



Cross-cultural relevance of the Interpersonal Theory of suicide across Korean and U.S. undergraduate students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the cross-cultural relevance and validity of the Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS) utilizing young adult samples from South Korea ($n = 554$) and the United States (U.S.; $n = 390$). To examine the ITS, all participants completed self-report questionnaires measuring *Thwarted Belongingness*, *Perceived Burdensomeness*, and *Capability for Suicide*. We examined whether each construct significantly predicted the severity of suicidal risk in both samples. We also determined whether the strength of the effects of *Thwarted Belongingness* and *Perceived Burdensomeness* on suicidal ideation differed between the two samples due to the greater degree of importance placed on interpersonal relationships in collectivistic cultures such as South Korea. Structural equation modeling was used to examine these hypotheses. *Thwarted Belongingness*, *Perceived Burdensomeness*, and *Capability for Suicide* significantly predicted elevated suicidal risk. However, there were no significant differences in the paths from *Thwarted Belongingness* or *Perceived Burdensomeness* to suicide risk between the South Korean and U.S. samples. These findings support the cross-cultural relevance and applicability of the ITS, whereby *Thwarted Belongingness* and *Perceived Burdensomeness* serve as indicators of suicide risk in both Western (U.S.) and East Asian (Korean) samples.

1. Introduction

Suicide rates in South Korea are the world's second highest and are increasing at an alarming rate (Normile, 2012). Suicide rates rose from 10 suicide deaths per 100,000 people in 1990 to 13.8 suicides per 100,000 in 2000. Suicide rates then increased by over 100% to 29.1 suicides per 100,000 people in 2012, with suicide currently being the fourth leading cause of death in South Korea—the highest rate among Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD, 2013) countries during the past 10 years (Korean National Statistical Office, 2013; World Health Organization, 2014). Elevated and accelerating rates of suicide in South Korea emphasize the critical need for more studies that identify evidence-based risk factors and intervention targets, including those taking cultural factors into consideration, to guide suicide prevention efforts.

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (ITS) provides a theoretical, empirically supported framework for understanding risk factors for suicide (Van Orden et al., 2010). The ITS highlights the necessity for

the co-occurrence of two interpersonal factors – *Perceived Burdensomeness* and *Thwarted Belongingness* – for the emergence of suicidal thoughts and desire. *Perceived Burdensomeness* is characterized by the perception that one is a liability on others with whom one is close and is typically accompanied by emotions and cognitions associated with self-contempt. *Thwarted Belongingness* is characterized by loneliness and an absence of reciprocal social relationships (Van Orden et al., 2010). The ITS proposes that when these two interpersonal factors (i.e. *Perceived Burdensomeness* and *Thwarted Belongingness*) co-occur and are perceived to be hopelessly intractable, and when an individual possesses elevated *Capability for Suicide* (i.e., high pain tolerance, fearlessness about death), he or she will engage in lethal or near-lethal suicidal behavior. It is this specific interaction of three components, *Perceived Burdensomeness*, *Thwarted Belongingness*, and *Capability for Suicide*, that leads to elevated risk for death by suicide.

Although the tenets of the ITS have been supported by many research studies (e.g., Bryan et al., 2010; Joiner Jr. et al., 2009), it is

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important not to assume that it functions identically across cultures. Thus, empirical studies must test whether the ITS can be applied to non-Western cultures, and if so, whether alterations are required (Hagan et al., in press; Lester, 2008). This is particularly important because, while the ITS emphasizes interpersonal risk factors for suicide, an individual's experience of interpersonal context may differ across cultures. This is highlighted in cultural differences regarding self-construal; that is, individuals who live in collectivistic cultures such as South Korea construe the self as interdependent, promoting fundamental connectedness among individuals within significant relationships (Markus and Kitayama, 1991).

In collectivistic cultures, psychological processes involved in the self, such as mood and positive evaluation of self, are not viewed as separate from the social context (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Kitayama et al., 1997). In contrast, individuals who live in individualistic cultures such as the U.S. typically construe the self as independent, and independence and autonomy are promoted and separated from social context (Markus and Kitayama, 1991; Kitayama et al., 1997). Additionally, “saving face”, or a desire to avoid embarrassment and preserve one's reputation, is more closely tied to Asian societies than Western societies (Yabuuchi, 2004). Furthermore, the Confucian roots of many Asian cultures have led to Asian societies strongly emphasizing social relationships (Yum, 1988). The sociologist Durkheim (1897) also suggested that collective social forces, such as strong social integration within a society, may be more strongly associated with suicide than individualistic social forces. Thus, it is necessary to explore the extent to which the ITS' interpersonal factors (i.e., *Perceived Burdensomeness* and *Thwarted Belongingness*) are associated with suicide across cultures.

