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A Dose-Response Relationship Between Imitational Suicides and Newspaper Distribution

Elmar Etzersdorfer, Martin Voracek, and Gernot Sonneck

Although the Werther effect is well known, up to now a correlation between the differential distribution of particular media reports and subsequent imitational suicides could not be found. This study investigates a celebrity suicide by gun in Austria, which led to extensive reports in the largest Austrian newspaper, whose distribution shows substantial regional differences. The numbers of suicides by firearm in the 3 weeks after the reporting showed an increase over the 3 weeks prior. Regional analysis revealed a strong correlation of suicides by firearm and distribution of the newspaper (log odds ratios; $r(9) = .62$; $p = .04$, one-tailed). This dose-response effect explains 40% of the variability of changes. These results underline the influence of media reports on suicidal behavior.

Keywords suicide, media, Werther effect, prevention

David Phillips (1974) coined the term “Werther effect” to describe that media reports about suicides may trigger additional suicides, so-called imitational suicides. It refers to Goethe’s novel *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, published in 1774, which had been accused of provoking a suicide epidemic, although evidence seems not to be convincing (Thorson & Öberg, 2003). The *Werther* novel is the most prominent but not the only and not the first supposed example of imitational effects on suicidal behavior. There are reports in literature and myths, for example, the mass suicide of Milesian virgins, and many others (Schmidtke & Schaller, 2000). William Farr was one of the first, who wrote in a scientific context about the

influence of media, then newspapers mainly, on suicide: “No fact is better established in science, than that suicide is often committed from imitation” (Farr, 1841). The starting point for the modern scientific investigation of imitational effects was Durkheim’s book *Le suicide* in 1897, and the “suicide discussion” in the Viennese Psychoanalytical Society in 1910 (Nunberg & Federn, 1962), subsequently published as a *Flugschrift* (Friedman, 1967; Wiener Psychoanalytischer Verein, 1910), which had been triggered by allegedly increased suicides of pupils in Vienna.

In modern suicidology, Jerome Motto (1967, 1970) was one of the first to investigate the influence of media. He tried to detect an effect in the negative, so to say,

by using data of suicides during newspaper strikes. While finding no significant decrease in his first investigation (Motto, 1967), in his second study he found a decrease mainly in women under 35 years of age and concluded: "For the present we have non-anecdotal and systematic evidence supporting the view that newspapers do exert such an effect [promoting of suicide] in a major metropolitan population" (Motto, 1970). In 1973 Blumenthal and Bergner also demonstrated a decrease of suicides in young women during a newspaper strike in New York over 140 days.

In 1974 David Phillips found additional suicides in the week after newspaper reports on celebrity suicides in a comprehensive study for the first time (Phillips, 1974). For instance, the suicide rate in the United States increased by 12% in the month after the suicide of Marilyn Monroe. Later Phillips enlarged evidence by studies of further areas. He found that motor vehicle fatalities, in particular with only one car involved (Phillips, 1977), and plane accidents (Phillips, 1978) increased after suicide reports. In both cases the interpretation that copycat suicides had occurred remained most probable after excluding different alternative explanations.

After Phillips' epochal papers, questions of imitations attracted more attention and stimulated several investigations. Consequences of television broadcasts were studied, fictional (Berman, 1988; Gould & Shaffer, 1986; Phillips, 1982) as well as nonfictional ones (Kessler, 1988; Phillips & Carstensen, 1986). A methodologically carefully designed study investigated the effect of a six-part television series by a German broadcasting station (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). The (fictional) suicide of a young man was examined from different angles in each part. Authors found a significant increase in suicides, mainly by young men with the same method, thus close to the "model." This study was alarming, insofar as the broadcast had been

produced with the best preventive aim. It made clear how little is known about the appropriate way of reporting on suicidal behavior, in particular how suicidal persons should be handled.

An investigation in Vienna showed that when a media initiative changed the former dramatic and extensive reports of subway suicides, those suicides and suicide attempts decreased considerably (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). Among the difficulties in this area of research is the fact that usually only aggregated data are available, and up to now only few investigations had the chance to study individual patients. A recent study in London found an increase of suicide attempts by paracetamol after a soap opera describing this method in detail. Furthermore, 20% of the suicide attempters said that this serial had influenced their decision to attempt suicide, 17% said that it had influenced the choice of the drug (Hawton et al., 1999).

