

The career of a suicidologist

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Abstract

Purpose – *This essay aims to describe how the author began his career as a suicidologist and his style that made him so productive.*

Design/methodology/approach – *The author used autobiographical details to illustrate the elements of his career.*

Findings – *Childhood experiences include sleeping in air raid shelter from 1942 to 1945 in London (UK), while his style includes obsessiveness in reading everything on suicide, applying ideas from other fields (such as economics) to the study of suicide and obtaining academic freedom early in his career.*

Originality/value – *The essay offers guidelines for others who are in the early stages of a career as a researcher.*

Keywords *Suicide, Thanatology, Childhood experiences, Academic freedom, Interdisciplinary studies*

Paper type *Case study*

The beginning

Some of those who research suicidal behavior and those who work in suicide prevention are motivated in part by having family members or close friends who were suicidal. Thomas Joiner (2005) discusses the suicide of his father in the introduction to his book on suicidal behavior. Unni Bille-Brahe's husband died by suicide (Connolly and Lester, 2022). There are no suicides in my family or social network.

My interest in and involvement with suicide research and suicide prevention happened serendipitously. While studying physics at Cambridge University (in England), I was delivering parcels for the post office at Christmas in 1962, and I came down with influenza. I was quite sick and depressed. The material in physics and mathematics that we were studying was difficult (as it always is at first encounter), and I wondered whether I had reached the limit of my understanding. I panicked. The only subjects that one could switch to were those not taught at high school (otherwise one would be four or more years behind). I choose psychology over sociology and anthropology without any knowledge of it. As a result of my First in Part 1 of Physics, I was accepted into the Department of Experimental Psychology.

The Psychology Department at Cambridge University focused on experimental psychology. One day, while sitting in the department library, I saw a book *Clues to Suicide* by Edwin Shneidman and Norman Farberow. It should not have been there. The department was not interested in those kinds of topics. I took it and looked at the 33 pairs of suicide notes at the back of the book, each consisting of one genuine note and one simulated note. It seemed to me that I could correctly choose the genuine one easily, although I never formally checked that. Years later, at Brandeis University (in the USA), when I was asked to choose a topic for my dissertation, I said *suicide* because of that book (Sidebar: Shneidman and I never got along!).

Have I been depressed? Of course. In my third and final year at Cambridge University, my tutor sent me to a psychiatrist who prescribed antidepressants (which I never took). In the

USA, I was depressed and contemplated suicide on three occasions, all brought on by break ups in romantic relationships and marriages. Now, at the age of 80 and retired, I can imagine circumstances that would motivate me to die by suicide, and I have collected the means for dying by suicide.

Other death-related influences

I was born in 1942 and lived with my parents in London during the war. They did not send me to safer places in England during the bombing by the Germans. We slept every night in an air raid shelter in the living room of the house. My mother told the story that, when the buzz bombs, as they were called, came near, I would hear them before the air raid sirens sounded, announce their arrival and rush to the air raid shelter.

Had I stayed as a physicist, that experience would be irrelevant. However, as a psychology graduate student, my first paper in a leading psychology journal (*Psychological Bulletin*) was a review of research on the fear of death, and one of my first research papers was on the development of a fear of death scale. One of my most cited papers is a later fear of death scale (The Collett-Lester Fear of Death Scale). I have researched extensively, in addition to suicidal behavior, the fear of death, life after death, voodoo death and homicide in all of its various manifestations (simple homicide, mass murder, serial murder and cannibalism). I am often described as a *thanatologist*.

Career opportunities

My first job was in academia – two years teaching at Wellesley College in Massachusetts. This was not a stimulating job. In my second year there, I was contacted by Gene Brockopp to come as research director at a suicide prevention center in Buffalo, New York. I was excited to accept his offer.

Gene wanted to set up a rival to the Los Angeles suicide prevention center established by Shneidman and Farberow. We started our own journal (*Crisis Intervention*) and our book on crisis intervention and suicide prevention by telephone (and in later editions on the Internet) ([Lester and Brockopp, 1973](#)) became the standard manual for suicide prevention centers. We sent *Crisis Intervention* free to all suicide prevention centers and to suicidologists (of whom there were not many in 1969).

I left the center after two years and, in 1971, joined a new state college opening in New Jersey (now called Stockton University). I was tenured in 1974 and a Full Professor in 1975 (at the age of 34). As a result, I had the freedom to research and publish anything that I wished. There was no pressure to publish only in prestigious journals, as there is in most universities.

Scholarly style

I have a distinct style in my research and writing which has shaped my scholarly career which has recently achieved my 3,000th scholarly publication.

First, I write (type) quickly. I usually have no plan or thoughts until I sit down at the keyboard and type. My wife and scholarly colleague (Bijou Yang) likes to think about an issue for days and then sit with a pen and legal pad to write down her ideas. That is not my style.

Second, I like playing with ideas, and I search for ideas from all possible sources. For example, I attended a lecture on the giving-up/given-up syndrome given by a psychiatrist, and I saw that this could be applied to voodoo death. I wrote an article about that ([Lester, 2009](#)).

