

Reporting distorts realities of suicide and gender roles

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Suicide and gender roles: reporting distorts reality. Credit: Fotolia

Men angry and rejected, women sociable and mentally ill - a current study by the MedUni Vienna demonstrates that these gender stereotypes prevail when Austrian daily newspapers report on suicide. This has far-reaching consequences.

When it comes to [suicidal behaviour](#), there is a clear gender paradox: the ratio of men to women who actually commit [suicide](#) is three to one, but with attempted suicides it is exactly the opposite - three women for every one man. A study by the MedUni Vienna which has recently been published in the highly respected journal *Sex Roles* demonstrates that the

cultural script that bears partial responsibility for this is also found in the reports by Austrian daily newspapers.

These gender-specific differences are made visible by the formulation, the nature and frequency of reported suicide motives. Articles about suicide in women focus more on sociability, relationships with other people and motives that are anchored in the family environment. Psychiatric illnesses are also cited as a motive and are described in a stigmatising manner. More complex language and cautious expressions are also the hallmarks of articles about female suicide. In contrast, the articles about male suicide use more words that relate to anger and rejection. This conservative role image that pervades Austria anyway is reinforced by this style of reporting.

Suicide risk could be reduced by changing the style of reporting

But that's not all. A very specific problem arises from this, which study leader Brigitte Eisenwort from the University Department of Paediatrics and Adolescent Medicine at the MedUni Vienna explains as follows: "Mental illnesses are described in a stigmatising way and are also generally under-represented, since they are barely mentioned at all in reports about suicidal men. This means that one key approach to prevention fails to register in the minds of Austrian readers. Psychiatric illnesses can be treated. The [suicide risk](#) can be reduced as a result." Journalists should therefore take care to present as correct a view as possible of suicidal tendencies and not revert to stereotypical portrayals of men and women.

Spotlight on eleven Austrian daily newspapers

507 articles containing the word 'suicide' from eleven Austrian daily

newspapers from between 1997 and 2005 were investigated. The study is one of the first investigations to look comprehensively at the subject of gender-specific patterns in the reporting of suicide. This groundbreaking study was set up under the leadership of Brigitte Eisenwort, together with Thomas Niederkrotenthaler and Benedikt Till (both from the Institute for Social Medicine at the MedUni Vienna's Centre for Public Health), as well as Barbara Hinterbuchinger from the University Department of Psychiatry and Psychotherapy at the MedUni Vienna.

More information: The complete study is available online:
link.springer.com/article/10.1007%2Fs11199-014-0395-3#page-1

Provided by Medical University of Vienna

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