The above studies indicate that some media reports on suicidal behavior may trigger additional suicides, which would not have occurred otherwise. Stack (2002) showed in a meta-analysis that a suicide story of a political or entertainment celebrity was 14.3 times more likely to find a copycat effect, stories on real suicides were 4.03 times more likely than fictional ones, and newspaper stories also were more likely than televised stories. The reader may also be referred to the reviews by Phillips and Lesyna (1995), Schmidtke and Schaller (2000), and, recently, by Pirkis and Blood (Blood & Pirkis, 2001; Pirkis & Blood 2001a, b). Rather new but increasingly important are the new media, Baume, Cantor, & Rolfe (1997) being among the first addressing these issues and concluding that new ways of research will be necessary to investigate "cybersuicide," a term pointing at possible new ways of imitation.

Among the issues still unanswered is the relationship between dose and response,

that is, whether the distribution of the media (which correlates with the reception, i.e., the number of readers) correlates with a possible Werther effect. Such a relationship has been suggested (Hazell, 1993) or concluded indirectly: Phillips developed a publicity index of suicide reports, using the number of copies, the number of days with reports on the front page, and further variables like headlines or photographs on the first page. He showed that the increase in suicide was bigger, the more general publicity this kind of report received (Phillips, 1974, 1977, 1978). Pirkis and Blood (2001a) also mention this effect, and Schmidtke and Schaller (2000, p. 690) point out that the different size of the effects found in the German study (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988) was correlated to the size of the audience (it had first been broadcast on Monday evenings, later repeated on Sunday afternoons with much fewer viewers). However, so far it has been difficult to specify a dose-response relationship between reported and actual suicides. The present study is therefore attempting to investigate this question (preliminary results have been published as a research letter; Etzersdorfer, Voracek, & Sonneck, 2001).

Austria provides a unique starting point in the Western world for this study, as one tabloid, the *Neue Kronenzeitung* (NKZ), reaches almost 50% of the population, albeit with substantial regional variation. On October 24, 1990, a well-known hotel owner in Vienna shot himself. Newspapers reported the suicide, although mostly in a moderate way. The main exception was the tabloid NKZ, which reported in a sensational manner. These reports were rather unique after a successful mass-media campaign in the 1980s, which had led to a dramatic decrease of subway suicides and subway suicide attempts following a change in reporting (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998). Thus it has to be suggested that these unusual and sensational reports in 1990 may have led to imitative suicides. The dif-

ferent distribution of the tabloid and the extensive reporting in this case provided preconditions for a "natural experiment."

METHOD

The suicide occurred in the night of October 23. The man who took his life, then 44 years old, was the owner of one of the most famous Austrian hotels. Having existed more than 100 years, it is one of the most famous Austrian sights, having been the location of a famous television serial. Further hotels and cafés are run under the same name in other Austrian counties. The hotel owner furthermore had at some earlier time seriously considered applying for a national election, thus receiving attention nationwide. It can be stated that he was a celebrity, well-known throughout the country.

In a pre-study the two largest Austrian newspapers were surveyed with regards to their coverage of the celebrity suicide. Whereas television, radio, and the second largest as well as other newspapers reported the news in a moderate and short fashion, NKZ reacted with extensive reports: on October 25 the suicide was reported in the headline, and a photograph included on the front page. Starting the next day, Friday, October 26, a serial was started, which covered two pages each day until Tuesday, October 30, reporting about the deceased and his life, including photographs. On two days there were also reports on the front page with the aim of directing attention to the extensive reports on the inner pages.

PROCEDURES

To investigate whether there had been a Werther effect after these extensive reports, and whether there was a closeness to the model, Austrian suicide data were stratified for date, sex, age, and method of suicide, for a period of three weeks before and after the suicide (target date in the control

Imitational Suicides

period), October 2 to 24 (“−3 weeks”), and October 26 to November 15 (“+3 weeks”), respectively. Control periods used are the same periods for the years 1981 to 1989. Austrian suicides have been recorded by the Austrian Federal Department for Statistics (Österreichisches Statistisches Zentralamt) for many years.

