Does the Media Matter to Suicide?:
Examining the Social Dynamics surrounding Media Reporting on Suicide in
a Suicide-Prone Community

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ABSTRACT:

Despite the widespread acknowledgement by public health organizations that media reporting matters to suicide, this link has been much debated and the mechanisms undergirding it poorly understood. With this study, I combine a media analysis with ethnographic data collected during 2014-2016 (N=91) to examine the social dynamics surrounding media reporting on suicide in a community (that I call Poplar Grove, USA) with an enduring adolescent suicide problem. I illustrate how the media crafted a particular story about why youth die by suicide that emphasized academic pressure over other plausible causes. In so doing, the media may have broadened ideas about when suicide is seen as an option. However, I also provide evidence that cautions against attributing too much causal power to the media. The media coverage in Poplar Grove reflected conditions that were already present in the community; it was already a high-pressure place for youth to live with widespread mental health stigma. These factors likely shaped media reporting, while also contributing independently to the suicide problem. Finally, I found that the suicide deaths that received media coverage were those that triggered significant cognitive dissonance and thus were much discussed among youth, independent of the media reporting. This generated ample opportunities for peer role modeling of suicide. Thus, while the media may have helped solidify a certain view of suicide in the community, it was not the only social force contributing to suicide in Poplar Grove. While the findings from this study do not negate the importance of responsible reporting on suicide, they do contextualize the role of the media in suicide and suggest that researchers must take a broader view of how suicide suggestion operates in the media and in social contexts.

Keywords

A large body of research has demonstrated that irresponsible media reporting on suicide is often associated with spikes in the suicide rate among groups exposed to the media (Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012; Pirkis, 2009; Stack, 2005). Though these spikes are most consistently found following media reports of a political or entertainment celebrity (Lee, Lee, Hwang, & Stack, 2014; Stack, 2005), recent scholarship also suggests that prominent articles in local newspapers about the suicide death of a youth may contribute to the emergence of adolescent suicide clusters (Gould, Kleinman, Lake, Forman, & Midle, 2014). Interestingly, despite the acknowledgement that media reporting matters to suicide by public health organizations like the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) (Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide 2011), the link between the media and suicide has been much debated, with some studies arguing that the link has been overstated (Stack, 2005). At the heart of this debate is that *most* media reports about suicide do not have any effect on the suicide rate (Stack, 2005). Of course, media reports on suicide can themselves vary dramatically – some follow guidelines, some do not – which may contribute to the varied findings regarding the media's ability to suggest suicide (e.g., Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010).

But the relationship between the media and suicide rates is also potentially more complex. We know little about how the media comes to tell particular stories about suicide. Media reports develop out of social contexts, and often reflect pre-existing cultural beliefs about suicide (Coyle & MacWhannell, 2002; Luce, 2016), though little work has examined this aspect of media reporting on suicide. With this study, I address this gap in the literature using data from an in-depth qualitative case study of a community prone to youth suicide: Poplar Grove (a pseudonym). The suicide problem in

Poplar Grove is centered on the community's only public high school. Since 2000, Poplar Grove High School (PGHS) has lost 15 current or recent graduates to suicide (the student body is approximately 2,000 students). Additionally, the community has experienced at least three suicide clusters. I examined both the media's role in actively shaping how suicide is understood, while also considering how the local community shapes the media reporting and any possible link between the media and suicide. Ultimately, this case study demonstrates how media stories are both producers and products of local culture.

Theorizing Suicide Suggestion via the Media

Why the media may be able to trigger suicide or even suicide clusters is a deeply fascinating and often undertheorized phenomenon (Pirkis, 2009). Though scholars often posit that exposure to media stories about suicide can have a "*suggestive effect* on vulnerable people who then *imitate* the publicized suicide" (Haw et al. 2013: 102 emphasis added), few studies have examined how this effect may operate. One perspective that draws on aspects of social learning theory (Bandura, 1977) is that suicide suggestion via the media may teach individuals how to die by suicide. For example, one study found that after a TV show modeled suicide by self-poisoning, there was an increase in suicides using that specific poisoning method in the two weeks following the broadcast (Hawton et al., 1999). Other scholars have argued that identification with or admiration of the suicide decedent is essential to the social learning process (Lee et al., 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2010; Stack, 2005; Tousignant, Mishara, Caillaud, Fortin, & St-Laurent, 2005). When an individual models a motive for suicide, individuals who admire or identify with that role model may then adopt suicide as an option for coping with a similar stressor. The role of the media in

these cases is to provide information about the motive (something that is cautioned against [Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide 2011]).

