

The relationship between familism and suicide attempts among Latina adolescents: Prevention and intervention efforts

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Abstract

Latina adolescents have the highest rates of suicidal behavior among ethnic and racial minority youth in the United States. The Latino population represents the largest minority group in the United States; thus, this is an important issue to address. Familism, a value central to the Latino culture, emphasizes the centrality of the family as a primary unit, in contrast to Western tradition that places the individual at the core. During adolescent development, Latinas may struggle with balancing their families' needs with their own needs for autonomy, creating a conflict between Latina adolescents and their families. A better understanding of familial factors that predict and protect against suicidal behaviors among Latina adolescents is necessary to identify alterable factors and develop culturally responsive prevention and intervention approaches. The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between familism and suicide attempts among Latina youth through an examination of the existing literature. Preventative strategies and interventions to address suicidal behavior for Latina youth will also be discussed.

Keywords

Latinas, adolescents, gender, suicide attempts, familism, prevention, intervention

For over a decade, the literature has identified Latina adolescents as having the highest rates of suicidal behavior among ethnic and racial minority youth in the United States (Zayas & Pilat, 2008). In 1996, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) reported that adolescent Hispanic females had a 21% prevalence rate of suicide attempts, while African American and Caucasian females had rates of 10.8% and 10.4%, respectively. More recent figures from the CDC's 2007 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) showed that among adolescent females, Hispanics were more likely to have seriously considered attempting suicide (21.1%), as compared to African American

(18%) and Caucasian (17.8%) females. The survey also found that Hispanic adolescent females (14%) were also more likely to have attempted suicide, compared to 9.9% of African American females and 7.7% of Caucasian females. High rates of suicide attempts among Latina youth place them at risk for death and serious injury (Turner, Kaplan, Zayas, & Ross, 2002). It is a well-known fact that past suicidal behavior predicts future suicidal behavior, making this a serious mental health concern (Colucci & Martin, 2007). This is an important issue to address since Latinos represent the largest minority group in the U.S.; they are projected to comprise 31% of the population by 2060 (U.S.

Census, 2010). Without targeted prevention and intervention efforts, the high level of suicidal behavior among Latina adolescents will likely persist (Peña et al., 2008).

The significant level of suicide attempts among Latina youth is theorized to be the outcome of a combination of cultural, familial, and individual level factors (Baumann, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2010; Kuhlberg, Peña, & Zayas, 2010). Poverty, traditional gender role expectations, acculturation, intergenerational conflict, and coping skills influence their suicidal behavior (Turner, Kaplan, Zayas, & Ross, 2002). Razin et al. (1991) indicated that the typical suicide attempter profile is a 15- or 16-year-old acculturated daughter of foreign-born, Hispanic immigrant parents who are not well acculturated. Therefore, a better understanding of familial factors that predict and protect against suicidal behaviors among Latina adolescents is necessary to identify alterable factors and develop culturally responsive prevention and intervention approaches (Colucci, & Martin, 2007). The purpose of this paper is to explore the relationship between familism and suicide attempts among Latina youth through an examination of the existing literature. Preventative strategies and interventions to address suicidal behavior for Latina youth will also be discussed.

Review of the Literature

In Latino culture, family is central to an individual's identity and directs how an individual behaves. *Familism* is a value that emphasizes the centrality of the *family* as a primary unit, in contrast to Western tradition that places the *individual* at the core (Germán, Gonzales, & Dumka, 2009; Zayas & Pilat, 2008). The needs of one's family take priority over one's own needs. In

a factor analytic study by Sabogal, G. Marin, Otero-Sabogal, B. V. Marin, and Perez-Stable (1987), the authors revealed three facets of familism: *familial obligations*, *perceived support and closeness*, and *family as referent*. *Familial obligations* refers to the belief that family members are responsible for providing economic and emotional support to kin. *Perceived support and closeness* is defined as the perception that family members are reliable sources of support, should be united, and have close relationships. *Family as referent* is the belief that the behavior of family members should meet familial expectations. The family is viewed as an extension of oneself; therefore, individual behavior reflects the whole family.

