The importance of ‘morality’ in the social construction of suicide in Scottish newspapers
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Abstract  Suicide stories in newspapers have been identified as an important risk factor for individual suicide because they provide real-life models for vulnerable individuals. The link between suicide ‘stories’ and suicide rates, however, is not clearly understood. One problem is the lack of detailed analysis of how suicide stories are constructed. Yet this is important because it would enable researchers to comprehend more fully how newspaper reports shape and structure ‘reality’. It is argued that the suicide story is a way of mapping out reality and that by de-constructing we can learn how this shapes and constrains our understanding of suicide and the actions adopted in response to it. The aim of this study, therefore, is to explore the social construction of suicide stories in Scottish newspapers. Two broad sheet and two tabloid newspapers were scanned for suicide stories for the year 1999. One hundred and ninety-one articles reporting suicide were identified and analysed using grounded theory. This generated a set of conceptual categories, which formed the basis of a framework. The study found that visualising, locating, social impacting and causal searching were key concepts in the construction of a suicide story, and that these were connected through the core explanatory category of ‘morality’. The study also showed how suicide was rendered explicable through the concepts of deviancy, dysfunction and moral weakness.

Keywords: suicide stories, newspapers, morality, deviance, dysfunction, location

Introduction

Research has identified suicide stories in the media as an important risk factor, which can provide real-life models for vulnerable individuals who are

One problem is the dearth of any detailed analyses of media representations of suicide. The majority of research has been concerned with cause and effect, the effect of suicide stories on suicide rates, rather than the social construction of suicide stories themselves. Yet understanding how suicide stories are constructed is important because it enables researchers to comprehend more fully how newspaper reports shape and structure ‘reality’. The aim of the research therefore is to contribute to the area by exploring the social construction of suicide in the Scottish newspapers.

The term ‘social construction of reality’ was introduced by Berger and Luckmann (1967) to identify the process by which people creatively shape reality through social action and interaction. Sociological and anthropological studies have shown that language and conventions play a key role in shaping people’s meanings and experience of reality (Sapir 1921, Mead 1934, Worf 1956). Furthermore, it is now also generally agreed that the mass media have a major role in this process, influencing how people speak, the words and symbols they use and the meanings they associate with them (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). Newspapers are said to assist the creation of reality by presenting printed versions of vocabulary and styles of expression while television and film representations attend to oral and more visual versions.

Thus, the media’s role in the production of the meaning of suicide is of key significance. The way in which this phenomenon is interpreted and framed, and the discourses and language used to discuss it, will help to structure how events or social groups are perceived and responded to by the public.

The influence of the media on meaning, language and attitudes

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) suggest four ways in which the mass media influence language and meaning. First, they can establish new words with associated meanings. For example, 20 years ago few people would have understood the term ‘spin doctor’, yet today, many respond to this label as someone who courts positive publicity for political parties and figures.

Secondly, the media can extend the meaning of existing terms. For example, the meaning of ‘ecology’ has progressed from a purely technical term to a more vague label about protecting the physical environment from degradation (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989).
Thirdly, the media can substitute new meanings by displacing older ones. The word ‘gate’, for example, had been a simple word with a clear meaning, which was totally transformed through reporting of ‘Watergate’.

Finally, the media can stabilise meanings by reinforcing existing usages. The media remind society of the standardised and shared meanings and associations of many words. For example, studies of public attitudes and media coverage of mental illness show remarkable consistency over the years in associating unpredictability and dangerousness with psychiatric patients (Steadman and Cocozza 1977, Day and Page 1986).

Some understanding of how suicide is represented in the media can be gained from research exploring the impact of media reporting on suicide rates. Studies show that only certain kinds of suicide story will appear in the media (O’Carroll 1996, Knickmeyer 1996, Michel et al. 1995, Weinmann and Fishman 1995, Hassan 1995). Newspaper editors in an American study commented that only suicides which were deemed ‘newsworthy’ would be covered. By this they meant those which injected themselves into the public arena, that is, if they happened in a public space, or if they involved a public figure (Knickmeyer 1996).

Male suicide is also far more likely to be reported than female suicide. Although the suicide rate for men is higher than for women, research suggests that proportionately male suicide is over-represented (Weinmann and Fishman 1995, Michel et al. 1995). Weinmann and Fishman (1995) in a study of the Israeli Press from 1955 to 1990, found that male suicide constituted 74.6 per cent of stories. This was beyond their share of the documented suicide rate, ranging from 47 per cent in 1955 to 69 per cent in 1990.

Other studies have found that suicides are more likely to be reported if they involve violent methods such as shooting or hanging (Hassan 1995, O’Carroll 1996, Frey et al. 1997). This may in part account for the over-representation of male suicide, since studies suggest that men are more likely to choose violent methods while women tend to adopt self-poisoning (Hassan 1995, Weinman and Fishman 1995, Platt 1999). Weinman and Fishman (1995) in their Israeli study found that while 29.9 per cent of men killed themselves by hanging, only three per cent of women adopted this method. The most frequent mode for women was self-poisoning (34.2 per cent), and as Weinmann and Fishman suggest, these less violent methods are less likely to attract publicity, comprising only 8.4 per cent of stories in the Israeli press. Although Weinmann and Fishman make little of this, however, they also found that proportionately slightly more women than men killed themselves by shooting, 18.1 per cent and 16.9 per cent respectively.

While newspapers frequently report the circumstances and methods of suicide they are less likely to comment on the cause of the suicide. Frey et al. (1997), in a study of the Swiss print media, found that only 63 of the 151 suicide ‘stories’ discussed a reason for the suicide. When newspapers do comment on causes, they have been criticised for presenting the motive as mono-causal (O’Carroll 1996, Frey et al. 1997). Reports tend to underplay
or over-emphasise particular motives or circumstances. For example, while
medical sources suggest depression is a major factor in suicide, studies show
that it is under-represented in the press (Weinmann and Fishman 1995, Frey
et al. 1997). Other reasons cited in newspaper articles include relationship
problems, personal and health problems, work problems and emotional
problems (Frey et al. 1997).

