

Comprehensive and Practical

Suicidal Behaviour – Assessment of People-at-Risk

Updesh Kumar and Manas K. Mandal
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Suicide has been extensively studied and a vast amount of literature has been widely published on this subject. A recent addition to this is the book *Suicidal Behaviour: Assessment of People-at-Risk* by Updesh Kumar and Manas K. Mandal, two social science research investigators, who felt a strong need to use a psychometric approach for explaining suicidal behaviour. The book, in the editors' own words "is an attempt to fill this void by following a psychometric approach to outline suicide risk assessment and in turn, to comprehensively understand the suicidal personality / behaviour."

The editors of this book come from a strong background in social sciences research, mainly in the areas of mental health, psychology and suicidology. The book is a compilation of 15 research articles contributed by experts belonging to varied disciplines such as researchers, academicians, psychologists, psychiatrists, sociologists, epidemiologists and suicidologists. This multi-disciplinary and unique combination of editors and contributors belonging to different cultures and nationalities brings a unique 'global' flavour to this book. The majority of the reference literature discussed / cited in this book comes from western background, even the chapters written by Indian contributors, which re-establishes the fact that there is dearth of literature in suicidology in the Indian context. Although the last chapter on 'Suicidal Ideation and Behaviour among Asian Adolescents' attempts to touch slightly the South Asian context, its scope is limited to a specific population of adolescents and nothing concrete in the Indian context.

This book contextualizes theoretical concepts of suicide risk assessment with respect to different vulnerable groups such as certain ethnic or cultural background, gender, mental disorders and professions. It has been successful in bringing to forefront a comprehensive understanding of suicidal behaviour i.e. an amalgamation of neurobiological, social, cultural, psychiatric as well as psychological perspectives well supported by epidemiological and clinical evidences. It also presents a thorough psychometric analysis of aspects related to assessment of suicidal risk with a purpose of explaining the phenomenon of suicidal vulnerability and using this understanding to predict suicidal behaviour, which is achieved very methodically by systematic division of the book into two sections i.e. theoretical issues from perspectives of different social science disciplines and practical issues among specific vulnerable populations related to suicidal behaviour and suicide risk assessment.

The explanation of the theoretical issues involves substantiating psychological, psychiatric, biological and social perspectives on the basis of existing research base and is concluded in the clinical implications for mental health practitioners on measuring the suicide risk on the basis of empirical analysis and evolving effective psychosocial interventions as well as suggesting at new domains of research for the researchers by pointing out the lacunae in the existing research base.

The inclusion of media, a highly effective but largely ignored key player in suicide response and prevention, is definitely a positive move. Moreover, the editors should be congratulated for providing a legitimate space for the issues of 'Violence', 'Culture', 'Gender' and 'Development' in the process of understanding suicidal behaviour and evolving suicide risk-assessment criteria. The associations between these constructs and suicidal behaviour have been emphasized effectively by providing evidence from the existing research literature and in making important suggestions for researchers, clinicians and policy-makers to consider while assessing and dealing with suicidal behaviour.

Although the acknowledgment of gender as a key players in suicidal behaviour assessment has an optimistic start, but for me, as a reader coming from a 'feminist' background and working on gender issues, this is not enough. The focus remains mainly on explaining higher suicide mortality in men, which makes the whole chapter specifically androcentric. The basic premise of argument that "completed and attempted suicides are not different phenomena" is debatable as the understanding developed in completed suicides has always been a third-person opinion / view (normally narrated by somebody related to the victim). Besides this, it is not the reasons, mechanisms or methods that distinguish completed suicides from attempted suicides, but the level of intention of killing oneself and by large it normally remains undisclosed for completed suicides.

In this chapter, Peter Osvath et al. also state that "male gender can be classified as a special, tertiary risk factor for suicide", considering the higher ratio of completed suicides amongst men. On the contrary, the statistics on attempted suicides depicts women as a major vulnerable group for e. g. - the data published by National Institute of Mental Health of the US listing 8-25 attempted suicides to one completion and by National Institute of Mental Health and Neuro-Sciences, India as the ratio of completed to attempted suicides as 1:8. In addition, the argument "the higher number of suicide attempts tends to lower the risk of fatal outcome among women" contradicts the basic premise of suicide risk assessment that previous suicide attempts are the strongest predictor for future suicide attempts / suicides.

The comparative analysis of gender-specific differences in risk factors, choice of methods, mental disorders, protective factors, help-seeking behaviour and socio-cultural aspects is just at a touch-and-go level, considering extensively published literature on linkages between gender and suicides. A tabular summary of gender differences for suicidal behaviour covering different aspects would have been some value addition to the existing knowledge base. The author has been successful in bringing out the impact of gender role stereotypes on suicidal behaviour but the understanding has remained restricted to the social

construction of ‘masculinity’ and ‘femininity’ and the contribution of these identities in suicidal behaviour. The traditional gender roles are discussed in relation to the help-seeking behaviour, but do not evolve further in linking the gender stereotypes to the prevalent gender inequality in almost all communities worldwide leading to lower socio-economic status of women, which translates further into ‘distress’ or ‘stress’ and / or manifesting into different forms of Violence against Women (VAW). The linkages between violence in women and suicide attempts have already been well established and needs to be highlighted while stating gender-specific differences in suicidal behaviour. The ‘distress/stress’ caused due to lower socio-economic status / opportunities is normally interpreted for women as ‘depression’ by majority of the mental health disciplines, which definitely needs to be viewed from a different angle.

The article looks at gender differences in suicide attempters, but the discussion has been completely based on WHO/Euro Multicenter Study on Suicidal Behaviour in Hungary, which does not throw much light on the subject. The high morbidity due to suicide attempts in men is definitely a matter of concern, but while suggesting gender-specific treatment possibilities, focus on male gender makes the chapter look male-biased. Even though both the genders are discussed by summarizing the differences in suicidal behaviour, the balance tilts towards the ‘male’ sex while discussing epidemiological and socio-cultural research or suggestion on gender-specific treatment and prevention possibilities or clinical implications for future research, which does not do enough justice to the ‘fairer’ sex.

By and large, the editors of this book have been successful in attaining the envisioned purpose of this book i.e. “The issues being raised in the volume are supposed to promote more researches in this area that will certainly prove beneficial in service of humanity.”

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