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POLEN

REVIEW on the Doctoral Dissertation by Elke Gerlach, MA

"Continuing Life After Suicide Loss: The Necessity and Challenges of Postvention from the Perspective of Bereaved Families and Professionals"

Relevance and Scientific Contribution

Suicide loss ranks among the most profound relational traumas an individual and a family system can experience. While suicide prevention has received considerable attention in international research, postvention—the structured support provided to bereaved individuals in the aftermath of a suicide—remains fragmented and insufficiently studied, particularly in rural contexts. Elke Gerlach's dissertation addresses precisely this research gap by examining the dynamics of postvention in the administrative district of Lower Bavaria, linking individual psychological coping, family relational dynamics, and institutional support systems. By including both bereaved families and professional helpers—social workers, psychologists, crisis counselors, and pastoral care providers—the author achieves a holistic, systemic perspective on suicide bereavement that goes well beyond a purely individual-psychological lens. The topic carries considerable social and academic relevance for family science, social work, and public health policy, particularly given that rural regions—with their dense social networks, limited anonymity, and heightened visibility of interpersonal relationships—have so far received little systematic attention in this field.

Content, Theoretical and Methodological Approach

The dissertation is clearly and logically constructed, developing its argument across eight chapters that move from conceptual foundations through empirical investigation to discussion and conclusions. Following a precise introduction of the research problem, objectives, and research questions, the author develops a well-grounded literature review on suicide bereavement, the vulnerability of those affected, and existing postvention models and access barriers in rural settings. The theoretical and methodological

sections establish a multi-level analytical framework and a qualitative-empirical research design consistently grounded in reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke—an approach well suited to capturing complex, biographically embedded experiences. Particularly noteworthy is the careful design of the protection concept for research with highly burdened groups: preliminary screening for emotional stability, a clear crisis-intervention chain, the option to discontinue an interview at any time without justification, the possibility of skipping distressing topics, and the provision of regional support contacts following the interviews all attest to a high level of ethical awareness. It is especially commendable that the author explicitly regards professional helpers as a vulnerable group as well, offering them flexible, low-threshold means of participation—such as anonymized written questionnaires. This methodological sensitivity is complemented by a pronounced reflexivity on the part of the researcher, who continuously and critically incorporates her own long-standing professional background in social work into the research process.

The socio-structural and legal context of Lower Bavaria is carefully elaborated, convincingly demonstrating how German federalism, Bavarian administrative structures, and reliance on local community resources shape service delivery on the ground. The empirical core of the dissertation reconstructs, from interviews and written accounts, a richly nuanced picture of complex emotional states—guilt, relief, ambivalence—social isolation, and institutional bottlenecks. Particularly original is the conceptual synthesis developed in Section 6.7, the so-called "postvention interface misalignment model." The author convincingly shows that the shortcomings of postvention in Lower Bavaria cannot be explained by resource scarcity alone, but rather result from the interplay of individual needs, institutional arrangements, and sociocultural conditions. This three-tiered, context-sensitive analytical model rightly makes no claim to universal validity, yet it offers an original theoretical framework for understanding why postvention remains fragmented even where support services formally exist. This constitutes the most original and academically ambitious contribution of the dissertation.

In the discussion, the author convincingly links her empirical findings to established theoretical frameworks—the Dual Process Model of grief by Stroebe and Schut, as well as a trauma-informed approach oriented around the principles of safety, predictability, transparency, collaboration, and choice (SAM-HSA, 2025). She persuasively interprets the ambivalence toward support experienced by participants—perceived as both relieving and intrusive—against this backdrop, drawing practically relevant conclusions from it. The findings further point to the central role of pastoral care as an important, denominationally independent resource, as well as to the significance of peer-support offerings, which are described as a valuable, though not universally suitable, complement to professional help. The concluding chapter

translate these insights into concrete, practice-oriented recommendations for policy, low-threshold counseling structures, quality assurance, and ongoing professional training—a contribution with direct relevance for care practice that extends well beyond the academic discourse.

The bibliography is extensive, current, and internationally oriented. The author combines classical grief and trauma literature with very recent scholarship extending into 2025 (including Jackson et al., 2025; Leaune et al., 2025; Charles-Rodriguez et al., 2025) and consistently draws on legal and regional reference documents, such as the German Basic Law (Grundgesetz), for contextualization. The citation style meets international scientific standards.

Critical Remarks and Questions for the Defense

While acknowledging the high overall quality of the work, several points offer fruitful ground for discussion during the defense. First, the empirical corpus combines semi-structured interviews with written questionnaires and, in the case of interview H05, AI-generated transcription notes (Minutes AI). While this adaptive data collection strategy undoubtedly increased accessibility for highly burdened participants, it raises questions regarding the comparability of data depth and—given the sensitivity of the topic of suicide—regarding how informed consent addressed the AI-assisted processing of this material. The candidate should clarify during the defense how this heterogeneity was methodologically accounted for and what data protection measures were taken with respect to AI transcription. Second, the question of transferability arises: Lower Bavaria exhibits very specific historical, cultural, and administrative characteristics; a discussion of the extent to which the models and low-threshold care proposals developed here can be transferred to other rural or structurally disadvantaged regions of Central Europe would further enrich the work. Third, the dissertation rightly identifies the absence of systematic quality evaluation in the regional counseling landscape; it would be of interest to learn which concrete, realistically implementable quality indicators the author would propose for resource-scarce rural contexts without placing additional burden on already-stretched practitioners.

Overall Assessment and Grade Recommendation

Overall, Elke Gerlach presents an original, methodologically rigorous, and deeply empathetic dissertation that demonstrates advanced knowledge of family science theory and qualitative research methodology, as well as the ability to conduct independent, high-level research under complex ethical requirements. The dissertation fulfills all formal and substantive requirements for a doctoral degree in accordance with Art. 187 of the Polish Law on Higher Education and Science.

I recommend admitting Ms. Elke Gerlach to the public defense of her doctoral dissertation.

Given the ethical sensitivity, structural depth, and practical relevance of the findings for the further development of postvention structures, I further recommend that the dissertation be considered for distinction (wyróżnienie), subject to a successful oral defense.

Grade recommendation: Very Good (1.0 / Bardzo dobry)



Frankfurt, 28.08.2026

Reviewer: Prof. Dr. med. Ute Lewitzka

Date

Sign

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