Should Suicide Be Reported in the Media?

A Critique of Research

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Particularly in cases where there is publicity about a death, a persons "reach from the grave" can have unexpected and wide impact beyond immediate family and friends. A body of literature has been accumulating over many years, concluding that publicity about suicide leads to imitation. This has led health authorities in several countries to issue guidelines for media organizations that warn of this danger and to recommend curtailment of such reports (e.g., Australia, 2004; Sonneck et al., 1994; Michel et al., 2000).

Most studies that have been undertaken to examine the relationship are relatively unsophisticated, either in media analysis; explaining the details of how such an effect might operate, investigating the forms of media reports most likely to provoke imitation; or in examining whether certain groups are more susceptible than others to this type of influence.

A number of studies have concluded that imitation is more likely to occur following publicity about the suicide of a celebrity (Wassermann, 1984; Stack, 1987, 1990). These results have been explained using social learning theory, as proposed by Albert Bandura and others, according to which the more sympathetic publicity an issue receives, the more likely it is to encourage imitation. Furthermore, imitation is more likely when celebrities are involved because people are more likely to identify with them (Blood & Pirkis, 2001).

If there is a connection between publicity about celebrity suicides and imitation, however, the effect is not consistent. In 1994 Kurt Cobain, lead singer of the rock music group Nirvana, died by suicide, an event that received extensive media attention throughout the English-speaking world. The effect of media reports of Cobain's death on the suicide rate was investigated by Martin and Koo (1997). They described Cobain's music in this way:

[It] speaks of his feelings of apathy, hopelessness [sic] and anger toward a society from which he was an outcast. He was hailed as an unwilling spokesman for a "generation that was equally tired of being lied to by their parents, by government, and by the music on the radio" (Gaines, 1994, p. 128). He was "the outcast kid's proof that in the end truth would be revealed and justice would prevail... ." (Martin & Koo, 1997, p. 188)

Martin and Koo noted that Cobain's death received extensive media coverage, especially in Seattle where he lived, but also throughout Australia, where it was first reported on April 8, 1994, "subsequently reaching every television channel in both news and music programs, and every

newspaper, with extensive detail given" (p.188). They also reported that the day after the announcement of Cobain's death, the Seattle Crisis Clinic received more than three hundred calls, nearly 100 more than usual (Toltz & O'Donnell, 1994) .... [A]t least two well-publicized sets of suicide in young Australians are reputed to have been linked, with Cobain's name mentioned in suicide notes (pp. 188-189).

In accordance with the literature on the effect of celebrity suicide, Martin and Koo expected that the publicity of Cobain's death would lead to an increase in suicide, particularly among young people:

On the basis of these reports, the death of Kurt Cobain, the lead singer-guitarist-lyricist of the popular 'grunge' group Nirvana, should have had an impact on the rate of suicide in young people (1997, p. 188).

They compared the suicide rate in Australia in the period following the media coverage of Cobain's suicide with that in the same period in the previous five years, controlling for uneven variability in weekends, Mondays, and holidays. Contrary to their expectation, Martin and Koo found no evidence of an increase in deaths by gunshot, the method Cobain used. Further, they found that while the suicide rate for young people (15-24 years) had been increasing slightly in the April-May period under investigation each year from 1989 to 1993, it dropped (from 39 to 30 cases) in the same period in 1994, which led them to the conclusion that "celebrity suicide had little impact on suicide in young persons in Australia'' (1997, p. 187).

Given the results of their study, it is interesting that Martin and Koo's opening sentence summarizing previous research in the field is so uncritical:

The research evidence that newspaper stories about suicide may lead to imitation is convincing ... despite equivocal finding [sic] .... Hassan (1995) has reinforced both the concerns about imitation or 'copycat* suicide and contagion and the conventional wisdom that a very cautious approach should be taken to media reporting of such events (1997, p. 187).

