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Research report

Suicide news reporting accuracy and stereotyping in Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

Background: The mass media are often criticized for oversimplifying the causes of suicide and overlooking some of the risk factors. However, there is a lack of empirical evidence to support this assertion. The study aims to examine the accuracy of news reports in Hong Kong (HK) and in particular whether or not such reports stereotype victims according to gender and suicide method. **Methods:** Data from a case-control psychological autopsy (PA) study of 150 HK suicides were utilized. The reports of the PA cases from five major HK newspapers were collected and reviewed to identify whether or not there was a match in terms of the cases' profile and risk factors.

Results: The age, gender, and method of the suicides were largely reported correctly (>70%) but accounts of risk factors were seldom accurate (<46%). No significant difference was found between tabloid- and non-tabloid-type newspapers' accuracy. Media stereotyping of gender-specific suicide and charcoal-burning suicide was identified.

Limitations: The study was based on a HK sample so the findings are not necessarily applicable elsewhere.

Conclusions: The HK mass media generally demonstrated poor accuracy in reporting suicide risk factors. Their reporting was also problematic in terms of stereotyping gender- and method-specific suicides. Clinical practitioners should be alerted to these findings when working with the media. They can also adopt this novel usage of PA data to extract further information from other PA studies and thereby broaden the investigation of reporting accuracy and stereotyping of suicide to more diverse social contexts.

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1. Introduction

The often-irresponsible reporting of suicide has been widely criticized, given the strong worldwide evidence that it can lead to copycat behaviors in vulnerable people (Cheng et al., 2007, 2011; Etzersdorfer et al., 2004; Fu and Yip, 2007; Pirkis and Blood, 2001; Stack, 2000). Inaccurate, rather than simply irresponsible, reporting of suicide is also noteworthy but less-studied by comparison. Previous studies tend to measure irresponsible reporting in terms of the amount of coverage, placement (in terms of front page and use of pictures), and

whether or not the method and location are described in detail. In contrast, inaccurate reporting denotes presenting the information incorrectly or falsely, including overlooking or simplifying some details and engaging in problematic stereotyping.

There are at least three reasons why we should pay attention to the accuracy of the news reporting of suicide. First of all, given the mass media's enormous penetration of daily life, the untruthful or problematic stereotyping found in the "mass-mediated reality" of suicide can lead to the creation of myths among the general public and make evidence-based prevention harder to promote (Fishman and Weimann, 1997; Hawton and Williams, 2002). In addition, such stereotyping may establish a linkage between certain life stressors and suicidal behaviors, which may influence vulnerable people to copy others' suicide through the social learning process (Fu et al., 2009). Last but not least, reporting accurately is the minimum acceptable standard of journalism, whereas reporting responsibly aspires to a rather

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higher level of performance. From a practical perspective, pushing the media to improve their practice beyond the minimum standard is likely to be easier than encouraging them to achieve even higher levels of performance.

Previous studies of the media and suicide have often compared news reporting of suicides with actual incidence rates at the population level to examine whether or not the media over- or under-reports suicides among particular age groups or professions, or in either gender (Au et al., 2004; Fu et al., 2011; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009). Taking Hong Kong (HK) as an example, previous studies show that newspapers have tended to underreport suicides among the elderly, preferring to focus on students (Au et al., 2004) or those aged 25 or below (Fu et al., 2011). However, no study has yet been conducted to compare the detailed profile of individual suicide cases with the content of how they have been reported in order to examine whether or not the news media has done so accurately and truthfully.

To fill this research gap, we examined the accuracy of, and stereotyping in, HK news reports of suicides by comparing the results of the psychological autopsies (PA) of individual suicides with their media coverage. The study is concerned with two research questions: 1) to what extent do HK newspapers present suicide risk factors accurately? and 2) do they deploy stereotypes around gender and suicide method?

