

MEDIA INFLUENCES ON SUICIDAL BEHAVIOUR: AN INTERVIEW STUDY OF YOUNG PEOPLE

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Abstract. In this pilot study the influences of the media on suicidal ideation and behaviour were investigated through interviews with patients who had recently engaged in an episode of self-harm. They were asked about the impact of individual media stories, how they had first learned about suicide and the role of the media in the formation of images related to self-harm. Twelve patients between the ages of 17 and 25 were interviewed using a semi-structured interview. Most of the patients reported being affected by a story presented in the media; four reported that a story had prompted them to self-harm. Some also reported beneficial effects of the media on self-harming behaviour, either in terms of preventing an act or encouraging help seeking. This study has shown that in-depth interviews using qualitative and quantitative methods can provide new information about influences of the media on suicidal behaviour.

Keywords: Media, self-harm, adolescents, images, memory.

Introduction

Suicidal behaviour is a major public health issue, which has prompted a national suicide prevention strategy (Department of Health, 2002). Some media reports and portrayals of suicide have been identified as having a significant influence on suicidal behaviour (e.g. Phillips & Carstensen, 1986; Fekete & Macsai, 1990; Stack, 1991; Hawton, Simkin et al., 1999), especially in young people (Phillips & Carstensen, 1988; Stack, 1991).

The usual approach to studying media influences on suicidal behaviour has been through “before-and-after” investigations, in which the incidence of suicide or attempted suicide following a media stimulus is compared with the incidence beforehand to determine if there is any indication of a change. More sophisticated studies will control for seasonal and secular changes by including in the analysis control data for identical periods in earlier years. Through such approaches convincing evidence of media influences on suicidal behaviour has been produced for reports and portrayals in newspapers (Phillips, 1974), television dramas (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Hawton et al., 1999) and films (Gould, Shaffer, & Kleinman, 1988). Such effects are more likely where media reporting or portrayal is dramatic (Phillips, 1974; Stack, 1987), features details of a specific method of suicide (Ashton & Donnan, 1981; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988; Hawton et al., 1999) and is repeated (Stack, 1987).

The weakness of many studies is that exposure to the media stimuli by those who subsequently engaged in suicidal behaviour has not been investigated, but a causal relationship

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is assumed. This issue was addressed in one study by asking those who presented to general hospitals after an episode of self-poisoning whether they had seen a recent television soap opera in which a paracetamol overdose was portrayed and, if so, the impact it had on them (Hawton et al., 1999). This study confirmed that the TV programme had specifically influenced some people to take overdoses and had had an impact on their choice of method.

Research to date has focused almost exclusively on short-term or triggering effects of media presentations. Most investigators have assumed that effects do not last much beyond two weeks (Phillips, 1974; Bollen & Phillips, 1982), although some have observed increases in suicidal behaviour over longer periods (Holding, 1975; Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). It has been suggested that some people may respond quickly to media presentations of suicide, acting impulsively or putting previous thoughts about suicide into action, while others may make a later, more considered response (Schmidtke & Häfner, 1988). Thus, in addition to potential immediate changes in suicidal behaviour, media portrayals and reports of suicide may also have longer-term influences, for instance by changing attitudes, providing information about methods, or planting the idea that suicide is an appropriate solution to problems.

Evidence that the media may be responsible for the formation of the idea and the concepts surrounding suicide comes from a Canadian study of young school children. The children were asked a number of open-ended questions such as "What does suicide mean?" and "How did you learn about suicide?" Many children reported learning about it from media sources (Mishara, 1997). We are not aware of studies in which young people who have self-harmed have been asked about this first awareness or memories of suicidal behaviour.

Media channels may vary in the potency of their influence. There has been hardly any comparative investigation of this, although Stack (2000) concluded that non-fictional television presentations of suicide are likely to have the most influence on suicidal behaviour.

The influence of music on suicidal ideation and suicidal behaviour has received some research attention (Martin, Clarke, & Pearce, 1993; Maguire & Snipes, 1994; Lester & Whipple, 1996). Links have been found between suicidal behaviour and heavy metal music (Stack, 1998). However, other characteristics of individuals who like this form of music may explain the increased risk. Nevertheless, the potential influence of music on suicidal behaviour merits further examination.

The Internet is a new and diverse source of information on suicidal behaviour. Anecdotal evidence of influence on suicide is accumulating (Baume, Cantor, & Rolfe, 1997; Alao, Yolles, & Armenta, 1999), but there is no detailed examination on the influence it may have, especially amongst those who have actually harmed themselves.