Research has also found that the motives reported differ according to the
person’s gender. Weinman and Fishman (1995) found that economic or
financial difficulty was more likely to be attributed to males, while romantic
problems were most associated with females; this motive, however, was over-
represented for both sexes.

In summary, studies suggest that the suicides which are most likely to
attract publicity are those which: take place in a public place; involve a
celebrity; are achieved by violent means; and involve males. Furthermore,
many researchers have been highly critical of media reports, for presenting
simplistic mono-causal explanations for suicide; for sensationalising or
romanticising the act; for focusing on morbid details and for glorifying the

The way suicide is presented will influence and shape public beliefs about
suicide and suicidal behaviour. The media are recognised as an extremely
important aspect of the cultural matrix, which helps to structure our reality.
Ideas and beliefs about the causes of suicide, for example, may reveal under-
lying attitudes and stances towards people who engage in suicidal behaviour
or other self-harm. The primary concern of this paper is to explore the
meaning of suicide as articulated through newspapers. This will provide
insights into how dominant values and discourses on death and suicide are
mediated and represented. The key questions to be explored in this study
include: How do the print media construct suicide? How do newspaper
reports shape and structure our perception of ‘reality’? What implications
does this have for our understanding of suicide and our response to it, at an
individual and societal level?

Methods: Study design

The aim of the research was to explore the social construction of suicide in
Scottish newspapers. Two broadsheet newspapers and two tabloids were
scanned over a period of one year from January 1999 to January 2000 for
articles reporting suicide. This identified 191 ‘suicide stories’. These were
first quantified in terms of pre-determined categories which had been identified
as important in the literature, such as, sex, age, celebrity/non celebrity status,
methods and motives. This allowed the authors to identify consistencies and
inconsistencies with previous research.

Secondly, the analysis proceeded by examining in more detail the content
of the reports using grounded theory. The use of grounded theory to analyse
texts is uncommon. The approach is more widely employed to explore processes, that is, the complex ways in which particular beliefs and experiences influence behaviour. It is however recognised that the strategy which uses ‘constant comparisons’ and ‘theoretical sampling’ could also work very well in an examination of personal documents such as letters, photographs and diaries (Plummer 2001). Grounded theory was deemed a suitable way of exploring the way in which meaning was constructed in newspaper reports for two reasons. First, it is particularly effective for exploratory research, and there had been little research on how suicide stories were constructed in newspapers. Second, and more importantly, the inductive techniques used in grounded theory analysis were reckoned to be most effective in helping the researchers with concept development. Grounded theory was therefore adopted because it represented a coordinated, systematic but flexible approach, which enabled us to generate categories and concepts, and to identify key themes, which were firmly grounded in the data (Strauss and Corbin 1990, 1997).

Another difference between grounded theory used in conventional settings and its’ use in this study to analyse texts concerns the use of a literature review. Glaser (1992) cautions against an initial literature review. He comments that the problem with reviewing the literature in advance of the study/analysis is that it can strongly influence the researcher when they come to analyse the data. However, Strauss and Corbin (1990) differ in their approach and advocate the use of an initial review of the literature to enhance theoretical sensitivity. Our own approach is towards the latter use of the literature. Our intention, however, was not to bring categories and concepts to the study from the literature, especially since there is very little on the construction of suicide stories, but to set the study in the context of suicide research and to justify why the study should be of interest to academics and health practitioners. We believe that analysis shows that the categories which ‘emerged’ were not excessively contaminated by the review, since they point to the introduction of new literature, especially around the concepts of moral identity, attribution, blame and responsibility, etc.

In accordance with grounded theory procedures, the 191 newspaper articles were theoretically sampled. Although the use of grounded theory to analyse texts differs from adopting the approach in more conventional settings (longitudinal participant observation and in-depth interviewing), the aim of sampling was similar, that is, to develop theory. The principle of theoretical sampling is that subsequent data collection should be guided by theoretical developments that emerge in the analysis. With texts, however, category saturation could not be achieved by going back to participants and asking them to clarify/expand on their attitudes or beliefs, or by sampling for new participants based on the emergence of a new category. Instead, longer and more discursive articles depicting actual suicides were initially selected to identity as many concepts and categories as possible. Sampling continued until theoretical saturation was reached (60), that is, when no new categories could be identified from analysing further articles.
The qualitative analysis proceeded by reading and re-reading the articles. This helped to identify recurring themes and issues, which seemed of initial importance. The texts were then ‘fractured’, that is, taken to pieces using ‘open coding’. From this, pieces of data were labelled and categorised and their properties identified. Several strategies were employed to help identify categories and to elaborate them in terms of their properties. The authors were also assisted by two other researchers and one non-researcher to ensure the reliability of interpretation and coding. The strategies employed included the constant comparative method where properties (indicators) are compared and questions are asked such as, ‘what does this piece of data stand for?’, ‘what category does the piece of data indicate?’. The basis of this process lies in the concept-indicator model, which recognises that a concept has many possible empirical indicators. The aim of analysis in the concept-indicator model is to search for and compare as many indicators as possible in order to infer the concept. The researcher is thus abstracting from a piece of empirical data to a more abstract concept. A similar process takes place in grounded theory.

At the end of open coding a set of conceptual categories were generated from the data. Some of these appeared more important and recurring than others. This allowed some classification and ordering of concepts. From this the authors gained a sense of what was central in the data. The analysis then proceeded by developing a framework inductively from the data to explain how the categories were connected.

