was unsuccessful in designing an experiment in which such self-destruction occurred in the laboratory, although I did manage to find conditions under which the participants would lower their performance and financial assets. The problem continued to intrigue me, however, embracing my interests in both social and abnormal psychology, as well as in literature and religion.

Exposed to the idea of "self-fulfilling prophecies" by Robert Merton, the research data I then collected with Mark Zanna on the "fear of success" was readily interpretable within the framework of the self-fulfilling prophecy (or expectancy confirmation processes). The diverse interests of Morton Deutsch, Mark Zanna, and Robert Merton coalesced within my research and graduate seminar on self-defeating behaviors. I would like to thank them for their contributions to my thinking. After completing my dissertation in the area of justice, I returned to work on "the choice to suffer." I would like to thank my students, Tony Mariano, Wayne Gersh, Pam Rietdorf, Diana Ronell, Paul Smith, Bob Moore, Steve Nyberg, Joe Ferrari, Kim Moore, Diane Felicio, Susan Gianone, and Paul Dobrin for their work on these "terrible things, and none done blindly now, all done with a will" (Sophocles, *Oedipus Rex*, ll. 1359–1360 [translated by Robert Fagles]):

It was Apollo, Apollo my friends
 Who brought into reality these pains upon pain, which are my misfortune.
 But my own hand, itself, struck the blow;
 I alone, no one else did it.

(*Oedipus Rex*, ll. 1329–1331)

I would also like to thank Tom Hefferman and Bill DeVito for their suggestions and Jim Fennelly for his translations of *Oedipus Rex* from the Greek.

Rebecca Curtis

New York, New York

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