



# Understanding the Stigma of Suicide

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# Our Goal

- To explore the stigma of suicide using a community-based participatory research approach
  - Examine the difference between stigma of suicide and stigma of mental illness
  - Develop a suicide stigma measure



# Critiques of Current Suicide Measures

- Some measures examine attitudes towards suicide, ie- acceptability, risk (see Kodaka et al. 2011 for review) rather than stigma
- Inconsistent factor structure for other measures (Anderson et al., 2008)
- Past measures not developed by those with personal suicide experiences or using community-based participatory research (Batterham et al., 2013)
- Past measures do not address family stigma or differentiate between those who attempt and those die by suicide



# Community-Based Participatory Research Team

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Stan Lewy, Suicide Prevention Association

Debbie Major, Catholic Charities

Jessica Mead, Catholic Charities

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Megghun Redmon, Suicide Prevention Services of  
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# Methods

- Developed interview guides with CBPR team
- Focus groups with 62 individuals:
  - Attempt Survivors (n=26)
  - Loss Survivors (n=26)
  - Providers (n=10)
- Asked about stereotypes, prejudice and discrimination experienced/encountered by these stakeholders



# Demographics of Focus Groups

- 31 participants (50%) reported contemplating suicide, 28 (45%) reported attempting suicide, 24 (39%) had lost family member to suicide
- 48% female, 52% male

Race/Ethnicity	Number	Percentage
White	22	35%
Black	21	34%
Other	4	6%
Hispanic	6	10%



# Qualitative Analysis

- Coded transcripts from 7 focus groups
- Generated 322 independent items (153 items relating to stereotypes for people who attempt/die by suicide, 37 for families)
- Combined these into themes



# RESULTS FOR THOSE WHO ATTEMPT OR DIE BY SUICIDE

# Qualitative Themes for Those Who Attempt Suicide or Die by Suicide

## Personal Characteristic Stereotypes

Cowardly	<b>Contagious</b>	<b>Malingering</b>
Incompetent	Dangerous	Non-compliant
Untrustworthy	Malicious	Beyond help
Unintelligent	Attention-seeking	<b>Not religious</b>
A loner	Selfish	Immoral
<b>A failure</b>	Stubborn	<b>Possessed</b>
Emotionally weak	Impulsive	<b>Honorable/ Strong-willed</b>



# Qualitative Themes for Those Who Attempt Suicide or Die by Suicide

Environmental Attribution Stereotypes	Sample Response
The person was feeling hopeless	"had no reason to live"
The person was traumatized	"trauma background"
The person had low social resources	"no support from others"
The person became overwhelmed	"in a corner they couldn't get out of"
The person had a physical illness	"has terminal illness"
The person had a mental illness	"depressed," "sick," "crazy"
The person had a drug or alcohol problems	"drunk"
The person genuinely wanted/needed help	Suicide attempt was "cry for help"



# Qualitative Themes for Those Who Attempt Suicide or Die by Suicide

Prejudice and Discrimination	Example
Mistrust	Not allowed to care for children, "false hovering" "under a microscope"
Fear	Providers afraid to treat people who express suicidal ideation, fear suicide will "rub off"
Anger	Frustration, annoyance
Avoidance	Ignored, cut off, tip-toe around subject, providers refuse treatment
Coercion	Hospitalized, restrict dangerous objects
Rejection	Criticized, shamed, fired
Institutional	Employment discrimination



# How are stereotypes about those who attempt different from those who die by suicide?

- Those who die by suicide are viewed more with:
  - Reverence, sorrow or glorification
- Those who attempt but don't die are seen as
  - Attention-seeking/ dramatic
  - Manipulative
  - Having a personality disorder
  - Non-compliant
  - Feared
  - Contagious



HOW DOES THE STIGMA OF  
SUICIDE OVERLAP WITH STIGMA  
OF MENTAL ILLNESS?

# Model of Mental Illness Stigma

	Public Stigma	Self-Stigma	Label Avoidance
Stereotype	People with mental illness are dangerous	I am <b>aware</b> of the stereotype that people with mental illness are incompetent	People with mental illness are "lunatics"
Prejudice	I agree that people with mental illness are dangerous and I'm afraid	I <b>agree</b> with the stereotype and apply to myself	I'm afraid to be labeled as a "lunatic"
Discrimination	I don't want to live next to someone with a mental illness	Why try to get a job	I won't tell anyone that I get treatment for depression



# Mental Illness Stigma Components (from Attribution Questionnaire)

- Pity
- Dangerousness
- Fear
- Blame
- Segregation
- Anger
- Help
- Avoidance
- Coercion



# How is the stigma of suicide similar to the stigma of mental illness?

- Incompetent/Unintelligent/Untrustworthy
- Emotionally weak
- Dangerous
- Contagious
- Socially Isolated
  
- Prejudice & Discrimination:
  - Mistrust, fear, anger, avoidance, coercion, rejection