Thus, the raw data were translated into theoretical formulations through the above techniques. A specific example will serve as an illustration. We found that when newspaper reports speculated upon causes of suicide, they generated notions of abnormality, disturbance or disorder. This could relate to biological or psychological problems (physical and mental illness), or problems with social relations. This category was termed ‘dysfunction’ and was formulated as a sub-category of ‘causal searching’. Having developed these elements of a conceptual framework, we searched the literature to see what had been written about the causes of illness and death. This suggested that issues of attribution, blame, responsibility and moral identity may be important to our understanding of how suicide is represented in newspapers. We re-examined the data and found that morality was indeed central to a number of our emerging categories such as ‘causal searching’, ‘locating’, and ‘social impacting’. This is set out more fully below. The techniques of grounded theory, then, helped us to demonstrate the ways in which the texts mapped out particular versions of the social world. Through the analysis we were able to clarify the meaning of suicide conveyed in newspaper reports.

The findings

The findings are presented first in terms of the descriptive characteristics of the articles, such as celebrity/non celebrity status, method, sex, age
and motive, and secondly, in terms of the qualitative grounded theory analysis.

**Descriptive characteristics**

One hundred and ninety-one articles were identified in the study. Table 1 shows that the overwhelming majority of articles were concerned with the suicides of non celebrities (84.8 per cent) rather than celebrities (15.2 per cent). In particular, the tabloid newspapers appear especially unconcerned with celebrity suicide. The method of committing suicide was reported in 127 of the 191 reports of suicide. Hanging was the most popular method reported (46.5 per cent), followed by shooting (15 per cent), jumping from a train, bridge or building (12.6 per cent), and self-poisoning (10.2 per cent).

The sex of the person was reported in 178 articles. Table 3 shows that the reported suicides of males (72.5 per cent) outweighed those of females’ (27.5 per cent).

### Table 1 Suicide stories

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Broadsheet</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Non celebrity</td>
<td>67</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Celebrity</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 2 Method of committing suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Methods if noted</th>
<th>Broadsheet</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hanging</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>59 (46.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shooting</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>19 (15.0)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jumping from train, bridge/building</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>16 (12.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overdose/self-poisoning</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13 (10.2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carbon monoxide/gas/suffocation</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>9 (7.1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burning/Fire</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8 (6.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plane/car crash</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2 (1.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drowning</td>
<td>–</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1 (0.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>64</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>127 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

### Table 3 Sex of person committing suicide

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Broadsheet</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Men</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>68</td>
<td>129 (72.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Women</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>49 (27.5)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>178 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 4  *Age of person reported as committing suicide*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Age (years)</th>
<th>Broadsheet</th>
<th>Tabloid</th>
<th>Total (%)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Under 16</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>14 (8.3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16–29</td>
<td>45</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>80 (47.6)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30–45</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>36 (21.4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>46–59</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>30 (17.9)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60 and over</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>8 (4.8)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>83</td>
<td>85</td>
<td>168 (100)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Age was reported in 168 cases. Table 4 shows that the overwhelming majority were aged between 16–29 years (47.6 per cent), followed by those aged 30–45 years (21.4 per cent), then 46–49 years (17.9 per cent). Stories involving suicide among the young under 16 and older people of 60 years and over were far less likely to appear. However, when stories of young people (under 16) and children did appear they were far more likely to occupy greater space in the newspaper on the front page, or close to the front page, or on the centre pages. They also tended to have larger and bolder headlines.

Finally, the speculated motives for suicide are presented in Table 5. There were 107 references to motives discussed in 92 articles. In the majority of cases, suicides were presented as mono-causal. Mental and physical illness featured strongly as motives for suicide with 57 references. Twenty-five of these (23.4 per cent of the total) suggested that depression was the primary factor. Problematic social relations, such as work problems, stress and harassment, also featured fairly strongly. Finally, deviance seemed an important category with 18 instances where criminal investigation and/or other scandal were suggested as motives. Only a small minority of articles discussed more than one cause, these tended be reports which focused on children and young people, celebrities or people with serious illness.

**Qualitative findings**

Using the techniques of grounded theory a set of conceptual categories was generated from the data. These formed the basis of the framework, which shows how meaning is constructed in the more lengthy articles on suicide in newspapers. The main concepts and their presumed relationship to each other are set out below. These include visualising, locating, social impacting, causal searching and moral labelling.

*Visualising*

Suicide stories tended to be presented in a very visual way, as if they were dramas, where the reader was invited to look in on the event or to imagine it, as the following extract illustrates:
Two teenage sweethearts . . . killed themselves . . . Anne Wilson, 16, and David Maxwell, 19, . . . were found dead in a car in Exham, Yorkshire last March . . . He was found by a neighbour in the reclined front seat of his Ford Escort, which had a hosepipe leading from the exhaust. Wilson was found under a duvet in the back seat of the car . . . Three written notes and a half-empty bottle of vodka were discovered in the vehicle (Evening News 12/7/1999).

The discovery of the suicide may also be re-enacted in a visually compelling way. The following extract shows the step-by-step way the reader is led through the eyes of the narrator towards the ‘discovery’:

His fellow workers knew something was wrong when they found a series of doors leading into the unit locked. A member of staff who asked not to be named, said: ‘Because he had to be in by 2am every day he always opened the gates to the unit, but on Friday they were closed, which we thought was rather strange. One worker had keys so he opened them and then went into the main unit. When he opened the door he saw Michael’s body (Evening News 27/9/1999).
Locating
Locating the person, the body and the act featured strongly in many suicide stories. Reports make visible a web of social relationships with the person at the centre. This can be seen in the extract below.

Her son Jeffrey and her former husband’s mother found Mrs Bryson . . . Mary Bryson whose son divorced Mrs Bryson after five years of marriage is now looking after Jeffrey – whose father had a brief relationship with the boy’s mother after the separation . . . Mrs Bryson (59) believes her former daughter-in-law (Scotsman 15/9/1999).

