The Effect of Country Music on Suicide*

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Abstract

This article assesses the link between country music and metropolitan suicide rates. Country music is hypothesized to nurture a suicidal mood through its concerns with problems common in the suicidal population, such as marital discord, alcohol abuse, and alienation from work. The results of a multiple regression analysis of 49 metropolitan areas show that the greater the airtime devoted to country music, the greater the white suicide rate. The effect is independent of divorce, southernness, poverty, and gun availability. The existence of a country music subculture is thought to reinforce the link between country music and suicide. Our model explains 51% of the variance in urban white suicide rates.

Sociological work on the relationship between art and society has been largely restricted to speculative, sociohistorical theories that are often mutually opposed. Some theorists see art as creating social structure (Adorno 1973), while Sorokin (1937) suggests that society and art are manifested in cyclical autonomous spheres; and still others contend that art is a reflection of social structure (Albrecht 1954). Little empirical work has been done on the impact of music on social problems. While some research has linked music to criminal behavior (Singer, Levine & Jou 1990), the relationship between music and suicide remains largely unexplored. Music is not mentioned in reviews of the literature on suicide (Lester 1983; Stack 1982, 1990b); instead, the impact of art on suicide has been largely restricted to analyses of television movies and soap operas (for a review, see Stack 1990b).

In this article, we explore the link between a particular form of popular music (country music) and metropolitan suicide rates. We contend that the themes found in country music foster a suicidal mood among people already at risk of suicide and that it is thereby associated with a high suicide rate. The effect is buttressed by the country subculture and a link between this subculture and a racial status related to an increased suicide risk.

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The Explanatory Scheme

Music can directly affect psychological moods, which often are a contributing factor in suicide (e.g., Asmus 1985). To the extent that the audience of a particular type of music forms a subculture — a group that holds special values and beliefs and that interacts recurrently — the impact of music on mood and behavior can be multiplied (Gross 1990). We suggest that country music fans form a subculture that reinforces a suicidal mood conveyed in the themes of country music. The subculture is pulled together by such shared traits as mode of dress, taste in music, radio stations listened to, concerts attended, and a value attributed to rural life-styles; some evidence suggests a certain degree of subcultural support for racial and gender inequality as well (e.g., Peterson 1991).

Country music fans constitute a national subculture bearing some relationship to social class and region. As Peterson and DiMaggio (1975) point out, country music has diffused beyond an audience of the southern, rural, lower class, capturing the imaginations of the working and lower middle classes (Peterson 1991). It has diffused out of the South as well. Furthermore, the country music audience is still disproportionately white (Peterson 1991; Peterson & DiMaggio 1975). Whites have a suicide rate double that of blacks, who tend to externalize aggression (Henry & Short 1954). Audience receptiveness (Blumer 1969) to suicidogenic problems such as alcohol abuse or marital discord is fairly high among country music's white audience: whites have a relatively high suicide rate and tend to internalize aggression when frustrated.

Content analyses of country songs note a number of suicidogenic themes that can foster suicide (e.g., Lewis 1989; Peterson 1991). One such theme is disharmony between the sexes, especially marital strife and dissolution (Chandler & Chalfant 1985; Lewis 1989). In a content analysis of 1,400 hit country songs, Rogers (1989) found that nearly three-fourths had the travails of love as at least one of their themes. Given a link between marital breakdown and suicide (e.g., Stack 1990a), this country music theme might nurture a preexisting suicidal mood. Furthermore, the same songs often contained other references to social problems that might serve as additional points of identification (Peterson 1991).

Country music may nurture suicide through its theme of alcohol abuse (Chalfant & Beckley 1977; Connors & Alpher 1989; Schaefer 1988). Lyrics often portray drinking as a normal and necessary method of dealing with life's problems (Chalfant & Beckley 1977). Field research on drinking behavior has linked exposure to country music to increased levels of consumption of alcohol (Schaefer 1988). Alcohol consumption, in turn, has often been associated with increased suicide risk (e.g., Wasserman 1989).

Additional themes in country music that might nurture a suicidal mood include financial strain and exploitation at work (Peterson 1991). Often a sense of fatalism or hopelessness is conveyed in these songs. Hopelessness is considered a key psychological state underlying suicide risk (Beck et al. 1985). A sense of bitterness and hopelessness pervades many country songs about

farmers, for example. Singing of a man whose farm has been auctioned off, the Nitty Gritty Dirt Band notes: "Worked this place all my life, broke my heart, took my wife. Now I got nothing to show" (Peterson 1991:8).

More generally, many country songs have addressed and continue to chronicle the lonesome and often abusive features of life among the lower socioeconomic classes (Schaefer 1988). Alfred Reed's "How Can a Man Stand Such Things and Live?" suggests a connection between suicide and impoverishment. Billy Hill's 1989 hit, "There's Too Much Month at the End of the Money," reflects the same problems of financial strain that have been dealt with in decades of country songs (Peterson 1991). However, financial strain is also felt among the working and middle classes in terms of relative deprivation. Persons in these classes may also identify with the financial strains of the poor in country songs.