It is useful to emphasize here that the motive for suicide matters precisely because it conveys a rationale for or the socially-constructed meaning of suicide. It communicates when suicide is justified or when it may be used to express or evoke particular emotions in salient social groups. This is important because research has shown that beliefs about suicide are not universal. They can vary based on individuals' identities (for example their gender identity [Alston, 2012; Braswell & Kushner, 2012; Cleary, 2012]) or based on nationality and culture (Kitanaka, 2008; Targum & Kitanaka, 2012). For example, in Japan, suicide has been seen by many as an act of free will that people choose rationally and legitimately, often as a way to either "create meaning through one's own death" or to "[take] responsibility for one's actions" (Targum & Kitanaka, 2012). This contrasts with the belief that suicide is caused by mental illness which is more common in places like the USA (Kitanaka, 2008). Though the literature on the meaning of suicide has not considered the role of the media, other research has shown that the media can shape how events are collectively remembered and understood (Kitch, 2008). As such, the media may be one location where collective meaning of suicide is generated and, importantly, perpetuated.

The Case for Caution

Though there are strong theoretical reasons to suspect suicide can be suggestible via the media, there is also good reason to be cautious about not overstating this relationship, particularly given the mixed results of past research on the role of the media in suicide (Stack, 2005). First, the media is not just a producer of culture and collective

memories (Kitch, 2008), it is also a product of society. As such, the media draws on society and on its pre-existing tropes and stereotypes when crafting stories (Coyle & MacWhannell, 2002); thus, how the story of a suicide is told may draw on existing knowledge or beliefs about motives for suicide. Second, the media does not cover all events equally, but rather goes through social processes to determine what is *newsworthy* (Gans, 1979), even in the case of suicide (Pirkis, Burgess, Blood, & Francis, 2007). This may mean that suicide deaths that impact more people or that were already highly discussed may be more likely to receive media attention. This point underscores the difficulty in determining whether the observed association between media coverage of suicide and suicide diffusion represent a causal or spurious relationship. Art, in the form of the media, may simply reflect life as it is, with or without the media covering it.

The difficulty separating the influence of the media from other factors that are often omitted or unmeasured in quantitative studies of the media's influence may be particularly relevant for the literature tying media coverage to adolescent suicide clusters (Gould et al., 2014). Adolescent suicide clusters are highly traumatic events that are often much discussed, in and out of the media (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016). Additionally, studies have shown that peer modeling of suicidal behaviors can also play a role in the diffusion of suicide among youth (Abrutyn & Mueller, 2014; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2015). Since clusters are more likely to occur within bounded social contexts, like schools (Haw, Hawton, Niedzwiedz, & Platt, 2013), there is good reason to suspect that peer-role modeling or shared environmental risk factors may contribute independently to adolescent suicide clusters. Hence, the impact of that media report on local suicide rates or even the emergence of a suicide cluster may be confounded with the effect of peer role

modeling of suicide in the community or school. With this study, I examine these issues to improve our understanding of the role of the media in suicide.

METHODS

To investigate the role the media plays in suicide suggestion, I conducted a media analysis matched with an in-depth case study of a community I call Poplar Grove. This study is part of a larger project to understand the social forces behind the significant adolescent suicide problem in Poplar Grove (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016). Poplar Grove is a relatively small (population < 50,000), wealthy, suburban, majority white, community with an enduring adolescent suicide problem.

The data for this study come from two main sources. First, I examined all media articles discussing suicide in and around the community. These articles were gathered via extensive searching on ProQuest Media, Lexis Nexus, Newspaper Archive: Academic Library Edition, Google News Archive, and EbscoHost Newspaper Source for key terms (including the words suicide, "Poplar Grove," and the names of all known suicide decedents). A total of 187 articles were collected and analyzed, though for this study I focus on the ones that appeared in the local newspaper. While most analyzed articles came from Poplar Grove's local paper, articles also came from a nearby city paper. To protect the identity of the town, papers are referred to according to their distribution size: Local Paper (readership around 20,000) and City Paper (readership around 200,000). The City Paper is located within an hour of Poplar Grove and primarily covers national and local city news with only occasional attention to Poplar Grove.

