

View

Why the ‘copycat’ theory on suicide coverage is a ‘conceptual red herring’

Following up articles in the last issue of *Ethical Space* highlighting research on suicide coverage, Simon Cross argues that the ‘copycat’ theory is a ‘conceptual red herring’ obscuring more important ethical issues

Suicide is not always a private affair. For example, on 3 January 2006 a woman, later identified as 52-year-old American lawyer Katherine Ward, was spotted clinging to the fourth-floor ledge of a London hotel. A policeman implored her to let him help, but his efforts were rebuffed. Shocked bystanders watched in horror as the woman turned and leaped to her death. Katherine Ward’s decision to die in a public place carries a double meaning, however.

Amongst the crowd of onlookers that day was an agency photographer. Over the next day, three newspapers – the *Sun*, *The Times* and London’s *Evening Standard* – published photographs of Ward standing on the ledge and in mid-flight. Various interested parties including the Samaritans (a charity that counsels the mentally distressed and suicidal) complained that publication of the photographs breached Clause 5 of the Press Complaints Commission (PCC) code of conduct, namely intrusion into grief and shock. The PCC later dismissed the complaints against the newspapers arguing that publication of the photographs had not breached the code.

Ethical debate that followed centred on rights and wrongs of publishing images of Ward's suicide and whether the photographs amplified the grief of her family. That debate quickly passed. Then in June 2006, the PCC issued new newspaper guidelines designed to prevent the 'international phenomenon' of copycat suicides. Referring to the new guidelines, the *Guardian* (26 June 2007) noted how 'Samaritans chief executive David King, who compiled a detailed submission [to the PCC], collating evidence from around the world on copycat suicides and detailing other concerns about what it saw as over-sensational and graphic reporting [of Ward's suicide], said the move was "a great step forward"' (p. 13).

Growing concerns over coverage

Concern about the reporting of suicide in the media has grown in recent years in a number of English-speaking countries. By way of illustration consider a New Zealand Ministry of Health document, *Suicide and the Media* (1999),¹ which provides news organizations with advice on reporting suicide stories. The booklet notes that 'a large body of research does show a link between media coverage of suicide and a subsequent increase in suicides and suicide attempts' (p. 1). Journalists are reminded of their responsibility to minimise risks that follow from reporting on suicide:

Evidence suggests if suicide is communicated publicly then some vulnerable individuals may consider it as an option ... In most cases, it appears the person may have been influenced by either the suicide of someone else or the depiction of suicide, factual or fictional [sic] (p. 1).

In a supplement to the New Zealand booklet, the press were singled out for special advice because of apparent links between reporting and suicidal behaviour. Thus, editors are advised, for example, to ‘Consider the effect of the location of the story’ since ‘placing a story about suicide on the front page of a paper may increase the risk of copycats’, whilst journalists are told: ‘Don’t use photographs and visuals because ‘photographs of a funeral, the deceased person’s bedroom, a rope in a noose or the site of the suicide may increase the risk of copycat suicides’. Suffice to say that in New Zealand (a country that has the highest suicide rate of selected OECD countries²), reporting on suicide is considered a high-risk occupation.

New Zealanders are not alone in their concern that journalists can influence some people to commit suicide. In Great Britain, for example, the MediaWise Trust (MWT) has expressed similar concerns about news media reporting on suicides. The MWT Internet home page (www.mediawise.org.uk/display_page.php?id=166) lists various reports, training material, and leaflets, which support the idea that insensitive and careless reporting, can and does lead to ‘copycat’ suicides. The MWT makes the point unambiguously clear in the title their most recent report, ‘Sensitive Coverage Saves Lives: Improving media portrayals of suicidal behaviour’ (2007). Professor Louis Appleby, National Director for Mental Health, writes in the report’s foreword:

The national suicide prevention strategy for England made a commitment to improve the reporting of suicide and suicidal behaviour in the media as one of its six goals. We all recognise that the media has a significant influence on our behaviour. Those working in suicide prevention and research activities are also very aware of the evidence that suggests sensitive reporting of suicides can save

lives and deter copycat suicides. We have made a commitment to work with the media to help improve the way suicide and suicidal behaviour are portrayed in the media. This report commissioned from the MediaWise Trust is the first but an important step in taking this commitment forward (p. 2).

The MWT report identifies ‘evidence’ alluded to in Appleby’s foreword, citing a 2001 Oxford University review of ‘90 studies of the impact of media portrayals on suicide from some 20 countries, covering 150 years’. The Oxford review apparently prompted MWT to work with the National Union of Journalists and International Federation of Journalists to develop guidelines and training ‘to help media practitioners appreciate how their approach to coverage might save lives’.

It would appear then that there is a good deal of certainty that sensitive reporting deters ‘copycat’ suicides. Or is there? Let me ask a straightforward question: how do we know that some who commit suicide may have been influenced by either the suicide of someone else or the depiction of suicide, factual or fictional?

Unfortunately, I have no hope of furnishing you with a conclusive answer to this question since (as I see it) we can never know because the only people who can confirm that they have been influenced by a depiction of suicide are *dead*.

