Improving our understanding of youth suicide clusters

The study by Madelyn S Gould and colleagues reported in The Lancet Psychiatry provides strong evidence to suggest that media reporting about suicide in the days after the suicide of a young person might have a ripple effect within a community, and be a factor in subsequent suicides that constitute a cluster. Gould and colleagues did a sophisticated case-control study that showed significantly more newspaper stories about suicide were published between the first and second deaths in a cluster of suicides than after suicides that were not part of a cluster. These stories were also more likely to be prominent (ie, published on the front page) and to describe the suicide in considerable detail.

Gould and colleagues’ study brings together two related research streams that have not been well integrated until now. The first of these is on the effect of media reporting of suicide on subsequent suicidal acts. The research published about this topic is sizeable and consists of many studies (predominantly ecological in design) that show peaks in suicide rates or temporal clustering of suicides after publication of suicide stories. These peaks have been referred to as temporal clusters or mass clusters, and the suicides in these clusters are not necessarily spatially related.

The second research stream brings in a geographical element, and is concerned with spatiotemporal clusters or point clusters, which are presumed to occur because members of the cluster have some connection. This research focuses on suicide clusters that occur within communities over a defined time period and has a particular emphasis on clusters involving young people. It comprises quantitative studies and qualitative studies. The quantitative studies use techniques that are similar to those employed by Gould and colleagues and involve identification of groups of suicides that occur in greater numbers in given space–time windows than would be expected by chance. The qualitative studies tend to map the relationships between individual members of given clusters.

We have reviewed both of these groups of research and have concluded that they are both largely atheoretical (ie, not driven by testable hypotheses that might explain clustering behaviour) and rarely intersect. Gould and colleagues’ study prompts the reader to think about how mass clusters and point clusters might be related, and whether they are underpinned by similar mechanisms. Both mass clusters and point clusters can be thought of as a form of suicide contagion—a term that is borrowed from the specialty of infectious diseases and implies the transmission of some sort of disorder via some form of contact. In the case of suicide clusters, the disorder is suicidality and the transmission mechanism involves imitation, which is based on modelling.

On the rare occasions when investigators have put forward explanations for how this process might work, they have favoured social learning theory. Social learning theory suggests that human actions are shaped by observers identifying with models and imitating their behaviour. In the case of mass clusters, this theoretical explanation is supported by the fact that studies have shown that the copycat effect is particularly strong for those with similar characteristics to the person in the given story. Social learning theory is also consistent with the occurrence of point clusters, particularly those involving young people, because peers are recognised as very powerful role models.

Social learning theory asserts that behaviour is shaped by reinforcement. If an observer sees someone with whom they identify being rewarded for a particular action, he or she might seek to copy that action. Again, this theory is in line with conventional wisdom about both mass clusters and point clusters. Guidelines on media reporting consistently discourage inadvertent reinforcement of suicide by glorification of the death, and resources for communities faced with suicide clusters recommend caution with respect to memorials.

When the persuasiveness of the media and the sway of peers are combined, the effect might be particularly dramatic. If a vulnerable 16-year-old girl reads about another teenage girl on the other side of the country who has died by suicide, she might be able to put herself in the other girl’s shoes. If the other girl is in her circle of friends or acquaintances, she almost certainly will be able to. If a boy who is struggling academically and socially at school takes his own life, others at the school will undoubtedly be affected by the death. If they are also finding schoolwork a challenge and being bullied, they might weigh up the pros and cons of taking the
same course of action. A series of prominent media accounts that serve as a memorial, despite being well intentioned, might reinforce suicide as a desirable action.

Gould and colleagues’ study adds considerably to knowledge in this area, suggesting that incautious newspaper reporting of suicide might compound the risk of an individual suicide becoming part of a cluster, at least in young people. This effect might be exacerbated for newer forms of internet-based media that might be favoured by young people over newspapers. Gould and colleagues’ study focused on the association between newspaper reports and suicide clusters occurring between 1988 and 1996, before the internet became commonplace, so they were not able to test this. It makes intuitive sense, however, that less regulated, more volatile, and more interactive media might have an even greater effect, particularly because young people are not only major consumers of these forms of media, but also the creators of their content. Investigating the role of newer media in suicide clusters—both mass clusters and point clusters—is the next logical step.

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We declare that we have no competing interests.