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Scholarship of Suicide

Andrea C. Walker

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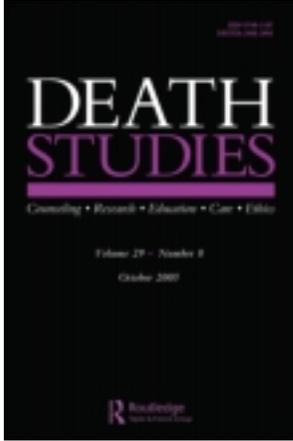
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BOOK REVIEWS

Edited by
DAVID E. BALK

Scholarship of Suicide

A review of *Grief After Suicide: Understanding the Consequences and Caring for the Survivors*, edited by John R. Jordan and John L. McIntosh. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 544 pp. (ISBN: 978-0-415-99355-5). \$39.95. Reviewed by Andrea C. Walker.

John R. Jordan practices clinical psychology in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. For over 10 years he has been the catalyst in the popular “Research That Matters” presentations at annual conferences of the Association for Death Education and Counseling. With Bob Baugher he is coauthor of *After Suicide Loss: Coping with Your Grief* (available at b_kbaugher@yahoo.com). He wrote “After Suicide: Clinical Work with Survivors,” published in *Australian Journal of Grief and Bereavement*, 2009, 12, 4–9.

John L. McIntosh is Associate Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs and Professor of Psychology at Indiana University South Bend and Past-President of the American Association of Suicidology. Along with John F. Santos, Richard W. Hubbard, and James C. Overholser, McIntosh coauthored *Elder Suicide: Research, Theory, and Treatment*, published by the American Psychological Association in 1994. He is the author of *U.S.A. Suicide 2006: Official Final Data* published in 2009 by the American Association of Suicidology.

Andrea C. Walker is an Associate Professor of Psychology at Oral Roberts University. Her areas of research include family studies and grief/bereavement issues regarding American Indian populations and college students. She is a licensed addictions counselor in the state of Oklahoma. She is the author of “Building Bridges in American Indian Bereavement Research,” published by *Omega*, 2009, 59, 351–367.

This academic book’s foundation consists solidly of research, and within the framework of what has been measured, deliberately intertwines clinical insight and experience. Jordan and McIntosh arrange intersection of thought from family, life span developmental,

and meaning-making perspectives. The book develops from systemic orientation, including discussion from multiple aspects within each major section. Attention is given to experiences as they differ across the life cycle and as they vary within families and with each individual, particularly in terms of the meaning reconstruction process. Consistent with the recommendations of other trauma and bereavement researchers (Neimeyer, Hogan, & Laurie, 2008; Norris, Galea, Friedman, & Watson, 2006), Jordan and McIntosh do not necessarily lean toward a particular type of methodology but concern themselves with what most informs knowledge about suicide survivors, whether quantitative, qualitative, or mixed methods approaches. Research findings then provide knowledge about what works, encompassing an evidence-based practice perspective.

The book's first section discusses the impact of suicide, beginning with the rationale of why suicide bereavement is considered a distinct topic. A discussion of its systemic impact follows, with attention to children, adolescents, adults, and professional caregivers. The second section, one of the most important in the book, explores methods of helping survivors. The focus here is multifaceted, spanning helping techniques across the life cycle, individual and group perspectives, and processes of reconstructing meaning, family systems, and organizational considerations. The next two sections serve as a sourcebook for available services and programs, located both domestically and internationally. Each chapter in these two sections presents a program, describing its orientation, overriding purpose, target population, and processes by which it is designed to reach its goals. The final section synthesizes the knowledge base, integrating what was discovered in the prior chapters into a fluid set of suggestions and concerns about both research and practice. After reading this book, those affected by suicide personally or professionally are informed about past lessons learned, updated on current modes of practice, and poised for the next step in becoming more knowledgeable about dealing with grief associated with suicide.

Before diving into the detail of the book, it is necessary to examine the governing reason for its development. There has been considerable debate in the literature regarding whether suicide bereavement exists as a distinct construct, and the authors address this debate directly. Jordan and McIntosh begin by explaining the breadth of impact suicide can have and define a *suicide survivor* as "someone who experiences a high level of self-perceived

psychological, physical, and/or social distress for a considerable length of time after exposure to the suicide of another person” (p. 7). Given this definition, the authors then provide a complexly conducted critical evaluation of literature measuring suicide survivors and further distinguish characteristics supported and not supported by research, indicating that suicide survivors tend to (a) feel abandoned or rejected, (b) experience shame and stigma, (c) conceal the cause of death as suicide, and (d) blame. The authors are sensitive to individual experiences and careful not to categorize suicide reactions. The case for the book’s relevancy is convincing despite contradictory findings in literature.

The focus of the major content of the book builds on the basic premise reflecting the authors’ perspectives of the unique parameters of helping those experiencing suicidal bereavement. The breadth of topics discussed reflects the authors’ incorporation of several theoretical orientations, a wise move that suggests that no one framework is more complementary than another in interpreting suicide bereavement. The authors discuss the value of all types of research designs in deepening understanding. Inclusion of both multiple theories and designs is a safe and appropriate assumption at this stage of development of empirical evidence.

The breadth of topics covered is noteworthy. Each of the four major sections includes several chapters addressing the various aspects of that section. For instance, Section 2 “Helping Survivors” contains chapters addressing survivors’ needs, counseling children, adolescents, and adults, group counseling, and family counseling. My personal favorite chapter in the book, “The Meaning of Suicide: A Narrative Approach to Healing” (Sands, Jordan, & Neimeyer, pp. 249–282), provided a breadth and depth of information incorporating overlapping themes from research into practice and finally into the development of a current theory, the Tripartite Model of Suicide Bereavement. Concepts of “tying on the shoes,” “walking in the shoes,” and “taking off the shoes” (p. 263) bring individuals’ experiences to life while finding common themes of “understanding relationship,” “reconstructing relationship,” and “repositioning relationship” (p. 263) in their experiences. The chapter, infused with recent research and personal narratives, represented formidable efforts in the discovery of knowledge.