Often the person was also located geographically, that is, we are told where they lived or grew up.
In suicide stories the body is also located. Typically the articles impress upon the reader the exact location of the body. This is shown in the following extract, which refers to the suicides of two men.

They were found hanging on either end of a rope which had been hung over a tree branch in a secluded area of the grounds of Ashpool House, the Redpathshire council offices (Herald 1/7/99).

The act may also be located in time. For example, in some cases the act is reported to have occurred after a negative life event such as the onset of illness. In other cases, it was said to have happened just before a seemingly positive life event such as a holiday. A small number of articles contextualised the suicide by locating it within the context of other broadly similar events. For example, the suicide of a person who is reported as having a drug problem might be discussed with reference to other drugs-related deaths in Scotland.
Lastly, a suicide might be located by referring to other suicides or tragic deaths, which had occurred in the same place. The following extract is from an article reporting the suicide of a 60-year-old-man in St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

It was believed to be the first suicide in Vatican grounds since May 1998, when Samuel Corday, a vice-corporal in the elite Swiss Guards shot himself after killing his commander Mr Weisman and Mr Weisman’s wife in their apartment . . . Four months earlier in January 1998, a homosexual Italian man set himself ablaze in St Peter’s Square, just outside the basilica in protest at discrimination against gays. He died ten days later (The Scotsman 27/8/1999).

Social impacting
Suicide stories typically depict how the suicide impacts upon other social actors. Family and friends are often portrayed as being overwhelmed with
grief and unable to articulate their feelings. Words such as shocked, stunned, and baffled are used to convey the emotional impact on members of the person's social network. For example:

The family and friends of a 19-year-old Glasgow University student were yesterday trying to come to terms with her suicide. Her father Robert, a fire fighter and her mother Anne who teaches at County School were too upset yesterday to talk about her death (The Scotsman 4/3/1999).

And:

We are stunned by it and we don’t have any idea why they would have done it (Herald 4/5/1999).

A little less typically, articles may also comment upon the longer-term impact upon close family and friends. These convey the ongoing nature of feelings such as vulnerability, fragility, guilt, and powerlessness. For example:

The family has been left to cope with what must be every parent’s worst nightmare. When a son or a daughter commits suicide no matter how old, the feelings of helplessness and guilt never go away (The Scotsman 21/9/1999).

Some reports focus on the reaction of onlookers, bystanders, ‘discoverers’ and the response of the emergency services. This is typically the case if the suicide has taken place in a public place. Shock and horror is the predominant way of conveying the impact upon bystanders or those who discover a suicide:

Det Chief Inspector Peter Simpson, the officer heading the investigation said: ‘It was a shocking find not only for the gentleman who was out with his dog but also for the ambulance staff who came to his assistance’ (The Scotsman 1/7/1999).

Articles depicting suicide in public places may also convey the impact on a wider group of people, for example, traffic congestion caused as a result of emergency services responding to the suicide.

Causal searching

The search for cause was a recurring theme in the more lengthy articles. Interestingly few articles referred to suicide notes. Where they are reported, most simply comment that a note was found close to the body. Occasionally,
it may also be reported that the note left no clue as to the motive for the suicide. The circumstances and factors commonly implicated in the cause of suicide were contained in explorations and descriptions of the person’s character and social relations, and centred predominantly on notions of dysfunction and deviancy. However, there appeared to be a continuum of certainty about causes, which ranged from strong speculations, to tentative implications, to causal mysteries where no reason could be found.

**Dysfunction:** The idea of dysfunction, that is, a perceived ‘abnormality’, or disturbance or disorder, featured strongly as a speculated cause of suicide. The dysfunction could relate to social, psychological or biological problems.

Explanations of suicide, which centre on problematic social relations such as work relations, interpersonal relations and community or neighbourhood relations, are seen as examples of social dysfunction. The link between social dysfunction and psychological dysfunction was typically made through a discourse of stress and depression, as can be seen in the extract below:

A 29-year-old teacher may have committed suicide because he believed he was not making enough progress with a class of ten-year-old pupils. The hearing was told by his sister that she found a letter believed to be a suicide note written by her brother, claiming he could not cope with the stress of his teaching job. . . . Mr Paterson had been off work for a month suffering from stress . . . Mr Paterson is understood to have believed that he was failing the class of ten-year-olds in his care. It is understood that he felt the class of ten-year-olds were under-achieving and he was responsible (The Scotsman 3/12/1999).

Organisational dysfunction could also be implicated as a cause or contributory factor in suicide. Typically, such reports highlight systems failures, organisational irresponsibility, and professional negligence as causing, facilitating or failing to protect the person from their suicidal behaviour. The following extracts illustrate such themes:

In an unprecedented legal action at the Court of Session, Margaret Dunbar and her teenage daughters will accuse two government bodies of negligence that contributed directly to the death of Richard Dunbar in 1993. . . . The summons alleges Dunbar’s death was ‘caused or materially contributed to’ by the negligence of the defenders in the case who failed in their duty to take reasonable care for the safety of their employee, who was suffering from a major depressive disorder (The Scotsman 3/10/1999).

At a more interpersonal level relationship problems could also be seen as a motive for suicide. In the extract below it appears along with a number of other factors leading up to the suicide:
One of the men is understood to have been recently showing signs of depression after splitting up with a girlfriend and had been drinking heavily (The Scotsman 1/7/1999).

Conflict and dysfunctional relations are often reported as characterising the final contacts of person. The following extract is from a report of an inquest into the death of a 19-year-old man:

The couple (his parents) broke down while hearing evidence of how their son's body was discovered after a night out with his girlfriend, Jenny Ross, 18, ended in a row... After an argument she had last seen him alive walking to a footpath which was a short cut to his home (The Scotsman 1/10/1999).