The CDC's 2007 YRBS survey data revealed that 21.1% of Hispanic female adolescents attempted suicide compared to 10.7% of Hispanic male adolescents. Traditional gender role expectations may place more pressure on Latina adolescents to meet family expectations compared to their Latino counterparts. Hispanic households may emphasize certain assertiveness and male-dominant behaviors, or *machismo*, among sons while urging passiveness and subservience among their daughters (Goldston et al., 2008). Latinas are often expected to engage in domestic work at home, including cooking, cleaning, and caring for siblings, while Latinos are afforded more freedom and less responsibility in the home; these gender role expectations may play a key role in differential rates in suicide attempts. Kuhlberg et al. (2010) reported that while familism does not directly predict suicide attempts among Latina youth, it has an indirect relationship with suicide attempts through the adolescents' internalizing behavior such as depression and withdrawal. The stress from being expected to put one's family first may trigger feelings such as sadness and depression

among Latina adolescents. Zayas, Gulbas, Fedoravicius, and Cabassa (2010) also found that family discord is insufficient to demonstrate a causal link in suicide attempts because the majority of Latinas do not become suicidal. Therefore, there is further need to explore this complex relationship and identify the factors that do in fact lead to suicidal behavior among Latina youth.

During adolescent development, Latinas may struggle with balancing their family's needs with their own need for autonomy (Goldston et al., 2008). This can create conflict between Latina adolescents and their families. Additionally, acculturation plays a significant role in this struggle; Latinas adapt to their new culture in the U.S. while trying to maintain elements of their culture of origin. They may also acculturate more quickly than their parents; this acculturative discrepancy contributes to tension and crisis for the adolescent. Latina mothers want their daughters to acculturate and be successful but struggle with the level of independence afforded to American adolescents (Zayas et al., 2000; Zayas & Pilat, 2008; Zayas, Hausmann-Stabile, & Kuhlberg, 2011). This dilemma diminishes the mother's capacity to act as a mentor for her daughter, and the daughter misinterprets her mother's intentions as controlling. Latino cultural traditions that socialize women to maintain closeness and obligation to family, while limiting the manner in which anger can be expressed, may have a causal relation to suicidal behavior (Zayas & Pilat, 2008). This occurs when a great deal of conflict exists; consequently, the Latina adolescent engages in suicidal behavior as a coping mechanism.

Turner et al. (2002) examined the differences between Latina youth with a history of suicide attempts and Latina youth with no history of suicide attempts. Among

the Latinas who attempted suicide, the researchers found a negative correlation with the perception of mother's responsiveness to their daughters. These Latina youth felt their mothers were indifferent toward them and less understanding. Conversely, those girls who felt their mothers were interested, engaged, respectful, patient, receptive, and understanding were less likely to attempt suicide. Turner and colleagues (2002) also found that suicide attempts by Latina adolescents typically followed breakups or fights with their mothers, creating feelings of hopelessness and desperation. The girls sought to please their mothers and stay close to them, but felt overwhelmed by the strict rules and demands placed on their activities. The use of positive coping strategies was comparable across the two groups of Latinas. However, the Latinas who attempted suicide disproportionately used negative coping strategies such as withdrawal, wishful thinking, self-criticism, and blaming others. Dysfunctional family environments and strict parents can have a negative effect on the self-esteem and coping skills of Latina youth leading to suicidal behavior.

