Author’s response to reviews

Title: The experiences of people bereaved by suicide regarding the press reporting of the death: qualitative study

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Author’s response to reviews:

Reviewer 1 Till Benedikt Accept after minor essential revisions

This study aimed to explore experiences of people bereaved by suicide regarding media reporting of the suicide of their friend or relative. The authors conducted an online survey and collected data from 140 participants in the UK. Responses to open-ended questions were subjected to a qualitative analysis. The results showed that most experiences with journalists was negative. Furthermore, the authors identified considerable variation in people's views over acceptable levels of detail reported in the press. The manuscript covers an interesting and important topic and is well written. With a lack of qualitative research in literature on suicide prevention, I also appreciate that fact that the authors conducted a qualitative study. Furthermore, conclusions are in line with the results presented in the paper. I only have a couple of suggestions for manuscript improvement, and most of them are minor points:

1) The authors have limited their sample to adults of 40 years of age. They explain in the manuscript why they have excluded children from the study, but not why they have excluded individuals older than 40 years of age. Such an explanation would be desirable.

Authors: When we designed this project we chose the 18-40 age range to reflect the group of greatest policy interest at that time, as set out in the 2002 Suicide Prevention Strategy for England and epidemiological studies showing high suicide rates in young (Gunnell, D, Wheeler, B, Chang, S-S, Thomas, B, Sterne, JAC & Dorling, D, 2011, ‘Changes in the geography of suicide in young men: England and Wales 1981-2005’. Journal of Epidemiology and Community Health, vol 66., pp. 536-43) and middle-aged men (White A, Holmes M: Patterns of mortality...
across 44 countries among men and women aged 15-44 years. Journal of Men's Health and Gender 3:139-151, 2006). A previous review we had authored on suicide in young men had highlighted suicide risk in this group, and the age limits used to define this group for our search had used WHO definitions (Pitman A, Krysinska K, Osborn D, King M. Suicide in young men. Lancet 2012;379(9834):2383-92). We have added this clarification to our selection of the age range in our Methods, thus:

“The 18-40 age range was chosen to reflect an under-researched group of great interest in suicide prevention policy.”

2) The authors should provide more details on intercoder reliability. First, how many responses (%) were analyzed by both coders for intercoder reliability? Second, please provide Krippendorff’s alphas or Cohen's kappas to assess intercoder reliability. It is crucial that all items of the analysis have an intercoder reliability of >.70.

Authors: We agree that this is important for content analysis, and that we did not include this in our submission for the first part of our analysis. We have added Cohen’s kappa to the results of the initial content analysis and included this in the methods.

We did not include a Cohen's Kappa Score for the thematic approach to our analysis due to the problems of assessing inter-rater reliability in thematic analysis (Campbell et al 2013 Coding In-depth Semistructured Interviews: Problems of Unitization and Intercoder Reliability and Agreement. Sociological Methods & Research 42(3) 294-320), including the risk of the scores being artificially deflated for interview studies or ethnographic data. We have been advised that for thematic analysis instead of quoting a Cohen's Kappa Score (or equivalent) we should instead state whether we had reviewed the consistency between coders for over 100 responses as a necessary and sufficient robustness check.

For the thematic analysis, our original submission stated:

“We then excluded all uninterpretable responses, and proceeded to a deeper exploration of the meaning of participants’ experiences, by independently coding all extended responses within this classification to identify key themes. Having compared coding frameworks to assess inter-rater reliability, and agreed an initial coding framework, PG then recoded the full dataset, building up a framework of new codes, sub-codes, and collapsed codes in collaboration with AP.”

We have changed this to:

“We then excluded all uninterpretable responses, and two researchers (PG & AP) proceeded to a deeper exploration of the meaning of participants’ experiences, by independently coding all extended responses within this classification to identify key themes. Having compared coding frameworks to review consistency between coders as a check on robustness, and agreed an initial coding framework, PG then recoded the full dataset, building up a framework of new codes, sub-codes, and collapsed codes in collaboration with AP.”

3) In Table 1, the SE status numbers need explanation in a footnote.
Authors: We have re-formatted this table and added as a footnote to explain that: “Socio-economic status was derived from a question about own occupation (for university staff) or parental occupation (for students), using the five categories from UK Office for National Statistics (ONS)”

4) On page 9, the authors provide IQR for the age of their sample. What is a little bit confusing to me is the fact that a range has been provided here. I assume that these are the numbers in terms of Q25 and Q75. However, IQR usually is provided with one specific number, not a range.

Authors: We had provided the actual range from Q1 to Q3, which as you note was incorrect. We realise now that we should have expressed the IQR as the difference between Q3 and Q1 and have corrected this.