An inconvenient truth

It may appear as though I am being pithy with a sensitive issue. This is not my intention since it remains an inconvenient truth that ‘copycat suicides’ are *by definition* dead and unable to shed light into how ‘insensitive’ reporting led to their suicide. This simple but decisive point pulls the rug from under the common sense

view that some suicides *must* be copycats because they have chosen to kill themselves in a manner akin to someone whose suicide has been reported. However, correlation does not equal causality i.e. because events occur in near time does not mean that one *causes* the other. To surmise that a depiction of suicide influenced someone to take their own life obfuscates the myriad psychological and social complexities engulfing individuals, and which contribute to their decision to end their life.

One might counter by pointing out that we can, of course, interview para-suicides to glean from them some understanding about the (media-related) factors that led to their decision to kill themselves. Let us imagine then the sort of question that researchers might ask of para-suicides. It might be something like this: ‘Did you attempt suicide by (insert mechanics of the suicide bid here) *because* you discovered via the media that someone took their own life via this method’? In these stark terms the question appears ludicrous, yet such is the preposition embedded in the ‘copycat’ (also known as ‘suicide contagion’) thesis. My view is that to collapse the multiple dynamics of an individual’s suicide down to a single causative factor (let’s say a newspaper report or TV soap storyline – see below) is fatuous. Let me explain.

If we allow that an insensitive journalist writing in sensational terms about a ‘death plunge’ (a headline phrase used by the *Sun* to anchor its image of Katherine Ward’s suicide) mediates knowledge of how to commit suicide, one can hardly blame journalists for the psychological and social factors leading an individual to make this decision: the desire to die must *already* have been set in train for which journalists cannot be held responsible. And neither am I discounting that media reporting of

suicide gives people knowledge of *how* to die, but even here we must avoid jumping to a conclusion.

For example, the BBC soap opera *EastEnders* was blamed for a purported rise in overdoses attending hospitals following the 1986 Christmas Day broadcast in which pub landlady Angie was shown attempting suicide by an overdose. In fact, hospital admission figures show that the numbers were no higher than normal³. A begged question here, though, is why a soap opera might so easily be held directly responsible for overdoses than, say, difficulties navigating a holiday that many people in emotional difficulty view as far from ‘special’. One possibility is that soaps are a perennial easy target for those unable to grasp the difference between real-world suicide and *representations* of suicide, where the latter is a meaningful attempt to communicate about (in the *EastEnders* case) domestic misery leading to para-suicide.

A suggestion to journalism educators

In flagging up the spurious link between representations of (self-inflicted) violence and real-world (self-inflicted) violence I want to suggest to journalism educators like the MWT that there is no analytical advantage in getting bogged down in the ‘media influence’ debate. This is for two reasons. Firstly, the ‘copycat’ suicide thesis is unproven, and is likely to remain so since research on ‘imitation’ and suicide is notoriously unreliable⁴. Secondly, the ‘copycat’ thesis is a conceptual red herring that obscures more fruitful contributions that organizations like the MWT can make to professional and public debate on ethical issues relating to reporting on suicide.

As contributors to a recent edition of *Ethical Space* (Vol. 4, No. 1 and 2) point out, the double standards involved in the media's use of images of death generate important questions the ethics of using such images where there is dubious 'public interest' concerns. Publishing photographs of Katherine Ward's suicide may be 'in the public interest' or may just 'interest the public' (in a voyeuristic sense). But to claim (as does the MWT and others) that we are in need of 'improved' (whatever that means) reporting of suicide in the media because of 'copycat' suicides, not only misidentifies journalists as responsible for the suicidal actions of those who read their copy or watch their TV bulletins, but also precludes debate on the *meaning* of suicide.

By way of a conclusion, then, I want to suggest that those concerned with the ethics of reporting suicide and suicidal behaviour keep in mind that self-annihilation is an act in which and through which individuals' *exercise autonomy over their own life and death*. It may, of course, be the case that some would not have committed suicide had all other things been equal (e.g. the absence of physical or psychological suffering). While this is moot, what is certain is that to (ir)rationalize suicide as a more or less reflex 'copycat' action of 'vulnerable' people who (like children?) easily succumb to the powerful influence of media not only misunderstands the notion of 'media effects' but more importantly human desire to exercise free-will at even the most despairing of times. In short, the ethical challenge in Katherine Ward's public suicide is how we transform the media's image from that of 'death plunge' into something that can also be seen, paradoxically, as a *life-affirming* event.

Notes

¹ Available at: www.moh.govt.nz/moh.nsf/indexmh/suicideprevention-media, accessed 9 October 2007

² For details on OECD figures on suicide see the booklet cited above

³ Platt, S. (1987) The aftermath of Angie's overdose: Is soap (opera) damaging to your health? *British Medical Journal* pp. 954-57

⁴ Cumberbatch, G. (1998) 'Media effects: the continuing controversy' in Briggs, A. and P. Copley (eds.) *The Media: An Introduction*, Harlow: Longman

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