Second, I draw on interviews and focus groups that my colleague, Seth Abrutyn, and I conducted with 91 community members, including youth, young adults, parents,

mental health workers, medical professionals, suicide prevention activists, and school personnel with the goal of understanding the community's suicide problem (N=91). These interviews offer important context for understanding the role of the media. Respondents were recruited via flyers, word of mouth, and information sessions at community events. Several community organizations also helped recruit respondents, including a community suicide prevention group, a local suicide bereavement group, and two religious organizations. We recruited two types of respondents: people with direct experience with suicide bereavement and people who live in the community and were willing to discuss suicide.

Given the sensitive nature of the study, we offered respondents flexibility with regard to participation. Respondents could choose to participate in a focus group or private interview. Particularly young respondents sometimes felt more comfortable participating in a focus group with friends (though later some youth also consented to an interview). Interviews and focus groups lasted between 45 minutes and 4 hours, with most lasting around 2 hours (short interviews were almost always with professionals with limited time). Interviews and focus groups were largely held in person, at a private location where the respondent felt comfortable, though some were held by phone or Skype. Several community leaders facilitated this research, including allowing me to use private office space where many interviews were held. Both interviews and focus groups discussed what life was like in the community, respondents' beliefs about the causes of the suicide problem (and if they saw it as a problem), and in interviews, respondents were asked specifically about their experiences with suicide bereavement. Data for this study was primarily collected between 2014 and 2016.

[INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

Data Analysis

Interviews and focus groups were digitally recorded and transcribed by professional transcribers. Transcripts were reviewed by the author for accuracy and then analyzed for themes in NVivo 11 software. The study design and data analysis was guided by abductive analytic reasoning (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012) that encourages a focus on surprising findings, while also allowing for the research to be guided by existing research and theory. Whenever possible, I interviewed multiple individuals close to suicide decedents, triangulated information, and obtained multiple perspectives on events. Finally, protecting the privacy of my respondents and the community is crucial to this research. All respondents were aware that this was an ethnographic study was of a particular place and consented to participate, be audio recorded, and quoted in publications and presentations. To protect their privacy, we agreed to use pseudonyms for people and places and to change information to obscure the community's and individuals' identities (including dates). As such, all names of people and places have been changed, and identifying details, including dates, are modified or omitted (though timelines are preserved). Also excerpts from newspaper articles are generally paraphrased not quoted. Respondents' whose profession involves caring for the wellbeing of children but whose specific profession would make them identifiable have been reclassified as either parents or mental health workers to protect their identity. Thus, the category "mental health worker" includes a broad group of professionals (including teachers, doctors, therapists etc.). This research received human subjects approval from the University of Chicago's Institutional Review Board.

RESULTS

Overview of the Suicides in Poplar Grove

In the early 2000s, Poplar Grove experienced the first suicide cluster in the community's collective memory. The cluster began with one high profile near-lethal suicide attempt (Alice) followed by one high profile suicide death (Zoe) and one lower profile suicide death (Steven) within a twelve-month period. All of these youth were current students at PGHS at the time of their attempt/death; the students in the cluster knew each other; and the first two students were well-admired by their peers. Zoe's suicide also used the same method and occurred in the same place as Alice's. It is less clear how popular Steven was (his death received little media coverage), but there was a well-attended memorial service for him and older community members remember his death today. Prior to Alice's attempt, community members reported that suicide "was kind of unheard of." A review of media stories from 1980-2000 suggests that this perception was accurate as there were no articles about a teen suicide in Poplar Grove until Alice's attempt in 2000 (though there were stories about other suicides in the county and nation).

The second suicide cluster emerged in 2007. Two male recent graduates of PGHS (who were neighbors and friends) died by suicide within weeks of each other; six months later, Kate (a female current PGHS student and a close friend of one of the initial decedents) died as well. A third cluster emerged in 2009 when four friends died by suicide within 9 weeks of each other (one current and two former PGHS students). Since 2007, a year has not gone by where at least one current student or recent graduate of PGHS has not died by suicide. Given the suicide rate for this age range in the U.S.

(Sullivan, Annest, Simon, Luo, & Dahlberg, 2015), PGHS has had a greater number of suicides for a high school of this size than we would expect.

Both the community and the local media have been focused on better understanding the causes of the suicide problem. Next I analyze the roles of both the community and the media in that process. I begin by examining the role the media played in constructing an explanation for the suicide problem, before considering the roles of the community.

Examining the Role of the Media

In general, the role of the Local Newspaper is most apparent in (1) their reporting on motives for suicide and (2) the physical placement of information in the paper.