To investigate a possible regional difference, distribution of NKZ was assessed, which is known as representing an East-West difference, being more read in the Eastern parts of the country. Eastern counties are Vienna, Lower Austria, Burgenland, Upper Austria, and Styria. Western counties are Vorarlberg, Tyrol, Salzburg, and Carinthia. Data used were collected from Verein Media-Analyse (1010 Vienna, Singerstraße 7/6), a well-known agency reporting on media data. Underlying was the hypothesis that an imitation effect will be bigger in those counties with a high distribution than in those with a low distribution. In Vienna 53% of the population read each issue, in Burgenland 51%. In contrast in Vorarlberg only 3%, in the Tyrol 26%, and in Salzburg 29% read each issue. The nine Austrian counties were divided into two groups of high versus low distribution of NKZ. In a second step a Pearson correlation was calculated on changes after the suicide reports (logarithmic odds ratios). We assessed the degree of association between percentage of NKZ readers in each of the nine Austrian regions (states) and log-odds ratios for suicide by shooting (i.e., within three weeks before versus after extensive suicide reports) with Pearson’s correlation coefficient (r).

RESULTS

In the study period (three weeks before and after the index suicide) in 1990 the number of suicides in Austria increased from 107 (“−3 weeks”) to 116 (“+3 weeks”). In the control period (1981 to 1989) the average was 114.8 (“−3 weeks”) and 113.1 (“+3

weeks”), respectively. The overall number of suicides in Austria in 1990 was 1,825, the average between 1981 and 1989 was 2,024.

Suicides by firearm increased in 1990 from 17 cases or 15.9% of total suicides (“−3 weeks”) to 28 cases or 24.1% of total suicides (“+3 weeks”). In the control period suicide by firearm decreased in the average from 17.6 (15.3% of total suicides) to 16.1 (14.2% of total suicides).

In 1990 in counties with low distribution of NKZ suicide by firearm was the method in 15.8% before the index suicide. In the three weeks after the suicide no suicide by firearm occurred. Concerning counties with high distribution the amount increased from 13.2% to 34.1%. In absolute numbers this represents a tripling of suicide by firearm from 5 to 15 cases. This increase is statistically significant (odds ratios, $OR = 3.42$, 95% CI for $OR = 1.11$ – 10.56). In the control period 1981 to 1989 the percentage of shooting decreased in regions with high as well as those with low distribution of NKZ, in high regions from 16.0% to 15.8%, in low regions from 10.8% to 7.9%.

Further regional analysis (nine Austrian counties) revealed a strong association between regional distribution of NKZ after publishing the suicide report and increase of suicide by firearm (expressed as logarithmic odds ratios, Pearson’s $r(9) = .62$; $p = .04$, one-tailed). In other words, nearly 40% of the variance in changes in suicide by firearm in 1990 can be explained by a linear relation to differential NKZ distribution. In the control period no such effect could be found.

DISCUSSION

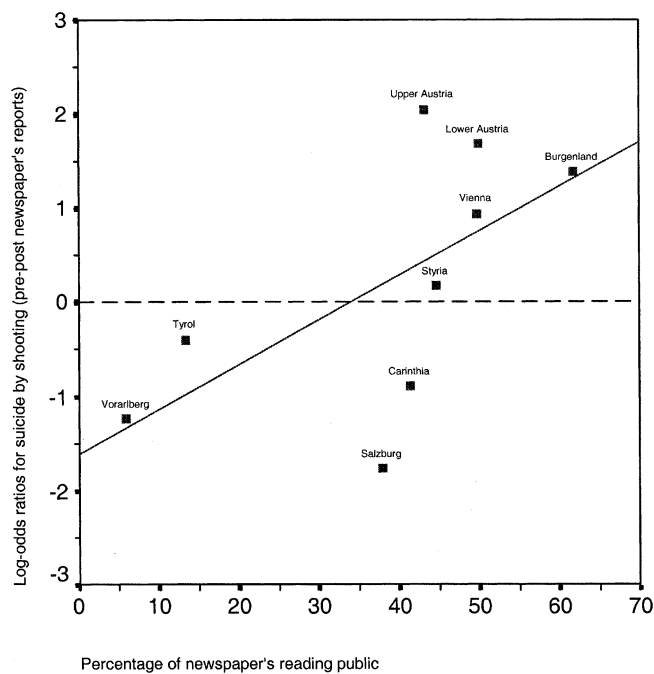
Data reveal a change in observed suicides for 1990 in the three weeks following the celebrity suicide. There were more suicides by firearm and the overall number of suicides increased slightly. A similar development could not be observed in the control