Other abnormal (dysfunctional) behaviour is also presented as clues to, or indicators of, later suicidal intent. In the extract below a neighbour indicates the abnormal behaviour of friends before their suicide:

She said she had noticed they were behaving strangely in the week leading up to their suicides. Mrs Lindesay said they had been shut up in the flat with the curtain drawn for most of the week. Mrs Lindesay said: ‘We heard them going about upstairs but we hardly ever saw them’ (The Scotsman 5/4/1999).

The most commonly inferred psychological reason (dysfunction) for suicide is depression. Often depression is presented to close off further speculation about cause. That is, there is a taken-for-granted assumption that that the reader will infer that depression explains the suicidal behaviour. Depression then can be represented as the hidden factor, or key, which solves the causal mystery. For example:

It is understood she had been in hospital on a number of occasions for treatment for depression in recent months (Herald 23/2/1999).

In a small minority of cases the cause of suicide is presented in a more complex way where depression is linked to a complex of factors such as bereavement, financial difficulties and illness. This is seen in the following extract about a celebrity suicide:

Police are investigating the apparent suicide of [celebrity] who was found hanged at his home. The former pop singer had suffered from depression. Friends said he had recently had money problems and was taking drugs, including the antidepressant Prozac. He had also lost his mother... (The Scotsman 17/6/1999).

Biological dysfunction, in particular the onset of chronic illness and disability, were also inferred as (understandable) reasons for suicide:
But the couple, who were both 28, did have health problems. Gordon suffered from Crohn’s Disease, a distressing condition affecting the bowel and intestines. It is understood Dorothy had recently had tests for a medical problem (Daily Record 5/4/1999).

**Deviancy:** Deviancy also appears as a factor which could be made to account for suicide. Thus, deviation from what are assumed to be shared norms and values (held by the reader) such as drug addiction, being charged with, or in prison for, a criminal offence such as murder, fraud, etc, are implicated as motives for suicide. The following extract illustrates the taken-for-granted way suicide and deviancy are linked:

One of two youths hanging from a tree in an apparent suicide pact earlier this week had been charged with attempted murder, it was revealed yesterday . . . Mr Connely did not leave a suicide note, and the revelation of his impending court appearance has cast fresh light on the possible motive behind the double suicide (The Scotsman 3/7/1999).

**Causal mysteries:** Finally, some articles might present the suicide as a causal mystery. This is particularly the case when dealing with the suicides of school students, university students or other young people who appear to be successful. Often these articles would be positioned close to the front page or on the front page. This was particularly the case in the tabloid newspapers. These articles tended to have large headlines, in some cases taking up as much as half the page. These reports are characterised by uncertainty, ambiguity, and contradiction. Commonly they suggest the person had no obvious reason to take their own life, which implies that there is something hidden or unknown. The following extract is fairly typical:

John Roberts (17) was found with gunshot wounds to his head . . . Today his family and friends were mourning a boy who was said to have no obvious reasons for taking his own life . . . Classmates said it was a mystery why John who was due to go on holiday to Cyprus with 20 friends in July, had taken his own life. They said he had no girlfriends in particular and was not stressed by approaching exams in May. . . . One 17 year old classmate said . . . ‘He had no worries that we knew of other than the everyday problems teenagers have. He got on well with his family. We knew he had a gun in the house but it was not something he talked about’ (Evening News 11/2/1999).

Often in these articles the positive personal attributes of the individual, their leisure activities, popularity, and career opportunities are presented as contradictions which render the suicidal behaviour as incomprehensible. This can be seen in the following extract depicting the death of a female university student:

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A family friend said: ‘She was a beautiful girl and very intelligent. She was involved with the army reserves and went parachuting’. Ms Anderson was a second year science undergraduate. . . Prof. Wilson said. . . ‘She was a popular student who appeared to be making the most of her university opportunities’ (The Scotsman 4/3/1999).

Similarly, health and fitness are often presented as contradictions of suicidal behaviour. The following extract relates to young man who shot himself:

Hamish was intelligent, good-looking and popular. He was a keen sportsman. He loved rugby and swam at competition level as well as working as a lifeguard (Daily Record 12/2/1999).

The causal mystery of suicide is also compounded by the notion of ‘normality’. The words of family and friends who say that the person seemed normal, was happy, seemed no different from usual when they had last seen them, add to the mystery. Thus ‘normal’ behaviour prior to suicide is presented as another contradiction.

**Moral labelling**

The final key conceptual category to be generated from the data is moral labelling. Causal searching and morality were interwoven within the reports such that speculation about causes invariably included comments on the moral character of the person. Four types of moral labelling were identified in the data. These comprise moral perfection, weakness, uncertainty and defection. Moral perfection tends to appear strongly in reports about the suicides of school students, university students or other young people who appear successful. For example:

The popular rugby player and swimmer. . . Head teacher Gordon Lansbury said: ‘John was a fine boy and a pleasure to know. He is the type of boy you would want to have as your own. John was friendly, outgoing, and full of life and enjoyed a great relationship with pupils as well as staff. He was as nice a young man as you’d ever meet’ (Evening News 11/2/1999).

The prominent positioning and headlining of articles dealing with the suicide of young people helps to convey certain messages about youth, morality, death and illness. It may be that the size and location of suicide stories in some way reflects the extent to which the behaviour is perceived as contradictory, unexpected and unaccountable. The more unexpected and contradictory the behaviour the larger, it seems, the headline and the more prominent the position. Reports, however, tend to be less prominent or eye-catching when the behaviour appears to be less contradictory, that is, if the suicide can be made accountable in the context of some form of deviancy
such as theft or drug use. For example, one report depicting the death of a woman who had ‘stalked’ a former lover merited a small column tucked away at the bottom of page 14 in a tabloid paper. The entire article is reproduced below:

Stalker is found dead (Headline)
A woman bank executive convicted of stalking a client after a drunken night together has been found dead. A court heard how Mrs Brown admitted harassment, sent a letter to Mr Wright’s parents claiming he took drugs when he spurned her marriage demands (The Evening News 24/3/199 p. 14).

