A person in silhouette stands on a road, looking towards a dense forest of bare trees under a cloudy sky. The person is wearing a dark jacket and pants. The road is paved and stretches into the distance.

# Theories *of* Suicide

*Past, Present and Future*

**John F. Gunn III**

**David Lester**

# **THEORIES OF SUICIDE**



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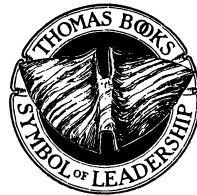
Past, Present and Future

*By*

JOHN F. GUNN III

*and*

DAVID LESTER



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## PREFACE

A perusal of current scholarly writing on suicide indicates how little of it is guided by theory. In addition to searching [www.pubmed.gov](http://www.pubmed.gov) and PsycINFO, a good weekly source of the 20-30 articles published each week on suicide can be found at [www.safetylit.org](http://www.safetylit.org). For the week of January 26, 2014, typical articles included:

- A pocket of very high suicide rates in a non-violent, egalitarian and cooperative population of South-East Asia;
- Antidepressant drugs and the risk of suicide in children and adolescents; and
- Changes in inpatient and post-discharge suicide rates in a nationwide cohort of Danish, psychiatric inpatients, 1998-2005.

These types of articles rarely further our understanding of suicide, and understanding is critical for prevention. The present book reviews theories of suicide with the hope that it will stimulate researchers to ground their research in theory and, in addition, to propose new and, hopefully, improved theories of suicide.

We first review the classic theories of suicide, both to remind scholars of those that have been neglected and to encourage scholars to reformulate them. For example, scholars continue to base some of their research on Durkheim's original, flawed formulation of his theory, rather than using the corrected formulation that has been proposed by Rootman and others. There is also a relative neglect of the theories proposed by Henry and Short and by Naroll. We also review the hypotheses that are generated by the classic theories of personality (in particular, the intrapsychic theories of the mind) and the classic systems of psychotherapy. Hypotheses from these sources are grounded in an enormous body of theory, supportive research and clinical practice.



We also review the theories of suicide that have been proposed in recent years, such as the Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide proposed by Joiner, the defeat-entrapment theory, the stress-diathesis model, and recent work by economists who are beginning to explore how suicidal behavior might fit into their models.

It is, of course, far from easy to propose new theories. We have suggested possible avenues for modifying past and present theories but, for the future, we have taken current work on critical thinking (a topic that is currently being introduced into academic course work) and applied some of those ideas to suicide research, ideas that should prove invaluable for guiding researchers and theorists in the future.

J.F.G. III  
D.L.

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# **THEORIES OF SUICIDE**



## Chapter 1

### INTRODUCTION

**F**acts and data points are sometimes useful for understanding a behavior but, without theory, facts do not advance our knowledge about the causes of the behavior. Too often, the facts lay littered around, without organization or import. Theories organize the facts, enabling the facts to confirm or fail to confirm predictions from a theory.

The study of suicide has had many theories in the past, and there are a few current theories that are exciting researchers. But, some in the field of suicidology think that the old theories are too constraining, that they impede advances in our understanding of suicide. Jack Gibbs (2004), writing for a book commemorating the 100th anniversary of the publication of *Le Suicide* by Emile Durkheim, entitled his essay *Durkheim's Heavy Hand in the Sociological Study of Suicide*. Gibbs argued that “sociologists should rightly proclaim Durkheim to have been a genius and then get on with it” (p. 30). If they do not, then further sociological studies of suicide will be unproductive.

The present authors are not quite so critical of past theories. In this book, we review the classic theories of suicide, both psychological and sociological, because they are the foundation of our current understanding of suicidal behavior. We also, of course, review current theories and, in addition, endeavor to propose the skeletons of possible future theories. Our goal is to present researchers with theories to guide their research, encourage them to modify these theories, perhaps meld them together in some cases, and think how they might propose new theories.

There are several recent proposals for psychological theories of suicide, including Joiner's Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicide and the defeat-entrapment theory of suicide, and these are reviewed in the first section. We think that it is important, and possibly stimulating for future research, to frame suicide in the classic theories of personality and systems of

psychotherapy, which, by themselves, have largely ignored suicidal behavior. We have, therefore, reviewed ideas from these theories and systems that pertain to suicidal behavior.

In this section, we have also reviewed the typologies of suicide that have been proposed because it is possible and, indeed, even very likely that no theory can explain every suicide. Some suicidal individuals may fit one theory, while other suicidal individuals may fit another theory. In a study of 30 famous individuals (sufficiently famous that someone wrote a biography of them), Lester (1994) examined which of 15 theories of suicide fitted them best. He found that the male suicides fitted Carl Jung's theory of suicide better than did the female suicides; that older suicides fitted the theory of Ludwig Binswanger better than did younger suicides; and that those who had suffered the loss of a significant other in childhood or adolescence fitted the theories of Alfred Adler, Gregory Zilboorg and Andrew Henry and James Short better. In an examination of the life and death by suicide of Sylvia Plath, Lester (1998) found that the theories of Aaron Beck, Henry Murray, and Edwin Shneidman seemed to provide a better understanding of her choice of suicide than the other theories.

The second section examines sociological and economic theories of suicide. Durkheim's classic theory of suicide remains the most influential sociological theory of suicide, and we think it is important that, in the future, sociologists become more creative in devising new theories and free themselves from the influence of Durkheim. One of us (DL) had an article rejected by reviewers of a sociology journal because he applied Durkheim's theory to primitive societies, and the reviewer objected that Durkheim did not study such societies. In another case, an article comparing suicide and homicide rates was rejected by the reviewers of a sociology journal because Durkheim never considered such a comparison. Jack Gibbs (2004), mentioned above, appears to be correct in objecting to Durkheim's *heavy hand*.

While sociologists seem to have been less creative in devising new theories of suicide, economists have increasingly become more interested in suicidal behavior in recent years and in applying their economic perspectives to the study of suicide, especially under the influence of the growing field of behavioral economics. Suicidologists in psychology and sociology appear to be unaware of this trend, and it is important for the future that more interdisciplinary cooperation take place in the field, and we hope that this chapter will stimulate such cooperation.

How does one sum up such a book as this in a concluding chapter? We would, of course, like to propose a new comprehensive and creative theory of suicide, but that is a task for future suicidologists. Instead, we have taken a psychologist who has written about critical thinking, a new and growing influence in academia and scholarship, and applied his ideas to the field of

suicidology. Some of the insights provided by David Levy are well known to researchers and theorists, while others are provocative. We think that an awareness of Levy's ideas may guide, and perhaps result in, new theories of suicide that improve our understanding of suicidal behavior.

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