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THOSE LEFT BEHIND – BETWEEN THE UNIVERSAL AND EXCEPTIONAL EXPERIENCE OF A LOVED ONE’S SUICIDE

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suicide of a loved one
those left behind
trace of experiencing loss

Summary

In this article, we seek to understand the experiences of individuals affected by the suicide of a loved one—those left behind and confronted with a loss that will leave a lasting mark on their lives. In the first part, we reflect on how to refer to individuals affected by such a profound loss. We then focus on analyzing the ways in which the experiences of the bereaved are described—taking into account both the dominant forms of conceptualization found in the literature and the scale of this experience. In the final section of the text, we observe that scholarly literature often seeks regularities in the experiences of those left behind. However, we emphasize that these regularities serve merely as a starting point for understanding what is unique, singular—and, as a result, deeply personal, solitary, and indivisible.

*This article constitutes the first of two parts devoted to this topic. Its continuation is presented in the text titled “Those Left Behind Among the Left Behind – Between Life and Suicide of a Loved One”, published in this issue of the journal *Psychotherapia*.*

Introduction

The experience of losing a loved one is a defining moment in any family’s life [1, 2], as well as in the lives of those whose connection to the deceased falls outside traditional kinship [3, 4]. In the face of such an experience, relationships among those who remain may shift in many ways – bonds may strengthen or weaken, and the dynamics of the family system as a whole may be subtly altered or fundamentally unsettled, sometimes even to the point of breaking down altogether. This loss is reflected in the functioning of those close to the deceased, in the lives of family members, and sometimes even in the experiences of subsequent generations [5].

Recognising the profound difficulty of confronting the death of a loved one, we resolved to look closely at the trace left in the lives of those close to the deceased by the experience of his or her suicide. Both the academic literature and the testimonies of people affected by such a loss highlight the far-reaching significance of this experience, evident in the

way bereaved individuals perceive themselves, others, the world, and the deceased [6, 7]. Sometimes its meaning is readily apparent to those around them; at other times it is more muted, emerging instead as subtle marks left by the life – and death – of the person who died by their own hand, imprinted on the lives of those who remain. The life of the one who ended their own life continues to reverberate in the lives of their loved ones. This reverberation may be discreet, yet it is invariably expressive. For this reason, we refer to it as a trace (Gr. *typos*). What is fleeting, like the imprint of a bird's feet on a sandy shore [8], leaves behind a trace on whatever it touches. So too does the experience of a life touched by death leave its mark on the life that continues.

Because of their subtle and often understated nature, the traces left by the death of a loved one may at times escape notice. Yet they matter, for they signify that life continues. Thus, we begin with the acknowledgement that, in the lives of those bereaved by suicide, traces of that experience remain. Their lives have been in contact with the life – and death – of the one who chose to end their own life. A trace of the experience of that death must therefore persist, even if it is difficult to discern. In recognising these traces, we honour both those who have died and those who continue to live. For such recognition is itself a gesture that says: “I see that you are here.” This is how every relationship begins. And it is from such recognition that a path can emerge – a path shared with those who understand that I bear a mark left by death.

In this article, we seek to take the first steps along that path by turning our attention to people living with the suicide of someone close to them. We begin by considering how best to name those affected by such a loss. We then draw on statistical data to illustrate the scale of suicide bereavement in Poland and beyond. Next, we examine the prevailing approaches in the literature to describing the experience of a loved one's suicide, noting the varying circumstances in which suicide is encountered. The article's opening section sets out the framework through which this experience is studied, establishing a basis for further reflection. Every human experience, including death, has two dimensions: the visible one – that which can be expressed in terms of statistics – and the hidden one – that which unfolds quietly within the fabric of everyday life, concealed by defence mechanisms, coping strategies, habits, or social conventions. The measures presented here (statistics, norms, and generalisations) reveal only the quantifiable aspects of such a loss; its non-quantifiable aspects lie in the lived experience of each individual. If the purpose of scholarship is to serve life, it is essential also to recognise these hidden dimensions which, although at first glance they may seem repetitive, conceal unique experiences. Accordingly, our reconstruction of positions found in the literature also prepares the ground for their deconstruction (to be undertaken in subsequent parts of this study), enabling us to look beneath what is already documented – beneath the visible – to reveal a hidden life which, despite its seeming repetitiveness, remains fundamentally idiomatic: always someone's, always sometime, always somewhere, among something, among someone, among those who remain, even as they live with absence. The final section of this article offers a preview of the analyses that follow in its second part, where we focus more closely on the distinctive, idiomatic traces left in the lives of the bereaved.