More commonly, however, the person’s moral character is presented with some ambiguity. For example, they might be represented as basically good but morally weak. Perhaps they had succumbed to the temptation of money (theft or fraud), drugs, or they tried but failed to overcome addictions, or they were unable to cope with loss, trauma or illness. Typically, acts of deviancy were associated with moral weakness, such as lack of discipline, control, failure, shame and guilt. The following extract demonstrates the complex way in which the moral identity of a young man is constructed. Here, his good moral identity that is, being fit, healthy, happy, caring, and considerate and hardworking is constantly undermined by the weakness of his addiction:

He was the football playing, marathon running son of loving middle class parents. He had a job, friends, a new home to call his own. . . . But Sean Docherty also had an addiction to drugs that overshadowed the promise of his young life . . . His mother Elizabeth said ‘To me, Sean was the antithesis of a drug user. He was a fit boy, so bright and healthy and full of fun. He was just 17 when he came to us and said he was taking cannabis and speed, and I think he knew he was an addict then. With the help of Calton Athletic the Glasgow-based group which aims to rehabilitate addicts with a tough physical regime and total abstinence, Sean became clean of drugs time and time again. But it was never to last. . . . Psychologically, he simply wasn’t strong enough. Sean just didn’t feel normal when he wasn’t taking drugs, when it really should have been the other way around. And I think he had low-esteem, because he was ashamed of what his addiction was putting the family through’. After leaving school at 16, he worked as a van driver despite his drug use, and remained a warm and considerate son. His addiction never led him to steal, or get in trouble with the police (The Scotsman 3/8/1999).

The ambiguous nature of moral identity was also conveyed through the notion of guilt. Guilt is seen as a moral response to wrongdoing, and hence
suggests that the person was not ‘bad’ but weak, sick or unthinking. The following extract illustrates this:

Two families were united in grief last night after the driver of a car in which a female passenger was killed in a car crash at the weekend took his own life by running into the path of an on-coming train. Joseph Wilson, a company driver, left behind a note, expressing his remorse for the death of Mary Taylor. . . . Mr Wilson’s note indicated that he could not live with himself after the death of the young woman it is believed he befriended on the night she died (The Scotsman 21/10/1999).

Summary
In summary the analysis generated five key concepts, dramatising, locating, social impacting, causal searching and moral labelling. These are connected by means of a visual story. The suicide is typically presented in a very visual way – it is a drama which the audience (reader) is looking in upon or imagining. The scene is set where the body is located, centred and set in the context of props and people. The suicide is a dramatic, mysterious act, which, has a wide social impact. The reader pictures the scene, the discovery and the impact on friends, family and others. The person is traced through a web of social relationships. Their character is built up and speculated upon and clues are searched for to account for the act/behaviour. It is read as an unravelling mystery – a why dunnit. It assumes the reader is searching for reasons – what caused the behaviour – who or what was responsible. Dysfunction, discord, moral and psychological weakness, deviancy, crime, addiction, illness are all served up as legitimate reasons for suicidal behaviour which render it understandable or explainable. However, what appears unfathomable is suicide in the context of moral perfection and an ideal life. Yet, similarly, while these narratives state that there was ‘no obvious reason’ for the suicide they also leave the reader with an impression that something is hidden and needs to be unravelled.

Discussion
The aim of the research was to explore how suicide was socially constructed in Scottish newspapers. Specifically, we sought to explore how newspaper reports help to shape and structure ‘reality’ and what implication this might have for our understanding of, and response to, suicide.

The quantitative analysis allowed us first to compare the type and characteristics of suicide reporting in Scotland with that found internationally. Previous research has identified that the type of stories which are most likely to appear in newspapers are those which involve a male, a public figure, take place in a public space, and are achieved through violent means (Knickmeyer 1996). Although Scottish newspapers are also more likely to report male
suicides, unlike other countries (Weinmann and Fishman 1995, Frey et al. 1997), these tend to be in proportion to the ratio of male to female deaths. In 1996–98 the mean suicide rate for females and males was 157 and 456, respectively (Platt 1999), which is fairly proportional to the number of articles depicting female (49) and male suicide (129) in Scotland in 1999.

The study also confirmed that Scottish newspapers were more likely to depict suicides which adopted violent means. Hanging was most frequently reported. Hanging also accounted for a substantial proportion (44 per cent) of male suicide in 1996–98 (Platt 1999). Although hanging has been traditionally associated with males it has also increased dramatically among women to 24 per cent in 1996–98. Nevertheless, as other research has shown (Weinmann and Fishman 1995), self-poisoning which was a means adopted in 22 per cent of male suicides and 52 per cent of female suicides in 1996–98 was grossly under-reported (Platt 1999).

Unlike the commonly held assumption that media suicide stories are more likely to centre on a celebrity (Knickmeyer 1996, O’Carroll 1996), the findings show that non-celebrity suicide stories were far more likely to appear in Scottish newspapers over the time frame of this study. This was particularly so with the tabloid newspapers. It is not clear why this should be the case – it may be simply that there are more cases of non-celebrity suicides available as potential stories.

Previous research suggested that while newspapers frequently report on the circumstances and methods of suicide they were less likely to comment on the cause of suicide (Frey et al. 1997). However, cause was revealed as a major category with over 107 references made in 92 of 191 articles. A wide range of factors were implicated as causes of suicide and these were grouped under the three main categories of health issues, social relations, and of deviance. The results differed from previous research in finding that issues related to physical and mental health, and deviance such as scandal and criminal investigation were frequently suggested as causes (Weinman and Fishman 1995, Frey et al. 1997), while romantic relationship problems were a relatively unimportant category.

