CHAPTER 7
CONCLUSION

In doing research we question the world’s very secrets and intimacies which are constitutive of the world, and which bring the world as world into being for us and in us (Van Manen, 1997:5)

7.1 WHAT SHOULD RESEARCH ACHIEVE?

Munhall (1994:192) has made the following remark that I can identify with in the context of my own project:

“Why do a study ... if it does not have relevance? Our studies should bring us close to our humanness, increase our consciousness, enable understanding, give us possible interpretations, offer us possible meaning, and guide us in our lives, personally and professionally. They should do nothing less for those we serve”.

Qualitative researchers in general and phenomenological researchers in particular endeavor to produce rich accounts and a deeper understanding of human experiences. These should be achieved through the responsible application of methodological techniques and practices that deepen our understanding and enable such accounts to be produced and analysed. Ideally, the consequences should include at least one of the following:
- To appreciate and be more sensitive to those involved in these experiences;
- To enrich and perhaps correct some of the understandings derived from logical-mathematical theories and research; and
- To influence social action and public policy so as to be more responsive to the way in which we respond and deal with such situations (Cutcliffe, 2003:145; Polkinghorne, 1989:58).
WHAT IS IT LIKE TO BE AN ADOLESCENT SUICIDE SURVIVOR?

The main focus, objective, content and outcome of this study can be described as an attempt to answer the following central question: “What is it like to be an adolescent suicide survivor?” I hear someone, perhaps you, asking another question: “Why would someone attempt to answer such a ‘sad’ and ‘traumatic’ question?” The answer is to be found in a personal strive to contribute “something that matters” to the “real world out there” where little if any dispute exists that the suicide of a loved one is one of the most difficult deaths that any individual can grapple with. Suicide is often the precipitant for the most intense bereavement experiences and, sadly enough, also for some of the most disturbed mourning patterns (Rando, 1993:523).

The research results of this project clearly indicate that the completed suicide of a significant other frequently leads to some of the following intense experiences: Stigma, guilt, self-blame, anger, confusion, rejection, lack of understanding, search for meaning and reasons, depression, suicide thoughts, emotional stuckness, changed family role, others’ stylised behaviour, sense of responsibility for the death, ineffective social support and pressure to stop grieving. At times these experiences are strong enough to overwhelm the suicide survivor, prolonging the grieving and healing process, and putting the survivor at increased psychological and physical risk. One needs to keep in mind that it is perfectly normal to experience these painful feelings and to express them - suicidal tendencies are a natural response to the suicide of someone close to you; anger is natural; some guilt is natural; loss of self-esteem is natural; and so is depression. Ultimately, survivors experience that healing starts when they acknowledge these feelings and when they realise that many others have also shared these feelings. Gradually they move towards a healthy adjustment to “normal” life and the changed world around them. Sometimes suicide survivors become so stuck, their emotions so distanced, their guilt so great, their anger so intense, that they find it impossible to move forward on their own. In these cases survivors may find professional help very helpful (Barrett & Scott, 1990:2; Dunn & Morrish-Vidners, 1987-88:175-176; Lukas & Seiden, 1987:136-137; Wagner & Calhoun, 1991-92:61-62).
Most, if not all, survivors eventually come to realise that some feelings and memories may never go away, for example some sense of loss and the need to find an “explanation and/or reason”. They come to accept that the suicide events can never be undone or made less tragic. However, what can be done is to continue their lives in a way that is healthier, more creative and more productive. Survivors learn to go on without the deceased, while at the same time the suicide victim is not forgotten altogether. They learn to adjust to a new relationship with themselves (revising the assumptive world and establishing a new personal identity) and the external world (family roles and social skills) (Lukas & Seiden, 1987:144; Rando, 1993:40-41).

An important aspect that one always need to keep in mind when reading through the various survivor experiences is that any reaction to loss can only be interpreted within the context of those factors that circumscribe the particular loss for the particular survivor in the particular context that the loss took place (Rando, 1993:12).

7.3 STRENGTHS OF THE STUDY

The following aspects of my study have made significant contributions to the understanding of adolescent suicide survivor experiences:

- The phenomenological approach to the situation analysis’ data collection and data analysis has ensured that the research results revealed detailed contextual descriptions of suicide survivor experiences. These descriptions should be able to provide any reader of the thesis with an in-depth insight and comprehension of the lived experiences around and after the completed suicide of a significant other (see Annexure G for the peer review report);

- The study’s exclusive focus on late adolescent female suicide survivors provide an insight into the suicide survivor experiences of a, up to now, poorly studied survivor group. Most published studies have focussed on adult survivors, in particular widows;

- The use of collages as narrative-facilitators during the situation analysis’ phenomenological data collection stage represents a novel research application for self-created art objects. It proved to be a very effective approach with regards to the
elicitation and expression of intense memories and emotions, as well as with the facilitation of the healing process (see Chapter 5, section 5.1.2; Fieldnotes, 1 Nov 2002); and

- The development of the web-based psycho-educational programme has produced an easily accessible resource instrument that can be used by adolescent suicide survivors and caregivers of suicide survivors alike. An extensive internet search for similar psycho-educational programmes has failed to yield any such dedicated resource, although a number of web sites that focus on suicide prevention per se do provide some guidelines for suicide survivors. I foresee that the psycho-educational programme will, within the foreseeable future, be implemented and evaluated within the secondary and tertiary education environment in South Africa; especially seen against the need that parents, ministers of religion and teachers have expressed first-hand to me over the past two years.

