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Werther's Effect: A Brief Review

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ABSTRACT

Suicide by a prominent public figure often leads to extensive, sensational media coverage. There are always concerns about whether such reporting has any influence on further suicides. Durkheim, Lester, Phillips, and other researchers had a different saying on imitative suicides. Various anecdotal shreds of evidence, studies, and meta-analyses now established media portrayal of suicide as an independent risk factor of further suicides in society. Phillips termed this phenomenon as the "Werther effect" after the main character in Goethe's novel "The sorrows of young Werther." In this review, we discuss the Werther effect, its postulated mechanism, some statistical considerations, the group at risk, and essential variables of this phenomenon, along with recent media guidelines.

Keywords: Werther effect, publicized suicide, imitative suicide

INTRODUCTION

Every individual is an essential building block of our society. Hence, whenever a life is lost prematurely to suicide, it is a personal tragedy and a devastating loss to a family and society. India has one of the highest reported deaths due to suicide worldwide [1]. NCRB data shows an increase in suicide by 3.6% and 3.5% in 2018 and 2019, respectively, compared to the previous years [2].

It is hard to ignore the association between a widely publicized celebrity suicide and an increase in suicidal thoughts, attempts, and rates thereafter. [3,4,5] A recent suicide by a famous Indian film actor and its media coverage prompts us to review this association.

EVIDENCE

Probably the first documented evidence of this association came after the publication of Goethe's novel *Die Leiden des Jungen Werthers (The Sorrows of Young Werther)* in 1774. Goethe's novel became very popular and was read widely in Europe. Young men in many European countries mimicked Werther's main character by dressing, but many of them imitated Werther's manner of death. Though the novel's influence on suicides was never conclusively demonstrated, the book was banned in many places, including Italy, Leipzig, and Copenhagen [6]. Similar phenomenon also occurred in Italy after the U. Foscolo's work "The Jacopo Ortis Last Letters" (*The Last Letters of Jacopo Ortis*) in 1802 [7].

Durkheim, in 1897, rejected any such association, especially at the national level. He believed that these suicides were only precipitated by prior suggestions, and these people would have committed suicide eventually [8].

Lester (1972) analyzed seven studies and concluded

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that the effect of suggestion on suicides is equally challenging to document and rule out [9].

David Phillips analyzed suicide stories publicized in the newspapers in Britain and the United States between 1947 to 1968 and observed an associated immediate increase in the number of suicides. He termed this increase in suicides as “the Werther effect” after Goethe’s hero and attributed this effect to the influence of suggestion. Highly publicized suicides, front-page coverage, and suicides by prestigious public figures are more likely to be imitated. Contrary to Durkheim’s rejection of the Werther effect on the national level, Phillips believed that the Werther effect is manifested nationally and sometimes on an international level. Phillips concluded that publicized suicide stories not only precipitate some suicides and also create others [6].

Later on, in 1985 and 1989, Phillips and his colleagues also found the rise in fatal car accidents along with suicides after a well-publicized suicide. He considered these accidents a form of suicide and leveled these accidents as “covert imitation” while explicit suicide was termed as “overt imitation” [10].

After the suicide of Indian actor Sushant Singh Rajput on June 14, 2020, there occurred an increase in suicide-seeking keywords related search on the internet from different parts of India. Many instances of copycat suicides were also reported suggesting Werther’s effect [11].

STATISTICS

Since Phillips’s study, many studies have been conducted in different parts of the world to find Werther’s effect’s statistical impact.

In the five months following the death of the international celebrity Robin Williams by suicide on August 11, 2014, deaths by suicide increased by 9.85% in the United States [12].

A recent Indian study found a significant proportion (> 5%) of subsequent suicides after SSR’s suicide was linked to celebrity suicide [13].

Michiko Ueda in Japan analyzed the daily suicide counts

in Japan from 1989 through 2010 using the Poisson regression model on 109 celebrity suicides and. On average, the total number of suicides increased by 4.6% on the day of media reports, and this increase lasted for about ten days [14].

After controlling for humidity, temperature, seasonal variation, calendar year, and unemployment rate, Cheng *et al.* found a marked increase in the number of suicides (relative risk =1.17, 95% CI 1.04–1.31) in 4 weeks after media reporting of suicide by famous male television actor in Taiwan. In another study, Cheng *et al.* interviewed suicide attempters within two months after the suicide by the television actor mentioned above. They found that 89.2% of suicide attempters reported exposure to publicized suicide. About 25% of the exposed suicide attempters reported an influence of the media reports on their subsequent suicide attempts [4,5].

One meta-analysis of 10 studies published in 2012 found an increase in suicide rates (suicides per 100, 000 population) by 0.26 in the month after a publicized celebrity suicide [15].

Another meta-analysis of 31 studies, published in 2020, reported that suicides increased by 8-18% in the next month of media reporting of celebrity suicide. The risk of suicide by the same method increases by 18-44% after reporting of the method of suicide [16].

DURATION OF EFFECT

Most of the studies assumed this imitation effect to be short term and assessed the short-term (mostly 2 to 4 weeks) effect only [6,17]. Schmidtke and Schaller called media reporting of suicide as a natural advertisement of suicide and feared that it might “sow the seeds of suicide in the distant future” [18]. A population-based household survey in Hong Kong revealed that celebrity suicide might lead to long-term effects on people’s suicidal ideation other than well-known short-term effects [3].

FACTORS/ VARIABLES

There are overwhelming shreds of evidence that imitative suicides have a “dose-response” relationship. The amount of publicity given to the news and the prominence of the placement (front page, in large headlines) of the

newspaper's story is closely related to the increase in suicidal behavior [6].

