



A systematic review of the predictions of the Interpersonal–Psychological Theory of Suicidal Behavior



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HIGHLIGHTS

- No previous systematic review has comprehensively examined evidence for the IPTS.
- The effect of perceived burdensomeness on suicide ideation was the most robust.
- Other IPTS effects were tested less frequently with less consistent findings.
- Many studies were limited by cross-sectional design and reliance on student samples,
- Additional research should test the full predictions of the IPTS in diverse samples,

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ABSTRACT

Context: Since the development of the Interpersonal Psychological Theory (IPTS; Joiner, 2005), a growing body of literature has emerged testing different aspects of the theory across a range of populations.

Objective: The aim of this review was to identify support for the IPTS, and critical gaps in the evidence base, by systematically reviewing current evidence testing the effects of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability on suicide ideation and attempt.

Methods: PsycInfo and PubMed databases were electronically searched for articles published between January 2005 and July 2015. Articles were included if they directly assessed the IPTS constructs as predictors of suicidal ideation or suicide attempt.

Results: Fifty-eight articles reporting on 66 studies were identified. Contrary to expectations, the studies provided mixed evidence across the theory's main predictions. The effect of perceived burdensomeness on suicide ideation was the most tested and supported relationship. The theory's other predictions, particularly in terms of critical interaction effects, were less strongly supported.

Conclusions: Future research focused on expanding the availability of valid measurement approaches for the interpersonal risk factors, and further elaborating upon their mixed relationships with suicide ideation and attempt across multiple populations is important to advance theoretical and clinical progress in the field.

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1. Introduction

Suicide is a phenomenon that bears a significant public health impact worldwide. Each year it is estimated that approximately 800,000 people die by suicide, ranking it as the second leading cause of death in 15–29 year olds globally (WHO, 2014). Though preventable, suicidal thoughts and behaviors are complex phenomena influenced by several interacting factors, including personal, social, psychological, cultural, biological, and environmental (Goldston et al., 2009; King et al., 2001; Mann, 2003; O'Connor, 2011). As such, there is no singular underlying explanation as to why a person may attempt suicide, resulting in a highly contextual and varied picture of the barriers and facilitators to help seeking.

Recently, the Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide (IPTS) (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010) was developed with the aim of providing a theoretical model of suicide behavior. The theory consolidates a broad range of suicide risk factors, and provides testable predictions of who will develop desire for suicide (i.e., ideation), and from these, who will go on to attempt. As such, the theory holds much promise in regards to bettering our understanding of how certain suicide risk factors interact, and where prevention and intervention efforts may be best focused.

According to the IPTS, suicidal desire is caused by the simultaneous presence of two proximal, causal risk factors: (1) thwarted belongingness and (2) perceived burdensomeness, and hopelessness (i.e., “this will never change”) about these states (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Thwarted belongingness refers to the experience that one is alienated from friends, family, or other valued social circles. It is said to comprise of two facets, loneliness (i.e., “I feel disconnected from others”) and the absence of reciprocal care (i.e., “I have no one to turn to and I don't support others”). It is viewed as a dynamic cognitive-affective state that is influenced by inter and intra-personal factors such as experiencing family conflict, living alone, possessing few social supports, and being prone to interpret others' behavior as rejection (Van Orden et al., 2010). Perceived burdensomeness, on the other hand, refers to the view that one's existence is a burden on friends, family members, and/or society, and comprises of two facets, self-hate (i.e., “I hate myself”) and feelings of liability (i.e., “my death is worth more than my life to others”). Like thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness is conceptualised as a dynamic cognitive affect state, where risk factors such as homelessness, unemployment, physical illness, and feelings of low-self-esteem and being unwanted are said to contribute to its development (Van Orden et al., 2010). Though it is hypothesized that experiencing either perceived burdensomeness or thwarted belongingness alone will elicit passive suicidal ideation, it is their

interaction coupled with the view that they are stable and unchanging (i.e., hopelessness) that will cause active suicidal desire.

The development from active suicidal desire to suicidal intent is said to only result through the presence of an additional third construct: (3) acquired capability. Acquired capability refers to one's ability to overcome the inherent drive for self-preservation and engage in lethal self-injury (Joiner, 2005). This is hypothesized as being possible due to a lowered fear of death resulting from repeated exposure and habituation to physically painful and/or fear-inducing experiences, and an elevated tolerance of physical pain. It is viewed as a continuous construct that accumulates over time, with risk factors such as family history of suicide, previous suicide attempt, exposure to combat, and childhood maltreatment contributing to its development (Ribeiro & Joiner, 2009; Van Orden et al., 2010). Thus, individuals who have high levels of all three constructs, thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and acquired capability, are said to be at most risk for lethal suicidal behavior, as they possess both the desire for and capability to attempt suicide. See Fig. 1.

Since the development of the IPTS in 2005, a growing body of research has emerged testing different aspects of the theory across a range of populations. In 2009, an article on the current status and future directions of the IPTS stated that the theory has stood up to 20 direct empirical tests, with results generally substantiating the theory's main predictions (Ribeiro & Joiner, 2009). Since then, two systematic reviews

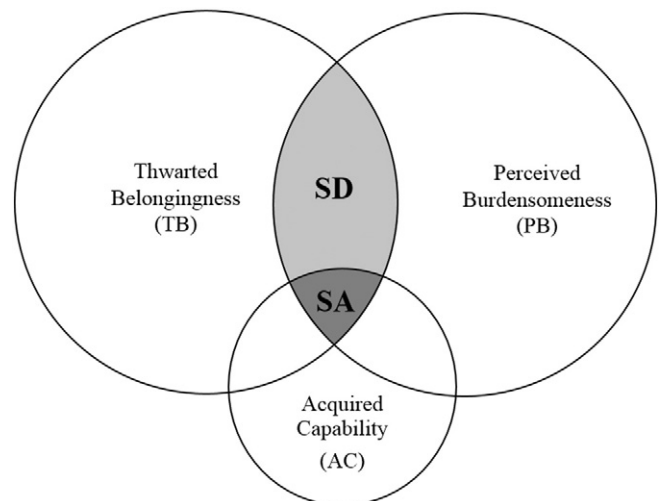


Fig. 1. The Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide. Note. SD = suicide desire, SA = suicide attempt.

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