

Letter to the Editors
**Revitalizing Suicidology:
A call for mixed methods designs**

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Abstract: Reflections on the current status of research and knowledge in Suicidology have sparked a debate in the literature related to the relative strengths and weaknesses of quantitative and qualitative approaches to research in the field. The purpose of this essay is to add to this discourse by arguing against an either/or perspective on these distinctive methodological approaches, but rather to promote the use of mixed methods designs in an effort to capitalize on the strengths of both and revitalize the field of Suicidology.

Keywords: suicide research, qualitative methods, quantitative methods, mixed methods

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Despite an ever burgeoning literature in the field of Suicidology, a few authors have questioned the extent to which current research has in fact advanced the field's understanding of suicide and other suicidal behaviors. For example, based on his reviews of the literature from 1897 through 1997 Lester (2000) rather boldly concluded that Suicidology as a scientific discipline had come to an end. In his essay, Lester suggested that early major advances in the field led to important and exciting discoveries and research foci, but that more recent work had stagnated and was generally characterized by narrow methodological approaches and a lack of truly innovative thinking. Lester's (2000) criticisms of the field of Suicidology in terms of stagnation were reiterated by Rogers (2003) who highlighted the importance of theoretical grounding in suicide research and the need for the field to embrace methodological

diversity if we are to advance our understanding of suicide and suicidal behavior beyond the identification of variables correlated with suicide-related behaviors. More recently, Rogers and Lester (2010) revisited this topic and concluded their critique of the field by encouraging "researchers to think out of the proverbial box that has characterized much of the literature in suicidology" (p. 185). The purpose of this essay is to further the discussion related to the status of suicide research by focusing on the issue of methodological diversity as one approach to revitalizing Suicidology.

Methodological Homogeny and the Bubble Hypothesis

In presenting their argument for the need of more qualitative research in Suicidology, Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) reviewed the three major suicide journals (*Archives*, *Crisis*, and *Suicide and Life-Threatening Behavior*) from 2005 to 2007 and found that approximately 97% of the empirical articles were quantitative in nature. Clearly an indication of methodological homogeny! In concluding their analysis of the predominant methodological approaches in Suicidology, these authors argued for the need for more studies

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focused on understanding suicidal behavior from a non-reductionist and contextualized perspective which they posited is the basis of qualitative approaches in general. Thus, Hjelmeland and Knizek argued for the need for more qualitative research in the field.

Similarly, in his supportive reaction to Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010), Lester (2010) identified six “bipolar” (p. 78) methodological constructs that he saw as key to Hjelmeland and Knizek’s argument. These six included (1) explaining versus understanding, (2) qualitative versus quantitative, (3) case studies versus large samples, (4) descriptive versus inferential, (5) ideographic versus nomothetic, and (6) phenomenological versus interpretative approaches. Lester argued that these six bipolar constructs might fruitfully be combined in considering methodological approaches to the study of suicide in ways that would advance the field beyond the extant singular quantitative approach.

In reading Hjelmeland and Knizek’s (2010) argument focused on the need in Suicidology for more qualitative research and Lester’s (2010) reaction we are reminded of an article by Charles Gelso (1979) in which he described the tradeoffs in research methodology in terms of internal and external validity. This relationship between the two was named by a graduate student in Gelso’s research design course as the “bubble hypothesis.” The basic premise of the bubble hypothesis is that experimental control (internal validity) and generalizability (external validity) are juxtaposed in such a way that, in any one study, as one increases, the other decreases. The student described the relationship between internal and external validity using the analogy of finding an air bubble while placing a sticker on a car windshield. As one attempts to eliminate the bubble by pressing on it (e.g., increasing experimental control), the bubble merely moves to a different spot under the sticker (e.g., reducing the generalizability of the results). That is, there are no perfect studies in terms of internal and external validity and the goal of research should be to employ diverse methodologies in terms of these characteristics in order to more fully understand a phenomenon. Here we take the liberty of extending the conceptualization of the bubble hypothesis beyond the methodological issues of internal and external validity but rather to the arguments presented by Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010) and Lester (2010).