2. Methods

2.1. Study design

We used data from a case–control PA study conducted in HK (Chen et al., 2006) and linked this information to the news coverage of the same cases. The articles' reporting accuracy was examined by comparing the PA and news report for each individual case. The PA study included 150 individuals aged 15–59 who had committed suicide between August 2002 and December 2004. These cases were representative of all suicides in this age group in HK in 2003 in terms of the distribution of age, gender, and method (incorporating the three most common methods). The case–control PA study obtained some of its factual information from the coroner's report and also included a systematic and comprehensive analysis of the psychological and contextual circumstances preceding the suicide. The PA methodology is generally accepted as valid and the data obtained from informants have been demonstrated to be reliable (Cavanagh et al., 2003; Chen et al., 2006). Certainly, some caution is warranted, since the methodology is still developing and has potential drawbacks. Recently some researchers have suggested that future PA studies should extend their interview content to areas such as the role of personality traits, illness, and the availability of lethal agents and also improve their interview procedures to minimize recall bias (Conner et al., 2011, 2012). Nevertheless, at the time of writing the PA study can be considered as the “gold standard” for comparison with media reports. In addition, the PA research method is similar to journalism in the sense that it involves interviewing informants who were familiar with the deceased. Therefore, a comparison between media reporting and the PA study using the same suicide cases can demonstrate the differences between the perspectives and perceptions of journalists and suicide prevention professionals.

The compliance of the HK media with the guidelines produced by the World Health Organization (WHO) for reporting suicides has been unsatisfactory when compared with the western media (Fu and Yip, 2008; Fu et al., 2011). Among the HK media, the Apple Daily, Oriental Daily News, and Sun Daily are tabloid-style papers notorious for reporting suicides frequently and sensationally (Fu and Yip, 2008). A recent study even found that the entry of the Apple Daily into the Taiwanese market in 2003 had increased the reporting intensity of suicide news in traditional local newspapers (Chen et al., 2011). Therefore, we paid special attention to the potential differences between tabloids and other types of newspapers in the study.

When examining the potential effect of media stereotyping, we focus on gender and the method of suicide by charcoal burning. Gender stereotyping is often found in the mass media and gender differences have been found in terms of suicidal behaviors and risk factors (Canetto, 2008; Kung et al., 2003). Charcoal burning is a relatively new method of suicide and has attracted huge media coverage in HK since the first case was reported in 1998. It has accounted for approximately 20% of annual suicides in HK since 2000 (Chan et al., 2009). People who commit suicide by charcoal burning, compared with people using other methods, are more likely to be economically active and physically healthy, and less likely to have a pre-diagnosed mental illness (Chan et al., 2005, 2009).

2.2. Data collection

To identify whether or not each of the 150 suicides had been reported in the newspapers, we searched through the five major local newspapers found in the WiseNews database, namely Apple Daily, Ming Pao, Oriental Daily, The Sun, and Singtao Daily. These cover various readerships and are often selected by researchers doing media studies in HK (Au et al., 2004; Fu et al., 2011). As the PA study had recruited cases based on the coroner's report, the official coroner's record of the cases was also documented in the PA database, although the deceased's name was recoded as a number and his or her HK ID card number was removed. We first tracked each PA case back to its coroner's record and established a detailed profile for it. When linking the cases to news articles, we first searched on the deceased's name and the date of incidence as identified from the coroner's report. However, in some cases only the deceased's surname was reported in the papers. In this case, the date of occurrence, place, and/or suicide method were also used as search keywords. This process was repeated until we were certain that the case could be linked with specific news articles. The search time period was set as 0–5 days after each incidence to avoid missing any coverage, although the mass media tend to report these events in a timely fashion. The first author then double-checked all the articles to make sure the linkage is robust.

Sixty-seven of the 150 PA cases (44%) had been reported across 175 articles published in the five newspapers under study. Some were reported by more than one newspaper. The first author read through all 175 articles and collected basic information about them such as their publication date and placement (that is, whether or not they appeared on the front page).