Framing Suicide Motives. The framing of suicide motives by the Local Newspaper was particularly relevant during the first cluster, when the community put no restrictions on the media reporting on suicide. These early stories often violated multiple guidelines for safe reporting on suicide (which were in existence at this time but were not particularly well known [Jamieson, Jamieson, & Romer, 2003]). In fact, nearly every article from 2000-2001 in the Local Newspaper violated the CDC's 1994 guidelines for reporting on suicide (O'Carroll & Potter, 1994).

In the content of these articles, the local newspaper focused quite explicitly on understanding why youth would turn to suicide and engaged in extensive speculation about youth's motives for suicide. Understanding Zoe's suicide was particularly difficult as it was largely portrayed in the media as unexpected by those close to her. Thus, in the absence of concrete information, the Local Newspaper had leeway in how they framed Zoe's death.

In the first article to appear following Zoe's death (Local Newspaper, front page [Article 2, Table 2]), the Local Newspaper refers to Zoe's death as a "mystery," and the only partial motive offered is that Zoe seemed upset because she was teased by schoolmates the day of her death (this motive appears in the first four articles about Zoe in the Local Newspaper [Articles 2,3,4, & 5, Table 2]). The second article (Article 3, Table 2) discussing Zoe's death appeared on the front page of the City Newspaper the day after Article 2 appeared in the Local Paper. Article 3 focused on both Alice and Zoe, arguing explicitly (but paraphrased here) that no one may understand what caused Zoe's suicide better than Alice, particularly given how similar the two girls were and that the girls knew each other. The article notes that they were both popular, played on the same team, and pictures of them together were included.

After establishing their similarity, the article went on to describe Alice's motive for attempting suicide: Alice explained that the pressure she was under was overwhelming, and while she now recognizes that she suffers from depression, she thought suicide was the answer to her need to escape the pressure (paraphrased). While the article stated that little was known about Zoe's motive (paraphrase), the article quotes a "suicide expert" as saying that "[Zoe] may have been influenced by Alice's [suicide]," further legitimizing the presumed link between Zoe and Alice. The article did reiterate that Zoe was upset about being teased the day of her death, but much more space was devoted to Alice's motive than Zoe's. By the fourth article published in the Local Newspaper about Zoe's death (Article 6, Table 2), Alice's name was not even mentioned, though the headline posited "pressure" as an explanation for why brilliant youth die by

suicide (paraphrased [Article 6, Table 2]). Thus, at this point, it seems that Alice's motive was fully attributed to Zoe.

Though the intense media reporting on suicide calmed down eight weeks after Zoe's death, the story about the hazards of pressure appeared to have taken hold, as did the substitution of Alice's voice for Zoe's (often with attribution to Zoe instead of Alice). In particular, this motive re-emerged four months after Zoe's death with a long front-page story in the Local Newspaper on the burden of academic pressure for youth (Article 10, Table 2). Indeed, Article 10 is an interesting article because it covers a roundtable discussion actually organized by the Local Newspaper where the newspaper selected panelists specifically because of their knowledge about the "pressures teens face." Though Zoe's name did not appear until the second page of the article, her suicide was explicitly referenced as the reason the community felt the need to discuss academic pressure, once again substituting Alice's motive for Zoe's and reaffirming pressure as a cause of suicide (at least according to the Local Newspaper).

The focus on academic pressure also appeared in the content of the media reporting on the later suicides, though the media reports on the later suicides were markedly less consistent and focused less on understanding individual suicide deaths and more on investigating whether or not there was a "suicide problem" and if the problem was centered on PGHS. This change in the reporting likely happened because according to my interviews, during this period, mental and public health workers in the community began to push the local media towards safer reporting on suicide. Indeed, media stories after 2007 did a better job of conforming to the guidelines. Still the continued importance of pressure appears through discussions of whether PGHS is at the root of the

community's suicide problem and articles (that did not appear on the front page) asserted things like "this town pushes kids too hard" and implied that the intense pressure combined with other issues could trigger the local problem with depression and in turn suicide.

The Presentation of Information. The framing of suicide motives by the Local Newspaper is also apparent in the physical placing of information in the newspaper. Stories about "pressure" as a cause of suicide received more front-page coverage (particularly during 2000-2001) than stories about depression. Even when a story on understanding depression appeared on the front page of the Local Newspaper (e.g., Article 8, Table 2), it was short, in small print, and in the bottom left corner of the page. This contrasts sharply with the placement of front-page stories that discussed the links between academic pressure and suicide (e.g., Article 6, Table 2). Article 6 appeared at the top of the front page in larger font than the depression article. This same pattern played out in Article 9 and Article 10, which were published around the same time. Article 9 (Table 2) appeared on page B4 (buried in the paper) and reported on a seminar to discuss the role of depression in suicide hosted by two local counseling centers, whereas Article 10 was front-page news, appeared in large font in the center of the page, and was extremely long. In Article 10, the news not only organized an event around the suicide motive they saw as more salient, but also gave that motive more visibility in the paper and thus potentially in the community. Through these actions, the media crafted a particular story about suicide in the community.

