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## Ethical and legal issues in suicide research<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

Moralist, libertarian and relativist ethical positions concerning suicide and its prevention are presented in order to clarify premises upon which ethical issues in suicide research may be resolved. Ethical concerns are differentiated from legal considerations and the implications of the vulnerability of suicidology research participants are discussed. Specific issues that arise in design, choice of participants, interpretation, diffusion of results and evaluative research are treated. These include: experimental methodologies, obtaining informed consent, deception and disclosure, studying innovative and unproven interventions, unknown consequences of participation, rescue criteria, disclosure of information to third parties, research with special populations, risks in publicizing results and measuring the value of human life. When specific legal obligations are lacking, ethical premises concerning the acceptability of suicide and obligations to intervene may influence research protocols. © 2004 Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

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Suicide is a major health problem worldwide. According to World Health Organization data, almost one million people die by suicide each year (WHO, 2002). There are more deaths by suicide annually than in all wars, conflicts, terrorist acts and homicides combined. Nevertheless, there are fewer research studies on suicide than many less common causes of mortality. This is so, at least in part because several specific ethical considerations lead to limitations on the nature of research investigations which are conducted. This article examines the nature of ethical concerns regarding suicide research in the context

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of common ethical perspectives on the acceptability of suicidal behaviors and the obligations and limitations to intervening to prevent suicides.

In suicide research, life and death are potentially at stake. For this reason research protocols may be held to a higher standard than studies of more innocuous issues. Ethical issues may influence whether or not specific studies are undertaken as well as the methodologies used and special precautions that are included. It is our premise that the resolution of ethical issues in suicide research is not simply based upon a direct application of existing guidelines. We contend that both explicit and implicit moral and ethical beliefs concerning suicide influence decisions concerning the design, methodology, interpretation, and dissemination of research in suicidology, as well as decisions about what research is undertaken.

We believe that clarification of the researcher's moral premises is essential in determining how common ethical issues in suicide research may be resolved. The authors do not propose a specific moral position, but believe that there is utility in unpacking implicit moral premises and their ethical bases in understanding current practices and in determining future directions in suicidology research. Before examining specific ethical dilemmas, several paradigmatic positions concerning suicide are described in order to permit analysis of ethical issues that arise in diverse research contexts.

## **1. Ethical perspectives to guide decision-making**

Suicide prevention workers may be assumed to adhere to the principle that lives should be saved whenever possible, although the limits of their obligations to intervene and prevent may vary depending upon the worker and the circumstance. However, suicide researchers do not necessarily adhere to such beliefs. Furthermore, there is no coherent set of principles to which one can refer in order to attain consensual outcomes. Within existing research and clinical cultures we can expect to find the garden variety of philosophical orientations that are revealed in contemporary bioethical discussions. The general ethical perspectives presented in this section are succinct stereotypes of alternative positions one may take concerning the moral acceptability or unacceptability of suicide as well as one's obligations and limitations to intervene to save a life. The philosophical basis of the morality of suicide has been the object of considerable debate for over two millennia. Several contemporary philosophical treatises discuss these issues in a sophisticated matter (e.g. [Battin, 1995](#)). Our presentation of philosophical perspectives is intentionally stereotypical and ignores the subtleties of the rich debates among philosophers on these issues.

We present what could be termed popular paradigms in the ethics of suicide research culture in order to articulate how these points of view do or do not make a difference in applied situations. Although we feel that pure philosophical forms are unlikely to be commonly identified in situations where moral dilemmas are faced by researchers, we think it may be of real assistance for researchers to admit and communicate their own value derivatives and how they rationalize them in trying to resolve hard cases in suicide research ethics ([Weisstub, 1998](#)).

We have designated three broad categories in order to demarcate recurrent positions that are present in familiar discourse among suicide researchers. We designate them as moralist, libertarian, and relativist. We present these stereotypical positions in order to reveal that there are a number of dominant perspectives that are the starting point for the way researchers position themselves in problematic or conflict situations. This article is only meant to address avenues of what could be called "opening conversations," ways of looking that should lead us to the demand for both greater dialogue and more extensive empirical research.

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