There has also been little investigation into whether those who self-harm experience specific images related to their suicidal ideation or behaviour. These might, for example, relate to the nature of the act or its components. Such images might well be related to media influences. Images have been found to contain negative elements that contribute to the maintenance of disorders in patients with health anxiety, social phobia and agoraphobia (Wells & Hackmann, 1993; Hackmann & Clark, 1999). It has also been shown that therapeutic work with such images can be effective (Hackmann & Clark, 1999). Whether self-harm patients have specific images is not known. Information related to this might open up potential novel approaches in therapy.

The research on the influence of the media to date has predominately used quantitative research methods. While these methods have been somewhat effective in looking at short-term effects, they have not enabled researchers to examine the longer-term effect that media

may have in terms of attitudes, thoughts and feelings. Qualitative research methods, on the other hand, enable exploration of such factors, which can in turn inform our understanding of mechanisms involved in media influences.

The aims of the present pilot study were to use a combination of quantitative and qualitative methods, to investigate the self-reported impact of the media on suicidal behaviour or ideation, how and where suicide or self-harm was first learned about, whether media channels may differ in the extent of their impact, the impact of music and the Internet on suicidal behaviour and ideation, and whether self-harm patients have images related to suicidal behaviour and/or ideation and the role the media may play in their formation.

Method

Study sample

The subjects were deliberate self-harm (self-poisoning or self-injury) patients aged 17–25 years. They were recruited in two separate settings: an adolescent psychiatric inpatient unit and a general hospital following admission for deliberate self-harm.

Patient recruitment

Patients were identified for inclusion in the study by clinical staff in each setting. They were given an information sheet describing the background, aims and what would be involved in the study. Subsequently, they gave informed consent. The study was approved by the Oxfordshire Psychiatric Research Ethics Committee.

The interview schedule

Patients were asked questions according to an interview schedule, which had been developed through a process of peer review. The schedule was designed to capture both qualitative and quantitative information. All interviews took place in a private room and were audiotaped. The interview covered the following topics.

Self-reported impact of the media on suicidal behaviour or ideation. The patients were asked to recall the details of the most recent story or stories they had been aware of in a range of media channels. These were TV fiction, TV non-fiction, films, newspapers, magazines, books, radio, music videos and the Internet. For each media type patients were prompted to identify the details and source of a story. They were also asked “Did it have an impact on you?” and “Did it affect your taking an overdose/harming yourself?”

Where the subject first learned about suicide or self-harm. First awareness of suicide or self-harm was examined by asking patients where they thought they may have first learnt that “sometimes people hurt or kill themselves”. Patients were then prompted using a pre-determined list of possible media and non-media sources (e.g. from friends, parents or guardians).

Music and the Internet. The potential roles of both music and the Internet were explored by first determining the types of music the patient listened to and the Internet sites visited, and

then asking them “Do you think it has influenced you with regard to self-harming or thinking about self-harm?”

Images related to suicidal behaviour and/or ideation. The interviewer gave a short description of what images are and then asked “Thinking back to times when you’ve harmed yourself or thought about harming yourself, did you at any time get an image in your head about it?” If patients replied in the affirmative they were asked to describe the image. This was followed by the question: “Does this image remind you of anything you have seen, read or heard?” The patient was then prompted against a pre-defined list of media types.

Analysis

A system of coding the qualitative responses was developed. This involved categorizing the types of stories mentioned for each question and coding the type of influences mentioned. Descriptive analyses of both the qualitative and quantitative data were conducted using SPSS v10 (SPSS Inc., 2000).

Results

Subjects

Twelve patients (11 female and 1 male) with a history of recent deliberate self-harm (self-poisoning or self-injury) were interviewed. Six were patients in an adolescent inpatient unit and six were patients who had been admitted to a general hospital following an episode of deliberate self-harm. The latter were interviewed within 24 hours of self-harm. Patient ages ranged from 19 to 23 years in the general hospital sample (mean age 21.3), and 16–17 years (mean age 16.8 years) in the inpatient sample. Three patients were first-timers and the remainder were repeaters (range of previous episodes was 1 to 12).

Recall and impact of stories in the media

A total of 33 media stories were recalled by the patients. Eleven mentioned stories about suicidal behaviour in at least one type of media (Table 1). Of those who were able to recall a story about suicide, over half reported that it had affected them in some way. Four patients reported self-harming after viewing a story. Conversely, one patient reported that a story had put them off a method of self-harm and another that a story had been instrumental in their decision to seek help.