It is important to briefly note that the media may have gotten the story partially right: the pressure to achieve is intense in Poplar Grove and may have contributed to

Zoe's death and Alice's attempt (indeed Alice consistently attributes part of her depression to the intense pressure). But, it is equally important to note that the media could have emphasized the mental health struggles that Alice discussed (instead of pressure) or more general warning signs for suicide, and the stories would have also been relevant to the community's understanding of suicide.

Indeed, based on my interviews with individuals close to Zoe, both pressure and mental illness likely contributed to Zoe ending her life. According to Rachel, one of Zoe's best friends, Zoe's suicide was likely related to her mental health struggles, which may have been exacerbated by the pressure to be perfect that Zoe felt (particularly from her family, but also the community). Rachel recalled that, "[Zoe] was, you know, at times, really happy-go-lucky. And other times, like, devastation central. And, knowing what I know now about mental illness… I am certainly not a psychiatrist, but [she had] highs and lows just like bipolar." Rachel also described Zoe has having significant self-esteem issues. She felt that these issues did originate at least in part from the pressure that Zoe felt to live up to her family's high expectations:

> I think that Zoe tried a lot to kind of live up to this image that she had of
> her [older] sister...Her [sister was] perfect. I hate that word, but it's the
> only descriptor that I have. And, especially for Zoe that was a huge
> deal…Her parents were very wealthy and all about keeping up
> appearances and a little bit strict and 'judgey.' And, I think her self-esteem
> suffered for that big time.

While these quotes are not intended to reveal the "true" cause of Zoe's suicide, Rachel's comments provide further evidence that what we are observing in the reporting by the

Local Newspaper is not simply the reporting of objective facts, but rather subjective framing. Given that, how did this subjective frame come about and what role did the culture of Poplar Grove play in constructing this frame for understanding the local teen suicides?

Examining the Role of the Community

The Community's Culture. One of the more complex things about examining the link between the news and suicide is that newspaper articles are both a producer of cultural ideas (as illustrated in the previous section) and a product of them. This was no different in Poplar Grove. There were reasons that the pressure narrative appealed to people in Poplar Grove. Mainly, the idea that pressure causes suicide is compelling because it reflects broadly shared beliefs and anxieties about life in Poplar Grove. Nearly all of the respondents I interviewed (many who have lived in the community since the 1990s) recognized the intense pressure to live up to coherent ideals for youth in Poplar Grove. This theme is apparent in the comments two mothers shared in a focus group:

> **Elizabeth:** Achievement is everything. So, when we think of Poplar Grove, we think of achievement, we speak of scholastic achievement, and we speak of sports achievement…
>
> **Tina [chimes in]:** I think that's pretty accurate. I think it's a wonderful community to raise a family in, and it's... great people, but it is very driven. It's exhausting. It's challenging…It's hard to complain about it because we have a lot of opportunity here…So, it's kind of a blessing and a curse all at the same time.

Part of the curse that Tina is referring to, is that the pressure is perceived as contributing to the on-going suicide problem in Poplar Grove. For example, Cynthia, a mental health worker in Poplar Grove, shared in a focus group:

> **Cynthia:** I sat in the office a week ago with somebody…who is suffering from thoughts of suicide *solely* because she is in the honors program and she's being driven, and she's just coming out of the middle school.

Though Cynthia is likely overstating the relationship between pressure and suicide to make a point in the interview, her comments represent a widespread belief in Poplar Grove. When Scott (who had several schoolmates die by suicide) was asked in an interview why he thought youth died by suicide in Poplar Grove answered "I think the pressure is ultimately the root of our problem."

Indeed, nearly 75 percent of youth and young adults we interviewed who grew up in the community believed that a need to escape the pressure played a major role in why youth die by suicide. Reactions to stories that appeared in the media following Zoe's death further confirm that pressure was seen as an issue for youth even prior to Alice's attempt. For example, twelve days after the initial newspaper story telling of Zoe's death, a college student wrote an op-ed piece where she admitted that the pressure of high school in Poplar Grove almost drove her to a suicide attempt (paraphrased, Article 7, Table 2).