Martin and Koo referred to an unpublished study by Martin in which he examined the impact of a suicide portrayed in a popular Australian television drama, broadcast in 1993. Although he found "no measurable effect" (1997, p. 189), they explain this as not the problem of the design, but rather that the audience penetration of the program was limited to 17% of the Australian viewing public ... arguably the series may not have appealed to, nor been seen by, young people (1997, p. 189).

Once again, given the results, Martin and Koo's conclusions seem extraordinary and indicate slavish loyalty to the media imitation thesis despite a lack of evidence. Martin and Koo restated the thesis and uncritically cite studies that support it:

The work of Phillips ... stands out as showing that both newspaper reports and television stories may influence particularly young people to suicide. This evidence supports the general public view that if suicide is talked about, particularly if it is glorified, then vulnerable young people will consider it as an alternative when they are struggling with ... problems which at the time appear to be insurmountable (1997, pp. 193-194).

Although they acknowledged dissenting data obtained in previous studies, consistent with their own, they dismissed or ignored these studies:

Apart from researchers who have had technical difficulties in discerning a clear effect of influence, the one dissenting voice comes from Kessler et al. (1988) who showed that during 1981-1984, teen-age suicides decreased after newscasts about suicide. As previously noted, this work has been attacked... (1997, p. 194).

Martin and Koo proceeded to consider a number of reasons why they might not have been able to demonstrate a media imitation effect, and to dismiss each one as implausible. First, they speculated on whether the 1994 data they used might be incomplete owing to a late return of coroners' (medical examiners') reports. Next, they questioned if coroners might have been reluctant to give a verdict of suicide. Surprisingly, Martin and Koo referred to a fundamental design flaw in many studies about the effect of media reporting of imitative suicide, the ecological fallacy, as a way of dismissing their own findings, but again, they found this explanation implausible given the amount of media coverage of Cobain's death. They considered whether the effect might have been undermined by a conspiracy theory published on the Internet that Cobain's death was not suicide, but they also dismissed this explanation because it "was raised too late to have influenced events in the first month" (1997, p. 195).

In the penultimate paragraph of the article, Martin and Koo raised the possibility that their results were "simply part of natural variability from year to year" (1997, p. 196), though they were reluctant to accept this explanation. They also referred to Kessler et al.'s (1989) study, which they had earlier dismissed, citing the suggestion that "increased public sensitivity to teenage suicide may have created a context in which teenagers have become more resistant to the effects of TV" (1997, p. 196), and to Simkin et al. (1995), whom they credit with the idea of "deterrent effects of media reporting in reducing the number of suicides" (1997, p. 196). In the final paragraph, while conceding that "the expected copycat effect did not occur" (1997, p. 196), they also suggested that "given previous work it is possible that any increase in suicide was disguised by a marked increase in the MVA (motor vehicle accident] rate of other deaths" and recommended "further exploration ... [of] what was special about the reporting in this case that may conceivably have reduced the likelihood of influence" (1997, p. 196).

THE INTERNET

In recent years, concern has also been expressed about the role of the Internet in provoking suicide. The on-demand, unregulated, and interactive nature of this communication medium distinguish it from print and television communications. At any time of the day or night, people can call up sites and "talk" with other users, who may express whatever views and post whatever information they like about suicide. While the Internet has been used as a tool for suicide prevention, it is easy to locate stories on the Internet of people who are thinking about suicide, or about people who have suicided.

Baume, Cantor and Rolfe (1997) were the first to examine suicide- related sites on the Internet and to raise the alarm about the danger of what was then a relatively new communication medium. The question arises as to whether Baume and colleagues raised a false alarm, or whether their concerns were legitimate.

Baume et al. briefly reviewed the literature on the media-suicide imitation thesis and rather injudiciously summarized:

Many studies have supported a significant relationship between the reporting of suicide and subsequent suicides. ... Both newspaper and television reports have been shown to influence disproportionately young people to engage in suicidal behavior... (1997, p. 73).

