A 2000 article by one of Understanding Suicide’s authors, David Lester, argued that very little had changed in the past 10 years in the field of suicidology. He even suggested that suicidology as a field of serious inquiry had come to an end. Lester maintained that some suicide-related topics have seemingly disappeared from the research literature due to a loss of interest. In Understanding Suicide, Rogers & Lester posit that this need not be the end of suicidology. Their book brings to light the need for innovative, competing theories and empirical, methodologically-sound tests of suicide-related hypotheses based on those theories.

This book is an excellent resource for professionals interested in designing studies to help contribute to an empirical understanding of suicide. The book is organized around specific recommendations, which are made by the authors throughout each chapter. There are fifteen chapters in all, with the first two chapters providing an introduction to suicide research and general methodological problems within the field (such as small sample size and inadequate scope and validity of measures). Part One of the book outlines how different disciplines (psychology, psychiatry, sociology, anthropology) have approached researching suicide. It is important to note that readers may not find it necessary to read each of these chapters in its entirety, unless one would like to gain a broad understanding of how each discipline can or has contributed to the suicide literature.

Part Two focuses on specific, illustrative topics related to issues such as assessment, the influence of social relationships, and personality. The authors additionally highlight the importance of approaching research from a multidisciplinary perspective and of building collaborative relationships with professionals from various academic disciplines. This section would be particularly informative and helpful for a researcher who is contemplating conducting a study related to one of these topics. It would also be extremely relevant reading for graduate students interested in pursuing a dissertation topic in the field of suicidology. The authors additionally highlight a number of areas in which suicide research needs stronger a priori conceptualization. For example, a clear, operational definition of “attitudes” is needed before designing a study of attitudes toward suicide. Similarly, a prior theoretical reason for why there should be a relationship between sexual abuse and suicide should be required before hypothesizing such a relationship. This suggestion also applies to the study of other antecedent behaviors; Rogers and Lester emphasize the general need for a theoretical foundation in suicidology research. However, they fail to acknowledge existing theories such as Thomas Joiner’s Interpersonal-Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behavior.

The authors believe that there is a future for suicidology research. In this book they critique the field of suicidology, while making constructive suggestions about what steps need to be taken to make such research meaningful and theoretically based. Rogers and Lester express the hope that their critique and recommendations will help to motivate other professionals to conduct research in the field. Overall, this book provides a thorough but concise view of recommendations to guide the future of suicidology theory and research.