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Pop-Rock Music As Precipitating Cause in Youth Suicide

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ABSTRACT: The plaintiffs in a law suit alleged that the heavy metal rock band Judas Priest, and its publisher CBS, were liable for damages to two youths who shot themselves after listening to the band's album. Crucial issues included "proximate cause" and "precipitating cause" in suicide, and the alleged role of subliminal messages. The judge ruled that although the "heavy metal" music might have had a toxic influence, the sounds and words are protected by the free speech first amendment. The influence of subliminal messages on behavior is unproven. There were many other elements in the personalities and situations of the victims to account for their self-destructive behavior.

KEYWORDS: psychiatry, suicide, rock music, subliminal messages

In October 1990 we were involved as expert witnesses in a lawsuit brought against the rock group, Judas Priest, and the publisher, Columbia Broadcasting System, by the families of two young men who shot themselves after listening to tape recordings by Judas Priest, a heavy metal rock band. The case involves some interesting aspects of the concepts of "proximate causation" and "precipitating causes" and their roles in suicide.

History of the Case

On December 23, 1985, Raymond Belknap, age 18 shot and killed himself. His friend, James Vance, age 20, carrying out his part of their suicide pact, immediately made a suicide attempt with the same gun, but only wounded himself critically, shooting away the lower half of his face. Approximately three years later Vance died of an overdose; however, the mode of death was certified as Undetermined when it could not be decided whether the ingestion was intentional. Later, the families brought suit against the Judas Priest band members, CBS Recordings, and the stores that sold the album "Stained Class," the album to which the boys were listening just before the suicidal behavior. Two songs in this album were blamed for causing the suicide and the attempted suicide, "Beyond the Realm of Death," and "Heroes End." The songs had been published in 1977.

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After an early hearing when the judge ruled that the express lyrics of the two songs were protected by the First Amendment, the plaintiffs shifted to allegations that there were subliminal messages placed in three other songs of the album. In one song, "Better By You, Better Than Me," which tells the story of a man leaving his girl friend and asking a friend to tell the girl he is leaving and not to wait, it was alleged that the message, "do it," had been inserted in seven places. There are no references to suicide in the overt lyrics of the song. "Backwards sounds," that is, lyrics that have different meanings when played backwards, were also alleged.

The suicides occurred late in the afternoon. The two young men had spent most of the day at Ray's house drinking beer, smoking pot and listening to Judas Priest records. Ray had just lost his job and James decided he would not go to work either. James had a short but loud confrontation with his mother, who came to reproach him for quitting his job without first having another one to go to. After further drinking, the two young men trashed the bedroom, breaking practically everything in the room except the album player. They then jumped out the first-floor window carrying Ray's sawed off shotgun and two shells, and ran to a nearby churchyard where Ray declared "Life sucks." Placing the gun under his chin, he shot himself fatally in the head. Holding to an agreement reached earlier, James tried to do the same but only succeeded in wounding himself.

The defendant's lawyers pointed out that both of these men were high school dropouts with histories of pathological family situations. Both abused drugs and alcohol. Both worked at transitory unskilled jobs, and had histories of violent acts and legal offenses. Both family backgrounds included violence, severe punishments, alcoholism, suicidal behaviors, depressive episodes, and legal encounters. Both young men had previously been diagnosed with conduct disorders. They were chronically depressed, negative about life, and involved continually in family, school and work conflicts. Ray was reported to have attempted suicide once previously by slashing his wrists. Both young men had discussed suicide previously. Their escapist activities included not only alcohol, drugs, and listening to heavy metal music, but they often engaged in joint fantasies of becoming mercenary soldiers, committing mass murders and going on killing sprees. In all this they represent not uncommon examples of youth suicides.

The plaintiffs argued that the defendants were reckless and irresponsible in preying on the vulnerability of the decedents and other similarly situated. The prosecution claimed that in order to make a profit for the entertainers and earn money for their stockholders, the defendants published music which overtly reinforced the alienation of vulnerable youths from the mainstream of society. It was alleged that the entertainers were taking advantage of crumbling moral values in society by pandering to the antisocial attitudes and values of such young people. They were vulnerable because they were alienated from the traditional support systems of home, family, church, and community.

One of the expert witnesses for the plaintiffs was Dr. Howard Shevrin, a highly respected researcher-clinician from the University of Michigan. While Dr. Shevrin's clinical work has been in psychoanalysis his research is in nerve conduction in the brain as a response to stimuli, both supraliminal and subliminal. He has found that when a subject looks at an image projected on a screen, an electrical brain response appears after a certain latent period, measured in milliseconds [1,2]. Dr. Shevrin also has reported that the latent period is longer when exposed to a supraliminal visual stimulus than when exposed to a subliminal stimulus. Dr. Shevrin interprets this to mean that a supraliminal stimulus has to go through a more complex process to reach conscious awareness, whereas a subliminal stimulus goes directly to the unconscious where it is lodged without the individual's awareness. Thereafter it may affect any response as if the stimulus were his own and comes from within the person. This interpretation is highly controversial, especially the opinion that the effect of subliminal stimuli can be perceived in behavior and actions [3]. This opinion has little research backing or evidence [4-7].

