

‘Critical Suicidology’: Toward an Inclusive, Inventive and Collaborative (Post) Suicidology

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In the spirit of Jennifer White’s (2015) comments, I am going to take a mildly optimistic stance. Though I too have experienced mainstream suicidology as excluding (and I have often felt quite demoralized as a consequence so I have sympathy with Tom Widger and Jennifer White with regards to this) I think the limited (and limiting) underlying assumptions the field operates within and maintains are beginning to be effectively critiqued.

The paper by Scott Fitzpatrick, Claire Hooker, and Ian Kerridge (2014), Tom Widger’s response (2015) and Jennifer White’s subsequent comments bear witness to that. This ‘critical suicidology’, I believe, can facilitate the development of a ‘post-suicidology’ that has the potential to be far more inclusive, creative, collaborative and critically engaged than the current field of study, and would draw on a broader range of interests and people.

The work on suicide that is currently being produced by people traditionally excluded from having an authoritative voice within the field—anthropologists, social justice activists, narrative therapists, critical and queer theorists, attempt survivors and many others—is perhaps already the emerging ‘post-suicidology’ to which Tom alluded. This work is characterized by a critical engagement with the dominant norms and conventions of suicidology, it draws on many different styles of thought and theoretical perspectives (feminist, indigenous, queer, critical and so on) in order to speak differently about the topic and to collectively imagine other ways of approaching suicide and suicide prevention. It also, importantly, attempts to grasp the relationship between power and knowledge and the ways in which the field is as much shaped by these relations as by any disinterested ‘search for truth’.

Mainstream Suicidology

In contrast to this emerging ‘critical’ / ‘post’ suicidology, mainstream suicidology seems somewhat moribund at present. The ‘authoritative’ voices in the field—the editors of the main suicide journals, the keynote speakers at conferences, the heads of the professional associations, and the recipients of the large research grants—are almost always drawn from academic psychiatry or psychology departments, and so suicide tends to be conceptualized in ways congruent with the epistemological and ontological assumptions and commitments of those disciplines.

In practice this means suicide is constituted primarily as an issue of individual mental health, and in relation to research particular forms of knowledge generation are strongly favored over others. As an example, the editor of one of the main suicide journals set out an order of priority for published articles; ‘the fully experimental design is advantaged over the quasi-experimental and the quasi-experimental over the nonexperimental. All other things being equal, the multistudy paper will compete for journal space more successfully than the single study (because of, among other factors, the emphasis on reproducibility), as will the longitudinal more than the cross-sectional, and the

quantitative more than the qualitative' (Joiner 2011, 471).

In light of such statements one can begin to understand how it is that work as lively, engaged, challenging, and illuminating as Jennifer's and Tom's can come to be excluded from mainstream suicidology. The forms this exclusion takes can even be measured (excuse the irony): Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010, 74) report that, 'in the period 2005–2007, less than 3% of the studies (research articles) published in the three main international suicidological journals had used qualitative methods. In *Archives of Suicide Research* 1.9% (n = 2), in *Crisis* 6.6% (n = 4), and in *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior* 2.1% (n=4) of the studies published had used a qualitative approach, most often in addition to a quantitative one.'

More recently, Heidi Hjelmeland (2015) looked at these same journals in terms of their 'focus, method, and findings' and concluded that the 'quantitative, repetitive risk-factor studies' that predominated 'were unable to provide much new or useful knowledge'. Heidi's claims would undoubtedly be challenged by those invested in suicidology's current project—the establishing of a 'science of suicide'—but for those of us at the margins there is, I think, a strong sense of disquiet at the position in which the field finds itself.

The analysis by Scott Fitzpatrick and colleagues' of how precisely suicidology has come to be constituted as the social practice it is now, the historical and social contexts of that formation, and the effects that follow is very valuable indeed, but I wonder if we don't also need to pay close attention to questions of power here too? The imposition and policing of disciplinary norms in the form of rules and hierarchies can be presented as the natural and necessary conditions of a scientific venture, but equally could be read as a 'regime of truth' (Foucault 2002), one that serves particular interests over others. (The exclusion from the field of certain styles of thought, theoretical perspectives and methodological approaches is certainly not disadvantaging the institutional interests of psychiatry and psychology, nor those of white western men, as far as I can see.)

Critical Suicidology

As Jennifer White (2012) has argued, a 'science of suicide' has been pursued based on a set of narrow (and, for the most part, unexamined) epistemological and ontological assumptions, and, over a period of time, this narrowing of the conceptual and methodological resources able to be brought to bear on the issue of suicide has led to a field increasingly ill-equipped to engage with human experience in all its messiness, 'wildness' and complexity.