5) The last paragraph on page 14 is unclear and needs some revision.

Authors: Originally this stated: “Some participants made reference to their sense of a loss of control over the release of information, particularly where press reports may have been the means by which some close contacts in the deceased’s circle had the news broken to them”.

We have revised this to: “Some participants described feeling a loss of control over the type of information (or level or detail) included in press reports. It worried them that some people in the deceased’s social circle might have the news broken to them through hearing about it in the news, before the next-of-kin had the chance to tell them in person.”

6) On page 16, the authors mention some sub-themes. These sub-themes, however, are only explained a little bit later in the manuscript. I think a clear outline of all themes and sub-themes need to be provided at the beginning of the results.

Authors: We had included themes and sub-themes in supplementary table 2, leaving it up to editors and reviewers to decide if this should be included in the main manuscript. That table also included additional quotes to reduce the volume of the main manuscript. However, we have revised the text of our results so that where themes are first stated, we also state the sub-themes. We have also added a summary Table 2, setting out themes and sub-themes, but without quotes. This means that it is not necessary to refer to the supplementary table for this, and we do not feel that supplementary table 2 needs to be published.

7) Some results are illustrated with only one example. I think it would be helpful to illustrated all major findings with at least 2 or 3 good examples.

Authors: We had included quotes in Supplementary table 2, but we have added in some more quotes to the main article where only 1 example was given, and within the limitations of space. We have also removed the identifier codes as these were not necessary. Again, we do not feel that supplementary table 2 needs to be published, but have included it here for peer reviewers.
8) Overall, the manuscript is well-written. However, on a few occasion during interpretation of the results, the language suddenly becomes a little bit "unscientific" and colloquial (e.g., "head-grabbing story", page 19). The authors may want to check the language throughout the entire manuscript.

Authors: We have amended that term to “a headline that might grab the public’s attention” and made minor edits throughout to improve the language.

9) On pages 26-27, the authors discuss explanations for the respondent's bad experiences with journalists. One possible explanation is not mentioned here: the lack of time journalists have to write their stories. This is an essential component and should be included in the discussion section.

Authors: This is an important point, also picked up by reviewer 3, and we have added this to the discussion in noting that although relatives preferred consultation, the time implications of this may not have felt realistic to the journalists concerned. For example where mentioning the potential role of a media spokesperson, we have added that:
“This is likely to be acceptable to journalists in saving them time spent information-gathering and relieving them from the potential awkwardness of interviewing a distressed person.”

We have also suggested further research to explore journalists’ attitudes to media guidelines, and how realistic the guidelines are as a restriction on press freedom. Thus:
“Gaining a better understanding of these barriers, including research to understand journalists’ priorities and experiences in suicide-reporting and their attitudes to media guidelines, would help the policy community find ways of engaging with the media to address this.”

Reviewer 2 Keith Hawton Accept after minor essential revisions

This paper addresses a very important topic (press reporting of suicides) and one that is relevant to suicide prevention policies in many countries and also to the policies of press organisations. Use of qualitative methodology is very appropriate in terms of trying to encompass the range of personal experiences of participants, especially given the diversity of experiences of people who have experienced suicides of relatives and friends. While the method of recruitment was bound to be affected by response biases, including lack of representivity of respondents (especially by gender) and possible tendency of those with poorer experiences of media reporting to respond, these have been fully acknowledged by the authors. The recruitment method used was an ingenious way of accessing a large number of potential participants, although using a university sample was bound to bias the study findings towards people of relatively high intelligence and verbal ability. This could perhaps be emphasised a little more.

Authors: We have added to the limitations this point about the sample being more articulate than the general population.

The results are largely in accord with those of the limited number of other studies of this issue, which both helps both validates them and emphasises the relevance of the conclusions. The
authors' conclusions are constructive. It is to be hoped that this paper can when published be shared with media organisations.

I have some small comments: The authors should perhaps include 'years' when referring to ages throughout e.g. 18-40.

Authors: We have addressed this throughout.

Page 2 Abstract - In Results the authors could avoid using 'negative' experiences twice in the same sentence. Also in this sentence there is an American spelling of 'behaviour'.

Authors: We have changed one of the mentions of negative to distressing, and corrected the spelling of behaviour.

Page 3 Where the authors use 'population-level suicides' they could put this more clearly i.e. increases in suicides

Authors: We have changed this to “increases in suicides at the population level.”

Page 4 Where the authors refer to suicide bereavement being a 'risk factor' for suicide I suggest that they say that this 'increases risk of suicide'. There are subtle differences between the two.