Table 1. Absolute Numbers of Suicides in Austria Three Weeks Before and After the Index Day

	1990	1981–89 (average)		
Suicides total				
–3 weeks	107	114.8		
+3 weeks	116	113.1		
Suicides by firearm				
–3 weeks	17 (15.9%)	17.6 (15.3%)		
+3 weeks	28 (24.1%)	16.1 (14.2%)		
Suicides by firearm, distribution of NKZ	“high”	“low”	“high”	“low”
–3 weeks	5 (13.2%)	3 (15.8%)	7,8 (16.0%)	1,9 (10.8%)
+3 weeks	15 (34.1%)	0 (0.0%)	7,6 (15.8%)	1,7 (7.9%)

period 1981 to 1989. It is therefore mainly a shift in the method, which could be observed. Generally suicides in Austria had declined since 1987, thus a lower number of suicides had been expected in 1990 than in the average 1981–1989.

A major precondition of this study is the fact that the media landscape in Austria is mostly homogenous nationwide, particularly concerning television. In 1990, there were only two TV channels and three radio stations that broadcasted nationwide. At

**FIGURE 1.** Association between percentage of NKZ readers in each Austrian region and log-odds ratios for suicide by shooting (within three weeks before vs. after extensive suicide reports).

that time there existed almost no local TV channels or radio stations. There are regional newspapers, but they do not normally report in a sensational way on suicides. Generally as a result of a media initiative in the 1980s, following an increase of subway suicides in Vienna (Etzersdorfer & Sonneck, 1998), Austrian media report carefully on suicidal behavior. This was also the case in the suicide under study, with the only exception of the biggest Austrian tabloid, NKZ (*Neue Kronenzeitung*).

The importance of the model presented is confirmed in this study: the method of the celebrity suicide was shooting, and subsequently this method increased in Austria from 15.9% in the three weeks before to 24.1% of all suicides in the three weeks after the incident. This percentage is much higher than the average recorded percentage. From 1980 to 1990 on average 19.5% of all male suicides and under 3% of female suicides were firearm suicides. The most common suicide method in Austria traditionally is hanging, 48.8% with men, 36.5% with women (Etzersdorfer, Fischer, & Sonneck, 1992).

Results also reveal, however, that the effect correlates with the distribution of the tabloid, which had reported the suicide in great detail and in a sensational way. In regions with high distribution of NKZ a tripling of suicides by firearm could be found, the percentage increasing from 13.2% to 24.1% of all suicides. An increase could only be found in regions with high distribution. In regions with low distribution no suicide by firearm occurred in the three weeks after the celebrity suicide. The calculated Pearson correlation coefficient confirms this dose-response-effect and reveals that 40% of the variance in suicides by firearm can be explained by the distribution of the newspaper.

There are, nevertheless, several limitations of this study to be discussed. First, the low number of suicides has to be mentioned. This is a limitation in several

comparable studies, as suicides are a statistically rare phenomenon (and furthermore Austria is a small country). This, however, may have an influence in both directions: the slight increase of the overall suicide rate in 1990 is not statistically significant, but may in fact reflect additional suicides. Secondly, data available do not allow definite proof or causal explanations, but can only show correlations. Therefore alternative explanations have to be considered.

One possible alternative explanation is that different cultural attitudes or some different suicidal atmosphere or the like may be the real reason for the increase in some areas only. Austria is a small country with 8 million inhabitants, politically divided into nine counties. There are in fact differences in suicide rates of the counties, but it cannot be argued that there are distinct cultural attitudes (this has never been suggested). Thus this hypothesis can be excluded.

