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## The role of language in suicide reporting: Investigating the influence of problematic suicide referents

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### ABSTRACT

**Background:** Although suicide experts recommend using neutral suicide referents in news media reporting, this recommendation has not yet been tested empirically. This recommendation, based on the empirically yet untested assumption that problematic suicide referents carry meaning that is inappropriate from a prevention perspective, may lead to a different perspective on suicide, termed “framing effects.” For example, in German-speaking countries, the neutral term *Suizid* (suicide) is recommended. Conversely, *Freitod* (“free death”) and *Selbstmord* (“self-murder”) convey associative meanings related to problematic concepts such as free will (*Freitod*) and crime/murder (*Selbstmord*), and are therefore not recommended.

**Method:** Using a web-based randomized controlled trial focused on German speakers ( $N = 451$ ), we tested whether the news media's use of *Suizid*, *Selbstmord*, and *Freitod* elicits framing effects. Participants read identical news reports about suicide. Only the specific suicide referents varied depending on the experimental condition. Post-reading, participants wrote short summaries of the news reports, completed a word-fragment completion test and a questionnaire targeting suicide-related attitudes.

**Results:** We found that the news frame primed some frame-related concepts in the memory and also increased frame-related word choice. Importantly, we found that participants reading the free will-related *Freitod* frame showed greater attitudinal support for suicide among individuals suffering from incurable diseases.

**Conclusions:** This study highlights the importance of how the news media write about suicide and supports the language recommendations put forward by suicide experts.

### 1. Introduction

Suicide is one of the leading causes of death worldwide (Wasserman and Wasserman, 2009). Approximately 800,000 persons die from suicide each year, which is more than one suicide per minute (World Health Organization [WHO], 2017b). The media are considered a key factor in suicide prevention (Cheng et al., 2014; Cheng and Yip, 2012; Mann et al., 2005; Niederkrotenthaler et al., 2014; Phillips, 1974; Stack, 2005). Therefore, media guidelines have been developed to increase responsible reporting on suicide (Bohanna and Wang, 2012; Pirkis et al., 2006; WHO, 2017a) and have been shown to effectively improve the quality of actual suicide reporting (Niederkrotenthaler and Sonneck, 2007; Scherr et al., 2016). A specific and important element of these guidelines is the use of neutral language. For example, some guidelines recommend using the phrase “fatal suicide attempt” instead of “successful suicide” (e.g., WHO, 2017a). Yet, in terms of logical reasoning, the two phrases are interchangeable and provide the same

information (see Kahneman, 2011). However, both phrases convey different associative meanings that may lead to different interpretations of the event: It is likely that different thoughts get activated when news users read about a “successful suicide” or a “fatal suicide attempt.” This may influence how individuals perceive suicide.

This phenomenon has been intensively addressed by framing research (Entman, 1993; Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007). Framing effects describe the phenomenon whereby specific aspects of an event or issue will be more salient than other aspects when particularly stressed in a news message so that a specific problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, or treatment recommendation will be promoted in the minds of the audience of that message (Entman, 1993). Thus, journalists reporting on suicide select, accentuate, or exclude aspects of the respective suicide that may evoke a specific, and sometimes, a substantially constricted, perspective on suicide (see Scheufele and Tewksbury, 2007).

Previous research outside the domain of suicide prevention provides

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evidence that even single words can elicit substantial framing effects. Using a randomized controlled trial, [Simon and Jerit \(2007\)](#) tested framing effects in the context of the so-called partial-birth abortion debate on a law prohibiting a form of late-term abortion. Participants read a news article describing the partial-birth abortion law. The experimental treatment condition featured a manipulated *New York Times* article. Authors used different versions of this article: The different versions were identical except for one global substitution. In the “fetus” condition of the experiment, the word “fetus” appeared 16 times throughout the article. Conversely, in the “baby” condition, the word “baby” substituted all instances in which “fetus” was used. After reading the newspaper article, participants were asked to summarize the news article using their own words and to complete some other measures, including their attitudes toward partial-birth abortion. The study revealed two important findings: First, participants reading articles in which the term “fetus” was used also employed the word “fetus” more often in their own summary writings immediately after having read the story. Interestingly, the same pattern emerged for the use of “baby” in the second condition. Hence, even simple manipulations such as replacing the term “fetus” with “baby” activate different associative networks in the memory that apparently influence subsequent information processing and reproduction. Second, the differently framed news stories influenced the participants’ attitudinal support for partial-birth abortion. In fact, respondents allocated to the “fetus” condition were significantly more likely to support partial-birth abortion, which may be explained by the more technical, colder, and less empathy-arousing term “fetus”—in contrast to framing abortion as an act to end the life of an unborn baby.

This framing effect indicates that even a simple word substitution can affect participants’ behaviors and expressed attitudes toward a societal issue. The broader framing literature also shows that different perspectives on and interpretations of the same phenomenon may actually persuade audiences (see [Arendt and Matthes, 2014](#); [Ludolph and Schulz, 2015](#)).