Furthermore, the reported cases and PA data were then cross-checked against each article to identify whether the deceased's age, suicide method used, and risk factors had been accurately reported. The PA study had identified six

general risk factors, namely being unemployed, having unmanageable debt, never having been married, lacking social support, being retrospectively diagnosed as having a psychiatric illness, and a history of past suicide attempts. Among these six factors, retrospective diagnosis with a psychiatric illness is a determination that can only be made by a qualified and registered psychiatrist, so it is unreasonable to expect a journalist to obtain this information. We therefore excluded this aspect from our review of the articles. Instead, an alternative criterion was included, that of having previously been treated for emotional problems. This is because, according to the guidelines for responsible reporting of suicides, the individual's personal mental-health history should be mentioned (Leung, 2004).

We firstly documented whether or not the individuals in each of the 150 PA cases had been unemployed, had unmanageable debt, had never been married, lacked social support, had a history of past suicide attempts, and/or had been treated for emotional problems. These were all recoded from the PA data. Next, we reviewed the 175 articles selected from the news database to identify whether or not they had referred to any of these risk factors. Finally, we compared the news articles' presentation of the suicides' risk factors with the outcome of the PA. Each of the 175 articles was coded as Matching, Not Matching, or Not Applicable (N/A). If a case was not identified by the PA study as showing a risk factor, every article about the case was coded as N/A. If a case was identified by the PA as showing a suicide risk factor but this had not been correctly reported in a news article about it, that article was coded as Not Matching. If a case was identified by the PA to show a suicide risk factor which had been correctly reported, that article was coded as Matching.

2.3. Data analysis

The accuracy of reporting for a certain subtype of newspaper was defined as the percentage of Matching articles among both Matching and Not Matching. N/A articles were excluded.

We conducted a pilot study by running a chi-squared test on all five newspapers to test their potential correlations in matching rates. The results showed no significant differences across all items. Therefore, we combined the Apple Daily, Oriental Daily News, and Sun Daily, as tabloid-type papers, and Ming Pao and Singtao Daily, as non-tabloids. The chi-squared test was then performed again to test the potential correlations between the two groups.

To examine the potential stereotyping of gender and suicide method, we compared how the risk factors were presented among the 67 PA case studies and the 175 news articles. A chi-squared test was performed to test the potential correlations in presenting a certain suicide risk factor between male and female, as well as between charcoal burning and other types of suicide. All the analysis was carried out using SPSS 16.0 for Windows.

3. Results

3.1. Reporting accuracy

Of the total 175 news articles, 92% were published the day after the suicide occurred and the other 8% on the second day thereafter. The news articles' reporting of basic incident information, such as the deceased's age and the method they had used, largely matched the PA (Table 1). About 30% of articles got the deceased's age wrong but most of them were accurate to within a year, which is understandable due to different calculating standards.

However, when we look at the reporting of suicide risk factors, most of the articles did not match the PA reports (see Table 1). Specifically, suicide risk factors such as being unemployed, having a history of suicide attempts, and lacking social support were misreported by over 70% of the articles. No significant differences were found between tabloid-type and other newspapers in terms of accuracy. Surprisingly, the tabloid-type newspapers actually showed higher accuracy in

Table 1
Comparison between the deceased's profiles identified by the PA study and their presentation in the HK newspapers.