The present study demonstrated that in the control period the percentage of suicide by firearm is higher in regions with high distribution of NKZ. The difference between "high" and "low" regions in the control period can be attributed to known differences in methods between different Austrian regions (Etzersdorfer, 1993). Furthermore, in the control period "high" and "low" regions show similar suicide rates three weeks before and after the index day. The hypothesis that "high" counties generally show an increased suicide risk due to media reports on suicide can be excluded, as generally the media report on suicidal behavior in a careful way and the attention given to this particular celebrity suicide is a rare example of reporting suicide in Austria. The hypothesis that "low" areas show some kind of protection cannot be confirmed either (see above: smallness and homogenous culture throughout Austria, rather homogenous media landscape).

Another hypothesis, that there were some other external factors affecting levels

of suicide is implausible, as it should have influenced suicides in “low” areas as well, if there was an exposure nationwide. Another alternative explanation is that the celebrity worked as a model only in a part of the country. This is implausible, as the hotel and the person both are well-known throughout the country.

Another alternative explanation is that actual differences in the rural-urban mix may confound the results. Vienna, being capital and county, is the only exclusive urban area, all other counties are mixed urban and rural in a comparable way.

Thus the conclusion is that the sensationalized reports are the most probable explanation for the observed increase in suicides. The effect found, however, is not a Werther effect in the narrow sense, which would mean that additional suicides could be found. Nevertheless it is evident that the reports had influence on the suicide method chosen. It is clear that a shift from soft methods to using a firearm contains a higher risk of lethal outcome, thus being an important task for preventive measures (Hawton et al., 1999). Therefore it has to be stated that the reports had a significant and considerable negative effect.

Outlook: A Second Werther Effect

(Prevention By Media)

The historical *Werther* of Goethe led to dramatic consequences. In fear of a wave of imitational suicides the book was banned in Leipzig and Copenhagen, and in Milan a complete edition was bought up and destroyed (Eisenberg, 1986). Gotthold Ephraim Lessing on the other hand proposed to change the end of the book in a letter to Johann Joachim Eschenburg: “Thousand thanks for the pleasure, which you afforded me by communication of Goethe’s novel [...]. If such a warm product should not cause more mischief than good: don’t you think that it should have a

small cold final speech?” (Lessing, 1984; transl. by E.E.). Wilke (1998) recently supplemented a personal detail: Goethe was brought in severe distress by the suicide of a friend, Christiane von Laßberg, only four years after the publication of *Werther*, who allegedly had a copy of the book in her bag when killing herself (Rothman, 1971). Wilke (1998) relates the fact that Goethe actually changed the book as a result of this experience, in the revised version showing more distance to the hero, thus making the model less attractive.

This further effect, that *Werther* has been changed by Goethe, has not been emphasized very much, nevertheless it is a second parallel to the ongoing debate. In the last years there have been important contributions about the possible use of media for prevention. Phillips and Lesyna (1995) wrote that some media reports may be seen as “advertising for the idea to die” and proposed to use knowledge from advertising for preventive strategies. There are initial positive results in this direction. After the suicide of the rock star Kurt Cobain it was very actively tried, using mass media among others, to make a clear distinction between the music and the suicide of Cobain. Subsequently utilization of crisis services increased, described as Cobain effect (Jobes, German, O’Carroll, et al., 1996), but suspected imitational suicides did not occur (Jobes et al., 1996; Martin & Koo, 1996). There is further evidence of a Swiss study that newspaper reporting can be modified in terms of reducing the sensationalism and length of reports (Michel, Frey, Wyss et al., 2000). An Australian survey found that reports vary but in general positive items following media guidelines outnumbered poorer ones (Pirkis, Francis, Blood et al., 2002). One might speak of a “second Werther effect,” describing efforts to influence the media in a way that imitational suicides can be prevented, without total restriction on reporting. This study confirms the effect of

media reports from a new perspective and strongly underlines the necessity to develop further preventive strategies.

AUTHOR NOTE

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