Contagion of Self-directed Violence: Empirical Basis for Concern

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SUICIDE CONTAGION/ MODELING

- Sources of evidence -

• Impact of media

• Suicide clusters

• Impact of exposure to suicidal peer
IMPACT OF MEDIA

Research finds a greater increase in suicide when:

- Frequency of stories increases (dose-response effect)
- Higher proportion of the population is exposed
- Headlines are dramatic
- Prominence of story increases (e.g. front page)

IMPACT OF MEDIA

Converse effects exist also:

↓ suicide following media guidelines or during newspaper strikes

EVIDENCE OF MEDIA GUIDELINES’ EFFECTIVENESS
SUICIDES IN THE VIENNA SUBWAY SYSTEM
- 1980 through 1990 -

I indicates the first six months and II the second six months. The media guidelines of the Austrian Association for Suicide Prevention went into effect in June 1987.
Critical Evaluation of Research on Impact of Media (I)

• Most studies are ecological but,
• Some individual-level studies have been conducted and results are consistent
IMPACT OF MEDIA

Interactive factors exist

• *Audience/observer’s pre-existing vulnerability*

• *Stories/model characteristics*

• *Match ➤ Differential Identification*

Content Analyses of Suicide Stories (I)

Suicide newspaper reports from six countries with different suicide rates were qualitatively examined.

- Attitudes toward suicide in newspaper reports varied by country.
- Media were more accepting of suicide in countries with higher suicide rates (Hungary and Japan).
- The media in countries with lower rates (Germany, Finland, and the U.S.) characterized suicide in the most negative terms - portraying the victim and the act in terms of psychopathology and abnormality, and describing the negative consequences of the suicide.

Content Analyses of Suicide Stories (II)

Content analysis of 497 suicide-related print media reports published in Austria between January 1 and June 30 2005. Ecological study to identify associations between media item content and short-term changes in suicide rates.

- In multivariate analysis, repetitive reporting, reports about suicides by jumping, and reporting on public myths about suicide associated with increases in suicide rates.

- Media items describing adoption of coping strategies other than suicidal behavior in adverse circumstances were associated with a decrease in suicide rates.

Suicide Clusters

SIXTH IN STRING OF FATAL FALLS

Joanne Michelle Leavy, 23, is the latest New York University student to die in a fatal fall in less than a year. Here’s a look at the rash of deaths:

- In late June, a graduate student, whose name has not been released, died in a fall from a midtown building.
- Diana Chien, 19, died when she threw herself off the 26th-story roof of her boyfriend’s off-campus apartment building on March 6, after a quarrel.
- Michelle Gluckman, 19, of Brooklyn plunged from six stories into the rear courtyard of a building near Washington Square Park on Oct. 18, 2003. Two students tried to stop Gluckman, a sophomore, but they could not pull her back inside the building.
- The death of the swim team member from Dayton, Ohio, initially was believed to be a suicide. But the medical examiner ruled it an accident after an autopsy revealed hallucinogenic mushrooms and marijuana in Bohler’s system.
- Jeff Skolnik, 19, a student from Evanston, Ill., climbed over the same balcony and jumped to his death as other students watched in horror on Sept. 12, 2003.

Dave Goldiner
Clusters occur primarily among teenagers and young adults

Content Analyses of Suicide Stories: Initiation of Clusters?

To identify specific features in media suicide reports that may contribute to the *initiation of teenage suicide clusters*, we developed a content analytic strategy of qualitative characteristics abstracted from newspaper stories. 51 youth cluster communities (713 stories) compared to 101 non-cluster communities (1,138 stories).

† **nonfictional newspaper stories following 1st victim in cluster**

† **stories about 1st victim in cluster**

Content Analyses of Suicide Stories: Initiation of Clusters?

More prominent coverage following 1

story placement, size of headlines, presence of picture

More sympathetic coverage: content and picture

No explanation of suicide other than mentioning school or work problems

More personal details provided: victim’s name, school’s name, time/place of death, suicide method
Impact of Exposure to Suicidal Peer

Association between suicide attempts or deaths by suicide of a peer and personal suicidal behavior

The majority of the 16 studies examining exposure to suicidal behavior of adolescent peers have found a significant association with adolescent suicide attempt.

OR’s range from 2.8 - 11.0 (attempted suicide)

See Insel & Gould, 2008 for review.
Magnitude of the Effect of Suicide Contagion

**Media**

- 12% increase in suicides following Marilyn Monroe’s death
- ~75% decrease in subway-suicides following implementation of media guidelines in Vienna

**Suicide Clusters**

- 1 - 5% of teen suicides occur in clusters

**Exposure to Suicidal Peer**

- OR’s range from 2.8 - 11.0 (attempted suicide)