TV – fiction

Only television soap operas were reported in this category. The programmes mentioned were “Casualty” and “Holby City”, which are hospital dramas, and “Hollyoakes” and “EastEnders”, which are general dramas. Of all media types this was the most commonly mentioned, with seven patients reporting at least one story they had seen regarding self-harm or suicide. In one case a patient reported how, after viewing an episode of “EastEnders” in which the character “Kat” cut herself, she had been put off the idea of doing the same thing.

Table 1. Recall of stories involving suicidal behaviour in the media

Media type	Number of subjects who recalled at least one story	Total number of stories recalled	Number of subjects reporting that a story had been influential
Television – fiction	7	8	3
Television – non fiction	3	4	2
Films	5	6	4
Newspapers	2	2	0
Magazines	4	6	1
Books	3	6	0
Radio	0	0	0
Internet	0	0	0
Music videos	1	1	1
Total	11*	33	6*

* Total number of subjects.

TV – non-fiction

Patients mentioned documentaries and news items in this category. They were unable to recall the name of the programme seen, but were able to recall the main outline of the story. Two patients said that a news or documentary item had affected them in some way. One patient said she had thought of hanging herself after seeing a story on national news about a boy who had hung himself.

Films

Five patients were able to recall examples of viewing self-harm or suicide in films. Other patients mentioned that they had almost certainly come across it in films, but could not recall any specific examples. Four patients reported that a film affected them in some way. One film mentioned by two inpatients was “Girl Interrupted”. In this film, teenage girls admitted to a psychiatric inpatient ward are shown to self-harm and a suicide is portrayed. One patient reported having seen the film at least 70 times and had read the book on which the film is based multiple times. She reported that watching the film made her feel less alone, but also that it was acceptable to take an overdose. The same patient revealed that she had seen the film “The Virgin Suicides”, which shows how five sisters kill themselves by different methods, at least 30 times. The patient reported that this film had made her think about different methods of self-harm, but she had not acted on any of these thoughts.

One patient reported that a film she had recently seen prompted her to seek help after taking an overdose. In this case the patient recounted how, in the film “Twenty Eight Days”, she had seen the negative impact of an overdose on a family. After the patient had taken an overdose, she thought of her own family and decided to tell her mother what she had done.

Newspapers

Most patients said that they did not read newspapers. Only two patients mentioned coming across a news item regarding self-harm or suicide in the papers. One patient reported that she

read the papers a lot and had certainly come across suicide or self-harm, but could not recall any specific details of stories.

Magazines

Magazines mentioned in relation to stories on suicidal behaviour were *Just 17*, *Bliss*, aimed at teenage girls and *Bella*, a women's magazine. Four patients described articles on suicidal behaviour in "real life" story sections. One patient recalled having read in a magazine that taking aspirin before cutting would prevent blood clotting and said that this prompted her to do the same thing.

Books

While only three patients recalled specific books in which self-harm or suicide was part of the content, others mentioned that they had "probably" come across it in reading, but could not name any examples. Two patients mentioned having read the work of Sylvia Plath. One inpatient said that she had a collection of 10 to 15 biographies and books in which self-harm or suicide was a major theme. However, no patients felt that any book had influenced their self-harm behaviour.

Music videos

One patient recalled having seen a music video by Eminem in which the performer is seen to self-harm by cutting. The patient recounted how watching this had prompted her to harm herself in the same way.

Internet

No patients were able to recall having seen a story regarding self-harm on the Internet. However, when asked about their use of the Internet later in the questionnaire, some patients did report using it to access information about self-harm.

Radio

No patients were able to recall having heard a story about self-harm on the radio.

Early memories about suicide and/or self-harm and the role of the media

Nine patients were able to recall some details about where they thought they had first learned about suicide or self-harm. Four thought they had probably learned about it when they were aged between 6 and 11 years. One patient suggested that her parents may have told her about it. Four patients mentioned the media during recollection. One patient said that she first became aware of suicide when Kurt Cobain died. Another mentioned that she had watched many soaps when she was younger and that it was probably from these. Another suggested that it was probably from soaps and then mentioned "ER", "Casualty" and "EastEnders", but could not recall a specific event or episode. Finally, one patient who said she read the papers a lot when she was younger recalled that she first became aware of suicide when she read about the death of Robert Maxwell. Thus, two patients were able to recall specific stories in the media that

marked their “first awareness”. However, most patients were quite vague in this regard and found it difficult to identify when or how they learned about suicide or self-harm.

Potency of different media channels

Of the 33 stories that were mentioned by the patients, the majority were fictional television programmes (see Table 1). However, in terms of stories most likely to have an impact on the individuals, films had the most influence; three patients reporting one film had affected them and one said that two films had influenced her. Only one patient reported viewing a film about self-harm or suicide and it having no impact on her.