Although some reports have investigated the propositions of the ITS within collectivistic cultures, to our knowledge, no studies to date have evaluated cross-cultural comparisons of the ITS between samples from two different cultures. One study by Zhang et al. (2013) tested the ITS in a sample of 439 Chinese college students and found that *Perceived Burdensomeness* and *Capability for Suicide* were each significantly associated with suicidal ideation, but *Thwarted Belongingness* was not. Another study by Wang et al. (2013) investigated interpersonal factors such as perfectionistic family discrepancy and discrimination within the ITS framework on Asian international students study in the U.S. and found family discrepancy and perceived discrimination to intensify the associations between interpersonal risk factors and suicide ideation. Another study by Wong et al. (2011) found that perceived burdensomeness was a more robust predictor of suicidal ideation compared to thwarted belongingness in Asian American college students living in the U.S. To date, only one study has investigated the ITS in a Korean sample. Kim and Yang (2015) compared predictors of suicidal ideation among homosexual participants to those found among heterosexual participants in South Korea based on ITS constructs. This study showed that *Perceived Burdensomeness* was a stronger predictor of suicidal ideation among homosexual participants than among heterosexual participants. Although this study expanded the applicability of the ITS in a Korean sample, this study did not examine cross-cultural differences in the ITS variables.

The current study aimed to test the propositions of the ITS in a Korean undergraduate sample and to compare these findings to data collected from a U.S. undergraduate sample. Considering that South Korea is a collectivistic culture, and based on past studies investigating the ITS in Asian countries, we hypothesized that *Perceived Burdensomeness* and *Thwarted Belongingness* would be stronger correlates of suicidal ideation among Korean undergraduates than U.S. undergraduates belonging to a more individualistic culture. The current study used structural equation modeling to test this hypothesis and investigate the relationship between ITS factors (*Thwarted Belongingness*, *Perceived Burdensomeness*, and *Capability for Suicide*) and suicide risk across two distinct cultural samples. In

Table 1
Demographic information of U.S. and Korean samples.

| Variable name | U.S. | Korea | t or χ^2 | p-value |
|----------------------------|--|---|---------------|-----------|
| N | M (SD) / N (%) 390 | M (SD) / N (%) 554 | | |
| Age | 19.08 (1.37) | 21.87 (2.23) | -21.89 | < 0.001** |
| Gender | 282 (72.3%) Female | 413 (74.8%) Female | 0.75 | 0.388 |
| Living arrangements | Lives Alone 14 (3.6%) With spouse or significant other 8 (2.1%) With parents 7 (1.8%) With other students/friend(s) 348 (89.2%) With relative 4 (1.0%) Other 9 (2.3%) | Lives Alone 138 (25.0%) With spouse or significant other 4 (0.7%) With parents 295 (53.4%) With other students/friend(s) 65 (11.2%) With relative 7 (1.3%) Other 46 (8.3%) | 592.00 | < 0.001** |

** $p < 0.001$

addition, we also explored possible differences in the interactions between ITS factors across cultures.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants and procedures

Participants were recruited from both the U.S. and South Korea. For the Korean sample, participants were 554 college undergraduates (74.8% female) recruited from psychology courses across four major universities in Seoul and Daejeon, South Korea (Table 1). On average, participants were 21.87 years old ($SD = 2.25$). Approximately 53.4% of participants lived with their parents, 25% lived alone, 11.2% lived with friends, 1.3% lived with another relative, 0.7% lived with spouse/significant other, and 8.3% lived with someone else. Participants completed self-report measures as part of a larger investigation of sleep disturbances and suicidal ideation. All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were compensated with course credit following completion of the study. All data were collected in 2015 using paper-and-pencil self-report surveys.

The U.S. sample included 390 undergraduate students who completed self-report measures as part of a larger study. Participants in this sample were predominantly female (72.3%) and had a mean age of 19.08 years ($SD = 1.37$, range 18–27). The majority of participants self-reported their primary racial identity as White (76.2%), 9.7% as Hispanic/Latino, 9.2% as African-American, 4.4% as Asian/Asian-American, and 0.6% as Other. The majority of U.S. participants lived with other students/their friends (89.2%) in dormitories or off-campus apartments; the remainder reported living with their parents (1.8%), other relatives (1%), their spouse/significant other (2.1%), alone (3.6%), or with other roommates (2.3%). All participants provided informed consent prior to participation and were compensated with course credit following completion of the study. All data were collected during the Fall 2014 semester through an online survey.

These studies were approved by the Institutional Review Boards from all institutions where the samples were recruited.

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