| Elements of deceased's profile | HK newspapers' reporting of a certain element (only "Match" and "Not Match" articles are counted) | | | χ^2 | d.f. | P | |
|---------------------------------|--|-------------------------|--------------|----------|-------|---|-------|
| | Tabloid-type papers | Non-tabloid-type papers | All 5 papers | | | | |
| Age | Total article amount | 99 | 66 | 165 | 0.000 | 1 | 1.000 |
| | % of "Match" | 72.70% | 72.70% | 72.70% | | | |
| Gender | Total article amount | 107 | 68 | 175 | a | | |
| | % of "Match" | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | | | |
| Suicide method | Total article amount | 107 | 68 | 175 | a | | |
| | % of "Match" | 100.00% | 100.00% | 100.00% | | | |
| Single | Total article amount | 44 | 26 | 70 | 0.193 | 1 | 0.660 |
| | % of "Match" | 47.70% | 42.30% | 45.70% | | | |
| Unemployed | Total article amount | 33 | 20 | 53 | 0.647 | 1 | 0.421 |
| | % of "Match" | 24.20% | 15.00% | 20.80% | | | |
| History of suicide attempts | Total article amount | 30 | 24 | 54 | 0.771 | 1 | 0.380 |
| | % of "Match" | 26.70% | 16.70% | 22.20% | | | |
| Unmanageable debt | Total article amount | 33 | 28 | 61 | 0.233 | 1 | 0.629 |
| | % of "Match" | 33.30% | 39.30% | 36.10% | | | |
| Been treated for mental illness | Total article amount | 52 | 31 | 83 | 0.719 | 1 | 0.396 |
| | % of "Match" | 32.70% | 41.90% | 36.10% | | | |
| Lack of social support | Total article amount | 17 | 10 | 27 | 1.271 | 1 | 0.260 |
| | % of "Match" | 11.80% | 0.00% | 7.40% | | | |

^a No statistics are computed because the data is a constant.

Table 2

Comparison of presenting gender-specific suicide and method-specific suicide risk factors between the 67 cases and the 175 news articles.

| Presenting a suicide risk factor | 67 cases | | | | | 175 articles | | | | |
|---|-------------------------|---------------------|----------|------|--------|------------------|--------------|--------------|------|---------|
| | Female (N=31) | | χ^2 | d.f. | P | Female (N=75) | | χ^2 | d.f. | P |
| | n (%) | Male (N=36) | | | | n (%) | Male (N=100) | | | |
| <i>Gender-specific features</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Single | 14 (45) | 13 (36) | 0.567 | 1 | 0.451 | 13 (17) | 20 (20) | 0.199 | 1 | 0.655 |
| Unemployed | 11 (36) | 13 (36) | 0.003 | 1 | 0.957 | 4 (5) | 18 (18) | 6.256 | 1 | 0.012* |
| History of suicide attempts | 14 (45) | 12 (33) | 0.981 | 1 | 0.322 | 5 (7) | 8 (8) | 0.111 | 1 | 0.739 |
| Unmanageable debt | 6 (19) | 13 (36) | 2.302 | 1 | 0.129 | 4 (5) | 18 (18) | 6.256 | 1 | 0.012* |
| Been treated for mental illness | 19 (61) | 13 (36) | 4.233 | 1 | 0.040* | 27 (36) | 11 (11) | 15.757 | 1 | 0.000** |
| Lack of social support | 3 (10) | 3 (8) | 0.037 | 1 | 0.848 | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | ^a | | |
| <i>Presenting a suicide risk factor</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Presenting a suicide risk factor | 67 cases | | | | | 175 articles | | | | |
| | Charcoal burning (N=17) | | χ^2 | d.f. | P | Charcoal burning | | χ^2 | d.f. | P |
| | n (%) | Other method (N=50) | | | | %(N=41) | %(N=134) | | | |
| <i>Method-specific features</i> | | | | | | | | | | |
| Single | 1 (6) | 26 (52) | 11.215 | 1 | 0.001* | 0 (0) | 33 (5) | 12.444 | 1 | 0.000** |
| Unemployed | 5 (29) | 19 (38) | 0.407 | 1 | 0.523 | 6 (15) | 16 (12) | 0.207 | 1 | 0.649 |
| History of suicide attempts | 8 (47) | 18 (36) | 0.653 | 1 | 0.419 | 1 (2) | 12 (9) | 1.938 | 1 | 0.164 |
| Unmanageable debt | 9 (53) | 10 (20) | 6.776 | 1 | 0.009* | 11 (27) | 11 (8) | 9.903 | 1 | 0.002* |
| Been treated for mental illness | 9 (53) | 23 (46) | 0.245 | 1 | 0.621 | 0 (0) | 38 (28) | 14.852 | 1 | 0.000** |
| Lack of social support | 3 (18) | 3 (6) | 2.111 | 1 | 0.146 | 0 (0) | 0 (0) | ^a | | |

* $p < 0.05$.** $p < 0.001$.^a No statistics are computed because the data is a constant.

reporting some risk factors although this difference was not significant.

