

Invited Essay  
**Qualitative Research in Suicidology:  
Thoughts on Hjelmeland and Knizek’s  
“Why we Need Qualitative Research in Suicidology”**

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**Abstract:** A recent article by Hjelemand and Knizek presented the case for qualitative research in suicidology. The present essay identifies and illustrates six dimensions in their discussion: explaining versus understanding, qualitative versus quantitative studies, case studies versus large samples, descriptive versus inferential statistics, idiographic versus nomothetic approaches and phenomenological versus interpretative approaches.

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Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) made a convincing case for the importance of qualitative research in suicidology.<sup>1</sup> This essay will explore and elaborate some of the dimensions discussed in their article and provide some examples from the suicidology literature.

### Explaining versus Understanding

Hjelmeland and Knizek drew attention to the distinction between explaining and understanding. They note that much research into suicidal behavior seeks to identify causes of the behavior in a simple linear cause-and-effect way.<sup>2</sup> Most of this research is quantitative. In contrast, efforts to *understand* suicidal behavior typically use qualitative methods and focus on the meaning of the behavior for the individual.

Butt (2004) also drew a distinction between understanding people and explaining their behavior. Hebb (1949) noted that we do not have to

explain why people *behave*. As long as we are alive, we are always doing something. What we have to explain is the choice of behavior – why we do this rather than that. Therefore, causal explanations do not have to explain what “kick-starts” our behavior (as Butt describes *explanation*). Some theorists see the causes of behavior (the determinants of our choices) as being in the mind, some in our genes and physiology, and others in the social forces that impinge upon us. The truth is usually a boring compromise of all of the alternatives, but theories tend to take extreme positions since that is the way to become noticed. Other approaches enable us to *understand* behavior. They provide a vocabulary to describe our inner experience, to explore the experience in greater depth and, occasionally, to provide tactics for changing the experience.

Can we ever explain suicidal behavior? I once humorously argued that the reason why we fail to prevent completed suicide is that the behavior is so rare (Lester, 1974)<sup>3</sup>. If it occurred much more frequently, then we would be more successful in predicting it and preventing it. The same is true for explaining suicide. Its rare occurrence makes it impossible to find any *necessary* or *sufficient* factor that causes it. This is why we have difficulty in answering the question, “Why do people kill themselves?” In contrast, a

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<sup>1</sup> Their published article was a shortened version of an originally longer article.

<sup>2</sup> Occasional research is teleological, that is, seeking to identify the *purpose* of the suicidal behavior.

<sup>3</sup> “...in order to prevent suicide more effectively, we must increase the suicide rate. Only then will we be able to reduce the rate!” (Lester, 1974, p. 27).

qualitative approach might enable us to understand why *this particular person* committed suicide.

### Qualitative versus Quantitative Studies

Hjelmeland and Knizek use the bipolar construct of qualitative versus quantitative frequently, but this confounds two separate dimensions. A typical *quantitative* study appears in the same issue as the article by Hjelmeland and Knizek. Britton and Conner (2010) reported a logistic regression to predict which of 2,966 individuals would attempt suicide after treatment for substance abuse. They found that sex, age, race, suicidal ideation and daily cocaine use were significant predictors of subsequent suicidal behavior.

A representative qualitative study is that by Lester (2010) who examined the understanding that the diary, written over a lifetime, by an eccentric individual provides for his suicide. Lester noted that writing the diary gave the man, Arthur Inman, a purpose for his life and perhaps enabled him to survive the many crises he experienced. Although his suicide seems to have been precipitated by construction in his neighborhood that would have forced him to move, Lester argued that writing about his emotional and traumatic experiences had a beneficial impact on his physiological functioning and mental health, as Pennebaker (1997) has noted that such writing often does, and that the diary involved beneficial self-disclosure to his significant others (who read the diary regularly). There are no numbers, counts and descriptive or inferential statistics in Lester's article.

### Case Studies versus Large Samples

These two examples illustrate a confounding element here: (1) qualitative versus quantitative studies and (2) case studies versus studies of large samples. Case studies can be quantitative. Although the study of the diary by Lester mentioned above did not use descriptive or inferential statistics, studies of a single individual can use statistics. For example, Barnes Lawal-Solarin and Lester (2007) studied the letters written by a young man to a friend for the two years prior to his suicide, put the letters through a computer program for linguistic analyses and reported correlations over time. Case studies can be quantitative.

Qualitative case studies are common, of course, in the clinical literature, for example, Sonneck and Etzerdorfer's (1996) account of a patient whose psychotherapy failed to prevent his suicide.

### Descriptive versus Inferential Statistics

There is also a distinction that can be made between the use of descriptive and inferential statistics. In a study in progress (Kaus & Lester, 2009), one of the researchers read the diary of a suicide, devised content categories and counted these in the diary overall and for each month prior to the man's death. Kaus views her analysis as qualitative since she presents only descriptive statistics in the paper.

To give another example, after many years of conducting research into suicide, I realized that I had no idea why people kill themselves. I decided that, if I could understand why one person committed suicide, then I could continue to conduct and publish research even though the research did not help me understand why *people* committed suicide. I started with reading a biography of Marilyn Monroe, and I felt that I understood her life and death. Being obsessive, I continued reading until, by now, I have read perhaps one hundred biographies of suicides. After reading the first thirty, I noticed (and counted) that fifteen of them had experienced loss of a parent or parent surrogate, and that fourteen of these fifteen losses occurred during latency. I published this finding (Lester, 1989). The statistical presentation was purely descriptive. Hjelmeland and Knizek noted that qualitative studies are often used to generate hypotheses that are then tested in quantitative research, and this perhaps is true of my study.

### Idiographic versus Nomothetic Approaches (Generality versus Uniqueness)

Windelband (1904) distinguished between idiographic and nomothetic approaches. The nomothetic approach deals with statistics and generalizations, while the idiographic approach involves the intense study in individuals as unique individuals, an approach advocated by Allport (1962) and which he illustrated in his book on the letters written by a young woman (Allport, 1965). This bipolarity clearly overlaps with those discussed above.

### Phenomenological versus Interpretative Approaches

Hjelmeland and Knizek also discuss the distinction between phenomenological versus interpretative approaches. Although couched in jargon, George Kelly's (1955) theory of personality permits a phenomenological description of people's cognitive processing. Similarly, Laing's (1969) descriptions of his schizophrenic patients are phenomenological. In contrast, psychoanalytic theory is replete with interpretation. Hjelmeland

and Knizek cite their own work on suicidal behavior as a communication as an example of an interpretive approach.

### Conclusion

Hjelmeland and Knizek's article on qualitative approaches to the study of suicide is provocative, and the present essay has attempted to tease out the many bipolar constructs touched on in their article. Many of these constructs are related in a one-to-one manner, but others, although associated, permit "crosstabbing" into four, eight and maybe more categories of research approaches in suicidology.

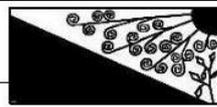
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