Third, Durkheim's book on suicide was published in 1897 ([Durkheim, 1897](#)), and so I decided to read everything written on suicide since 1897, and I mean everything. I spent

many hours in the basement of the Countway Library in Boston, blowing the dust from old journals to read the articles on suicide in them. I stopped in 1997 because the volume of articles was growing too great for me to read *every one*. My reviews of what I read are in four editions of *Why People Kill Themselves* (Lester, 1972) [1]. This meant that I read articles in journals in psychology, psychiatry medicine, religion, sociology, anthropology, feminism, criminal justice, etc. I located and developed ideas that few others found.

For example, Uematsue (1961) in an obscure journal proposed that the number of potential suicides in a cohort is fixed. If that cohort has a high suicide rate at an early age, it will have a low suicide rate later in life, and vice versa. I rediscovered this hypothesis (Lester, 1984). Another example is Raoul Naroll's theory of suicide (Naroll, 1962) which was published in a book entitled *Data Quality Control*, but which I discovered and tested with a research study (Lester, 1995).

I learned from my wife (an economist) about some economic concepts, such as *the natural unemployment rate*, an idea that the unemployment can never be zero. We soon had joint papers on the concept of a *natural suicide rate*, proposing that the suicide rate of a country could never be zero (Yang and Lester, 2009). There is research on whether stock market indices follow a *random walk*. My wife soon had a paper on the suicide rate as a random walk (Yang, et al., 2015).

In playing with ideas, I have also taken both sides on an issue. I have worked at a suicide prevention, and I am known for papers evaluating the effectiveness of suicide prevention centers in preventing suicide and in the impact of restricting access to lethal methods for suicides (such as guns). However, I have written a book on how to choose to die by suicide rationally (Lester, 2003), called *Fixin' to Die: A Compassionate Guide to Committing Suicide or Staying Alive* [2].

I have used a case of a suicide presented by Binswanger, an existential psychiatrist, to argue in one article that a suicide can be a meaningful act (as Binswanger claimed; Lester, 1969), and in another article to accuse Binswanger of allowing a patient, whom he was unable to help, to die by suicide (*psychic homicide*) (Lester, 1971).

Fourth, as my early desire was to be a physicist, I have never taken psychology and the social sciences as seriously. Research and publishing in this field has always seemed to me to be, partly, a game. As I had the privilege of job security, I was able to have fun [3]. I have, therefore, published all my ideas in many kinds of journals. One researcher once chided me for publishing in an obscure Czech journal. I responded that perhaps one Czech student or researcher might read that article and be stimulated to pursue the topic.

Fifth, as Goldney (2005) noted, I have collaborated with and helped researchers from all over the world, from Australia to Zimbabwe and from Ahmed Abdel-Khalek to Tamás Zonda. Whenever I have met people at conferences or received letters and e-mails from them, I have always been encouraging and agreed to collaborate if they asked. In addition, I have published over 100 scholarly articles with my students at Stockton University (as well as with some of my colleagues).

Finally, I am an obsessive-compulsive in my scholarship (but a hysteric in my romantic life). Remember, I read *everything* written on suicide in a 100-year period. Another example; at one point, I thought that, despite all of my reading and research, I did not understand why people choose to die by suicide. If I could understand one suicide, then I could continue with my research and writing. I chose to read a biography of Ernest Hemingway and wrote an essay on his life and suicide. I have now read biographies and written essays on about 100 suicides and posted my essays online (www.drdauidlester.net). Recently, researchers have been conducting research on samples of these essays (Zhang, et al., 2013).

Conclusions

A commonly asked question is whether the scholarly contributions are any good. Are they useful? Do they advance our understanding of suicide?

Perhaps my answer may be seen as avoiding the issue but, truly, that is not for me to worry about or to answer. It is for others to answer. These days, citations are the central focus of evaluating researchers. I recently looked at 91 citations to an article that I wrote with my wife on recalculating the cost of suicide. Many of the citations misunderstood the conclusions of the paper and, of the 91 citations, only 9 cited our conclusions correctly, and only one examined the issues raised in detail and tried to advance the discussion.

However, my paper with Aaron Beck on the development of what is now known as the hopelessness scale (Beck, *et al.*, 1974), using a sample of attempted suicides, has over 7,500 citations. My paper reviewing research on the fear of death (Lester, 1967), while I was a graduate student, which was seen as bringing the topic into serious discourse, has 328 citations. My h-index is 96 and my i10-index is 1153. Yes, I do know how to play the academic game!

Notes

1. Herbert Hendin, in reviewing one of these volumes, complained that the book did not explain why people kill themselves. Hendin, like several others, was hostile to me. He knew fully well what the books were trying to do.
2. This book also caused some in the field to be hostile to me.
3. I once submitted an article on cannibalism to the editor of the *International Journal of Eating Disorders* just to imagine his shock on opening my e-mail. He rejected it, of course, immediately.

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Further reading

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