

## **Letter to the Editor**

### **Methodological Issues in Suicide Research in Bangladesh**

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We are writing to you to allow us to enter into an ongoing debate concerning a write-up titled, “Young teenage suicides in Bangladesh – are mandatory Junior School Certificate exams to blame?” published in ‘International Journal of Mental Health and Addiction’ by Mamun and Griffiths (2020a). Arafat (2020), a researcher from Bangladesh, initiated the debate through a letter to the editor of that journal raising several theoretical and procedural/methodological flaws of the original publication of Mamun and Griffiths (2020a). Arafat (2020) finds this publication as “potentially flawed” and “purely hypothetical” (p.1). Hereafter, Mamun, and Griffiths (2020b) categorically refuted each of the claims raised by Arafat (2020) to justify their stance and flows writing another letter to the editor. Space will not allow us to touch upon each of their arguments and counter-arguments rather we would shed light on the major issues of their dissonance cornering the methodological issues. At the same time, we would also highlight our opinions in this regard.

Arafat (2020) raised serious concerns about the usefulness of newspaper sources to draw any conclusion with regards to the tacit causal relationship between teenage suicide and Junior School Certificate exam results. Whilst Arafat claimed insufficiently of newspaper sources, Mamun and Griffiths (2020b) argued that they had used the basic facts from the newspaper sources to report their findings only. In their words, “The information in the media reports that we extracted were neither imagined nor suggested. They were reported and we faithfully reproduced what we found (p.4). Despite their claim, we think their conclusion was pseudo-rational (not reasonable) as they did not compare what was the nature of teenage suicide before the introduction of Junior School

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Certificate examination in Bangladesh. For example, the following claim reflects little (or no) reliability and internal validity which propounds the concern that the deduction made from the analysis might be misleading. “Based on the data we collected, it is evident that students are not just committing suicide because they fail in the JSC but also because they are not getting the maximum GPA (i.e., 5 out of 5). Given that there were 2.61 million JSC examinees in 2019, this is a sizeable “at-risk” group that could experience mental health and stress issues, and in extreme cases, suicide” (Mamun and Griffiths, 2020a p.2).

Mamun and Griffiths (2020b) also expressed their astonishment as to why such methodological question was raised given the fact Arafat as a researcher is broadly reliant on newspaper sources in writing academic papers. This is an interesting claim and factually correct as well. They provided specific shreds of evidence to support this claim. But what Mamun and Griffiths missed out (perhaps, deliberately) is the fact of their over-reliance on newspaper sources in their academic works (see, Mamun and Griffiths 2020b for a reference list as such). Nonetheless, we appreciate the conviction made by Mamun and Griffiths (2020b) that suicide risk factors cannot be accurately understood as the victims are already deceased. The coroners apply psychological autopsy through interviewing concerned individuals to reconstruct the incident of suicide. Journalists use a similar sort of technique (psychological autopsy) while reporting suicidal incidents. On this point, we would like to add that Shneidman (1981), the proponent of psychological autopsy in suicidology, proposed 16 specific parameters as autopsy indicators and suggested to ask open-ended questions to explore the necessary details about the deceased. But what makes us overtly unconvinced is the claim which they made regarding journalists’ aptness in collecting information about the deceased persons. Are journalists designated to be trained to use psychological autopsy? Understandably, this is an area of expertise of psychologists, coroners, or suicidologists. There is a sharp difference between the academic task and the reporting task, and that must be appropriately recognised and valued.

Our point of view is not to discard newspaper sources since these could provide valuable information about suicidal behaviour for a country like Bangladesh where there is no national suicide data repository system. Yet, same as Arafat (2020), we do assert the fact that newspaper contents are often ridden with exaggerations and sensationalism and poorly crafted in response to the World Health Organisation (WHO) reporting guidelines. From the point of that dilemma, we come out with two specific questions. How long should suicide researchers in Bangladesh use such methodology based on the pretext of not having any national suicide surveillance or data repository? How will it take for them to be deeply involved in extricating suicidal context through in-depth empirical works?

Anyone having an intuitive mind will not disagree that using newspaper sources have a lot of advantages in conducting desk research on a sensitive issue like suicide. Newspaper sources (also reviews) are often not financially cost incurring, do not require cumbersome institutional ethical approval and involve any long-standing personal field engagement. Also, it is easy to go approach to make publications without being involved in rigorous field-based work and data analysis. We are afraid whether newspaper reporting based publications could potentially make any substantial contribution to the advancement of knowledge in Bangladesh. We would like to term this leap as an expedient presentation of the scattered but already known information through an organised means which technically leads us to an ostensibly objective answer/question.

At this backdrop, there must be an urgent call for suicide researchers in Bangladesh to conduct empirical works. Drawing on Max Weberian postulations of “meaningful social actions/subjective meanings”, Jack Douglas (1967), one of the eminent suicidologists/sociologists advocated for extricating the context of suicide by paying attention to the history of individual suicide cases. While doing so, Douglas (1967) proposed to explicate the meanings of the individual cases of suicide by interpreting the statements, patterns of actions, motives, and intentions of the actors involved (Varty 2000). Interviews with key actors/significant others such as “friends and family members who experienced a loss to suicide could offer much-needed data” (Wray, Colen and Pescosolido 2011 p. 522), and could necessarily inform context-based prevention and intervention strategies (Andoh-Arthur, Kinizek, Osafo and Hjelmeland 2018). Considering the need of using of in-depth qualitative research in suicidology, Hjelmeland and Knizek (2010 p.79) categorically stated, “we challenge the editors of suicidology journals to encourage qualitative research, research that will help us to improve our understanding of suicidal behaviour in different contexts.”

Finally, all concerned (editors and researchers) need to think omnisciently on how to contribute in the most befitting manner towards sophisticating suicidal knowledge in Bangladesh. Racing around to publish papers using newspaper sources might increase the number of sources but would no way help in expanding the quality of knowledge. We leave this issue for further academic debate and consider your journal as a venue to nurture this debate in order to help and direct scholars in Bangladesh to get rid of content analysis and adopt empirical works (what we suggest) more vigorously. Knowledge that is produced from the real-life context has significant implications in providing appropriate policy directions as well.

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