3.2. Reporting stereotypes

Media stereotyping was examined by comparing the features of the 67 suicide cases and the 175 news articles (Table 2). In terms of gender, there was only one noteworthy feature among the 67 suicide cases; women had been treated for mental illness significantly more frequently. This feature was properly reflected in the 175 news articles. However, the news articles also established a further two gender-related features. Firstly, male suicides were significantly associated with unemployment and unmanageable debt, which had not been identified among the 67 cases. Secondly, more female suicides than male among the 67 reported cases were reported as being single, whereas the reverse trend was found in the 175 news articles. The same gender ratio “twist” was found in the reporting of the victims' history of suicide attempts. These results support the suggestion that there is problematic gender stereotyping in suicide reporting in HK.

In terms of method, charcoal burning, according to the 67 cases, was more likely to be significantly associated with having unmanageable debt but less likely to be linked with being single. Both features were also reflected in the 175 news articles. These articles also established that suicides in charcoal burning were significantly less likely to have been treated for mental illness, a pattern which was not identified among the 67 cases. Furthermore, among the PA cases, charcoal burning was slightly less often associated with unemployment and slightly more often with a history of suicide attempts, whereas the news articles reported the reverse trend.

4. Discussion

Our study has provided empirical evidence to support the statement that there is a gap between the “official reality” and the mass-mediated reality of suicide (Fishman and Weimann, 1997; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2009; Pirkis et al., 2007). It is perhaps surprising that we found no significant difference in accuracy between tabloid-type and non-tabloid-type newspapers. Stereotypes around gender and charcoal burning were both demonstrated in the HK media. The results suggest that the attribution of motives to suicides is socially reconstructed by the media by various means including simplification and stereotyping. Media and social stereotyping are related and can act as a code to help the audience to understand a person or group quickly (Oakes et al., 1994). Unfortunately, while this enhances the efficiency of communication, it comes at the expense of accuracy and depth.

4.1. Reporting accuracy and homogenization

News writing is well known to include five basic components: the when, where, who, what, and why. Most of the HK news articles had been published immediately after the incident had happened and correctly reported the incident date (when), location (where), suicide method (what), and the surname, gender, age, and some other personal profile aspects of the deceased (the who). However, this kind of accuracy may actually be harmful in terms of the media's social responsibility in suicide prevention. Specifically, the accurate reporting of method and location can be disturbing because readers may learn about methods or get ideas from reading the articles (Liu et al., 2007; Yip and Lee, 2007).

As for the why, suicide risk factors were often simplified, if not ignored entirely, by the HK newspapers. Guidelines or recommendations for the media reporting of suicide often highlight that it is desirable to provide accurate facts about the causes in order that the public may benefit from an improved awareness of mental health and suicide prevention (Hawton and Williams, 2002; Pirkis et al., 2006). On the contrary, however, simplifying suicide risk factors may encourage readers to view suicidal behavior as a facile reaction to certain life stressors and build up a mythical connection between suicide and particular problems.

The HK newspapers' high tendency to report suicide risk factors incorrectly might be related to the fact that most of the articles were published within a day of the event, meaning that journalists might not have taken sufficient time to conduct in-depth investigations. Furthermore, the turnover rate among HK journalists is high, due to the long working hours and poor pay, so most frontline news reporters are relatively young and inexperienced. If they have not been trained in how to write about mental health issues, including the guidelines for media reporting of suicide, nor had much of a chance to learn about this on the job, they may not yet have acquired sufficient knowledge of this area.