In a second and almost identical article on the subject published in 1998, Baume, Rolfe and Clinton's summary of the literature would likely leave little doubt in the mind of readers:

The social modelling hypothesis is plausible as studies have found a significant relationship between the reporting of a completed suicide and subsequent suicides .... (S)tudies have demonstrated that press and television reports significantly influence young people to complete suicide ... . This evidence suggests that explicit discussion of completed suicide in the media encourages young people to consider it a viable option. Therefore, young people struggling with seemingly insurmountable problems may be at their most vulnerable when confronted by news of the death by suicide of a celebrity or close friend... (1998, pp. 134-135).

Baume et al. identify the Internet as "a medium of communication which allows access to seemingly limitless amounts of information by anyone, at anytime..." (1997, p. 74). They continued:

[T]he amount of material relating to suicide available on the internet is enormous. This information ranges from news reports on electronic newspapers, information on suicide methods, self-help information, academic research and interactive discussion, as well as sites dedicated to the memorial of "pop" culture identities who have completed suicide and music groups who embrace a message of suicide. (1997, p. 74).

Baume et al. (1997) were particularly concerned about the Heaven's Gate mass suicide Internet site. They next cited figures showing that Internet use was increasing rapidly, particularly among males and younger people. They used five search engines using the word ''suicide" and came up with between under 12,000 to 124,000 hits, and then grouped the information into three categories, discussed below.

Entertainment and Alternative Culture Sites

Over 300 Internet sites chronicle and pay tribute to the life, death, and music of the punk rock musician [Kurt Cobain] from the band Nirvana. Many of the sites include copies of the suicide note and death certificate. Other sites in this category include joke sites ..., computer game sites .... and music sites... [which] are of particular interest because of the significant associations that appear to exist between a preference for rock or metal music and suicidal thought and self-harm acts, particularly in adolescent girls (Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993; Martin & Koo, 1996 [sic]). (Baume et al., 1997, pp. 74-75)

Crisis, education, and Research Resources

In this category, Baume et al. (1997, 1998) include sites run by the American Association of Suicidology, the Canadian Association for Suicide Prevention, the Suicide Information Centre, the Samaritans, the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention, Suicide Prevention Australia, and Kids Helpline.

Newsgroups and Mailing Lists

This category included sites for suicide survivors and suicide support. In particular, Baume et al. discussed a popular newsgroup that began to discuss why suicides increased during holiday periods, but developed to discuss suicide more broadly. They reported that the etiquette of the site was:

... messages of discouragement, disparagement, or religious disapproval are not welcome. This site is for those who want to discuss options for suicide ... (and includes) a list of (40) suicide methods with comments about the(ir) speed and efficacy ... About half the methods are frivolous (1997, p. 75). They discussed two other sites, including IRC (Internet Relay Chat) channels and concluded: "Whether written or verbal we must acknowledge that these sites are interactive and that essentially they are the open declaration of suicide notes" (p. 75).

Having briefly surveyed Internet content related to suicide, Baume et al. discussed three cases of suicide notes published on the Internet. 'The age of one author was given as 26 years, but no information was provided on the age of the other two authors. One case describes the lead-up to a suicide attempt following which the author "urged others to reconsider thoughts of suicide" (1997, p. 77; 1998, p. 137). Baume et al. explained:

That may be so, but it is also the case that the Internet could be a powerful agent in suicide prevention by providing support to people reaching out for help. The weight of argument in Baume et al.'s work, however, is on the negative side. Second, even if the two cases of suicide Baume et al. presented were real, that some people chose to describe their anguish and prospective death on the Internet does not provide evidence that these postings contributed to their deaths, let alone encouraged anyone else to follow suit. The innuendo and speculation continued:

What is also worth noting in this context is that the individuals who access the internet in general may differ from those who watch more television or videos. These young people seem to be already more vulnerable, with high risk taking behavior, substance abuse, and depression scores than controls (Martin, 1996). As previously mentioned, the bulk of those who access the internet are 18-24 years of age ... and this happened to be a group with a high suicide rate, at least in industrialized nations. (Baume et al., 1997, p. 78)

This statement indicates a very low standard of scholarship. Internet users may or may not differ in a host of ways from consumers of other media. Baume et al. presented no evidence whatsoever to indicate any difference, other than a misleading summary of Martins work on a cohort of teen- aged television viewers. Baume et al.'s reference to "controls" implies that Martin et al.'s research used an experimental design. Baume et al.'s comment implying a connection between youth suicide and Internet use displays no understanding whatsoever of the ecological fallacy.

