

WHY PEOPLE KILL THEMSELVES

Fourth Edition

WHY PEOPLE KILL THEMSELVES

A 2000 Summary of Research on Suicide

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PREFACE

Over the last 40 years, I have made an effort to read or peruse everything written in the English language since 1897 on suicidal behavior, the year of publication of Durkheim's classic book on suicide. The results of these reviews have been published in three volumes (Lester, 1972, 1983, 1992), which review the research up to 1969, in the 1970s, and in the 1980s, respectively. This is the fourth and final volume by me in this series, reviewing the research published during the period 1990 to 1997. The four volumes together will, therefore, review one hundred years of research and theory into suicidal behavior.

As before, the present book reviews only current research and theory. It does not review clinical papers dealing with the treatment of suicidal clients. The book assumes knowledge of the previous three books and mentions earlier works only if these works were not cited in the earlier volumes. The books differ in how critical they are of the research and theory. The first edition was highly critical of the research, whereas the second and third editions summarized the research without major criticisms of the goals of the research or the methodology. The change in focus was intentional, since the goal of the books is to review what we know about suicidal behavior, rather than show how "ignorant" previous researchers have been – a switch from a negative to a positive focus. The present book adopts the same uncritical approach throughout, except for the final chapter in which I present my personal evaluation of the research, particularly of the 1990s.

The major sources for locating the scholarly literature on suicidal behavior have been *Biological Abstracts*, *Index Medicus*, *Psychological Abstracts*, and *Sociological Abstracts*, but I have also used other abstracts, primarily in anthropology, criminal justice and women's studies.

The number of papers on suicidal behavior has risen dramatically over the last few decades, from one "shoe box" of 4 x 6 index cards for the 1960s to two for the 1970s, three for the 1980s and five for the 1990s up to 1997. It is partly this increasing quantity of papers and books on suicide that makes the task of reviewing the literature daunting at the present time and led me to make this my last review. My advancing age and my interests in other issues in thanatology also contributed to my decision. I also find that the modern

techniques for searching abstracts make the task more difficult, since the on-line and CD-ROM abstract services identify many more irrelevant articles than the paper-bound abstracts of times past. Rather than having an informed person decide whether the article deals with suicidal behavior, modern techniques search for the word “suicide,” regardless of whether the articles explore suicidal behavior or merely mention it in passing.

This, then, completes my review of the scholarly literature on suicidal behavior, and I pass the burden on to scholars of the future to continue this task.

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