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Rethinking the Study of College Student Suicide

Critical Suicidology and Higher Education

RESEARCH-IN-BRIEF

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Q Why did you choose the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs for this article?

A The editor of the Journal of Critical Scholarship on Higher Education and Student Affairs (JCSHESA), Sydney Curtis, was a panelist in a session at the Association for the Study of Higher Education (ASHE) about publishing as a graduate student. As I listened to Ms. Curtis describe the mission of JCSHESA and her personal commitment to developing graduate student scholarship and writing, I felt compelled to submit a manuscript to the journal. I had been searching for an appropriate venue for my article about critical suicidology, and upon reading several articles in JCSHESA, I felt that this was the ideal venue for my work. I wanted to submit to a venue that would be open minded about a critical approach to studying suicide. My perception of the JCSHESA editorial board members is that they are comfortable pushing back against dominant discourses in an effort to advance forms of knowledge that have been historically silenced.

Q How does this article reflect your identity as a critical scholar?

A When I think about how this article fits into my identity as a critical scholar, I envision this article as the springboard for my individual scholarship. Critical suicidology is the theoretical framework in which my dissertation research is situated. Although I am a higher education scholar, I have never found critical suicidology in higher education literature. I see this article as my opportunity to introduce an entire body of literature to the field of higher education. In writing and revising this article, I thought carefully about my responsibility to advocate for marginalized student populations, and data clearly demonstrate that students representing various marginalized

groups are adversely impacted by high levels of suicidal thoughts and suicide attempts. I want my scholarship to be accessible to readers who are unfamiliar with literature on suicide, so I integrated metaphors from other authors that I found compelling throughout the manuscript to help readers visualize the problem I discuss.

Q What motivates you to create critical scholarship?

A I am a critical scholar because I believe it is the only type of scholarship that can truly affect change; the world we live in revolves around power and critical scholarship attempts to understand and dismantle oppressive systems of power.

I began researching college student suicide after working on a mental health response team at a large, public university. In my role, I could see that institutional actors were doing their best to serve students but were clearly limited in their capacity to do so because of institutional and systemic obstacles. I also perceived that Students of Color seemed to be further marginalized by the institutional policies related to suicide. In graduate school, I wanted to better understand why that was. It has always been paramount to me that my scholarship has realistic and actionable implications. I want my research about suicide to improve the experience of marginalized students who experience suicidal thoughts. In the first year of my PhD program, I remember talking with my advisor and telling her that universities were colonizing mental health by requiring all students to adhere to a linear template in their suicide response protocols. When I found the authors in critical suicidology who I cite in this paper, I knew I had found like-minded scholars who were attempting to dismantle the dominant way of thinking about suicide. I continue to be inspired by their writing and their comfort with pushing back

against the discourse of suicide that leads one to believe suicide is the result of a mental illness. As I develop my critical scholarship through critical suicidology, I feel compelled to explore and better understand other critical bodies of knowledge.

Q Who do you hope reads your writing and why?

A I hope that graduate students and faculty who are interested in student mental health read this article. There is a great deal that we do not know about college student suicide and many opportunities exist to explore this issue qualitatively. I hope this article invites scholars to question some of their assumptions about suicide. I also hope that scholars who study marginalized student populations but have not thought about how suicide impacts those populations read this article. As I discuss in the article, surveys show that nearly 15% of students experience suicidal thoughts. To truly improve the student experience, I think scholars must incorporate suicidal experiences into their scholarship about higher education.

Author Biography

Lisa S. Kaler is a Ph.D. candidate in the Department of Organizational Leadership, Policy, and Development at the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities. Lisa's dissertation research focuses on the discourses about suicide present on a university campus. Lisa also researches and writes about undergraduate and graduate student mental health, including the experiences of mother-scholars. Lisa is an advocate for graduate student mental health.

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