Baume et al. (1997) concluded by stating, "Cybersuicide is now a reality," and calling for an "appreciation of technologically initiated suicides" as well as the effect of the Internet "on vulnerable populations" (p. 78). In 1998, they suggested that something might need to be done, though they were vague about what action needed to be taken:

There is a need ... to consider carefully the special challenges posed by the Internet and, if necessary, to lobby appropriate agencies and government departments for action. In addition, the various State and national bodies concerned with mental health, media regulation and suicide prevention strategies may need to formulate policies to counter the negative influences of the Internet. (Baume et al., 1998, p. 140)

It is both easy and common for academics to suggest that governments should act, but much less common for such action to occur. Despite this, Martin and Baume were influential in the formulation of media guidelines distributed by the Australian government that recommend a curtailment of suicide reporting for fear of imitation (Penrose-Wall, Baume, & Martin, 1999a, 1999b).

CONCLUSION

Undoubtedly, there are many effects of suicide on the living, particularly for the family, friends, and associates of those who die by suicide. This chapter has examined an aspect of the effect of suicide on the broader community and concludes that based on careful assessment of the presented evidence, skepticism about the link between publicity about suicides and imitation is warranted — contrary to the conclusions of many studies and the common belief that there is a connection between suicide publicity and imitation. As mentioned earlier, owing to the conclusions reached in studies such as those discussed above, the energy and influence of their authors, and popular concern about the issue, health authorities in several countries have issued guidelines recommending curtailment of suicide reports in the media. The extent to which these guidelines alter reporting practices is a separate issue, but at least in some communities, they appear to have an effect. Therefore, this contribution to the understanding how the dead might influence the living concludes that there is an effect on the community. The effect simply is that of self censorship on the part of journalists and editors at the behest of public health authorities. That there is imitative suicide due to media publicity is yet to be established.

NOTES

Pierre Baume was founding director of the Australian Institute for Suicide Research and Prevention at Griffith University in Brisbane. Together with Graham Martin and Jonine Penrose-Wall, Baume is credited as an author of the suicide reporting guidelines distributed under the auspices of the Australian government (Penrose-Wall et al., 1999).

A Google search conducted in September 2006 produced 1-10 million hits for "suicide". It also produced 448 million using the word "drugs", 207 million hits for "murder" plus 28.2 million for "homicide", 104 million hits for "divorce", and 91.1 million hits for "rape". Few people seriously suggest that the Internet is responsible for these behaviors. This branch of suicidology would benefit enormously by considering the literature on the impact of media on audiences, and particularly in relation to other behaviors

regarded as socially undesirable; and by the development of an adequate theoretical explanation for the imitation thesis.

In the second article, Baume et al. are more emphatic about the findings of Martin's research and cite themselves (in what is essentially the same article) as a source to indicate "These sites are important (Baume et al., 1997) because of the significant associations between some kinds of rock music, suicidal thoughts and suicidal behaviour in young people (Martin, Clarke, & Pierce, 1993)" (Baume et al., 1998, p. 136).

This quote became stronger in its second iteration. Together with an implication that the first article provides some supporting evidence, by 1998 it had become: "However, the Internet has considerable potential to be a powerful destructive force that turns ambivalence into declarations of suicide from which it might be impossible to retreat (Baume et al., 1997)" (p. 139).

In the second article, Baume ct al. (1998) cite themselves, in what is essentially the same article, implying that there is evidence of this phenomenon: "The only Australian study published on this topic so far concluded that the Internet may play a major role in influencing the suicide rates of young vulnerable people who look for confirmation of their feelings and problem solving approaches in sites that provide encouragement for the act of suicide (Baume et al., 1997)" (p. 139).

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