A study by Zayas et al. (2011) found that Latina youth who attempted suicide and Latina youth with no history of suicide attempts exhibited similar characteristics to those found in the study by Turner et al. (2002). Those who attempted suicide demonstrated significantly less mutuality and connection with their mothers than those with no history of suicide attempts. Higher levels of mutuality, or connectedness and communication with mothers, served as protective factors for suicidal ideations and attempts. Low levels of support were associated with more internalizing behaviors such as depression. Reducing parent-daughter conflict and fostering close family ties can reduce internalizing behaviors and lessen the

likelihood of suicide attempts among Latinas. Moreover, girls with higher involvement with their Latino culture expressed more mutuality with their mothers and, in turn, lower levels of all three types of internalizing behaviors: withdrawn-depressive behaviors, anxious-depressive behaviors, and somatic complaints. Withdrawn-depressive behaviors were associated with suicide attempts, mediating the relationship between mutuality and attempts. Zayas et al.'s study (2011) stresses the positive effect Latino cultural values can have on the relationship between Latina adolescents and mothers. When their relationship is strained due to developmental changes and cultural differences, Latino culture involvement may play a role in promoting positive family interactions.

Similarly, Baumann et al. (2010) found that low levels of mother-daughter mutuality predicted higher internalizing and externalizing behaviors, which in turn, predicted suicide attempts. Additionally, mothers reported higher familism values than their Latina daughters, predicted less mother-daughter mutuality, and more externalizing behaviors in adolescents. Accordingly, familism can serve as a protective factor, but it can also act as a risk factor. Familism from the perspective of the Latina girls was positively related to mutuality and negatively related to externalizing behaviors. Familism from the perspective of their mothers was only slightly related to mutuality. Familism can be a protective factor from the girls' perspective, but the same was not true from the mothers' perspective. Mothers differed significantly from their daughters in familism values; and the gap in familism values between mothers and daughters was related to lower mother-daughter conflict.

Familism is a multi-faceted concept; certain components may be more related to higher levels of internalizing behavior, while

other components account for reduced levels of conflict. It can have a double-edged effect due to its protective effects that enhance self-esteem while also causing familial conflict. Restrictions of activities among Latina adolescents may lead to internalization of emotions, lower self-esteem, depression, and suicidal behavior (Kuhlberg et al., 2010). L. O'Donnell, C. O'Donnell, Wardlaw, and Stueve (2004) reported that family closeness predicted both suicidal ideations and attempts. Interestingly, living in a two-parent household did not serve as a protective factor and having either parent absent was not a significant risk factor. Instead, feeling that one's family was there when needed was important for Latina adolescents. This is a point that should be emphasized to parents of teenagers who feel that either they are not getting through to their children or that their children do not need them as much now that they are older.

Peña et al. (2011) identified three family environment types: tight-knit, intermediate-knit, and loose-knit. They found that the type of family environment impacted suicidal behavior among Latina adolescents. Tight-knit families (high cohesion and low conflict) were significantly less likely to have teens that attempted suicide in comparison to intermediate-knit and loose-knit families. Familism potentially protected against suicidal behavior among Latinas through its influence on the family environment. Latina youth who internalize cultural values such as familism from an early age may react to parental demands, rules, and expectations in ways that are more culturally acceptable to parents. Familism leads to tight-knit families, and tight-knit families reinforce beliefs in familism. Flexibility in the family system may moderate the protective elements of familism for Latinas. Thus, high levels of familism when combined with an inflexible

family system and overly harsh parenting may diminish or reverse its protective effect.

The relationship between fathers and suicidal behavior among Latinas has not been thoroughly examined in the literature. Instead, a more pronounced effect of the mother-daughter relationship than of the father-daughter relationship on suicide attempts has been revealed throughout the literature. The absence of fathers and overwhelming presence of mothers in the samples accounts for this difference (Zayas et al., 2000). Nonetheless, a recent study by DeLuca, Wyman, and Warren (2012) found that suicidal ideations were associated with having a suicidal friend, lower perceived father support, and overall parent caring. Suicide attempts were associated with having a suicidal friend and lower perceived teacher and parent support. Support from both parents and teachers was associated with fewer suicide attempts. Therefore, Latinas who perceived their fathers as more supportive and their parents as caring for them were less likely to have suicidal ideations. Having a suicidal friend was associated with elevated risk of both ideation and attempts. The influence of fathers on the suicidal behavior of their Latina adolescents requires further inquiry to determine its specific effects. Nonetheless, this study lends support to the fact that parents and teachers can serve as potentially important protective factors for Latina adolescents and to suicidal peers as important risk factors.

