

Article

Preventing suicide by influencing mass-media reporting. The Viennese experience 1980–1996

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Abstract. This paper reports a field experiment concerning mass-media and suicide. After the implementation of the subway system in Vienna in 1978, it became increasingly acceptable as means to commit suicide, with the suicide rates showing a sharp increase. This and the fact that the mass-media reported about these events in a very dramatic way, lead to the formation of a study-group of the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention (ÖVSKK), which developed media guidelines and launched a media campaign in mid-1987. Subsequently, the media reports changed markedly and the number of subway-suicides and -attempts dropped more than 80% from the first to the second half of 1987, remaining at a rather low level since. Conclusions regarding the possible reduction of imitative suicidal behaviour by influencing mass-media-reports are drawn. Experiences from the media campaign are presented, as well as considerations about further research.

Key words: imitation, suicide, mass-media, prevention, Werther effect

Introduction

Since the beginning of suicide prevention very different strategies and approaches to prevent suicidal behaviour have been addressed. Apart from direct interventions with the individual (pairs, families or groups), approaches which focus on a broader level have been discussed but for a long time had a reputation of being unscientific or at least very difficult to evaluate. Concepts like primary prevention of suicidal behaviour are widely accepted as desirable, but whether it is really possible to be primarily preventive remained a different question. One area of research which investigates influences on suicidal behaviour on a macro-perspective is the possible influence of media reports on suicidal behaviour. Phillips (1974) used the term “Werther effect”, which in the meantime has become widely used to describe imitative suicidal behaviour. It refers to Goethe’s novel, which was blamed as having lead several young men to commit suicide in the same way as young Werther after the publication of the book.

A lot of subsequent studies dealt with the matter of media reports and suicide, and the most influential studies will be reviewed here. First, the influence of newspaper reports was investigated. Results were inconclusive (for review see Sonneck et al., 1994); nevertheless, several studies found that imitation was the best explanation to understand an increase of suicides, similar to the early study by Phillips (1974).

Later the effects of television reports were also studied, both fictional (Berman, 1988; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Phillips, 1982) and non-fictional stories (Kessler, 1988; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986). One of the most influential studies was that by Schmidtke and Häfner (1988), finding additional suicides after a weekly serial in six episodes, dealing with the fictional suicide story of a young man, which was presented from different points of view in each film.

Phillips added studies regarding suicides hidden as car crashes (Phillips, 1977) or airplane accidents (Phillips, 1978), showing that imitational suicides did occur using these rare means also. Imitative suicidal behaviour has also been described independent from mass media, such as reports about suicide epidemics in psychiatric hospitals (e.g. Zemishlany et al., 1987), or in a school (Callahan, 1996). And, finally, imitation has also been discussed in connection with other behaviour than suicide, such as mass murder (Cantor & Sheehan, 1996).

Nevertheless, most of the above mentioned studies started after the increase of suicidal behaviour or suspected imitational behaviour had occurred and retrospectively tried to find an imitation effect. Our investigation in Vienna seems to be the only field experiment so far in this area (Phillips & Lesyna, 1995). This paper describes investigation efforts regarding media reports and imitative suicidal behaviour in the Viennese subway system and summarizes the experiences as well as the conclusions drawn from this research. At the end of the paper strategies for further research are proposed.

Methods

This study was designed as a prospective field experiment. The starting point was that after starting the subway system in 1978, it became increasingly accepted as a means to commit suicide in the eighties. Furthermore it was recognized that mass media reported about these events in a very dramatic and extensive way (headlines, pictures of the deceased, etc.). A working group of the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention (ÖVSKK) was established to study mass-media reporting. Using the literature on imitative suicide then available, the actual reports in the Viennese newspapers as well as the clinical experience of the participants, hypotheses of a possible relation between

Table 1. Hypotheses used for the media campaign (Sonneck et al., 1994)

The trigger-effect will be the bigger:

- the more details of the special methods are reported
- the more suicide is reported as being inconceivable (“he had everything life can give”)
- the more the motives are reported to be romantic (“to be forever united”)
- the more simplifications are used (“suicide because of bad news”)

The attention will be bigger:

- if the report is printed on the front page
- if the term “suicide” is used in the headline
- if there is a photograph of the person, who committed suicide
- if the attitude of the person is implicitly described as being heroic and desirable (“he had to do that in this situation”)

The effect will be smaller:

- if more alternatives are shown (where is it possible to find help in such a situation?)
 - if there are reports about a crisis that was overcome and did not result in suicide
 - if readers are provided with background information on suicidal behaviour and suicide in general (such as what to do with someone who expresses suicidal thoughts)
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media reports and imitative suicidal behaviour were formulated (Table 1). It was suggested that certain reports, that could be found after the first subway suicides and attempts, could trigger additional suicides, something Phillips and Lesyna (1995) recently called a “natural advertisement” for the idea of suicide. A differentiation was made between on the one hand aspects that could be a trigger through their expressed attitude and on the other hand aspects of a report that would increase the attention, making it more probable that someone recognizes it. We added suggestions about how to reduce the effect, which could be called an advertisement for the idea of life.