Other scholars have argued along similar lines (e.g. Marsh 2010; Jaworski 2014; Reynolds 2015), and the paper by Scott Fitzpatrick and colleagues and Tom Widger's response I see as being part of this move towards a more 'critical suicidology' (and by 'critical' I mean identifying and questioning the underlying assumptions the field operates within; paying close attention to the context in which they have come to be formed (including relations of power); and analyzing the effects of constituting suicide in the ways we do). The need for such an approach has been well-argued by all the previous

contributors to this discussion, but is perhaps best summed up by Fitzpatrick et al.:

To limit the discussion of suicide to certain kinds of descriptions—some of which may redefine or overlook important aspects of suicide—is both myopic, for it gives insufficient weight to the complexity of suicide or to the degree to which it is embodied and socially felt, and misguided, for it misses opportunities for developing coherent social responses to suicide (2014, 17).

The question remains, though; in what ways might the dominant assumptions, ontological commitments and privileges within the field of mainstream suicidology be effectively challenged in order to open up the field to a broader range of voices, ideas and values? One way might be to take up Tom Widger’s challenge and to try to imagine what a ‘post-suicidology’ might look like. Imagination, utopian thought and radical transformation might not be flavor of the month within mainstream suicidology, but that might be as good a reason as any to pursue such an exercise.

Post-Suicidology

For me, a ‘post-suicidology’ would have some of the following features:

- It would be less ‘psychocentric’ (Rimke 2010; Rimke & Brock 2012).

‘Psychocentrism’—the reducing of human problems to flaws in individual bodies/minds—I think is one of the most pervasive and limiting ways we have come to constitute the problem of suicide. Is suicide always only ‘a regrettable, self-inflicted, intentional, and tragic death that is linked to individual psychopathology’ (White 2015)? A ‘post-suicidology’ would have within it the resources to usefully read suicide as an ethical, social and political issue, not just one of individual pathology.

- As a corollary of the above, ‘post-suicidology’ would be more inclusive.

Social justice activists, anthropologists, suicide attempt survivors, feminists, critical psychiatrists and psychologists, those bereaved by suicide, and many more (and many falling under more than one description) have potentially much to say of great value about how we have come to think about, and respond to, suicide. At the moment such voices are kept at the margins (deemed ‘insufficiently scientific’); ‘post-suicidology’ would be more open to a broader range of perspectives.

Similarly, journal editors, conference organizers and funding bodies would be more encouraging of theoretical and methodological diversity (being, in a ‘post-suicidology’ world, more theoretically and methodologically informed and diverse themselves).

- Questions could usefully be asked as to the relationship between language,

institutions and power, and the effects of constituting ‘suicide’ in the ways we do.

‘Suicide’ is a fairly recently coined term, but one (as Tom argues) thoroughly ‘written through’ with implicit assumptions and meanings which are hard to escape. The word conjures particular images and pictures, and these can hold us captive. It might be that dropping the word is a step too far, but more overtly acknowledging its historical and cultural contingency might help free us a little bit from its hold.

A ‘post-suicidology’ would be able to draw on a diversity of discursive resources in order to construct understandings of, and responses to, suicide that are culturally congruent and meaningful.

We would have moved beyond the idea that the language we employ is somehow representative of reality, ideologically neutral and without constituting effects. Post-suicidology would be critically reflective as to the ways our language practices work in productive and ideological ways, and sensitive to how language produces effects.

The style of expression in mainstream scientific suicidological writings—‘objective’, ‘neutral’, ‘detached’—does not often sit well with the subject matter under discussion. (One could ask what is being defended against here?) Discussions and descriptions of suicide in a post-suicidological world would reflect more the emotional landscape out of which they have emerged.

For me ‘critical suicidology’ is a necessary step in ‘shaking up’ mainstream suicidology, a process from which, hopefully, a more inclusive, creative and collaborative (post) suicidology will emerge. There are positive signs on the horizon.

Daniel Münster and Ludek Broz have a co-edited book forthcoming—*Suicide and Agency*—which is illustrative of what an important contribution anthropology can make to the field (Tom Widger has an excellent chapter in that). Jennifer White et al.’s *Critical Suicidology*, due this autumn, has contributions from 20 international authors, each of whom has an extensive knowledge, understanding and experience of studying suicide from many different (and often overlapping) perspectives—attempt survivor, researcher, social justice activist, bereaved by suicide, therapist. Hopefully, Scott Fitzpatrick will continue to illuminate the topic in incisive, rigorous and challenging ways, and maybe from these sources, and others, something resembling a ‘post-suicidology’ will emerge.

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