A word that allows one to see

In undertaking this study, grounded in a comparative analysis of the literature on the experiences of people living through the suicide of someone close to them, and an analysis of their testimonies¹, we asked what seemed to us the first and most fundamental question: how are we to name these persons? By posing this question, we allow those touched by such a loss to hear that we are indeed asking, that we do not presume to know, and that we are looking for a way forward. We search because we wish to speak in a manner that enables them to recognise themselves as the ones to whom we address our words. Thus, we begin by seeking terms that might guide us towards a reality not yet fully contained within language. We search for words that might help us enter into relation with those who elude the grasp of the very words attempting to name them. For this reason, we set aside the terms that “already know” who and what they describe, and instead turn towards language that might respond to the ineffable dimension of their experience.

Our search for a name took place both through the study of the literature as well as through the careful reading of testimonies of those touched by suicide loss. In Polish-language publications, we encountered several attempts to name such persons – among them *osieroceni* [9], *ocaleni* [10], and *osoby ocalale po samobójstwie* [11]. Yet none of these terms seemed fitting for the purposes of our study. Observing that the cited authors had been inspired by English-language terminology, we turned likewise to English sources.

The terms most commonly used in English publications – “suicide survivors” or “survivors of suicide loss” – are indeed the dominant ones, as confirmed by a meta-analysis conducted by Julie Cerel et al. [12], who draw on studies by LaRita Archibald [13] and John Jordan and John McIntosh [14], among others. However, difficulties quickly surfaced. The term “suicide survivors” is used both for those who have survived a suicide attempt and for those bereaved by the suicide of someone close to them – a usage that risks misunderstanding or confusion [cf. 15, 16].

Moreover, the testimonies of those affected confirmed our reservations regarding the appropriateness of adopting and attempting to adapt “suicide survivors” into Polish discourse [cf. 17, 18, 19]. Many describe the term “survivor” as inadequate to their experience: they do not feel as though they have “survived” in the sense of having emerged intact. More often, they feel overwhelmed by the experience, which is in stark contrast to the connotations of survival. For many, feelings of shame or guilt also render the term uncomfortable and ill-fitting. This critical stance towards the use of the term “suicide survivor” drew our attention to yet another problem: that of finding a viable alternative. The term “victim

¹) The reflections offered here are drawn from a review of the literature and from analyses conducted between 2018 and 2023 as part of Joanna Ruczaj’s doctoral dissertation entitled “*A grief unshared. A phenomenological analysis of the experience of grieving after the suicide death of a loved one*”. The dissertation was prepared under the academic supervision of Dr hab. Małgorzata Opoczyńska-Morasiewicz, Professor at the Jagiellonian University, and has been successfully defended.

The first part of that dissertation comprised a comparative analysis of existing research, highlighting both the specificity of this experience and the discrepancy between society’s reception of suicide bereavement and the support available to those affected. The second part presented the findings of our own study: a phenomenological analysis of testimonies, on the basis of which we formulated a description of the experience and practical recommendations for support, as well as proposals for further inquiry.

of suicide”, used interchangeably in academic works and personal accounts, appears, for example, in the writings of Shneidman [20], Address and Corey [21], and Mitchell, Kim, Prigerson, and Mortimer-Stephens [22], as well as in the testimonies recorded, for example, in *Suicide Finding Hope* [23, 24]. Yet this term likewise encounters resistance. To call someone a “victim” can imply that the deceased is the perpetrator of the suffering endured by those who remain. Meanwhile, weighed down by a sense of responsibility for the suicide of their loved one, the bereaved often do not feel entitled to assume the position of the wronged party. Furthermore, out of concern for the deceased – and to preserve their good name after death – they are reluctant to adopt terminology that could be perceived as accusatory or exclusionary towards the tragically departed loved one.

Our reading of both scholarly literature and personal testimonies therefore revealed the inadequacy of the established academic terminology in suicidology [25] in relation to the articulated experience of those it seeks to describe. This observation prompted us to step away from these established terms in favour of proposing a new one. Ultimately, after considering the various aspects of living through a loved one’s suicide, we chose the term “the left-behind” (Polish: *pozostawieni*), which:

1. draws attention to the sense of abandonment or being left by the deceased – a feeling frequently reported by those bereaved by suicide [e.g. 26];
2. shifts attention towards the life that remains after death, rather than the perspective, prevalent in the literature, that focuses on the suicidal death itself while overlooking the significance of the bereaved;
3. attempts to avoid the pitfalls of social discourse, which often leads to the stigmatisation or exclusion of those affected by this singular event.

The term “left-behind” names the factual nature of the experience: where someone once was, there is now someone who remains. Someone who was left behind, who stayed². Having found a name through which we might address those touched by suicide loss, we turned to consider the scale of the group we seek to address. Accordingly, the next section of the article steps back from individual persons in order to outline the broader extent of suicide bereavement.