The general assumption was twofold: A person in a suicidal crisis is ambivalent and therefore possibly prone to suggestions in both directions. A media report which allows one to identify with the person described and its suicide and to experience it as support for the (already existing and possibly urging) idea of killing oneself, may work as the last trigger for the decision to commit suicide. Another aspect was that a person who is constricted in a severe crisis and cannot think of a way out could find the solution for his unbearable situation formulated in the media report.

After formulating these hypotheses a press campaign was launched in mid-1987, informing journalists about possible negative consequences of their reporting and offering alternative ways of dealing with those issues. The effect of the campaign was that media reports changed markedly and immediately. Reports on suicidal behaviour in general became much more

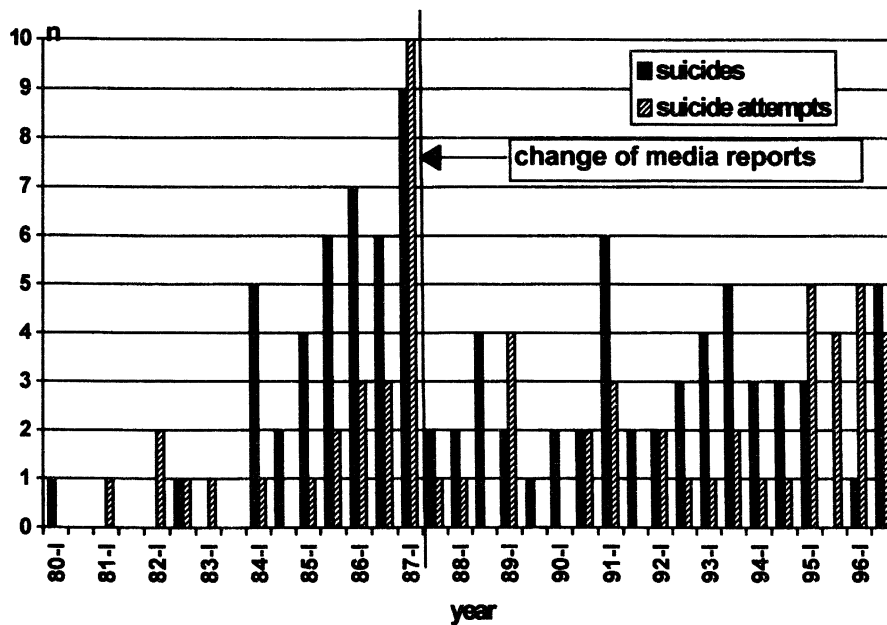


Figure 1. Subway suicides and suicide attempts in Vienna 1980–1996 (half-years).

moderate than before, and for the first time several subway suicides were even left unreported. Continuous observation of media reporting allowed subsequent reaction in providing again and again the media with the guidelines.

Results

Figure 1 shows the number of subway suicides and attempts in Vienna from 1980 to 1996 (for half-years). In the first years following the implementation of the subway system, only a few suicides or attempts occurred; but starting about 1983, an increase of both suicides and attempts was found. After the media campaign in mid-1987 a sharp drop of suicides and attempts can be found. The decrease from the first half of 1987 to the second half is 84.2% for suicides and attempts taken together ($n = 19$ to $n = 3$). In the subsequent years the number of suicides and attempts stayed low, although up to five events per half-year can be found. The level of 1983 to 1987, nevertheless, has not been reached until 1996.

Discussion

The results show that following a media campaign in Vienna, which was launched after an increase of suicides and attempts, the subway suicides and attempts decreased and remained on a rather low level since. The preceding increase was not correlated to an extension of the transport system, nor is the drop correlated to a similar decrease in the overall number of suicides. Thus the most probable explanation is that the changed reports led to the drop of subway suicides and attempts (for more details see Sonneck et al., 1994).

The overall suicide rate also slightly decreased in Vienna and in Austria in the next years, nevertheless without a sharp decline such as was seen with subway suicides. There was no increase in other methods of suicide pointing to a possible shift of method only. The further development of subway suicides and attempts suggests that some suicides at the peak have occurred additionally. The alternative explanation that they occurred earlier only but would have occurred anyway is not supported by our data, as in this case the numbers in the time before and after the drop should level (for a detailed analysis of this alternative explanation, see Phillips, 1974; or Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988).

Subway suicides are a public way to commit suicide, therefore media are more interested in it than in other methods. The subway system has to be stopped for a while after a suicide, witnesses in the station have to watch it and may be interested to read about it subsequently. A further reason for the dramatic reports in the Viennese mass-media in the eighties might have been that subway suicides and attempts had been new events, as the whole system had been started only a few years ago.