Additionally, mental health stigma is prevalent in Poplar Grove. Many respondents, both youth and parents, mentioned that mental health problems in Poplar Grove were often hidden and seen as shameful. Youth felt this particularly acutely. Shara, a schoolmate of Alice and Zoe, mentioned that "there was this weird sense…that you

can't talk about things that are wrong," something that many other youth I interviewed

echoed and that many explicitly labeled "mental health stigma." This amplified Shara's

fear and alienation:

> I felt like a lot of adults didn't understand or…believe us when we said
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> we're stressed out, when we said, 'This is really hard,' and 'we're really
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> scared.' They were like, 'Oh, you're fine. It's just high school.' But it's so
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> much more and people are dying [by suicide].

Mental health workers also stressed that it was often difficult to get parents to pursue

mental health help for their children. Ken, a mental health worker, told me that a common

refrain from parents when he recommend hospitalizing their child for mental health

problems was "we're covering it up [and it's] going to be fine [without hospitalization]."

Another mental health worker emphasized that her patients worry more about "what my

neighbors are going to think" than what their child needs to be healthy or happy. This

widespread mental health stigma may make it easier to talk about intense academic

pressure as the cause of suicide rather than mental illness.

  The Co-occuring Role-Modeling of Suicide. In addition to the community culture

that played a role in generating the news, it is also important to consider other factors that

were occurring in the community at the same time as the news reporting. Perhaps the

most important of these is that many of the suicide deaths that were discussed in the

paper were also much discussed in every day life, around the community and particularly

in the school. Rachel shared that "within [her] group of friends, [Alice's attempt] was just

kind of talked about as like, 'Whoa.' …like, 'Why?' like, no one could really understand

it….[she was] one of like, the popular girls who seemingly had all of her shit together.…

And beautiful... Absolutely stunning girl." For the classmates of suicide decedents, knowledge about many (but not all) of the student deaths was widespread. Some of the deaths even occurred in public spaces. While it is beyond the scope of this paper to fully examine the role of peer-role modeling in the suicide problem in Poplar Grove, this process was certainly happening and is difficult to disentangle from any possible effect of the media.

Whose Death is Newsworthy

Rachel's comment (above) about Alice's attempt also reveals another important aspect of the media reporting. The deaths that received media coverage were also the deaths that triggered significant cognitive dissonance for people in the community – e.g., when a seemingly "perfect" happy youth suddenly and inexplicably (at least publicly) dies by suicide. Alice and Zoe were perceived as popular and seemingly perfect. Michelle, a later suicide decedent who received media attention, was similarly perceived:

Madison: Yeah. [Michelle's death] was weird 'cause Michelle was like all-star sports player...

Hannah: She was like *"The Poplar Grove"*...

Madison [chimes in]: Yeah, she had like the perfect GPA, and…she was pretty, and everyone loved her, and she was the sweetest person.

Like other studies, I found that most suicide deaths in Poplar Grove do not receive any media coverage. Of the 17 suicide decedents from Poplar Grove (15 affiliated with PGHS), 9 received some media attention, but only 5 received prominent media attention. Four of the deaths that received prominent media attention were of youth whose death triggered this cognitive dissonance.

It is worth noting that not all deaths in the community triggered cognitive dissonance. The suicide death of youth perceived as drug users or children with "problems" received less attention, particularly from the media but also in other aspects of the community (such as vigils for mourning). Attention via the media or in the community was more frequent for youth who were popular and/or well-liked, had "so much going for them," were female, and were current PG high school students. This suggests that it is important to recognize that media reporting on suicide may serve as a proxy for other social forces that increase both the saliency of the suicide decedent as a peer role model in a community and increase the desire in the community for media reporting on the death.

To summarize, I found evidence that while the media does actively frame suicide in ways that may contribute to shared understandings of why youth die by suicide (as seen in the construction of motives during the first cluster), this framing for suicide also (1) reflects pre-existing beliefs and anxieties present in the community and (2) is not the only channel through which information about suicide flows through the community.

DISCUSSION

Though a substantial debate has surrounded scholarship on the media's effects on suicide, most scholars agree that some media stories have the potential to trigger increases in suicide rates, particularly when those stories are accompanied by irresponsible reporting practices (Gould et al., 2014; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2012; Stack, 2005). Past research has theorized that suicide is suggestible, and that youth in particular may "imitate" the suicides that they see or hear about in the media (Haw et al.,

2013). But what prior research has largely neglected is that additional social forces may complicate the relationship between the media reporting on suicide and suicide rates.

