Media coverage as a risk factor in suicide

S Stack

A total of 293 findings from 42 studies on the impact of publicized suicide stories in the media on the incidence of suicide in the real world were analyzed by logistic regression analysis. Studies measuring the effect of either an entertainment or political celebrity suicide story were 14.3 times more likely to find a copycat effect than studies that did not. Studies based on a real as opposed to fictional story were 4.03 times more likely to uncover a copycat effect. Research based on televised stories was 82% less likely to report a copycat effect than research based on newspapers. A review of recent events in Austria and Switzerland indicates that suicide prevention organizations can successfully convince the media to change the frequency and content of their suicide coverage in an effort to reduce copycat effects.

Widespread coverage of a suicide in the media has long been thought to be capable of triggering copycat suicides in the mass public. In 1774, Goethe’s The Sorrows of Young Werther, a novel where the hero commits suicide due to a failed love affair, was banned in many European locations. It was perceived as responsible for imitative suicides in such places as Italy, Leipzig, and Copenhagen.

Systematic scientific investigations on copycat suicide began with the work of David Phillips in the 1970s. The largest possible copycat effect found was for the well known movie star Marilyn Monroe. During the month of her suicide in August 1962 there were an additional 303 suicides, an increase of 12%. In general, however, highly publicized stories increase the national suicide rate by only 2.51% in the month of media coverage.1

More than 40 scientific papers have been published on the impact of suicide stories in the media on suicide in the real world. However, there have been some inconsistencies in the findings of this research. Some studies find significant increases in suicide after a widely publicized suicide story, while other research finds no effect. The present study reviews this research evidence with four goals in mind. First, what hard evidence is there for a copycat effect—do suicidal people actually imitate suicides in the media? Second, how can this association be interpreted? What are the major theories that have been used? Third, what scientific generalizations can we now construct from the existing studies through meta analysis? Finally, implications for data driven, media suicide guidelines are discussed for the purposes of suicide prevention.

DIRECT EVIDENCE FOR A MEDIA IMPACT

Most of the evidence to date for a copycat suicide effect is very indirect and not fully satisfactory. That is, associations are drawn between the presence of a suicide story and a rise in the social suicide rate. It typically is not known to what extent the people committing suicide are aware of the suicide story.

Nevertheless, there is some convincing evidence for a direct copycat effect. For example, in the book, Final Exit, a guide to suicide for terminally ill persons, asphyxiation is the recommended means of suicide. In the year that Final Exit was published, the number of suicides by asphyxiation in New York City rose by 313% from eight to 33. Furthermore, a copy of Final Exit was found at the scene of 27% of these suicides.1 A study of Quebec by Tousignant and his colleagues2 of 71 coroners reports determined that at least 14% of the suicides in the month following a widely publicized suicide of a popular Quebec journalist were at least partially linked to the story. Ninety percent of the suicides used the same method (hanging) as the role model in the story.

EXPLANATIONS OF MEDIA IMPACTS ON SUICIDE

Explanations of media impacts on suicide have generally been framed in terms of social learning theory. Basically one learns that there are troubled people who solve their life’s problems (for example, divorce, terminal illness, dishonor) through suicide. Mentally troubled persons in society may simply copy the behavior of troubled people in the suicide stories.

A more complex set of explanations revolves around the learning process of differential identification. To the extent that people identify with a type of story, that type would be expected to have more of an impact. For example, if people tend to copycat the suicides of superior people, they would be expected to copy the ones of famous celebrities more than the suicides of ordinary people.

A third variety of explanation focuses not on story characteristics but on audience mood. The central thesis is that stories which appear when suicidogenic conditions are high in society (for example, high unemployment, high divorce rates, low church attendance rates) will have more of a copycat effect since more people are on the verge of suicide. This is the most understudied explanation.

EMPIRICAL GENERALIZATIONS ABOUT MEDIA IMPACTS ON SUICIDAL BEHAVIOR

_stack__ provides the only quantitative analysis of the findings of research studies to date. Stack’s review is based on 293 findings contained in 42 scientific articles on the subject. There are few generalizations that can be made about the conditions that maximize the relation between the media coverage of suicide and suicidal behavior.

Story characteristics 1: celebrity suicides

Studies that measured the presence of stories regarding well known entertainment and political celebrities were 14.3 times more likely to uncover a copycat effect than studies which did not do so. It is argued that suicide stories about such well known people (for example, Marilyn Monroe, US senators and cabinet members), spark a greater degree of identification than stories about the suicides of other persons. The entertainment celebrity, in particular, has the greatest impact on copycat suicide. According to a reference group approach, if
Media coverage as a risk factor in suicide

Table 1  Percentage of newspaper stories containing dangerous stimuli before and after dissemination of media guidelines for suicide reporting in Switzerland

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dangerous stimuli</th>
<th>1991</th>
<th>1994</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Front page stories</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensational headlines</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pictures</td>
<td>43%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sensational text</td>
<td>48%</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of suicide stories</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>468</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Suicide rate</td>
<td>20.7/100K</td>
<td>19.6/100K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Implied lives saved</td>
<td>77</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Influencing the media's presentation of suicide

A Swiss study explored the impact of a 1992 press conference between the media, suicidologists, and the Swiss Medical Association. Officials from the media were urged to follow guidelines for reporting suicide. A content analysis of stories over an eight month period before and an eight month period after distribution of the guidelines illustrated a substantial increase in the responsible reporting of suicide. For example, the data in Table 1 indicate that the percentage of suicide stories on page one declined from 20% to 4%. Further the proportion of stories with sensational headlines declined from 62% to 25%.