The Bubble Hypothesis and the Call for Qualitative Research

In terms of the work of Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010), the data are clear. The primary approach to the study of suicide as represented by published work in the three main suicide journals

has been quantitative. So as argued, for much of this research, the bubble has obscured our *understanding* of suicidality. As suggested by Rogers and Lester (2010), the field has produced volumes of literature identifying correlates of suicidal behavior, but suicide continues to be enigmatic from the perspective of understanding.

Although we support strongly the need for more qualitative research approaches in Suicidology, we might be as concerned about the *bubble* from this perspective as we are concerned about the over-reliance on quantitative methods. That is, we highlight what seems to be an “either/or” perspective in Hjelmeland and Knizek’s (2010) discussion and a similar perspective as Lester (2010) has framed his discussion regarding methodological issues in suicide research in terms of dichotomies. For example, Lester presents his methodological themes as competitive or incompatible (e.g., qualitative *versus* quantitative, explaining *versus* understanding, and phenomenological *versus* interpretative) similar to the either/or perspective of Hjelmeland and Knizek.

In contrast, we prefer to consider these themes as complementary or on continua and suggest a reframing of the methodological issues as requiring attention to explaining *and* understanding, qualitative *and* quantitative, case studies *and* large samples, descriptive *and* inferential, ideographic *and* nomothetic, and phenomenological *and* interpretative. Thus, we argue that the study of suicide can best be revived by moving beyond the either/or conceptualizations regarding methodological themes and choices towards more inclusive methodologies; adopting mixed methods approaches.

Mixed Methods Designs

At its core, mixed methods research refers to integrating quantitative and qualitative approaches (Hanson, Plano Clark, Petska, Creswell, & Creswell, 2005) and has been defined as “the collection or analysis of both quantitative and qualitative data in a single study in which the data are collected concurrently or sequentially, are given a priority, and involve the integration of the data at one or more stages in the process of research” (Creswell, Plano Clark, Gutmann, & Hanson, 2003, p. 212). Mixed methods research has increased in popularity in other fields and allows researchers to enrich the results of their data in ways that using one method alone does not allow. Therefore, mixed methods are viewed as providing an advantage to single method designs (either quantitative or qualitative) by increasing the representativeness, generalizability, and internal validity of the data and increasing the validity of subsequent interpretations of those data.

According to Mertens (2003) and Punch (1998), mixed methods research may be used to (a)

better understand a research problem by combining numeric trends from quantitative data and the specific details resulting from qualitative data; (b) identify constructs/variables that can be measured afterward by using existing instruments or by developing new ones; (c) obtain quantitative, statistical data from a sample of a population and use these data to identify individuals who may augment the results in terms of understanding through qualitative data; and (d) convey the needs of underrepresented groups or individuals.

Similarly, Hanson, Plano Clark, Petska, Creswell, and Creswell (2005) described the rationale for using mixed methods: "Specifically, quantitative and qualitative methods could be combined to use results from one method to elaborate on results from the other method (complementarity), use results from one method to help develop or inform the other method (development), recast results from one method to questions or results from the other method (initiation), and extend the breadth or range of inquiry by using different methods for different inquiry components (expansion)" (p. 226).

Mixed Methods in Suicidology

So what of Suicidology? The predominantly utilized methodology in suicide research has been quantitative in nature with Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010), Lester (2010) and Rogers and Lester (2010) rightfully arguing that this body of research has done little to advance our contextualized and ideographic understanding of suicide and suicide-related behaviors. This lack of a contextualized and ideographic component represents the "bubble" that currently exists in Suicidology. Shifting suicide research methodologies to include more qualitative research, albeit a critically important shift that we support, merely moves the "bubble" in ways that limit the ability to draw broader conclusions and generalize results beyond the individuals participating in that research.

The solution from our perspective is to adopt mixed method designs incorporating both quantitative and qualitative data in the same study. Using mixed method designs should provide the nexus between explaining and understanding suicide that is at the heart of the current discourse related to the qualitative versus quantitative methodologies (Hjelmeland & Knizek, 2010; Lester (2010), and facilitate the out of the box thinking promoted by Rogers and Lester (2010). Finally, in consideration of the bubble hypothesis (Gelso, 1979), although the bubble may not disappear completely, we would predict that the adoption of mixed methods approaches to the study of suicide would lessen the negative impact of the bubble and revitalize Suicidology.

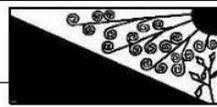
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