With this study, I provided deeper insights into the process of suicide suggestion via the media through an in-depth case study of the media reports about suicide during repeated suicide clusters in a community called Poplar Grove. Specifically, I illustrate how the media crafted a particular story about why youth die by suicide that emphasized academic pressure as a motive for suicide. The media also downplayed other competing explanations for suicide, such as depression, by granting them limited visibility in the paper. Because virtually all of my respondents reported feeling negative consequences from the intense academic pressure in Poplar Grove, the media's irresponsible reporting may have had quite serious consequences by forging or reifying the link between needing to escape the pressure of the community and suicide.

However, this study also cautions against attributing too much causal force to the role of the media in the on-going suicide problem in Poplar Grove. There was a reason that the Local Newspaper's focus was on academic pressure and not on other possible causes of suicide. The community was (and is) a high-pressure place for youth to live, and there were widespread anxieties about the pressure. Additionally, mental health problems are highly stigmatized in Poplar Grove; thus, it is unlikely that readers were interested in reading about the possible role mental illness plays in suicide. Indeed, there may have even been social pressure to suppress information about mental health problems of suicide decedents in the news since that could be seen as tarnishing the reputation of a child (and their family). What is important about these two factors is that the news did not produce them; they are rooted in the community and they can both have

independent harmful consequences for mental health, help-seeking and even possibly suicide (Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016).

Additionally, not every suicide death of a youth was deemed newsworthy in Poplar Grove. Indeed, the media coverage was most intense for youth whose suicide was already much discussed in the adolescent and adult society, and probably would have been much discussed with or without the media coverage. These youth tended to be high school students, popular or well-liked, and female. The deaths that received media coverage were the ones that also caused significant cognitive dissonance, where youth and adults struggled to make sense of how a seemingly "perfect" kid could end their life in suicide. This cognitive dissonance likely spurred both conversation among the people of Poplar Grove and media reporting. And to the extent that the content of media reports matched the content of conversations, the effects of peer role-modeling and peer discussions about suicide may be conflated with the effects of the media.

The findings from this study offer several insights for existing scholarship on suicide and the media. First, this study illustrates how local news reports are a product of society and their constituents and not just an independent institution that reports facts or information objectively. While the media will always be in part a product of society, the media should endeavor to be more critical about how they report on suicide. In particular, the media in Poplar Grove (as in other communities with serious suicide problems [Luce, 2016]) missed an opportunity to contribute to ending the suicide problem by providing challenging, but well-researched, information on suicide to help structure conversations among their readership. Instead, they reified stereotypes and likely amplified community fears.

Second, that the news is a reflection of society (in part) has implications for how we interpret significant spikes in suicide rates following media stories, particularly when the stories and the effects are local. While it is possible that the news reports may trigger spikes in suicide rates (a causal argument), the news reports may also serve as proxies for other social forces that are potentially more difficult to observe without local or contextual data. Given that most suicide deaths are not considered newsworthy, the ones that reach the news may be broadly discussed through other channels, such as between schoolmates or friends in the case of adolescent suicide clusters. While this does not negate the importance of responsible reporting on suicide (Recommendations for Reporting on Suicide 2011), it does suggest that additional strategies may be needed for suicide prevention (and postvention) to be effective and that researchers should endeavor to better understand how social forces, like peer role modeling or community culture, condition suicide and the relationship between the media and the suicide rate.

This may be particularly salient in the case of adolescent suicide clusters. Very little is known about why adolescent suicide clusters emerge or persist (Haw et al., 2013; Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016; Niedzwiedz, Haw, Hawton, & Platt, 2014; Pirkis & Robinson, 2014), beyond their troubling association with irresponsible media reporting (Gould et al., 2014; John et al., 2016). The media in Poplar Grove certainly played an active role in shaping information that related to suicide motives during the first suicide cluster in the community. And yet, even after (largely) ending irresponsible media coverage of suicide around 2006, PGHS continues to lose an unexpected number of current and recent graduates to suicide. Thus, suicide prevention strategies need to consider additional social forces that may promote suicide (like beliefs about suicide that increase vulnerable

youths' willingness to see suicide as an option), while also considering community-level factors that may diminish the effectiveness of interventions (like the mental health stigma, social cohesion, and gossip that suppresses help-seeking in Poplar Grove [Mueller & Abrutyn, 2016]).