Authors: We have changed this to “suicide bereavement increases the risk of suicide and psychiatric illness”

In line 10 'suicide attempt' should be plural

Authors: We have edited this.

In the first sentence of the second paragraph I suggest inserting 'generally' before 'poor'.

Authors: We have edited this.

Page 5, second paragraph. Seems slightly odd to refer to 'bereaved and non-bereaved' staff at this point.

Authors: We have edited this by specifying it was not possible to calculate the proportion of bereaved people in this sample.

Regarding methodology, participants could have experienced more than one loss by suicide. The results are reported as if they each experienced just one such death. Presumably the authors could not distinguish those who had one such experience from those who had more than one - would be worth making this point and adding a note to this effect in the Discussion.

Authors: We have clarified this and added this point to the limitations.
Page 8, again use of 'bereaved and non-bereaved' seems odd. They should at least be put in brackets.

Authors: We have cut this, as this point was made previously regarding the bereaved denominator.

Page 9 The percentages for those reporting loss of a family member and those of a non-relative do not add up to 100%. Again, were there not some individuals who had experienced a loss in both categories?

Authors: We have double-checked this and realised we had got the % the wrong way round, so have corrected the table. For people bereaved by more than one suicide, they were asked to relate their responses to the person who they had felt closest too. We have added this to the methods and table.

My overall conclusion is that this paper will be a useful addition to the literature on this difficult but important topic.

Reviewer 3 Karl Andriessen Accept after minor essential revisions

This interesting study reports on the subjective experiences of people bereaved by suicide who were confronted with media reports of the death. Overall, the methods and results were well described. A few questions and suggestions.

The introduction starts with a clear statement regarding potential harm related to media coverage of suicide. If I were a journalist, I stopped reading immediately. Couldn't you start by saying that, for example, media coverage of suicide offers opportunities to promote suicide prevention. Yet, current practices may entail a few problems. Or something along these lines. If you want to build a bridge to media professionals, I guess that the opening lines are crucial.

Authors: We are keen for journalists to read this article and have edited accordingly to acknowledge that their job is to report the facts, and it can be hard to know how to approach this, also referencing that media guidelines offer opportunities to promote suicide prevention.

Authors stated that they followed COREQ guidelines. Hence, I was wondering about researcher reflexivity.

Authors: We have edited the analysis section of our methods to clarify that: “Regular discussion meetings within the research team encouraged reflexivity and enhanced validity by providing opportunities to question and refine our interpretations and analytic processes, and to provide further validation of the conceptual coherence of thematic codes.”

We have also added to the limitations:
“Reflexivity may have been limited by the primary coders being research psychiatrists, but the research team included a medical sociologist (FS).”
A few questions for the discussion. Anger is a frequent emotion in people bereaved by suicide. Is it possible that some participants projected their anger towards journalists because journalists were there on the wrong place or the wrong time, or that the presence of journalists triggered their aggression and frustrations?

Authors: We have added to the Limitations: “It was also possible that frustration with journalists (and other agencies) represented a projection of anger about the death.”

Could you make a difference between, for example, tabloids and so-called quality press? Or freelance journalists and 'real' journalists?

Authors: We were unable to ascertain from the data collected what types of journalists (broadsheet vs tabloid; staff vs freelance) were described. Interestingly, our previous analysis of British press reports had found that breaches of media guidelines were more common among broadsheet papers than tabloids, although we did not actually report that in our published paper (Pitman & Stevenson, 2014. Suicide reporting within British newspapers’ arts coverage, Crisis DOI: 10.1027/0227-5910/a000294). We have added to the strengths and limitations section that we lacked this information. Thus:

“Due to the nature of data collection we were unable to ascertain whether the media content described was published in broadsheet or tabloid newspapers, or whether the journalists concerned were staff or freelance, and this limits how we can use the findings to target journalists’ training appropriately.”

To improve media coverage, there is of course the strategy of educating media professionals and co-creation and promotion of guidelines. However, a first, yet unanswered question is how journalists perceive suicide-related stories: How do they approach the stories and what is important to them? It is unlikely that journalist will adhere to media guidelines that do not acknowledge their perspective.

Authors: We have added this point to our discussion, in line with the comment made by reviewer 1 about journalists’ lack of time to investigate a story.

Data collection occurred 9 years ago. Meanwhile, many things have happened regarding promotion of media guidelines, also in the UK. So, how valid are the study findings today?

Authors: We have added this to the limitations. Thus: “Data collection occurred nine years ago, and an exploration of more recent experiences of the bereaved would provide a more valid account of the effects of media reporting, assuming greater current awareness of media guidelines.”

Good luck with a revision!