Grounded theory analysis went on to show how the concepts of visual dramatisation, location, causal searching, social impact and moral labelling were the key to understanding how suicide stories were socially constructed, and functioned to map out particular versions of the social world.

The suicide story was constructed in a very visually compelling way. The emphasis on visuality in newspaper reports undermines the sharp distinction that is often made between newspapers and TV where newspapers are said to contribute to the creation of reality by presenting printed versions of vocabulary and styles of expression while TV attends to oral and more visual versions (DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach 1989). The concern with visual dramatisation may also help to explain why suicides that are achieved by violent means and which take place in a public space are more likely to be reported. For they are, it could be argued, more visually compelling.
Through visualising, the reader follows discovery, locates the person, the place, the network, the impact, and speculates on causes. Research on the social organisation of death and dying has similarly found that people who ‘discover’ suicides or onlookers give vivid descriptions of the scene (Glaser and Strauss 1968, Seale 1995). Glaser and Strauss (1968) recording the reactions of ward staff to a suicide found that staff tended to describe in a step-by-step fashion their actions leading up to the ‘discovery’. They would also describe how the body was positioned, and how it appeared to them using terms such as ‘grotesque’, ‘pretty awful’. Seale (1995) in a study of friends and relatives of people dying alone commented that explanations were vivid in a cinematic way and portrayed a sense of mystery and detective-like search. Both studies suggest that the speakers needed explanations, accounts of what must have happened. Seale suggests that the reconstructions of the last moments of life were responses to the sense of dislocation and shock felt by onlookers. Thus, the similarity in approach of newspaper articles may reflect the more general way people try to deal with and account for suicide. The reconstructions in newspaper reports seem to place the reader as onlooker. The dramatisation and closeness is heightened by the reader being part of the scene in the same way as the participants in Seale’s study. This also involves them and pulls them into the story.

Causal searching was a key category within many of the discursive articles on suicide; similarly ethnographers have found the search for causes to be important in studies concerning sudden unexpected death (Glaser and Strauss 1968, Sudnow 1967, Charmaz 1976). Charmaz (1976) found that coroners employed the strategy of ‘constructing’ a death explanation when breaking the news of a death to relatives. Similarly, Glaser and Strauss (1968) observed that causation was an essential part of the story or stories staff had constructed around the death from suicide of a women in their care. They describe how each member of staff contributed something to the overall picture of what the woman was like and why she might have killed herself. This resulted in a collective story about the suicide. Similarly, in newspaper articles the reader is presented with different accounts of the person and event from various actors including relatives, friends, neighbours, onlookers, police and emergency services.

Sudnow (1967) observed in a study of death and dying in hospital that all announcements of deaths to relatives included reference to some medically relevant causal antecedent. This was the case in accidental as well as natural deaths and whether or not the doctor had any basis for assuming the likely cause of death. Sudnow comments that on no occasion did doctors give simple announcements that the person had died without qualifying it with causally relevant conditions. The doctors felt setting boundaries on the range of possibilities helped to reduce the shock of such sudden deaths and aided in the grasp of the news. Relatives were felt to need a causally portrayed version of what had happen. They needed a story of death. This may also be reflected in our findings of newspaper reports. The search for causes
aids the reader (and perhaps the writer) in grasping and digesting shocking information.

As Prior and Bloor (1993: 346) point out, however, talking about causes of death is not to provide a factual description of a chain of events, but rather to ‘integrate the existence of death into a culturally structured system of representations’. Such representations provide frameworks and resources for thinking about causation. They remind us that in Western societies the dominant representations through which we understand life and death are based upon scientific medicine. The meaning of cause has been central to scientific medicine and the system of representations it embodies can be seen to be mediated and reflected in the media. For just as the medical model is concerned with ‘abnormal’ functioning as the cause (and indicator) of disease, so the search for causes in newspapers is focused upon abnormality, disturbance and dysfunction in social relations, psychological and biological functioning as plausible causes of suicide. Bloor and Prior (1993) in their examination of death certificates point out that death is always represented as the product of a pathology, an abnormality or disease which is in some way evident in the person’s body. Likewise, speculation about the causes of suicide in newspapers direct the readers towards some form of abnormality, deviance or dysfunction in their lives or puzzlement that none exists. In death certificates death is seen as a singular event that exists as part of a sequence. Prior (1989) stresses that the doctor is required to determine a causal sequence for the death and to unravel the relative importance of the respective factors caught up in the causal network. They will try to cite one disease process that either precedes or determines the sequence of other such processes. This sequencing of events was also apparent in many newspaper reports of suicide where for example problems at work or with other social relations were commented upon as leading to stress which led to depression and so on. Prior (1989) points out, however, that death certificates highlight the view that although human beings die from many causes at once, it is always possible to isolate a single cause that precipitates death. This also appears to be the case in newspaper articles, which are often criticised for presenting the motive for suicide as mono-causal.

The categories of locating, causal searching and social impact were linked to the notion of morality. For example, locating the person and searching for causes through the words of friends, relatives and colleagues were intricately interwoven with assessing the moral character of the person. Studies of lay beliefs and chronic illness have also found that cause, responsibility and blame for illness are consistently related to ideas about moral identity (Blaxter 1993, Pollock 1993, Mullen 1994).

The findings revealed an inverse relationship between moral identity and cause. The more moral, healthy and competent a person is portrayed the more difficult it is to find a reason for their suicide, while the suicide of someone who is portrayed as less morally sound is more readily explainable. Their suicide could be explained or at least was understandable in terms
of deviancy and abnormal relations, conflicts, failure, shame, guilt, illness, depression and crime.