Finally, this study has some implications for understanding the mechanisms behind suicide suggestion. The use of the terms "imitation," "copycat," and "mimic" do not adequately capture the complex social-psychological processes undergirding the suggestion of suicide. Suicide is not a behavior that is imitated or mimicked. It is born out of deep psychological pain and hopelessness (Shneidman, 1998). That said, the meaning of suicide may vary based on individual experiences and cultural contexts (Cleary, 2012). Importantly, the meaning of behaviors are powerful motivators precisely because they are *socially* negotiated and *contextually* situated (Kral, 1994; Roen, Scourfield, & McDermott, 2008). An act like suicide can take on symbolic meaning greater than or beyond what the suicide decedent potentially intended, particularly when their death causes cognitive dissonance or goes against norms within a community. Future youth may absorb these newly negotiated meanings and may learn that suicide is one option to escape their pain or express themselves symbolically to their community. This complex social-psychological process is not "imitation," and future research should continue to examine it in more detail. While the psychological motives for suicide are often emphasized in the USA and in suicidology, we also know that beliefs about suicide are an important risk factor for future suicidality (Joe, Romer, & Jamieson, 2007). Understanding the socially constructed meaning of suicide may play an important role shaping beliefs about suicide and determining when psychological pain or hopelessness

translates into suicidal thoughts, actions or even deaths, while also offering additional strategies for suicide prevention.

Despite the contributions of this study, it also has limitations. First, a significant amount of time has passed since the cluster that is the focus of the first part of this study. As a result, some respondents affected by the cluster and the early media reports have moved away and thus were unavailable to participate in this study. Additionally, I am dependent on respondents' memories, which may have faded with time. Second, I did my best to interview a broad array of people in Poplar Grove, however, not everyone felt comfortable talking about suicide. Thus, my sample may omit important voices. Third, my data relies heavily on in-depth interviews to contextualize the media reports on suicide which some criticize as accessing only people's rationalizations for their actions and feelings, and not their true motives. To minimize this, my colleague and I did our best to pay attention to people's tone of voice and narrative choices, thus paying attention to not just what was said but how it was said (Pugh, 2013). Also, to the extent possible, we supplemented our interviews with participant observations. Finally, it is difficult to assess how generalizable my findings are given the dearth of research contextualizing the relationship between the local media and suicide and on how social forces contribute to suicide problems (and particularly clusters) in communities. Future research would do well to examine why some communities and schools, but not others have disproportionate rates of suicide. Despite these limitations, this study provides important insights into the complex connections between the media and suicide and illustrates how media stories may come to matter to the people exposed to the stories, particularly in terms of constructing the meaning of suicide. At the same time, scholars should continue

to examine the diverse social forces that may facilitate suicide and condition the media's role in suicide.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Interview & Focus Group Data

	Percent
Youth	11.0
Young Adults	26.4
Parents	42.9
Mental Health Workers	19.8
Female	74.7
Non-Hispanic White	98.9
Total N	91

Table 2: The Framing of Suicide Motives in the Early Media Reports in Poplar Grove, USA

Article ID	Date	Publication Information	Motive for Suicide	Notes
	Nov-3			Alice's attempt
1	Nov-4	City News, Article	None	Sensationalized headline Headline mentions method and location
	Apr-4			Zoe's death
2	Apr-5	Local News, Article	Zoe: Teasing	Front page Sensationalized headline Headline mentions method and location Includes pictures of Zoe
3	Apr-6	City News, Article	Zoe: Teasing Alice: Depression/ Pressure	Front page Sensationalized headline Headline mentions method and location Includes pictures of Zoe and Alice together
4	Apr-8	Local News, Article	Zoe: Teasing	Front page Sensationalized headline Headline mentions method and location
5	Apr-9	Local News, Article	Zoe: Teasing	Text mentions method and location Discusses how admired Zoe was
6	Apr-10	Local News, Article	Generalized: Pressure	Front page Sensationalized headline Headline mentions method and location
7	Apr-17	Local News, Op-Ed	Author: Pressure	Describes "near" suicide attempt
8	Apr-22	Local News, Article	Generalized: Depression	Front page (bottom of page, small font) Describes suicides in strong terms ("crisis") Mentions method and location
9	8-Jul	Local News, Article	Generalized: Depression	Mentions method and location Discusses how admired Zoe was
10	18-Jul	Local News, Article	Generalized: Pressure	Front page Mentions Zoe's suicide.
	4-Aug			Steven's death