

# *PARENTAL PORTRAITS OF SUICIDE*

*NARRATING THE LOSS OF A YOUNG ADULT CHILD*

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I certify that I am the sole author and that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.

A large black rectangular redaction box covers the signature area. Below the box, there are three short, slanted lines that appear to be the remnants of a signature or a decorative flourish.

Myfanwy Jane Maple

March 2005

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## ABSTRACT

Elevated rates of suicide among young people throughout the Western world have been of concern, particularly during the past three decades. Australia was one of the first countries to respond with a national initiative to address this devastating trend. Still many lives are lost, and for those left behind, devastating grief at the loss of young life. To date, little research has been undertaken in this area, and as a consequence this grief tends to be poorly understood.

This study provides empirical data, which examines the experience of parents bereaved through their son or daughter's suicide death. In-depth interviews with 22 mothers and fathers elicited their narratives surrounding the experience of suicide. Interview data was analysed using a narrative method, which examined both the smaller narratives within each story and the plotlines that permeate the stories of the group as a whole. This analysis revealed three narrative components that parents use to talk about and give meaning to their experience. The first speaks to the manner in which parents find themselves silenced after the suicide death of their child. The second accounts for how prepared or otherwise parents are for the suicide death of the child. The third explores death as a physical end to life, but elaborates on a parent's enduring relationship with their child.

The findings of this study highlight the need for a social health framework to understand suicide-bereaved parents' experiences, as it takes place within a particular social and cultural realm. This framework recognises that in some instances the suicide may be anticipated, and the bond that a parent shares

with their child in life continues after death. Most importantly, these findings recognise that these young people are much more to their parents than their suicide death. In light of these findings, recommendations for suicide prevention and postvention services are made along with identification of unanswered questions that will require future investigation.

## PUBLICATION OF THIS RESEARCH TO DATE

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