### 1.1. Effects of problematic suicide referents

In the German language, the suicide referents *Freitod* and *Selbstmord* are generally considered problematic and media guidelines recommend not using them; instead, the neutral term *Suizid* is recommended ([Tomandl et al., 2008](#)). *Freitod* (English: “free death”) conveys associative meanings related to the concept of free will and rational decision making, whereas *Selbstmord* (English: “self-murder”) refers to crime, which can be explained by religion-laden, moral interpretations of suicides ([Tomandl et al., 2008](#)). Although the terms *Suizid*, *Selbstmord*, and *Freitod* refer to the same type of event, the terms convey different associative meanings. Of interest, *Freitod* conveys associative meanings whereby humans can freely and rationally choose from several behavioral options, which may prove problematic.

In fact, research has shown that individuals in a suicidal crisis exhibit an emotional and intellectual narrowing, thus hardly lending support to the free-will and rational-choice assumptions ([Sonneck et al., 2012](#)). According to [Shneidman \(1987\)](#), when in a suicidal crisis this perceptual state can be understood as a “transient psychological constriction of affect and intellect” (p. 170). Related to this issue is the fact that a suicidal person’s cognitive state represents a state of ambivalence ([Shneidman, 1987](#)). For example, a suicidal individual may make suicide plans and, at the same time, hope to get rescued by others. Thus, research indicates that suicidal individuals are in a special, constricted condition that does not support the “free” and “rational decision” argument.

**The psychological mechanism behind framing effects.** Each time our brain encodes, for example, the term *Freitod* in a news report, our brain reactivates the neural representations of this concept (i.e., suicide) in the memory. In addition, the brain—as “associative machinery” ([Kahneman, 2011](#), p. 363, p. 363)—also reactivates concepts that are

mentally linked to the target concept. These include attributes that link suicide with being painful, negative, or irreversible, but can also be attributes linked to aspects such as freedom, self-determination, and the relief of pain. Mental associations between concepts are strengthened by the simultaneous activation of concepts ([Greenwald et al., 2002](#)). Therefore, when news consumers are repeatedly exposed to specific suicide referents such as *Freitod*, associative meanings that are conveyed with this specific referent (e.g., free will, rational, heroic) will become more salient in their mind, and therefore, will become more tightly associated with the target concept (i.e., suicide). Stated differently, after reading a news article in which suicide is repeatedly framed in a specific way, the news content will prime (i.e., reactivate) the reader’s mental concepts related to the frame. This may influence subsequent suicide-related thinking, feelings, and behaviors. Importantly, previous research suggests that activated associations can influence human behavior, even when they occur outside of conscious awareness ([Bargh et al., 1996](#)).

### 1.2. Previous research on suicide referents

There is a lack of empirical evidence regarding framing effects in the suicide domain. To our knowledge, there is only one study investigating news framing (but not framing effects) in the context of suicide prevention. [Arendt \(2017\)](#) conducted a content analysis of German-speaking suicide coverage using data from the period 2004–2016. The study also investigated how often the public used the terms for information-seeking via Google’s search engine. The latter was used as an indicator of the popularity of a given suicide referent within a given period, acting as an indicator of the public’s use of the terms. Analyses revealed that *Selbstmord* was the most frequently used term in the news and by the public. Of interest, the use of the neutral term *Suizid* in both the news and by the public has increased in recent years, nearly approaching the *Selbstmord* level. Importantly, the highly problematic term *Freitod* has also been regularly used. Although it is important to note that the use of *Freitod* was at a low level (compared to the other two terms), the regular and ongoing use of this specific term was deemed to be particularly problematic.

### 1.3. Hypotheses and the research question

There is a lack of causal evidence regarding framing effects. The question is whether news reporting using a specific suicide referent causally influences readers’ suicide-related thinking and behavior. We hypothesized that reading news reports using a specific frame would prime this frame in the reader’s mind, as indicated by a standard word-fragment completion test (Hypothesis 1) and that it would influence the reader’s word choice in a subsequent writing task (Hypothesis 2). Furthermore, given the lack of empirical work, we asked whether reading different frames would influence suicide-related attitudes (Research Question 1). Thus, we particularly focused on the term *Freitod*. As outlined above, the associative meaning related to rational and free decision making in suicidal individuals is particularly problematic.

## 2. Method

We conducted a web-based randomized controlled trial testing the effects of different suicide referents.

### 2.1. Participants

In total, 451 individuals who enrolled via a non-commercial online access panel ([Leiner, 2012](#); see details on the process below) represent the sample of the present study. Of this total, 48.1% were female. The participants ranged in age from 18 to 85 ( $M = 46.37$ ,  $SD = 15.73$ ). Among the participants, 16.4% indicated that they had no high school

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