The scale of experiencing a suicidal death

According to the WHO’s 2022 report, someone in the world takes their own life roughly every 40 seconds [cf. 27]. Each year, around 700,000 people die by suicide globally [cf. 27]. In Poland, the scale of this phenomenon can be traced in statistical data published by the National Police Headquarters (KGP) and Statistics Poland (GUS). Statistics from

²) Although the term “left-behind” highlights the presence of the one who remains after a loss, we are mindful of its limitations and the possibility that it may not fully capture the intricate dynamics between the deceased and the left-behind. An alternative term we considered was “the remaining” (Polish: *pozostali*). The remaining – as, in a sense, each of us belongs to this category: those who come after those who have gone before, and who walk for a time beside others still journeying. Some depart; the remaining continue further along the path traced by those who walked it before. Human community is, in this sense, a community of the remaining. The left-behind and the remaining. Every left-behind is also among the remaining.

2017–2023 show an upward trend in suicidal behaviours, particularly suicide attempts. Across these years, approximately 13,000 suicide attempts are reported annually [cf. 28], with around 5,220 resulting deaths each year [cf. 29].

When considering the social significance of this troubling scale, both in Poland and worldwide, it is essential to recognise that the impact of a suicidal death extends far beyond the person who dies. A single suicide affects between 5 and 10 people within the person's immediate environment (“at least 5” [30]; “10” [31]; “6–10” [9, 32]), each of whom faces a demanding and often overwhelming process of grief. Based on the average number of suicides in Poland, as many as 52,200 people per year may experience the suicidal death of someone close to them.

These statistics, together with the estimated breadth of a suicide's impact (affecting 5–10 people), prompt reflection on: (1) the sources of the considerable variation in estimates of suicide's impact on the lives of the left-behind; (2) the arbitrariness of criteria used to assess how this event affects the bereaved; and (3) the question of how long a person remains “affected by a suicidal death.” Only by attempting to confront these uncertainties can we begin to perceive and thoughtfully engage with the traces that suicidal death leaves in the lives of the left-behind.

The problem of defining loss

The data above raises the question of whether every person who has experienced the suicidal death of someone close may be considered left-behind, in line with the understanding of this experience proposed by John Jordan and John McIntosh [34, p. 7]:

A left-behind person (the original work uses the term “suicide survivor”) is someone who, to a significant degree and for an extended period after another person's suicidal death, experiences markedly increased psychological, physical or social distress.

Their meta-analysis [35, pp. 54–60] highlights significant differences in the ways suicidal death is experienced. Drawing on their observations, those affected by suicide may broadly be divided into people who:

- 1) witnessed a suicidal death:
 - were directly exposed to a suicidal death, including medical personnel confirming the death; police officers or negotiators; funeral home workers preparing the body; or passers-by who accidentally discovered it;
 - were indirectly touched by learning of the death (e.g. neighbours, co-workers, classmates);
- 2) experience the suicidal death in the sense that it significantly alters their life, leaving a lasting trace by changing their everyday functioning, emotional life, and beliefs about the world and the future, as well as triggering substantial emotional distress.

Building on the above categorisation, this article explores the varied ways in which suicidal death is experienced by those whose lives have been profoundly marked by it (cf. group 2), that is, by individuals who, following Julie Cerel's research, would identify

themselves as left-behind, understood as persons for whom the suicidal death of another is particularly central or salient [36].

In the literature describing the experience of the left-behind, authors most often point to three fundamental circumstances that shape how loss is experienced and account for differences in how the left-behind live through the death of someone close to them.

1. In the suicidology literature, it is often argued that the way a person experiences the suicidal death of a loved one is closely linked to the degree of kinship between the bereaved and the deceased. As a result, most studies focus on those connected to the deceased by ties of blood [22, 36], while largely overlooking the experiences of close others who were not genetically related.
2. Research also indicates that many analytical frameworks fail to account for the diversity of ways in which the loss of a loved one is experienced, depending on the particular form the suicidal death takes. Such deaths may differ:
 - in the means used, which affect the body of the deceased in markedly different ways (a factor indirectly associated with the likelihood of trauma or PTSD symptoms among loved ones who identify the body [37, 38]);
 - in whether the circumstances suggest clear intentionality (e.g. the use of a highly lethal method such as hanging), or whether the death may have resulted from a degree of carelessness or ambivalence (e.g. using a low-lethality method such as a substance overdose). It is also possible that the death represents the long-term consequence of harmful behaviours, addiction, or neglect, where intentionality (that is, whether such behaviours were sustained with the aim of ending one's life) is difficult to determine. This form of suicidal death is explored in studies on phenomena such as slow suicide [39] and subtle suicide [40].