However, at the same time, the media tripled the number of suicide stories covered, evidently ignoring the guideline for less coverage of suicide. Further, there is no rigorous information on the extent to which the change in the presentation of suicide in the media had any effect on the Swiss social suicide rate.

 turning from Switzerland to the United States, a number of American Associations (for example, Centers for Disease Control, American Association of Suicidology) have published guidelines. However, according to the US Surgeon General’s Report, National Strategy for Suicide Prevention, there is no evidence that these guidelines have changed the way the American media report on suicide.

Impact of Austrian media guidelines on suicide

From 1983 to 1986 a sharp increase in the number of subway suicides in Vienna was linked to a dramatic increase in their coverage in the media. In 1987 the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention launched a media campaign to change the amount and the nature of press coverage of subway suicide. After June 1987 the Austrian press either did not report the subway suicides at all or covered them in short reports in the inside pages.

During the years of sensational news coverage there were up to nine subway suicides per six months. After the study ended, a dramatic decrease in the number of suicides was observed. The suicide rate dropped from 19 to 2.5 suicides per 100,000 people.

A hypothetical study design would have been to compare the number of suicides before and after the media campaign to control for changes in other factors that might influence suicide rate.

A comparison of the number of suicides before and after the media campaign would provide evidence of the effectiveness of the campaign in reducing suicide rate.
sensational coverage ceased, there were between one and four subway suicides per six month interval. However, it is not clear how much of the drop in subway suicides was due to (1) the decline in the quantity, including the reduction in page one coverage, or (2) the quality or framing of the stories—to what extent did they follow the guidelines?

Impact of American media guidelines on teenage suicide

Phillips and colleagues studied characteristics of 32 televised suicide stories and their impact on teenage suicide in the US. Twelve aspects of story content were measured, including mention of the method of suicide, picture of the victim in normal life, picture of the victim’s body or coffin, and whether or not the motive was specified. None of these characteristics of the stories were associated with significant increases or decreases in suicide risk (see table 2). From the present review of empirical generalizations, media guidelines might best focus on limiting the amount of coverage given to the story.

However, the findings of Phillips et al should be taken with caution. First, they are corrected for the amount of coverage. Without a control for coverage some of the media guidelines might be related to suicide. Second, some aspects of suicide guidelines (for example, suicide mentioned in headlines, degree of sensationalism) were not coded. Future work should do this. Third, these findings are only for teenagers. Replication is needed for other age groups. Nevertheless, results suggest that media guidelines might best focus on limiting the amount of coverage given to the story.

CONCLUSION

As anticipated from social learning theory, the greater the amount of coverage of suicide in the media, the greater the increase in suicide rate. The meta analysis showed: (1) studies including stories airing on just one TV network were 84% less apt to find a copycat effect; (2) studies based on television stories, which contain less detail than newspaper stories, were 87% less likely to report a copycat effect than studies based on newspapers.

Differential identification theory received strong support: (1) studies measuring the presence of stories concerning entertainers and political celebrities are more than 14 times more likely to find a copycat effect than their counterparts; (B) studies based on real suicides are 4.03 times more likely to uncover copycat effects than studies based on fictional stories. The degree of copycat effects may be seriously underestimated in most research since most research has not: (1) matched the age/gender of the model with the age/gender of the observer; (2) controlled for nationality of model and observer; and (3) controlled for marital status of the model.

Prevention

Recent events in Austria and Switzerland show that suicide prevention organizations can change the quantity and/or quality of news reporting on suicide. Hence the media may contribute to the reduction of suicide. However, it appears that the greatest reduction in copycat suicide may sometimes come from reducing the sheer quantity of news on suicide as opposed to the perceived quality of news reporting.

Author’s affiliation

S Stack, Wayne State University, Detroit, Michigan, USA

REFERENCES


Table 2 Differences between mean reductions in teenage suicides for stories with and without dangerous characteristics (corrected for the amount of publicity accorded each story) (n=32 televised stories)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Story characteristic</th>
<th>t test</th>
<th>Probability</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No motive stated v motive stated</td>
<td>1.41</td>
<td>0.17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Method reported v method not reported</td>
<td>-0.84</td>
<td>0.42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Photo of model v no photo of model</td>
<td>-1.29</td>
<td>0.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No mention family/friends v mention of family/friends</td>
<td>-1.40</td>
<td>0.26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Definite suicide” v apparent suicide</td>
<td>-1.21</td>
<td>0.24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>