Prevention and Intervention Efforts

To date, no empirically based suicide prevention or treatment intervention programs have been developed exclusively for Latinos (Goldston et al., 2008). However, the development of cultural competence

among mental health practitioners such as social workers, school counselors, and school psychologists can assist in addressing suicidal behavior among Latina youth. Respect for racial and ethnicity minority patients and their cultural beliefs and health practices are extremely important (Huang, Appel, & Ai, 2011). For instance, mental health service providers must also have an understanding of the collectivistic culture among Latinos and the importance of involving the entire family in treatment. Additionally, effective prevention approaches should aim to minimize risk factors for suicidal behavior and strengthen protective factors (Eaton et al., 2011).

Interventions should focus on facilitating positive communication between Latino parents, especially mothers, and their daughters. This can reduce conflict and the risk of suicidal actions by improving the emotional connection and sense of support that comes from talking with parents in open, trusting, and reliable interactions. Further, allowing Latina adolescents the opportunity to discuss their feelings related to their relationships with their mothers allows them to develop more appropriate coping mechanisms than internalizing their feelings and attempting suicide (Zayas et al., 2000). Because family is central in the Latino culture, family-oriented treatment is beneficial. Thus, working with both mother and daughter is essential in building a positive and trusting relationship (Zayas & Pilat, 2008). Gulbas et al. (2011) recommended therapy address parent-child negotiation of realistic expectations due to their findings, which indicated that unrealistic expectations, particularly surrounding issues of dating, sexuality, and family responsibilities, led to recurrent episodes of conflict. Emerging research addressing the relationship between fathers and suicidal ideations among Latina adolescents

(DeLuca et al., 2012) highlights the importance of involving fathers in family therapy with their daughters to strengthen the father-daughter bond. While further inquiry is necessary in this area, strong relationships between Latina adolescents and their fathers may play a critical role in protecting the adolescents from engaging in suicidal behavior.

In the schools, culturally competent parent education could provide parents with information on how to establish more mutual and supportive relationships with their daughters (Turner et al., 2002). Culturally competent teaching of effective coping strategies such as problem solving, cognitive restructuring, emotional regulation, and social support in schools, in mental health agencies, and in the home, can help prevent suicide attempts and make Latina adolescent girls feel more empowered and resilient (Turner et al., 2002). Additionally, school psychologists, school counselors, and school social workers can identify Latinas who are at risk for suicidal behavior through parent and/or teacher referrals and engage them in support groups. Parent-oriented education groups can be facilitated at school to assist parents in understanding their daughter's developmental needs and the expected conflicts to occur during the acculturation process (Zayas & Pilat, 2008).

Garcia, Skay, Sieving, Naughton, and Bearinger (2008) indicated that efforts should be made by schools to involve parents who would like to strengthen relationships with their daughters. They recommended providing incentives such as food, childcare, and holding gatherings at locations convenient for parents—such as churches and community centers—to help increase attendance and participation. For Latina youth whose parents are uninvolved or unable to participate in these prevention/intervention

efforts, youth connectedness can be promoted through extended family members. Further, for Latinas who have limited connectedness with their families, school staff such as teachers, school counselors, and school psychologists can offer structured mentoring programs to provide much needed support.

Discussion

Family is a central component of Latino culture. While researchers have found that familism does not directly predict suicide attempts among Latina youth, an indirect relationship has been found (Kuhlberg et al., 2010; Zayas et al., 2010). The discrepancy in acculturation between Latina adolescents and their parents often leads to conflict. Latinas adapt to American culture, which traditionally values independence, and their parents attempt to maintain and reinforce their Latino culture. This value conflict can lead to suicidal behavior among Latinas as a way to cope with the stress. There is a need for research examining Latina adolescents and their family by generational status (i.e., foreign-born, first generation, etc.), time in the U.S., and levels of acculturation to further understand the effects of family influence and acculturation on suicide attempts. Are suicide attempts among Latinas prevalent in Latino families that are acculturated and/or born in the U.S.? These factors must be further explored.