Role of music and the Internet

Music. All patients reported listening to some kind of music, which ranged widely in type. Five reported that music affected their mood. Three (all inpatients) reported self-harming when listening to music. Two of these patients reported listening to the music of Papa Roche (Rap music) when self-harming. Two patients reported that listening to music had a calming effect. One explained that listening to music helped them to relax, and another that singing along to heavy metal music was a way of releasing tension.

Internet. Five patients reported using the Internet to find out about self-harm. Four patients said that viewing self-harm sites had been a part of “homework” set by their therapist. Three patients reported that viewing information on the web had been a positive experience. One patient in the adolescent unit who was a prolific self-cutter reported using the Internet daily to view medical web sites about surgery. This patient also reported that they searched for information about cutting and “collected” this information.

Imagery and the media

Nine patients reported that they had experienced an image in their mind either when they had harmed or thought about harming themselves. After prompting, three related the image they had experienced as being connected to the media. One patient mentioned a scene in a film “The Craft” in which the patient said that self-cutting is portrayed. Another thought that the image of peace she had experienced was related to a series of books by Virginia Andrews in which it is suggested that dying in your sleep is not painful. Lastly, a patient thought that an image of being surrounded by doctors in a hospital while she was being resuscitated was related to viewing an episode of “Casualty” in which this happened.

Discussion

The results of this pilot study suggest that young patients who have harmed themselves are able to identify media portrayals or reporting that have influenced their attitudes or behaviour related to self-harm or suicide. We found that patients are able to recall relevant stories about suicidal behaviour in several types of media. Some patients recognized that they may have first learned about suicide from the media, despite the fact that this had occurred several years previously.

The findings suggest that media channels may differ in their potential influence. Stories that were presented visually (through television programmes or in films) were more likely to be recalled and have more influence than those presented mainly textually (in newspapers, magazines and books). Stories seen in the context of films appeared to have the most influence, although the numbers involved were small. The stronger influence of stories presented through the television is supported by other research (Stack, 2000). The relatively young age of the patients may go some way to explaining their preference for fictional over non-fictional media. Also, visual images may translate more readily into personal images and hence have more potent influence.

Music was found to play a role in the act of self-harming for those who engaged in self-harm repeatedly. Others, however, reported that music was therapeutic. The Internet was mainly used for therapeutic reasons; sites had been viewed on the recommendation of some of the patients' therapists in order to find out about other people's experiences of self-harm. It is unclear whether this is a helpful strategy. Other reports have suggested that "suicide sites" on the Internet may have damaging influences (Baume et al., 1997). There is a major need to investigate the role of such sites, although the research challenges in doing so are considerable.

Images may play an important role for those who are thinking about self-harming. Accessing images when not currently in the same emotional or cognitive state can be difficult (Hackmann & Clark, 1999). Indeed, examining the contents of these images and being able to decipher links and meanings in them can be particularly challenging for patients. The use of specific techniques to enhance the recall of images was not deemed to be appropriate as it might have increased risk of further self-harm. However, the fact that one third of those who reported experiencing images were able to readily associate them with a media source is surprising and suggests that the impact of these media sources may have been particularly strong. This study found that two patients linked images to visual channels, and further research may wish to determine if there is a link between media channel and images. The identification of protective and harmful images in self-harmers and controls may help further understanding of the relationship between the media and suicidal behaviour.

Limitations of this study are that it involved a relatively small number of patients and did not include controls. The inclusion of a control group in further research would allow one to explore differences in recall, influence, type and amount of media consumed by self-harmers. Only one male was interviewed, which precluded any comparison of differences between the genders. Such comparison may be particularly informative given the much higher rates of self-harm amongst females (Hawton et al., 2003) and the high rates of suicide amongst males (Hawton, Houston, & Shepperd, 1999). One might expect, for example, recall of stories related to self-harm to be more frequent in females and those of suicides to be more common in males.

We believe, however, that the methodology and findings of this study can guide future research in this area. It highlights the need to study media influences in a detailed qualitative as well as quantitative fashion, using in-depth interviews. We propose testing the findings of this pilot study in a larger sample of deliberate self-harm patients.

At this stage the main clinical implications are that clinicians assessing self-harming patients should be aware of the potential media influences (both positive and negative) on this behaviour and include inquiry about these during their assessments. Information about media influences might, where appropriate, be incorporated in advice and treatment, which could include a focus on how to counter the risk they may pose. Accumulated evidence on the role of the media also needs to be used to inform initiatives to prevent both self-harm and suicide.

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