Simultaneously, however, the identification of social, psychological and biological dysfunction or suggesting causal mystery may illustrate a generalised discomfort in attributing responsibility to the individual for their suicide. Studies of lay beliefs have also found that people are generally uncomfortable with attributing responsibility to individuals, especially for serious life-threatening conditions (Blaxter and Paterson 1982, Mullen 1994). Conditions such as cancer are often associated with ill fortune or simply chance, rather than individual behaviour. In a similar way, in newspaper articles the concept of dysfunction was a means by which the individual could be held as less responsible for their behaviour. If the suicide happened in the wake of serious illness (biological dysfunction) or after the wrongdoing of others (social dysfunction), then they might not be held as so morally responsible for their actions.

Healthy persons engaging in suicidal behaviour were presented as a paradox. This may be because health itself has been taken as an indicator of morality and success. Crawford (1984) argues that people’s concern about being ‘healthy’ in Western society represents a perceived prerequisite for autonomy and competence, which underpins success and achievement in capitalist society. To Williams (1993) it is not so much health itself that is seen as virtuous, but the self-disciplined activity which produces it. The presence of health reflects self-discipline, correct conduct, will power and virtue, while its absence is a sign of indiscipline, gluttony and sloth. The paradox then is how could self-discipline, virtue and will power have ended in suicide?

The metaphors of ‘fighting illness’, ‘not lying down to illness’, or overcoming adversity, recur frequently in lay accounts of health and illness (Blaxter and Paterson 1982, Calnan 1987, Robinson 1990, Pollock 1993). Self-responsibility for managing illness and fighting disease has been found to be particularly strong among people suffering from chronic conditions (Robinson 1990, Pollock 1993). What was important was not so much apportioning blame and responsibility but assessing the moral character of the person, through his or her response to illness. This suggests that ‘overcoming adversity’ or ‘fighting the illness’ constitute strong culturally sanctioned ways of talking about illness and untoward life events.

Thus, the findings, which show how suicidal behaviour was explained in terms of ‘moral weakness’ such as people succumbing to temptation, not being strong enough to cope with life’s problems, lacking self discipline and self control, experiencing shame and guilt, is consistent with political and social traditions of individualism and self responsibility in Western society.

Studies of lay beliefs also show that responsibility to maintain health is regarded not only as a duty to oneself but to other people, families, wider society and even a higher authority (God) (Blaxter and Paterson 1982, Blaxter 1990, Mullen 1994). Women have commented on a moral duty to maintain their health or manage their illness in order to care for and nurture other family
members (Hughes et al. 1980, Blaxter and Paterson 1982, Graham 1985). The concept of morality then also helps to explain why categories such as tracing social networks and detailing social impact were important in nearly all articles. For the person has failed both in their duty to others to remain fit and healthy and they have caused pain and suffering to others. Thus the moral wrongfulness of the act becomes apparent in the context of a predominantly Judeo-Christian culture which is underpinned by individualism and altruism.

Thus, the pre-existing view that suicide is morally wrong and could only be ‘committed’ by ‘deviant’ or ‘weak’ people, or in the context of other deviant behaviour, is subtly present in many newspaper articles about suicide. This may help to explain why, when given the opportunity, relatives and friends are concerned to establish the moral identity of the person through the reports.

DeFleur and Ball-Rokeach (1989) suggested that one way the media can influence meaning is to stabilise existing conventions through reinforcing existing usage. In this study the findings show how newspapers helped to stabilise the meanings of suicide by reinforcing existing and pre-existing usages around the concept of morality.

The actual impact that suicide stories in Scottish newspapers have on public attitudes towards suicide is still to be examined. But, studies of the media and mental illness show that the media may play a powerful role in structuring how the public perceive and respond to those engaging in what is perceived as suicidal behaviour.

Philo et al. (1994) carried out an audience reception study in which participants were invited to comment upon episodes of popular soap operas depicting characters with mental illnesses. The attitudes of the majority of participants (two-thirds) were found to be strongly influenced by negative stereotypes (such as being violent, ‘mad’, ‘psycho’ or ‘manic’). Moreover, these respondents said they felt extremely hostile towards the female character and suggested they would act violently or aggressively toward her. However, media reporting of suicide cannot be said to be ‘inaccurate’ in the same way as Philo et al’s study of mental illness, since the reports seem quite close to ‘professional’ explanations and statistics (in Scotland). Rather, they seem to mediate a culturally-structured system of representations about suicide which influences and is influenced by medical, psychological and ‘common sense’ explanations of death. These include the interweaving of such themes as dysfunction, deviancy, morality, and weakness with suicide. Through analysing newspaper reports of suicide, we hope we have generated sensitising concepts which can complement other more quantitative research, and help us understand more fully how suicide is perceived and responded to.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study has provided insights into how dominant values and discourses on suicide, illness and death are mediated and represented in
Scottish newspapers. Morality was the key concept, which helped to explain why some suicides were rendered understandable and why others were inexplicable. Suicide was understandable in the context of deviancy, social, psychological and biological dysfunction, and was explainable with reference to moral weakness. Suicide was mysterious and unaccountable when none of these factors came into play. The concept of morality also helped us to understand through the social impact of an individual suicide why locating the person in their social network, and detailing the impact were such recurring themes in many articles.

How suicide stories are constructed has important implications for how suicide is understood and responded to. It tells us that there are certain factors and contexts in which suicide is understandable, and therefore implicitly suggests that there are legitimate reasons for suicide. Suicide becomes explicable in the context of deviant acts, criminal investigations, trials, fraud, theft, murder, and/or the context of social, psychological or biological dysfunction – illness, depression, rows and conflict. These then may be searched for, or implied when no other reasons can be found. These hidden factors, flaws or weaknesses may even explain the seemingly unsolvable mysteries. The suicide story is only one way of mapping reality. However, by de-constructing it we can learn how it constrains our understanding of suicide and the actions adopted in response to it.

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Note

1 All names in this and subsequent quotes have been changed to prevent further attention being drawn to actual suicides.

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