Research on the differences in Latina youth with a history of suicide attempts versus those with no history of suicide attempts included coping strategies and levels of mutuality or connectedness with their mothers. Suicide attempts may be used as an escape to cope with conflict, but these Latinas may not actually want to die. The use of suicidal behavior as a coping mechanism may be

a cry for help; therefore, it is important to examine the relationships these Latinas have with their families at home to develop more appropriate coping skills in the face of conflict. Building positive and communicative relationships between Latinas and their mothers is necessary since suicidal Latinas felt their mothers were indifferent and less understanding. Determining ways to increase mother-daughter mutuality without increasing risk factors should also be considered.

Moreover, there is a need for comparative studies that examine suicidal behavior by country of origin due to the heterogeneity of the Latino population. Duarte-Vélez and Bernal (2006) recommended that research focus on within-group comparison among Latinos and also focus only on specific Latino groups (i.e., Mexicans, Cubans, Puerto Ricans, etc.). Research studies must also explore the role of socioeconomic status (e.g., poverty, middle class) and suicidal behavior by Latinas to determine its potential influence. Conceptual and methodological issues exist in previous studies due to the way suicidal behavior is conceptualized and operationalized making it difficult to draw conclusions and compare studies (Duarte-Vélez & Bernal, 2006). Thus, researchers must provide a definition of suicidal behavior and how it is being measured in their studies to contribute to what is known about this behavior. Sociocultural and environmental variables such as acculturation, acculturative stress, perceived discrimination, ethnic identity, and barriers to physical and mental health services must also be taken into account when examining suicidal behavior among Latina youth (Duarte-Vélez & Bernal, 2006).

Limited research focusing on the role of fathers and suicidal behavior among Latina youth exists; therefore, it is important that

future research examine their impact. Additionally, due to the lack of culturally sensitive prevention and intervention approaches for suicidal Latinas, the degree to which interventions focus on decreasing risk factors and enhancing culturally relevant protective factors in reducing suicidality must be explored (Goldston et al., 2008). The effectiveness of informal sources of help (e.g., family, friends) in addressing suicidality among Latinas should be examined since they are more likely to seek help from friends and family instead of mental health practitioners (Goldston et al., 2008). Existing research tends to utilize clinical populations such as Latinas admitted to psychiatric hospitals for suicide attempts. Identifying Latina adolescents in schools who are at-risk for suicide attempts or who have attempted suicide can assist school counselors and school psychologists in developing and providing school-based intervention services. Due to barriers in receiving mental health services including poverty and a lack of health insurance, school-based services may be ideal in addressing the needs of Latina adolescents and their families. Schools can provide their staffs with in-service trainings on developing cultural awareness and competence in meeting the needs of diverse students and families such as Latinos. School-based educational outreach to families and support groups may also be beneficial in bringing parents and their daughters closer and in understanding changes in development. In the absence of support from family members, school staff can step in and provide mentorship to Latinas at risk for suicide attempts.

Conclusion

Familism appears to play a significant role in the lives of Latina youth due to its cultural

value; the research indicates that it can serve as both a risk and protective factor against suicide attempts. Nonetheless, a direct relationship between familism and suicidal behavior among Latinas has not been found. Instead, sociocultural factors including acculturation, acculturative stress, poverty, adolescent development, and intergenerational conflict must be taken into account when examining the cause of suicidal behavior. Gender role expectations and acculturation to American values of individualism merge to create conflicts between Latinas and their families. This conflict to maintain cultural values and integrate American values combined with poor coping skills leads Latinas to attempt suicide. While these young girls may not want to commit suicide, they struggle with appropriately dealing with the conflict with their parents and use suicidal behavior as an escape mechanism. It is clear that this is a significant issue that must be addressed. Further research is needed to assist Latinas and their families in managing acculturative stress and developing healthy coping skills when conflict arises to prevent suicide attempts. ■

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