

PREFACE

In recent years there has been increasing recognition that health in all its aspects is linked intricately with "lifestyle," that general rubric for the social, cultural and economic realities that bear on individual behavior and well-being. By contrast, mental health research, and suicide studies in particular, have recognized the importance of these broad social influences for at least a century. Yet only in the past few years has the study of suicide gained high priority among public health officials in the United States, and remains little recognized in less developed countries. However, recent sharp increases in youth suicide in certain parts of the Pacific have drawn public attention to suicide as an important societal problem. This volume, then, presents a unique and timely look at suicide in all its social and cultural aspects, seen in the context of major changes affecting Pacific societies today.

The papers in this volume were first prepared for a conference on "Culture, Youth and Suicide in the Pacific" held at the East-West Center, September 10-14, 1984. The conference was organized to provide a comparative, regional assessment of suicide in selected Pacific Island societies — particularly in light of recent epidemic increases in parts of Micronesia and Western Samoa. These papers, drawn from such diverse perspectives as anthropology and sociology, psychiatry and medicine, and community development, demonstrate the need for complementary multi-disciplinary approaches to problems as complex as suicide.

The Pacific is a culturally diverse region of small, rapidly changing societies, and these papers reflect that diversity. In parts of the Pacific, notably Western Samoa and some Micronesian areas, suicide recently has increased in an unusual, epidemic-like fashion, as documented in the chapters by Bowles and Rubinstein. Suicide has even become the primary cause of mortality among some age groups. Among other Pacific cultures, such as the Melanesian societies discussed by Akin and Poole, high suicide rates appear traditionally endemic.

The objectives of the conference were, first of all, to assemble and assess available information on suicide in the Pacific; secondly, to discuss the social meanings and cultural patterns of Pacific suicide, particularly in the context of social change; and thirdly, to explore prevention strategies for

reducing the burden of suicide. The main orientation of the papers in this volume is towards research rather than prevention, with the notable exception of Oliver's chapter. Yet these three objectives clearly build upon each other. The papers included here present convincing evidence that effective prevention efforts must be grounded in an understanding of the social and cultural context of suicide within particular communities.

The chapters are organized in three sections according to cultural area: Western Samoa (Polynesia), Micronesia and Melanesia. The introductory chapter by White presents a rationale for research on suicide as a cultural phenomenon. Following this, three chapters by Bowles, the Macphersons and Oliver deal with Western Samoa. The next section includes three chapters focusing on different parts of Micronesia. Rubinstein gives an overview of the region as a whole while Hezel and Polloi deal with Truk and Palau, respectively. Because both Micronesia and Western Samoa have undergone epidemic increases of adolescent suicide (which now appear to be abating), the regions present some fruitful points of comparison that were given attention at the conference. The last four chapters are on Melanesian suicide. Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, and Akin describe neighboring societies on the island of Malaita, Solomon Islands; while Pataki-Schweizer presents an overview for Papua New Guinea, and Pool discusses a remote Highlands society in that country. This last set contrasts with the other two in that the authors deal with traditional patterns of suicide in Melanesian societies which have experienced little of the rapid and extensive social changes of Western Samoa and Micronesia. Hezel writes a final chapter summarizing conference discussions on the practical issues of problems in the collection of data on suicide and approaches to prevention.

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