7.4 LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The following three important limitations are an integral part of my study:

- The results of the phenomenological study only reflect the experiences of female suicide survivors. At the onset of the study I’ve explicitly decided to focus on female survivors due to a much larger frequency of females that were affected by the suicide of a significant other in a previous study within this specific research context (Hoffmann, 2002:50). I can merely speculate on the differences and similarities between the survivor experiences of male and female adolescents. Readers of my research results and users of the psycho-educational programme will have to be cautious when applying the results to contexts that include male adolescent suicide survivors;

- An important limitation with regards to the use of collages as narrative-facilitators during the situation analysis’ phenomenological data collection stage is that it only represents a snapshot of the collagists’ experiences at the time of its creation. As a result, the dynamic nature of changes and longitudinal progression in survivors’ experiences are largely absent; and
- Access to the web-based psycho-educational programme is obviously restricted to individuals that have access to the internet. Given the high level of poverty in South Africa, it is likely that a large number of adolescents will not be able to gain access to the programme at home. Fortunately, nowadays many schools and universities provide computer and “internet café” facilities to learners and registered students. Despite this restriction, I would like to argue that even within the current web-based technology context in South Africa, it is more than likely that a higher number of adolescents can be reached by a web-based programme than by a paper-based version.

7.5 IMPLICATIONS AND FURTHER RESEARCH

Readers of my research results need to be careful not to deduce a “typical” adolescent suicide survivor from the phenomenological descriptions. Such a reductionistic approach will merely result in a “survivor” that is devoid of a context. Each adolescent suicide survivor must be understood within his/her culture and context. The implication is that the research results should not be used as indicative of an universal “survivor”-pattern, but rather as contextual experiences. As a result, variations within any specific experience are “normal” and acceptable. There is no universal “right” or “wrong” way to experience any of the survivor reactions. Rather, the contextualised reactions should be interpreted and understood within that particular context. Thus, I would like to encourage all readers and users of my thesis and web-based programme to use it as “guidelines” and “exemplars” of suicide survivor reactions, as oppose to fixed “rules” regarding those reactions (Laubscher, 2003:135).

I would like to encourage prospective researchers to urgently address the following research themes that are of the utmost importance to broaden our understanding of suicide survivor experiences:

- A study that explores the lived experiences of adolescent male suicide survivors;
- Longitudinal studies regarding the course of suicide survivor bereavement and grief patterns. Such studies will provide a much clearer indication of the changes that occur within individuals over time than are the case with retrospective studies. Studies that
start early in the bereavement process and proceed over an extended period of time will reveal important experiential aspects and definitely expand our current knowledge base (McIntosh, 1987a:273; 1996:148);

- The role and influence of suicide survivors’ social support networks, both short-term and long-term, formal and informal (AFSP/NIMH Workshop, 2002; McIntosh, 1987a:266-267, 272);

- The language that is used to refer to various concepts in suicide and suicide survivor literature too often carry messages about crime (“committing”), murder (“killing oneself”) and a life task (“successful suicide” and “failed suicide attempt”). Narrative research regarding the current use of such words can reveal important attitudes, beliefs and views on suicide. Research regarding appropriate alternatives, such as “completing suicide” instead of “committing suicide”, need to be undertaken (Wertheimer, 1991:12-13); and

- A study on the use of multiple and sequential collages as narrative-facilitators during phenomenological studies. This may reveal valuable descriptions of the dynamic nature of changes and progression in suicide survivor experiences.

My immediate personal plan for post-doctoral research is to focus on the formal implementation and evaluation of the psycho-educational programme that I have developed during this study. It will meet an urgent and existing need to provide adolescent suicide survivors and potential caregivers with psycho-educational resource material (Fieldnotes, 26 Aug 2002, 28 Aug 2003, 13 Nov 2003, 8 May 2004).

7.6 FINAL WORD

Recently I took some time to reflect on this research project. I came to the realisation that it may not radically change the world in which I live. In fact, for some people it may even seem to be “just another study”. However, I also realised that it is not these “some people” that really matters. When I read through the research participants’ narratives it is clear that they carry around a lot of emotional hurt and baggage. Merely partaking in the project has brought to them some healing; in being allowed to tell their stories and
For the adolescent, death is an anathema. Everything emphasises life, change, growth. His body’s development, the excitement of his developing thought processes, the enticing world of adulthood and power that is now so near: all these things make death seem impossible. The adolescent faces bereavement unwillingly, as though he has been assaulted by a confrontation with reality that has no place in his world. (Raphael, 1984:139)