A major strength of the book is its focus on diversity and inclusiveness of remote populations, particularly in Sections 3 and 4.

Improvement in this area can always be made (why not include American Indian groups or Hispanic countries, for instance?), but this book's contribution marks significant progress toward having multicultural relevance. The implications of integrating this type of diverse information for further theory development about the experience of suicide are far-reaching. Moreover, with professional caregiver grief as the exception, there was less deliberate focus on specific types of relationships that often experience disenfranchisement in their grief, such as same-sex significant other relationships, relationships with "exes," and fictive kin, than has been mentioned in past references. The very definition authors provide of "suicide survivor," however, is self-defining and inclusive and can be taken as incorporating greater sensitivity to the individual and progression beyond drawing attention to potentially marginalized relationships.

My personal desire was to see a greater focus throughout the book on posttraumatic growth, in the form of hopefulness, as the chapter mentioned above did examine briefly. In one example, Sands, Jordan, and Neimeyer refer to the following quote from Sands' earlier research: "I am not angry with him [for killing himself]. I feel great compassion and sadness...for somebody who was so brave with the mental illness he suffered" (p. 271).

With the general purpose of providing a current, scholarly sourcebook, the overall tone was guided largely by empirical evidence. This same focus could be invoked for examining suicide survivors from various religious persuasions. A brief discussion of variables affecting suicide bereavement, including religion, was provided in one chapter and moderately addressed throughout the chapters discussing U.S. and international programs of support. The truth of the matter is that very little research has been conducted regarding these variables in terms of suicide bereavement. In a book committed to a research focus, it is understandable why a section addressing such variables is small. Clearly, more research examining specific aspects of suicide bereavement is needed.

Sometimes an academic work's biggest strength can also be its most significant challenge. Put another way, scholarly, academic books based on research can be boring. As a user, producer, and teacher of research, I understand the oftentimes difficult task of igniting my students' interests in research designs, analyses, and theory development. Ultimately, success in doing so seems to involve streamlining the process to relate to the user, and contributing

authors understand this. Chow and Yip, for instance, discussed examples of suicide as a means to teach or make a point or to show one's loyalty in the Chinese culture. Harrington-LaMorie and Ruocco presented a treatment program for military suicide survivors, discussing the experience of a young, pregnant wife, who found her husband shortly after he had taken his own life, as an application. Webb provided this example:

Michael, aged 17, lived with his mother following his parents' divorce 5 years earlier . . . Michael's relationship with his mother was not close; he did not know that she had recently been diagnosed with inoperable cancer. One day, when he returned home from his after-school job, his father was there and told him that his mother had taken an overdose of medication and then sat in her car in the garage with the motor running until she died . . . His father, a physician, made arrangements for Michael to move in with him and attend a bereavement group at the local hospice. (pp. 244–245)

Webb then discussed the study's inherent therapeutic themes, which are targeted in evidence-based practice modalities. Design and the theory must be intimately intertwined with client, family, or in this case survivor(s) of suicide. The book as a whole was intriguing, relevant, and decidedly not boring because the authors were successful in this undertaking.

Overall, I experienced a positive reaction to the book. The book's topic excited me when I was asked to write a review, and I remain convinced that this book is timely, relevant, and needed. Most current books on suicide offer a person's unique journey to recovery, a narrative that is certainly a valuable contribution to literature on the topic. Academic books that have discussed suicide have often been less focused on providing evidence-based practice as this book or have not focused exclusively on suicide bereavement. Enough research has now been conducted to organize and synthesize the information into this type of scholarly sourcebook so that efforts to help suicide survivors are more focused and effective. I expect that a few years down the road, as more research concerning specific influences such as religion, gender, cultural groups, etc., on suicide bereavement is conducted, a revised edition of this book will be needed.

As I delved more deeply into the chapters, I appreciated the book not only for its relevancy but also its professionalism. Great

care and thought went into the development of this book. Its authors demonstrate knowledge and expertise of the prior conflicting findings and the many resulting nuances inherent in suicide bereavement as a scholarly topic. The structure and arrangement of the sections is logical and comprehensive. The book's organization, in terms of table of contents, index, sections, and chapters, add considerably to its ease of use. The authors provided important contributions and represent some of the most knowledgeable professionals in the field. It provides a sensitively written, coherent interface of what is known and what is not known about helping those surviving suicide bereavement.

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Nondeath Loss and the Web of Life

A review of *Counting Our Losses: Reflecting on Change, Loss, and Transition in Everyday Life*, edited by Darcy L. Harris. New York, NY: Routledge, 2011. 261 pp. (ISBN: 978-0415875295). \$34.95. Reviewed by Lori A. Magda.

Darcy L. Harris is a professor in the department of Interdisciplinary Programs at King's College at the University of Western Ontario. Along with Robert A. Neimeyer, Howard R. Winokuer, and Gordon F. Thornton, Harris edited *Grief and Bereavement in Contemporary Society: Bridging Research and Practice* (Routledge, 2011).

Lori A. Magda was a data manager at the Mailman School of Public Health, Columbia University. After graduating summa cum laude from Loyola College in Maryland with a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology, she received a Master of Arts degree in Psychology in Education from Teachers College, Columbia University. She was recently awarded an Advanced Certificate in Grief Counseling from Brooklyn College, and