Suicide of Australians during the Vietnam War

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Abstract

Objectives: National suicide rates fall during times of war. This fits with the notion of the population coming together against a common foe. But, what happens in the case of a war which is not fully supported, which draws the population and families apart? We consider this question by examining the Australian suicide rates during the divisive Vietnam War.

Methods: We graphed and examined the Australian suicide figures for 1921–2010.

Results: We found clear evidence of a decrease in the suicide rate for World War II (consistent with other studies), but a marked elevation of suicide during the Vietnam War.

Conclusions: The elevation of the Australian suicide rate during the Vietnam War is consistent with Durkheim’s social integration model – when social integration is lessened, either by individual characteristics or societal characteristics, the risk of suicide rises.

Keywords: suicide, suicide prevention, war, social integration model

Durkheim\(^1\) studied many European countries involved in wars in the second half of the 19th century and concluded that during war years, suicide rates decline. This applied to the conquerors as well as the vanquished, the invaders as well as the invaded. However, he found this effect was restricted to “popular wars” (p.166), by which he meant those that stimulate partisan spirit and patriotism, with all cooperating toward a common goal. He proposed the social integration model of suicide, and he explained that the circumstances of war “temporarily cause a stronger integration of society” (p.166).

Minois\(^2\) with the broad view of the historian, agreed that the suicide rate declines “sharply” (p.10) in times of war, and that group cohesion is probably an important factor.

Osman and Parnell\(^3\) report that the suicide rate in Ireland significantly reduced during World War I, and Henderson et al.\(^4\) reported that all-age male and female suicide rates decreased in Scotland during World War II. Rojcewicz\(^5\) studied various countries during World War II, and found that the suicide rates fell in Sweden (neutral), Norway (invaded and resistant) and France (invaded and compliant). This indicates that actual fighting is not a core factor, but suggests the increased integration of society during the common struggle reduces suicide.

Bosnar et al.\(^6\) reported that during the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) – which was a civil war – the suicide rate in Croatia rose by 20%. A majority of Croats wished to break away from Yugoslavia and form a sovereign country. The situation was complex, with ethnic Serbs living in Croatia and ethnic Croats living in Serbia, and controversies even within groups. Croatia’s economy was ruined, 20,000 people were killed and refugees were displaced on both sides. This could not be described as either a popular or an unpopular war, but the social fabric was rent and social integration was likely damaged.

The question arises of whether an “unpopular” international war, by which we mean a war that divides the populace and families on questions of justification and costs (both financial and human), would have the same effect. Such was the case with Australia’s participation in the Vietnam War.

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War commenced in Vietnam in the 1950s. The government of South Vietnam requested US and her allies send military assistance in 1961. Australia began sending military advisors to Vietnam in 1962. From 1965 to 1970, we had almost 8000 troops in that country. Conscription was introduced in 1964. In the opinion of the first author (who was 20 years old at the time) 1966 was a year of trouble—we sent conscripts to war, the battle of Long Tan cost 18 Australian and 245 Vietnamese lives and the American President, Lyndon Johnson, came to Australia to boost support for US action in Vietnam, but protesting students threw paint on his car. Conscientious objectors were jailed and the journalists told of atrocities against Vietnam civilians. Anti-war sentiments grew through 1967. In 1970 and 71, Moratorium marches of 100,000 people took place. Our troops began to withdraw in 1970 and the last pulled out in 1972. This was not simply some students railing against government policy, it was a time of considerable family stress and it was common for some family members to be strongly opposed, while others were in favor of our involvement. There is no criticism here of those Australians who fought, the point is simply that this was a divisive event.

The Australian War Memorial states, “The war was the cause of the greatest social and political dissent in Australia since the conscription referendums of the First World War”.7

The aim is to examine the effect of this “unpopular” international war on the suicide rate in Australia.

Method

Information was obtained from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare8 and we graphed suicide by gender and total persons from 1921 to 2010. The periods of World War II and the Vietnam War were identified and movement of the suicide rate (if any) was identified.

Results

During World War II, the suicide rate in Australia fell (from 12.9 in 1939 to 8.4 in 1943 and 1944, and returned to 11.2 in 1947).

During the Vietnam War, the suicide rate rose (from 13.8 in 1961 to >16 in 1962–1967, returning to 13.9 in 1972).

Discussion

A limitation of this study may be that we have not used statistics. However, we believe a solid argument is clear from perusal of the graph (see Figure 1).

It is of interest that the graph in Figure 1 shows the suicide rate of Australians fell during World War II. This is consistent with the findings of authors listed in the introduction, among others.9,10

It is of great interest that the suicide rate of Australians elevated during the years of the Vietnam War. Some colleagues have drawn attention to the fact that the suicide rate was gradually rising from the end of World War II to the period of the Vietnam War. It has also been argued that the graph shows an increase after 1961, but the first Australian troops did not leave until 1962. It could be counter argued that the public knew of the Vietnam War, and the scary “domino theory”, which stated that communism was overtaking one country after another, and Australia had to do something to protect itself.

However, two things can happen at the same time, so let us place this period in context. The 1950s were a prosperous time, but there was some unrest among women who had rewarding work during World War II, but were expected to stay at home in peacetime, and the Cold War was an ever-present concern. In 1959, the film adaptation of Australian author Nevil Shute’s novel, On the Beach, was released, depicting life in Australia following nuclear war. In 1960 the world’s first skyjacking occurred in Australia. In 1961 the oral
contraceptive was released in Australia, and second-wave feminism was building. This was a decade in which young people were disillusioned and challenged the values of former generations and the materialism of contemporary society.

We believe Figure 1 depicts an increase in suicide rate which is associated with the Vietnam War. In response to concern that the rise was a little earlier than expected, we offer that this was a time of change and unrest. The rise is sharp and the elevation persists until the end of the war, and fits well with this event.

Little attention has been paid to the opposition to the Vietnam War, perhaps because we do not want to discredit our soldiers and relive difficult times. But this era was certainly a divisive and difficult time.

It is unlikely that this increase was due to a sudden increase in the rate of mental illness. It fits better with Durkheim’s model in which unsatisfactory integration into society places individuals at greater risk of suicide. Unsatisfactory integration may arise from individual characteristics such as personality or mental disorder, or through society characteristics, when agreed goals, rewards, support and cohesion are no longer available. This can occur when an indigenous people is exposed to a dominant culture, or when half of the population wants to go to war and the other half does not.

The suicide rate in Australia is at a 10-year high. Is it possible that social media is playing a part? It is suggested that social media, like a “popular” war, can draw people together; but it can also, like an “unpopular” war, drive them apart and isolate individuals.

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