Dr. Shevrin testified that he had become convinced of the presence of the subliminal messages "Do it, do it," in the Judas Priest album and that also, in his opinion, these messages went directly to the unconscious of both Belknap and Vance and served as precipitating causes for their suicidal actions. Shevrin acknowledged that other causes were present and, in his formulations of the case, described the two youths as troubled and disturbed, with histories of school difficulty, drug abuse, job problems and parental conflict. He also indicated the presence of profoundly distressing conflicts both conscious and unconscious, along with a strong predisposition to engage in acts of violence against others and themselves.

Such a description of factors, conflicts and personality is not uncommon in youth suicides. We found notable similarities in the results of our own comprehensive research into youth suicide in the State of California [8-10]. Psychological autopsies of 64 consecutive cases of teen age suicides (ages 13 through 19) showed significant associations with such background experiences as a broken home, alcoholism, suicide in the family, negative personal relationships, conduct disorder, school problems, and severe psychological distress.

It is of interest to note that two of our psychological autopsy cases were young men who shot themselves while listening with earphones to cassette tapes of rock bands. Both youths had indicated that they wanted their special favorite tapes buried with them, and these wishes were honored. In one case the tape was of an Ozzie Osborne concert. In a second case we were unable to discover exactly which tape was being listened to at the time of suicide, but four favorite cassettes with recordings by favorite bands, namely Devo, Weird Al Yankovich, Stray Cats, and Men Without Hats, were buried with the youngster. Neither family blamed the music for the suicide.

Although the psychological autopsy protocol used in our study had not been designed originally to pick up music preferences, some questions asked about the decedents' favorite activities and hobbies. Informants indicated that for 20% of the decedents a favorite activity or hobby, consisted of listening to rock tapes and records. We do not know what kind of rock was referred to, but the results are of interest in light of the findings of Wass et al. [11,12] that 24% of urban high school students and 54% of youths in detention centers preferred rock music with themes about homicide, Satanism and suicide.

The Decision

Were the alleged subliminal messages a cause of Raymond Belknap's suicide, and James Vance's attempted suicide? For legal purposes plaintiffs must show that the alleged subliminal messages were a proximate cause of the shootings. The term "proximate cause" means a cause that in a direct unbroken sequence, produces the damage complained of, and without which, the damage would not have occurred.

The judge noted that Dr. Shevrin did testify that a person has to have both a personality predisposition and a situational disposition for subliminal message to have an effect on behavior and serve as a precipitating factor. Dr. Shevrin testified that both deceased in this case had personality predispositions for suicide, which were indicated by a propensity for violence and failures at school and employment, and that they were also situationally predisposed on December 23, 1985 because of the use of alcohol and marijuana combined with the music. In this context the subliminal command "Do it" created a compulsion toward doing that which James and Raymond were already predisposed to do, to commit suicide.

However, other expert witnesses in this field testified that there is no substantial evidence a subliminal message can have a discernable impact on *behavior*. The judge ruled that the scientific research presented did not establish that subliminal stimuli, even if

perceived, may precipitate conduct of such magnitude. He stated there were other factors that explained the conduct of the deceased independent of the subliminal stimuli, and highlighted such factors as the deceased's relationship with each other; their multiple school problems, including both learning and behavioral problems; their history of aggressive behaviors and criminal activity; drug and alcohol usage; unstable work histories; family disputes; fantasies of harming people; and finally, their common affinity for a type of music known as heavy metal music. The judge commented that the boys were drawn by the loudness of the music and the aggressive qualities of the lyrics.

Additionally the judge was convinced by evidence produced by technical experts that the subliminal sounds which could possibly be interpreted as "Do it" resulted from a chance combination of sounds, specifically an exhalation of breath by one of the singers on one track of the sub-tapes, which inadvertently combined with a string instrument on another tape at certain points in the master tape. Furthermore, in this particular case, there was no liability on the part of Judas Priest or CBS because there was no credible evidence of intentional misconduct, since it could not have been foreseen or predicted that the alleged subliminal messages could have resulted in the suicide of a listener.

Discussion

From a clinical standpoint our major interest in this case was the contention of the plaintiff's attorney, with support from the research and testimony of Dr. Shevrin, that the precipitating factor in the suicide was listening to the despairing, nihilistic music of Judas Priest and responding to the alleged messages of the subliminal stimuli supposed to be imbedded in the music.