We expected the tabloid-type newspapers to show less accuracy than the other types, which may be considered more professional. However, it is disappointing to see that all five newspapers showed low accuracy rates in reporting risk factors. This suggests a strong homogenization of the HK newspapers. The daily newspaper market in HK is very competitive and the best sellers are the two tabloids, the *Oriental Daily* and *Apple Daily*. This may encourage other newspapers to strive for timely but sensational news reporting as well.

4.2. Gender and method stereotypes of suicide in the HK media

Female suicides were more likely to be reported as having been treated for mental illness, which actually matched the findings of the PA. The situation may be related to a stereotype in Chinese society that women are more emotional, sensitive, and fragile (Canetto, 2008). Studies indicate women suffer more from mental illness and make more suicide attempts (Zhang and Xu, 2007). However, because they tend to use less lethal methods, they die less often from suicide than men. It seems that the media, and perhaps also society as a whole, have blurred the facts about women's mental health and suicide attempts into a stereotype that they die from suicide more often.

On the other hand, male suicides were stereotyped by the HK newspapers as being associated with unemployment and unmanageable debt, which was not supported by the PA. According to the mainstream Chinese concept, a man, as a husband or a father, is the breadwinner for the family (Birkelund and Mastekaasa, 2010). Being unemployed or having unmanageable debt can be considered as a huge crisis for a man and his family, which may explain why the media try to provide a quick explanation to their readers of suicide among males.

People who committed suicide by charcoal burning were usually stereotyped by the media as unemployed, whereas the PA found that users of this method were in fact often economically active. The stereotyping might be related to HK's socio-economic environment at the time the study data

were collected. The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) crisis and economic recession both hit HK hard in 2003, culminating in the highest-ever unemployment rate recorded (8.7%) in May–July of that year (Hong Kong Information Services Department, 2004). As the mass media want to attract a large audience, they may choose to write about suicide victims who had unmanageable debt but were also unemployed so as to reflect the general socio-economic context and encourage readers to empathize even more.

5. Limitations

The study was based on 150 PA cases, so while the data benefit from richness and depth, the relatively small sample size is a drawback. In addition, the data collection period ran from 2002 to 2004, and in November 2004, a campaign was conducted to raise awareness of the WHO reporting guidelines. Although previous study has shown there were only minor changes in how the HK press reported suicide after the campaign (Fu and Yip, 2008), we still need to be cautious about possible changes in media reporting style as a result. More up-to-date studies are needed.

6. Conclusions

The HK media generally demonstrated poor accuracy in their reporting of suicide risk factors. Their reporting was also problematic in its stereotyping of gender- and method-specific suicides. This study has explored a novel usage of PA data which can be adopted by mental health clinical practitioners and researchers to extract more information from other such studies. It has also provided a precise investigation of the accuracy and quality of the HK media's reporting of suicide which can be easily used to guide best practice in suicide reporting.

To reduce problematic media reporting and prevent further suicides, close cooperation with the mass media is widely considered to be a promising strategy (Mann et al., 2005; Niederkrotenthaler and Sonneck, 2007; Pirkis et al., 2006). However, the implementation of guidelines often faces resistance from media professionals who may emphasize freedom of information and their adherence to the professional principle of discovering truth (Michel et al., 2000). To better cooperate with the media, we need to understand more about their working style.

Our study has demonstrated that HK newspapers tend to describe suicide methods and the deceased's personal information in detail but to be less careful in presenting suicide risk factors. This approach is neither professional nor ethical. By identifying these discrepancies, suicide prevention professionals can develop more effective strategies for cooperating with media professionals and persuading them to develop more sensitive attitudes and more prudent working behaviors when reporting on suicide. In addition, they should promote among journalists the view that suicide is a complicated phenomenon and there are various risk factors.

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