Identification with exploitation at work can also cut across class lines. Country songs often use long-distance truckers as an illustration of such exploitation, but truckers are not technically part of the official poverty class. In Dave Dudley's "Six Days on the Road," for example, truckers are portrayed as enduring all kinds of dangers and alienating working conditions — long hours, pep pills, evading police, violating load limit restrictions, fatigue — all in a desperate effort to meet loan payments on their rigs. (For further discussion, see Peterson 1991.)[1]

Through connecting with suicidogenic conditions and moods of the suicidal population, country music may increase suicide risk. Country music per se is not expected to drive people to suicide. But, given the existence of an organized country subculture, the risk of suicide is enhanced. Since country music appeals disproportionately to whites (e.g., Peterson 1991; Peterson & DiMaggio 1975), we anticipate that the relationship between suicide and music will be stronger for whites than for blacks.

Methodology

Our sample is comprised of 49 large metropolitan areas for which data on music were available. Exposure to country music is measured as the proportion of radio airtime devoted to country music (as opposed to other forms of music, such as rock and classical). The data are from the *Radio and Records Rating Report and Directory, Spring 1985.*

Suicide data were extracted from the annual Mortality Tapes, obtained from the Inter-University Consortium for Political and Social Research (ICPSR) at the University of Michigan. The dependent variable is the number of suicides per 100,000 population. Rates are calculated for both whites and blacks (e.g., the white suicide rate refers to the number of white suicides per 100,000 whites). It would also be desirable to calculate suicide rates by social class and by urban vs. rural location to test the massification (of country music) thesis as it applies to these variables (Peterson & DiMaggio 1975), but such data are unavailable. An average of the 1984 and 1985 rates was taken to reduce measurement error. (For a systematic defense of official suicide data, see Pescosolido & Mendelsohn 1986).

In order to test for spuriousness in any zero-order relationship between music and suicide, control variables are introduced. First, an index of structural poverty (e.g., Bankston, Allen & Cunningham 1983) was constructed. If country music is still largely the music of the impoverished, then the relationship between country music and suicide, if any, may be reduced or may even vanish once poverty is controlled. Five indicators of structural poverty were available in CO-STAT 3, which was obtained from the ICPSR at the University of Michigan (U.S. Department of Commerce 1988). These indicators are the percentage of households without plumbing, the infant mortality rate, the percentage of female-headed households with children, the percentage of families who receive Aid to Families with Dependent Children, and the percentage of families with incomes of less than $2,500 a year. These were combined into an index using principle components analysis.[2] Country music has traditionally been associated with the South, although some have argued that it is no longer exclusively a southern phenomenon (Peterson & DiMaggio 1975). In order to disentangle country music from southern culture, a control for southern region was introduced (1 = South, 0 = non-South, where South is comprised of south Atlantic, east southcentral, and west southcentral states [U.S. Bureau of the Census 1991]).

Divorce is a powerful determinant of suicide (e.g., Trovato 1987; Wasserman 1990). Because marital trouble is a key theme in country music, divorce and country music may be related. Crude divorce rates were extracted from CO-STAT 3. Suicide is also related to opportunity factors such as the availability of firearms, which are the chief means of suicide in the U.S. (Clarke & Lester 1989). Since the stories in country music often encourage gun ownership (Peterson, pers. com.), it is important to control for this factor. Gun availability is measured as the number of retail outlets (per 100,000 population) listed under "guns" or "firearms" in the Phonefiche version of the yellow pages (University Microfilms International 1980). (For an extended discussion of this measure of gun availability, see Gundlach 1990.)

Results

A significant zero-order correlation was found between white suicide rates and country music (r=.54, p<.05). The greater the airtime given to country music, the greater the white suicide rate. The black suicide rate was not related to country music (r=.11, p>.05). Country music was also significantly related to gun availability (r=.50, p<.05). Metropolitan areas high in country music also are high in opportunity for suicide. Country music was also related to divorce (r=.51, p<.05) and to southern location (r=.26, p<.05). It was not, however, related to structural poverty, indicating support for the massification thesis. Other factors related to white suicide were divorce, southern location, and the structural poverty index.

In order to test for possible spuriousness in the link between country music and suicide, ordinary least squares regression techniques were applied. The equations were first checked for problems of multicollinearity and outliers, which could invalidate the results. A crude variance inflation factor (VIF) test

derived from auxiliary regressions did not detect any multicollinearity (Neter, Wasserman & Kutner 1985). None of the VIFs were larger than 5. Nor was any multicollinearity found using Belsley, Kuh, and Welsch's (1980) condition index as a criterion. No condition indices were greater than 30 and no two variances associated with any condition index were both greater than .50. Finally, standardized residuals were computed as a test for outliers. Since none of these were larger than 4, the estimates are also free of the problem of outliers.