Given the varied ways in which loved ones experience such loss, shaped by differences in the circumstances surrounding the suicide, it becomes important to consider the question of accompanying a life moving towards death: the moment at which death first begins to leave its traces within the shared life of the left-behind and the loved one. Those who accompany such a life witness how – even while still alive – the loved one engages in negative or risky behaviours arising from habit, addiction, or neglect. Suicidal death is also frequently preceded by suicidal behaviours that are co-experienced by close others [26, 41]. In this light, a further question emerges concerning the differing ways the left-behind experience such loss, particularly in relation to how far the arrival of death in their shared life, in the context of destructive habits or acts of self-harm preceding the suicide, was anticipated.

3. In the literature offering an in-depth account of the experience of the left-behind, the potential connection suggested above between the trace a loved one's suicidal death leaves in their lives and the extent to which that death was anticipated is addressed only to a limited degree. Here, we have in mind the distinction between those who were “taken by surprise” by a loved one's suicide and those who, in some way, sensed its approach [41].

The foregoing analysis of the traces a suicidal death leaves in the lives of the left-behind shows that this experience is always someone's. A question therefore arises: whose experience is it? At this point, the question remains unanswered; it serves as a point of departure

for further reflection, for it cannot be resolved by appealing either to the circumstances of the death or to relations of kinship or familiarity. The death of a loved one touches and stirs all that constitutes our being and existence³.

On the life that remains

These reflections lead us to recognise that, like life, death too is always someone's, always situated among something and someone. Research aimed at supporting practitioners working with the left-behind must therefore strive to listen attentively to what speaks and to what cannot speak; to the silence that sometimes clothes itself in words, yet remains concealed within them.

For how can one give linguistic expression to an experience that resists articulation? What cannot be spoken or written may only be pointed towards, yet such pointing presupposes the presence of another who notices what is being indicated. Without that presence, the gesture loses meaning, and silence becomes the only possible path. Our reflections thus lead us to ask how we might be with the left-behind so that they do not remain alone in their search for a time that cannot be lost – alone in facing questions that admit no answer (“Why?” “Could it have been prevented?”), and in searching for a time they fear cannot be regained (“Can I live after death?”). We seek a way for them to share this experience, not necessarily by articulating it, but by pointing to it. And in that pointing, to sense that they are not alone before the time that cannot be lost, the time that leaves its traces – traces that the left-behind themselves embody, touched by the life that came upon them through the death of the one they loved. To sense that beside them stands someone who looks towards the place to which they point.

As practitioners and researchers, we must above all cultivate the art of attentive listening, seeing, and speaking, so that through our projects, interventions, procedures, and concepts we do not startle, silence, or take the voice from that which lives, even though it has died; so that we do not diminish the life that remains. Every study ought to begin in a place marked by such care.

A study of this form of loss, whose aim is not only description but also care, must be accompanied by a search for a method (Gr. *metha hodos*), a path that allows us to approach and inquire into that which exists among what is, and does not cease to be, even in dying. Adopting such a perspective enables us to draw nearer to the person living through life and death (their own death as well). The researcher who meets the experience with care takes up the position of one addressed by reality, and to whom reality poses its questions. Such a study involves seeking a path that allows for recognising phenomena and coming closer to the experience of the other.

In our work, we began by searching for a name with which to address those living through the suicidal death of someone close. An attentive search for a language of expres-

³) Existence understood as the movement *ex-sistere*, meaning the constant elusion of fixed concepts, grasping, or being confined within a particular perspective. It is a continual crossing of boundaries, going beyond everything that seems to exist at rest, and orienting oneself towards the world with which one forms a unity (*Da-sein*).

sion opens the way towards an analysis that speaks to the left-behind, rather than merely about their experience. This leads us to reflect on the language used in the scholarly literature devoted to the left-behind. Does it bear witness to the fact that it sees the trace of their experience? Does it safeguard that trace? Does the ideal of “objective” distance risk leading us, by looking from afar, to lose sight?

In reviewing the most common ways of describing such loss, we observed that the literature often seeks regularities within the experiences of the left-behind. We begin our reflections by recognising that such regularities serve only as a point of departure for understanding that which is unrepeatable, singular, and therefore solitary and indivisible. For this reason, in the second part of the article we continue our inquiry by focusing on what escapes general patterns – the idiomaticity of the traces a loved one’s suicidal death leaves in the lives of those who have experienced it. The term idiomaticity is crucial here, for it signals a form of untranslatability and singularity that proves difficult to grasp, even within the interpretive attempts mentioned above.

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