Causation in suicide is always multiple and always complex. In our view, the relative importance of precipitating events in suicides is often exaggerated or overstated. This is not to deny the frequent existence of a precipitating event in the form of some special circumstance or occurrence as, for example, a young man breaks up with his girl friend, or totals his friend's car or is arrested for a minor crime. In our own study of youth suicides, with some effort, it was possible for us to identify some sort of final "last straw," or a specific precipitating event, occurring within the last 24 to 48 hours in only about one half of the deaths. More often, there was a history of chronic dissatisfaction, unhappiness, or frank depression, with nothing special happening in the last day or two, except that the feelings of frustration, pain, and exhaustion were increasing gradually. For Ray and James their last day spent drinking beer, smoking marijuana, listening to music, fighting with their families, and weaving violent fantasies instead of working, was a fairly typical day. A key factor, but not a precipitating cause, was the easy availability of a lethal weapon. We could not discern any particular circumstance or event uniquely responsible for Ray's decision to shoot himself at that time and place. Rather there was a blending together of many circumstances and events, past and present.

In our explanation of the shootings we stated that these two young men had been drifting further and further from a sense of the real world by dropping out of school and jobs and losing touch with their friends and families. The music, like drugs and alcohol, helped to blur the distinction between the real world and their fantasy world. Two years after the shooting, but before the lawsuit, James Vance had described a feeling of tension that was approaching frenzy that built up to the last scene in the house where they broke up the room but not the record player. The music did play a part, but it was along with drugs and alcohol, mental illness, the whole background of social alienation and the family history of violence and suicide. The toxic effects of this and other similar music could be attributed to the emphatic beat, the manifest lyrics, the posters and the album covers, all of which are protected constitutionally. We concluded the music had an in-

fluence, but that it was not proximate and was not subliminal. In addition, all the elements are protected constitutionally.

The profile of youth suicide described by both ourselves [8] and others [13–15] indicates that a combination of depression, substance abuse and conduct disorder has been a surprisingly frequent feature. These addictive and antisocial behaviors frequently start out as defenses against suicide, or develop as alternatives to suicide. As situations and conditions worsen they may then appear as the “causes” of suicide. If the preoccupation with pop rock music is likewise carried on too long and too far, it too can be considered to be a type of addictive and antisocial behavior. These are behaviors that may start out as alternatives to suicide, but in the end they lead back toward suicide because they are poor quality coping efforts, and often themselves are cause for more frustration, helplessness and hopelessness.

The popular music to some extent incorporates many of the influences in society that may be playing a part in increasing the numbers of suicidal youth and in placing them at higher risk. In the early counterculture music the most popular theme by far was love, not a theme to promote suicide. But there are other themes as well. As hard-rock and heavy metal developed, the most popular theme was chaos, symbolized visually by skulls, monsters, and gothic horror scenes, and verbally by dramatization of conflict, boredom, dissatisfaction, protest, revolution, antiestablishment feelings and the struggle to carry freedom and liberation to the edge of death and beyond [16]. Some songs feature ugly sex and sadism, alcohol and drugs, risk taking, the pain of depression and the Blues. In recent times there has been a special emphasis on anger, violence, Satanism, homicide, suicide, and death.

Does this music contribute to youth suicide? Probably it does not for the great majority of relatively normal adolescents. Clinical experience has shown that pop music, at least the “lite” metal [16], may actually help them leave their parents and join their peers as a part of their normal development. Many times in the past, after presentations about rock music of the 60s and 70s, people in the audience would report that it was the Rolling Stones, Led Zeppelin and The Grateful Dead that *prevented* them from committing suicide when they were teenagers. The social aspects of adolescents and their music are reviewed comprehensively by Weinstein [16] and by Brown and Hendee [17].

The music seems to offer one more problem for a small minority, maybe 2% who are already disturbed and alienated, lacking in healthy identification and healthy role models entering repeatedly into conflict with authorities and abusing alcohol and drugs. Like other addictions this music (and the people who create it) encourages further turning away from normal pursuits into escapist fantasies, often aggressive, destructive, and nihilistic. For these young persons, addiction to the heavy metal “thrash” music [16] becomes part of their self-destructive subculture. We would label such an addiction as a “risk factor” for suicide rather than a “cause.”

Afterthoughts

The possible suicidogenic influence of Judas Priest through their overt lyrics and visual images is constitutionally protected, and therefore was not an issue in this case. Does this mean the end of litigation against rock entertainers and publishers? It is possible that material directed specifically toward juveniles might be held to higher standards of responsibility, just as other products subject to misuse, such as tobacco, alcohol, guns and motorcycles are subject to restrictions when sold to minors. (Belknap and Vance were both over age 18.) As in all litigation, the facts would decide the issues. Is pop-rock directed toward juveniles? If so, should it be restricted, licensed, supervised? To what extent are those who make it and sell it liable if it causes harm?

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