Continuing in the Face of Rejection: Advocating for Persistence in Ethical Engagement with Suicide Research

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Abstract

This short paper considers the challenges encountered when attempting to conduct suicide research within Higher Education (HE) institutions, particularly focusing on the resistance faced from universities in recruiting participants. Despite widespread acknowledgment of the importance of suicide prevention and postvention policies within universities, the author's experiences reflect a persistent reluctance to engage with such research. The rejection of research invitations often stems from lingering stigma surrounding suicide, and fears of causing harm to participants. However, this paper argues these concerns may overlook the potential therapeutic benefits for bereaved individuals participating in such research. Drawing attention to the tension between institutional commitments to suicide prevention and the reluctance to participate in related research, the paper advocates for a cultural shift within HE institutions. It emphasizes the necessity of genuine openness and ethical engagement with suicide research, challenging researchers to persist in their endeavours despite facing rejection.

Full paper

Another no. I felt deflated again, and this time, it came with the comment 'it wouldn't be appropriate to circulate. Do you even have ethical approval?'

Despite advancements in media, social and policy attention to university suicide pre- and post-vention policy (Universities UK and Papyrus, 2018) and publicised HE support for ethical suicide research, challenges still remain in accessing HE contexts to undertake research in this area. This short paper outlines my experiences with attempting to disseminate invitations to my PhD research, *Lessons of Loss, Life and Those Left Behind; An Exploration of the Experience of Student Suicide Loss within the Higher Education Learning Community and How to Best Respond to the Suicide Bereft Within Higher Education* and the resistance faced when attempting to access potential participants. It highlights two potential causes of this; lingering taboo and fear of harm, and poses the need for commitment to ethical suicide research in the face of rejection.

My PhD research has involved interviewing HE staff and students impacted by student suicide with a view to identifying best practice to inform policy and practice developments. To access participants, a research invite was developed and sent to university faculties and schools for

dissemination (see Figure 1). Whilst I successfully recruited thirteen generous participants, rejection was commonplace, frequently including comments that my research was 'inappropriate' and sometimes questioning of my ethical approval or similar. This was often in deep contrast to universities' own policies that cited a commitment to supporting suicide prevention and postvention, encouraging talking about suicide, irradicating stigma, and promoting suicide research (University of Bristol, 2022; Bentley, 2022). This highlights a key barrier to suicide research I suggest stems from lingering stigma, fear and taboo. This lingering stigma was highlighted by my research participants, who reflected current research noting that despite significant advancements in UK society in public attitudes towards openness regarding mental health, suicide remains a cultural taboo, rarely spoken about in day-to-day life (Krysinska and Andriessen, 2017; BACP, 2021; Lukas and Seiden, 2007) and thus it remains an under-researched subject (Causer *et al.*, 2021; Causer *et al.*, 2019; Flynn, 2022; Causer, 2022; Lakeman and Fitzgerald, 2009; Allie *et al.*, 2023). The rejection from HE institutions I argue stems from a reputational fear of being perceived to have done 'the wrong thing', either in individual circumstances of suicide at their institution, or through supporting research deemed taboo or risky. This is something I suggest stems from an economic influence, given falling undergraduate student numbers (Jack, 2024) and 60% of prospective students highlighting mental health services as a very important factor in making their university choices (Svanholm, 2020). Wider cultural stigma of suicide may therefore influence universities' engagement with suicide research despite public indications of support and openness.

After internal discussion, we are not able to support your request, we need to protect our students.

Rejections often came citing a need to safeguard students, suggesting a fear that the invite may cause people to re-experience their trauma (Buckle *et al.*, 2010). Yet this removal of choice to participate from bereaved individuals silenced their experiences of suicide loss. Research highlights dangers of silencing grief experiences as it may prevent those bereaved by suicide from going through "some of the normal healing processes" (Lukas and Seiden, 2007, p.21) and this too was reflected in conversations with my participants, who identified the experience of participating as *therapeutic*. Therefore, despite concerns often raised by ethics committees regarding potential harm to participants (Andriessen et al., 2019) and the concerns indicated in the emails of rejection I received, participants in bereavement research often find the experience a positive one, allowing them to explore their distressing experiences, make sense of their loss experience, and feel they are contributing to the improvement of the experiences of others (O'Brien et al., 1991; Lakeman et al., 2013).

Whilst high-quality suicide research is essential to change and inform policy and practice, this short paper highlights two key barriers to suicide research in HE; lingering stigma and fear of harm. Navigating suicide research therefore requires a deeply ethical approach with a sensitivity to the social, emotional and political influences at play. A cultural shift for HE institutions through a commitment to practising what they preach by engaging in conversations and research about suicide as urged in suicide policies is therefore essential; something that will only occur if researchers are brave enough to ask the questions and dedicated enough to continue in the face of rejection.

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