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**Bad Death:
Sociology and the moral regulation of suicide in New Zealand**

A thesis presented in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree
of
Doctor of Philosophy
in
Sociology
at Massey University, Palmerston North.

Ruth McManus

2003

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This is to certify that the research carried out for my Doctoral thesis entitled "*Bad Death: Sociology and the moral regulation of suicide in New Zealand*" in the Sociology Programme, Massey University, Turitea, New Zealand is my own work and that the thesis material has not been used in part or in whole for any other qualification.

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Abstract

This thesis investigates the moral regulation of suicide in New Zealand. In classical sociology, moral regulation is conceived as the placing of external constraints upon social actors, a conception that fails to acknowledge moral agency. In response to classical dualities, Foucauldian studies of governmentality theorise moral boundaries and actors as simultaneous discursive constructions. Regulation is achieved through the enablement of subjectivity. Analysis undertaken on these terms shows that suicide regulation in New Zealand consists of three discrete periods – criminalisation, pathologisation and, in the current era, riskification. Currently, suicide regulation is achieved by constructing subjectivity as rational and instrumental individuals who take responsibility for their own lives. Although in many respects useful, this Foucauldian analysis fails to consider relations between governors and governed. Consequently, an implicit logic of assimilation devolves governmentality into a theory of elite domination that, like classical sociology, fails to recognise moral agency. In response, the thesis investigates discursive relations centred on bereaved by suicide support groups. Analysis shows that the governed refuse to assimilate official discourses. Rejecting responsibility as a stigma, the governed develop an ethic of self-care that constructs compassionate selves. In theoretical terms, then, moral regulation is an outcome of hierarchical discursive conflict. Moral agency is developed through lay resistance to authority.

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Epigraph

Because our judgements about others are often superficial or unfair, it does not follow that one must never judge at all; or, indeed that one can avoid doing so. As well forbid all men to count, because some cannot add correctly.

Berlin *Four Essays on Liberty*

I dedicate this thesis to my big brother Ray who set me on this route and my dad who died just short of its completion.

For Ray and dad