A conclusion from our study is that it is possible to change media reports, but it is necessary to state that this is not possible by forcing journalists. Journalists are used to defending their freedom to report about any issue or abstain, and of course it is not possible to forbid reports about suicide totally. Besides, it is not clear whether this really would be the most favourable way to deal with suicides in the mass media, or whether there is a preventive potential of reports as well that can be used. Our approach was to inform journalists and leave it up to them and their responsibility to make their own conclusions. Nevertheless we provided guidelines, which offer possible alternative ways of reporting (see Table 1).

Another experience in the last ten years was that it is necessary to “refresh” the knowledge or willingness of journalists from time to time. The number of subway suicides and attempts in the last years (see Figure 1) might be interpreted as a new slight increase; and, in fact, reports about subway suicides have been published again in some cases. We found that, at least in Austria, often the youngest or inexperienced journalist has to prepare the report about

a suicide; someone who may be unaware about possible imitational effects. This has to do with the fact that local stories are at the bottom of the hierarchy of reporting, which again contributes to the fact that the responsibility for this issues often changes. Our strategy in Austria is to be aware of reports in newspapers and in the case of a report to send the guidelines, which are one page only, to the journalist and the newspaper and to ask for their discussion. Furthermore we are spreading the information and the guidelines among journalists, if members of the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention get in touch with journalists for whatever reason.

Conclusions

1) It is possible to prevent suicide by influencing mass-media reports

Although results of the studies on imitational suicides are inconclusive (e.g., Merskey, 1996), there is strong evidence that media reports about suicide may trigger additional suicides (for an overview see Phillips & Lesyna, 1995). From our study it can be concluded that it is possible to prevent imitative suicides by influencing the reports. Nevertheless many questions are up for discussion, and as our study seems to be the only field experiment in this area so far, we can only encourage to replicate it or create similar designs for further field experiments. Our study is not necessarily a proof for our hypotheses about the mechanisms of imitation, nor necessarily for all of the hypotheses used. So far it has to be concluded that we particular still do not know which reports about suicide do not trigger imitative suicides. The TV-series, which have been studied by Schmidtke and Häfner, were intended as information about suicide, tried to be not sensational and nevertheless triggered additional suicides as shown in the very sophisticated investigation (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988).

A different strategy is to try to use media reports to spread information about help available, about alternatives to suicide and so on, which has been proposed in our media guidelines (see Table 1). Nevertheless it is well known, that only “bad news is good news”, therefore a report about a crisis that has been overcome will in many cases be less interesting for mass-media than a very sensational suicide. A similar proposal is to make use of knowledge from advertising to prevent imitative suicides (Merskey, 1996), something which has been worked on already by Phillips and Lesyna (1995).

2) Methodological difficulties

It is rarely possible to explore imitational behaviour in a single case, in the way that someone would report that because he read an article he now will kill himself. Even if this were the case one would have to discuss which influence

a mass-media report actually has had, and how imitation took place. Thus there are methodological difficulties.

a) If a macro-level is studied (usually with aggregate data), it is only possible to find correlations, which, nevertheless, allow to conclude whether an influence of reports is the most probable explanation of an increase or a decrease (as in our study). There are many proposals for further studies on this level, which are needed, and we refer to the excellent review of Phillips and Lesyna (1995).

b) On an individual level imitation is very difficult to assess, apart from the fact that this information will rarely be available. Nevertheless, all studies at least use hypotheses about the transformation of reports into behaviour, which then is individually motivated. The term “imitation” refers to the behaviour, the underlying psychological processes are more difficult to approach. Identification, particularly, is a very complex phenomenon, which in psychoanalysis is understood as a developmental as well as a pathological process (Abend & Porder, 1986). Taiminen (1992) provided one of the few studies describing intrapsychic mechanisms in an actual case of “suicide contagion”, making use of the model of projective identification. In the case of media reports there is no object available of course, as it is necessary in projective identification in the strict sense. Taiminen (1992), using a intrapsychic formulation of projective identification, described that in this case an actual object was replaced by internal object representations, on which unbearable feelings were projected on.

Modelling effects have been described on work in imitation, as well as an “infectious disease model” (Hazell, 1993), consisting of host susceptibility, modes of transmission, degree of virulence, and dose dependency. Martin (1996) took a somewhat different approach, showing that adolescents who had a higher exposure to television suicide also more often had a history of suicide attempts, had higher depression scores and had more often experienced suicides. There seems to be a selective process by persons on risk, paying more attention to suicide reports (whether fictional or non-fictional) and thus increasing the exposure and facilitating imitational behaviour as well.

It remains another area of research to further elucidate how an identification takes place psychologically, what may facilitate imitational behaviour psychologically, and also what may make alternatives more attracting.

Thus there are very different areas of research involved in further studies of media reports and suicidal behaviour. Although there are many open questions, the Viennese experiences show that it is possible to prevent imitative suicides by influencing media reports.

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