# Self-Stigma and Label Avoidance

- Self-Stigma
  - Self-isolate, feel like a burden to others, feel guilt, imagine gossip
- Label Avoidance
  - Keep attempts or loved ones' death secret from children, grandchildren, employers, partners, significant others



# Suicide-specific Stereotypes

- Selfishness
- Attention-seeking
- Malicious
- Cowardly
- Honorable
- Failure
- Not religious
- Impulsive
- Malingering



# RESULTS FOR LOSS SURVIVORS (FAMILIES)



# Qualitative Findings on Loss Survivors

Stereotypes	Examples
The family caused the suicide or attempted suicide	It was a dysfunctional family; There was chaos in the family; Family is "off"
The family was in denial about the person's mental state	Family members didn't see it coming; Families can't accept that person needed help
The family failed to provide sufficient help	Family members were too preoccupied or self-obsessed to respond to the person's needs.
Family members are contaminated by suicide	Family members also have a mental illness; Suicide is a generational curse.
Family members are victims of the person who attempted or died by suicide	Children (of those who die by suicide) are damaged, "screwed up" or hopeless
The family is harboring a secret	The family are good actors; The family looks normal from the outside.
Family members are strong	Family members have extraordinary strength to endure loved ones suicide



# Qualitative Findings on Loss Survivors

Prejudice and Discrimination Themes	Examples
Shunning	Church won't allow funerals; Acquaintances avoid in the grocery aisle; Parents won't let children come to the house
Shushing	Survivors are told to not talk about it and to "keep it in the family"
Community gossip	Neighbors whisper and talk behind back.
Community impatience	Others tell the loss survivor to "get over it" and "move on"
Denial of support	Support groups for family members are scarce
Family contaminated by mental illness	Family member over-observed after loss of loved one; Employers super-critical



# Implications

- Attempt survivors and loss survivors perceive stigma related to suicidal acts, including:
  - Public stigma
  - Self-stigma
  - Label avoidance
  - Prejudice and discrimination



# Implications

- This stigma of suicide consists of themes similar to those of mental illness, but also contains unique content
- Consequently, attempt survivors could be subject to double stigma which impedes recovery and access to care
- Stigmatization of loss survivors may exacerbate grieving process and limit opportunities for support



## Next Steps

- We are currently in the process of testing the full list of stereotypes in a sample from the general public.
- We hope to explore which stereotypes are most highly-endorsed by the public and compare the public's stereotypes of those who attempt versus those who die by suicide
- Quantitatively analyze family stigma concepts



# Quantitative Survey on Stereotypes

- The purpose of this study is to explore stereotypes about suicide. Stereotypes are the public's beliefs about a group of people. For example, a negative stereotype about the Irish is that they are drunks. Although you may not agree that Irish are drunks, you are probably aware of this stereotype from your life experiences. Stereotypes may include positive descriptions as well as negative (Ex- Irish are lucky).

In this survey, we are NOT asking for your personal beliefs; rather, we are seeking your insight into beliefs and opinions of the **general public**.

- For this section, please identify whether each of the following are stereotypes about people who die by ("commit") suicide.
- The public believes that people who die by suicide are....



# Preliminary Quantitative Data

## People Who Die By Suicide

Item	Mean
Depressed	4.52
In need of help	4.34
Unable to handle pressure	4.28
Suffering	4.25
Mentally Ill	4.24
Unable to solve their problems	4.2
Always feeling depressed	4.18
Weak	4.16
In pain	4.14
Alienated from others	4.13

## People Who Attempt Suicide

Item	Mean
Depressed	4.59
In need of help	4.41
Mentally ill	4.33
Weak	4.3
Unable to handle pressure	4.27
Unable to solve their problems	4.27
Always feeling depressed	4.25
Suffering	4.24
Selfish	4.24
Irrational	4.2

(Likert 1-5, 5= Strongly agree)

# 10 Most Highly Endorsed Stereotypes

People Who Die By Suicide	
Item	Mean
Heroic	1.47
Strong	1.47
Able to cope with problems	1.52
Powerful	1.54
Courageous	1.56
Honorable	1.57
Strong-willed	1.67
Dutiful	1.81
Understandable	1.96
Terrorists	2

People Who Attempt Suicide	
Item	Mean
Heroic	1.49
Courageous	1.5
Powerful	1.51
Strong	1.56
Honorable	1.6
Able to cope with problems	1.66
Strong-willed	1.69
Dutiful	1.83
Terrorists	1.92
Contagious	2.02

(Likert 1-5, 5= Strongly agree)

# 10 Least Endorsed Stereotypes

Questions?





# References

- Anderson, A. L., Lester, D., & Rogers, J. R. (2008). A psychometric investigation of the Suicide Opinion Questionnaire. *Death Studies*, 32, 924-936.
- Batterham, P. J., Calear, A. L. & Christensen, H. (2013). *Crisis*, 34(1), 13-21. doi: 10.1027/0227-5910/a000156
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