Controlling for the other independent variables in the equation, the greater the exposure to country music, the greater the suicide rate for whites (panel A), but not for blacks (panel B). The country coefficient for whites is twice its standard error. This effect is independent of the controls including the covariates of country music: gun availability, southern location, and divorce. It is also independent of structural poverty, which indicates that country music exerts an impact on suicide independent of any association with poverty. Also, the greater the divorce rate, the greater the white suicide rate. Finally, southern region affects suicide. An analysis of beta coefficients indicates that the divorce rate (β=.30) was only somewhat more closely tied to the variance in suicide than was music (β=.27) and southern region (β=.27). The model, which explains 51% of the variance in urban white suicide rates, is largely inapplicable to black suicide rates.

Conclusion

This is the first study to assess the impact of country music on suicide. Whites are the typical consumers of country music and are more closely tied to the country subculture than are blacks. For our sample of 49 major U.S. cities, we found that the greater the percentage of radio time devoted to country music, the higher the incidence of white suicide; black suicide was unrelated to country music. Our interpretation stresses themes in country music noted by Peterson (1991). These recurrent patterns, which stress problems such as alcohol abuse, are assumed to promote audience identification and thereby to promote suicide through the reinforcement of preexisting suicidal moods (Blumer 1969). While country music per se probably will not drive people to suicide, given its link to a subculture and its appeal to persons within the subculture who are already at increased risk of suicide, it can impact on suicide rates.

The study has some implications for the debate on the diffusion of country music. While country music has been historically the music of lower classes, we found no association between poverty and country music. This finding supports the massification thesis that country music has diffused across the spectrum of social classes.[3] In addition, there was only a weak association between country music and southern region. Country music fans may constitute an emerging "culture class" (Peterson & DiMaggio 1975).

Our results have some bearing on the debate over media impacts on suicide. Although the songs are largely fictional, they are associated with increases in suicide. Furthermore, the songs generally do not involve any overt acts of suicide, but simply nurture a suicidal mood. In contrast, fictional suicide stories such as those in soap operas and television films, which contain overt suicidal

TABLE 1: The Effect of Country Music, Structural Poverty, Southern Region, Divorce, and Gun Availability on Metropolitan Suicide Rates

		Panel A White Suicide Rate		
	β	b	t-test	VIF[a]
Country music	0.27	0.13	2.03*	1.53
Structural poverty	0.13	0.28	1.06	1.37
Southern region	0.27	2.17	2.04*	1.53
Divorce	0.30	0.74	2.34*	1.52
Gun availability	0.08	0.20	0.64	1.53
Intercept	—	7.73	5.58*	—
R^2	0.51			
		Panel B Black Suicide Rate		
	β	b	t-test	VIF
Country music	0.06	0.02	0.34	1.53
Structural poverty	-0.18	-0.26	-1.06	1.37
Southern region	-0.16	-0.89	-0.90	1.53
Divorce	-0.009	-0.01	-0.05	1.52
Gun availability	0.18	0.30	1.02	1.53
Intercept	—	6.39	4.94*	—
R^2	0.11			

(N = 49)

[a] VIF = variance inflation factor

* $p < .05$

behavior, are unrelated to suicide (Stack 1990b). Country songs, unlike television stories, appear recurrently as part of a musical subculture. It is possible that fictional work in the media is more apt to promote suicide risk if it occurs as part of a long-standing cultural nexus. In that context, associations can be frequent, durable over time, and highly accessible. In contrast, fictional suicide stories are scattered over time, relatively infrequent, and not connected to a subculture.

Our model is largely inapplicable to black suicide, an understudied phenomenon (Stack 1982). Perhaps new theoretical approaches need to be developed to explain adequately the variation in metropolitan black suicide rates.

Notes

1. Peterson (1991) also notes some patterns that might decrease what we see as the basic suicidogenic nature of country music's themes. There is also an undercurrent stressing pride in poverty, for example, suggesting that there is less sexual gratification in the middle class (see, e.g., Jeanne Pruett's "Satin Sheets"). One might anticipate that rock music might also increase suicide, given the mention of suicide in its lyrics. Survey research on the psychological reactions of rock music's audience finds, however, that rock music elicits antisuicidal moods of happiness, delight, and love (Wells 1990).

2. An analysis using the percentage of individuals below the poverty level as an index of poverty yielded the same results as those using the structural poverty index.

3. Hypothetically, one might anticipate that the association between country music and suicide reflects a white, lower-class, southern subculture more prone to violence. This argument has been the subject of much debate in the literature on homicide (see, e.g., Land, McCall & Cohen 1990 for a review). Given differences in the etiology of suicide and homicide (e.g., Henry & Short 1954), however, lower-class status and/or a southern subculture of violence might affect homicide more than suicide. In our study, the southern regional variable was indeed associated with suicide, but structural poverty was not. This is essentially the reverse of the typical findings on homicide rates.

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