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**by Marc Abrahams<sup>1</sup>**

Those who achieve stardom in academia are much like their counterparts in movies and television - they can be unfairly, if admiringly, pigeonholed by their public. Consider the case of David Lester.

Professor Lester, British-born but now based at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, has published considerably more than 1,000 academic papers. The majority appear either in the journal *Psychological Reports* or in its sister publication, *Perceptual and Motor Skills*. Nearly every one of his publications is a very readable one to two pages in length. There have been many years in which he has published more than 60 new papers.

It is true that the vast majority of these reports deal with variations on a single topic. Lester is perhaps the world's preeminent digester and explainer of the statistics of suicide. In that field he is a superstar.

Yet there are many other subjects upon which Lester has made a mark, and these are little celebrated. His non-suicide reports, like his others, are pithy. And most were published in Lester's favourite journals, *Psychological Reports* or *Perceptual and Motor Skills*. Here is a small sampling. Some of these were solo shots, others written together with one or more colleagues.

Lester has poked his metaphorical magnifying lens into some especially specialised corners. Some examples: *The Personalities of Short People* (1982); *Personalities of Players of Dungeons and Dragons* (1998); *The Big Four: Personality in Dogs* (2003); and the still-topical *Marijuana Use and Personality* (1986), which reported that "results suggest marijuana use was related to personality".

Certain of Lester's reports have titles that are curiously ambiguous. Perhaps this is intentional, meant to heighten the reader's curiosity and inspire a deeper level of inquiry and thought. Two examples are his 1978 paper *Attitudes Toward Mental Illness in Police Officers* and 1974's *Fear of Death and Femininity*.

David Lester and his wife, the economist Bijou Yang Lester, have co-written more than 50 academic papers. These include an ongoing series about an esoteric aspect of computer usage. *Who Buys Their Textbooks Online?* (2000) reports that: "A pilot study of 82 undergraduates indicated that skills with computers and internet use predicted purchasing textbooks online."

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<sup>1</sup> Editor of the bimonthly magazine *Annals of Improbable Research* ([www.improbable.com](http://www.improbable.com)) and organiser of the Ig Nobel Prize

Buying Textbooks Online (2002) says that: "In a sample of 77 undergraduates, purchasing textbooks online was predicted by computer/internet skills but not by personality traits."

Purchasing Textbooks Online (2003) sums up the findings to date: "In a sample of 72 undergraduate students at a university, purchasing textbooks online was predicted by possession of computer/internet skills, having a retentive attitude towards money and dissatisfaction with the university bookstore."

It is heartening when a prolific author attains a reputation. But it is heartbreaking if that causes his most thought-provoking work to be overlooked.

## **DAVID LESTER: A PRODIGIOUS RESEARCHER IN SUICIDOLOGY**

**By Robert D. Goldney**  
(Crisis, 2005, 26, 40-41)

In the last thirty there has been an exponential increase in research on suicidal behaviours. A major contributor to this has been David Lester. Indeed, his productivity has been, and continues to be, quite phenomenal. He has published over 2000 papers and reports in no fewer than 158 American Journals and 47 Journals from other countries; his work has appeared in eight languages other than English; he has written or edited 78 books; and he has served on the Editorial Boards of a number of American and international journals.

David Lester was born in England in 1942 and his initial Bachelor Degree was completed with scholarships at Cambridge University. Then he attended Brandeis University in the United States where he completed his Masters degree and a Doctorate of Philosophy in Psychology. After brief periods of teaching at Wellesley College in Massachusetts and directing a research programme at a Suicide Prevention and Crisis Service in Buffalo in New York State, in 1971 he became Professor of Psychology at Richard Stockton College in Pomona New Jersey, and he has remained there to the present time. He has used that as a base from which he has pursued research covering a broad range of issues, primarily those associated with suicidal behaviour, but also those related to criminology, economics, feminism and religion.

Much of Lester's work is based on data obtained from official government records, rather than as a result of specifically designed research proposals to test hypotheses. However, publicly available official statistics are very amenable to test certain hypotheses, and it is important that they are utilised and scrutinised in the manner in which Lester has done. For example, he has provided valuable insights into the relationship between prescription rates of medication and suicide (Lester, 1994); the economy and suicide (Lester and Yang, 1997); the use of motor vehicle exhaust, carbon monoxide poisoning for suicide (Lester, 1989); the effect of firearms legislation on suicide (Leenaars et al, 2003); and the impact of suicide prevention centres on suicide rates (Lester, 1997). Indeed, in regard to the latter research, since his early work at the crisis Service in buffalo he has analysed not only the overall influence of suicide prevention centres, but also the nature of the therapeutic contact that telephone counselling can provide (Lester, 1974).

He has also provided scholarly reviews of important topics such as the significance of neuro-transmitter metabolites in the cerebro-spinal fluid of suicidal persons (Lester, 1995); the use of the dexamethasone suppression test as a potential indicator for suicide (Lester, 1992); and twin studies in suicidal behaviour (Lester, 2002).

It is fair to note that although he was President of the International Association for Suicide Prevention between 1991 and 1995, his main influence has not been in the

political arena of organisations. Rather, it can be measured not only by his own publications, but perhaps even more so by his encouragement of and co-operation with researchers from a number of other countries. Thus, in addition to co-operating with 46 co-authors from the United States, Lester has published work with 74 colleagues in no fewer than 34 other countries. This has included work with researchers in countries literally from A to Z, from Austria through Cuba, India, Kuwait, the Philippines, and Turkey to Zimbabwe.

This involvement has been important from two points of view. First, it has enabled the world to examine data from countries where the awareness of the problem of suicide, let alone suicide research, has sometimes not been well recognised, and it has also provided the impetus for researchers in those countries to promote their own clinical and research programmes. Examples of his cooperative work include papers on suicide in Zimbabwe (Lester and Wilson, 1988); in Hungarian gypsies (Zonda and Lester, 1990); and in the Lodz Ghetto During World War II (Krysinska and Lester, 2002); on suicide and homicide in Siberia (Lester and Kondrichin, 2003); and on research methodology involving the Kuwait University Anxiety Scale (Abdel-Khalek and Lester, 2003).

Probably the most influential of his books has been “Why people kill themselves”, first published in 1972 and with further editions in 1982, 1992 and 2000. These reviews have incorporated data from the English language literature for one hundred years from a number of disciplines, and they have been an important starting point for many new researchers in the field of suicidology. As he noted in the preface to the fourth edition, it has become a daunting task to review the plethora of research in the area of suicidology. Further, he observed that although the advent of computer retrieval technology could be seen as an advance, the dilemma is that sometimes such searches provide articles only peripheral to the subject, and it still needs the input of an informed person to interpret the relevance of various publications. After having been that “informed person” for almost 30 years, it is not unexpected that in the most recent preface he stated that he would “pass the burden on to scholars of the future to continue this task”.

Perhaps that comment is an indication of him slowing down, although he still published 58 papers in 2003. It is doubtful if suicidology will ever see any one person in the future who could emulate the productivity of David Lester.

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