A meta-analysis by Stack *et al.* 2005, showed that compared to studies based on non-celebrity suicides, those based on celebrity suicides were 5.27 times more likely to report an imitation effect. High-profile celebrities were associated with a more considerable (6.3% in the 10-day post-report period) increase in the number of suicides [14].

Among different types of celebrities, only suicide of celebrities from entertainment and politics was found to have a significant imitative effect [17]. Kim *et al.* 2013 found the longer Werther effect band for entertainment celebrities than politicians and attributed it to more significant and positive frames of media coverage [19]. In Japan, suicides of politicians and economic elites evoked a larger imitation than after the deaths of entertainment celebrities [14].

Adverse life events also increase the likelihood of suicide following a celebrity suicide [20].

Both retrospective and prospective studies identified pre-existing mental illness as a risk factor for subsequent suicides following celebrity suicide [3,20]. However, a study from India found persons without mental illness to be at a higher risk of suicide following celebrity suicide [13].

Cheng *et al.* 2007, after controlling the variable, found temperature as the most salient factor and held it responsible for higher suicides during spring to summer. [5,21].

An individual's thinking is also an essential factor. A study says that having less reason for living, a greater level of anxiety symptoms, and more irrational values enhance the suicidogenic effect of celebrity suicide. On the other hand, positive thinking after a celebrity suicide, less impulsivity, and having health problems are predictors of not having severe suicidal ideation [3].

GROUPS AT RISK

Some studies reported the most significant effect of a publicized celebrity suicide on teenagers, while others found those belonging to the same age group as the

celebrity at greater risk [5,22-24]. Similarly, some studies found females to be more commonly affected by the Werther effect. Some find the same gender more vulnerable, and some didn't find any gender-specific impact in some celebrity suicides [5,13,18,24-26].

The age gender-specific effect is a complex interaction rather than a simple linear stimulus-response relationship. Age group and gender of celebrity's admirers is also an important consideration while studying Werther's effect. These people are more likely to identify with celebrity' behavior [5].

MECHANISM

First of all, the media report of celebrity suicide makes its influence much more far-reaching than it would have been otherwise. Further increased media coverage of suicide leads to the normalization of suicide as an acceptable way of coping with problems.²⁷ Romanticized and sensationalized reporting about celebrities make the people see suicide as a glamorous ending, with the victim getting attention and sympathy that they never got in life.

Werther effect can also be explained by the concept of behavioral or social contagion. Some people might have a pre-existing motivation to perform a specific behavior, but they have internal restraints against performing it. Publicized suicides provide them a model to imitate, which results in the reduction of internal restraints [28]. Suicidal thoughts are a common occurrence, and media reports of suicide can negatively influence many vulnerable people [29].

Specific stories promote "differential identification" in specific individuals if they find themselves similar to the deceased celebrity in certain aspects [30]. Higher imitative suicides in similar age and sex group provide evidence for identification [24]. Increase in suicides by the same method as that of a celebrity suggests that information transfer about the method might increase the same method's cognitive availability [16].

PAPAGENO EFFECT

The Papageno effect is named after a lovelorn character in Mozart's 18th-century opera "The Magic Flute,"

wherein the character plans his suicide. At the last minute, his attempt is prevented by three boys who remind him of alternatives to suicide. [31]

Philips predicted that the suicide rate should decrease if more publicity is given to an alternative to suicide [6]. Research also says that not all reporting on suicide is associated with increases in suicides. Media reports might help prevent suicides if they feature positive coping in adverse circumstances, stories of hope, and healing [32,33]

This effect can be seen after the suicide of singer and guitarist Kurt Cobain. Coverage of Cobain's suicide in the area focused largely on suffering to his family after Cobain's death, treatment for mental health problems, and suicide prevention. As a result of this, the local suicide rate declined in the following months. [34]

MEDIA GUIDELINES

Following the implementation of media guidelines, Austria noted a significant decline in suicide rates after celebrity suicide.³⁵This encouraged media guidelines for reporting about suicide by the World Health Organization and other countries. In general, these guidelines attempt to reduce sensationalism and prevent content that may be a trigger or prompt suicides in vulnerable individuals. Inclusion of preventive information (e.g., suicide helpline) is also recommended.³⁶

On September 13, 2019, the Press Council of India released guidelines on suicide reporting, based on WHO media guidelines.³⁷It states that stories about suicide must NOT be placed prominently and unduly repeated. It must NOT sensationalize or normalize suicide or present suicide as a constructive solution to problems. Explicit description of suicide method, details of site/location, and use of photographs, video footage, or social media links are also strictly prohibited.³⁸However, adherence to this guideline is far from ideal in India.¹¹

CONCLUSION

Werther effect is a well-documented phenomenon, and media portrayal of celebrity suicide act as an independent risk factor. However, this effect is probably smaller but significant enough to warrant special attention. Media

reports spread the news to a large number of people rather quickly. The normalization of suicide by such reports, identification with a celebrity by some individuals, and information about suicide methods often results in imitative suicides. The risk of these copycat suicides is highest during the short term, but sometimes suicidal thoughts may last longer. These suicides have a "dose-response" relationship with the amount of publicity given to the news. Certain individuals, such as individuals with adverse life events, pre-existing psychiatric disorders, are at higher risk than others. Implementation of media guidelines in Austria and a resultant decrease in suicide rates encouraged other countries, including India, to adopt these guidelines. However, there is still a deficit in following these guidelines. Efforts should be made to enhance quality research in this area, to sensitize media personals, and strict compliance of media guidelines must be ensured.

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