



Research report

Interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence: An indirect association through perceived burdensomeness toward others

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ABSTRACT

Background: Research has documented significant associations between life stress, especially interpersonal stress, and suicidal ideation in adolescents. Little is known about variables that explain the association between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation.

Methods: The present study evaluated a conceptual model in which interpersonal stress (chronic and episodic) predicted suicidal ideation indirectly via thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness among 180 inpatients (65.0% girls) ages 12–17 years ($M = 14.72$, $SD = 1.49$). Non-interpersonal stress was also examined to determine whether the model was specific to interpersonal stress or common to stress in general.

Results: Structural equation modeling identified a significant indirect effect of chronic interpersonal stress on suicidal ideation via perceived burdensomeness. Episodic interpersonal stress was significantly correlated with thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation, but was not a significant predictor of suicidal ideation in a model that controlled for depressive and anxious symptoms. No significant associations were found between non-interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation.

Limitations: Adolescents were the sole informant source, data on psychiatric diagnoses were not available, and the optimal time interval for examining stress remains unclear. The cross-sectional study design prevents conclusions regarding directionality.

Conclusions: These findings highlight the role of chronic interpersonal stress in suicidal ideation in adolescents, as well as the potential promise of perceived burdensomeness as a target for programs designed to prevent or reduce suicidal ideation.

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1. Introduction

The prevalence of suicidal ideation increases dramatically and peaks during adolescence; 17% of high school students endorsed seriously considering a suicide attempt and 14% reported making a specific plan about how they would attempt suicide in the past 12 months (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2014). Adolescence thus is a crucial period in which to examine variables indicated in the etiology of suicidal ideation. Life stress, especially life stress in interpersonal relationships, has received considerable attention in the etiology of suicidal ideation among adolescents (e.g., Heikkinen et al., 1993; Johnson et al., 2002; King and Merchant, 2008; Sandin et al., 1998).

1.1. Life stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence

A large empirical literature has demonstrated significant associations between life stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence (e.g., Overholser, 2003; Pettit et al., 2011), including episodic stress and chronic stress (Grover et al., 2009). Episodic stress includes discrete, acute events that disrupt an adolescent's life (e.g., break-up of a romantic relationship), whereas chronic stress refers to ongoing and persistent difficulties and threats (e.g., frequent arguments with parents). Global, or composite, indices of episodic stress and chronic stress have demonstrated only modest associations with suicidal ideation (Kelly et al., 2001), indicating a need for a more fine-grained examination of the associations between specific domains of stress and suicidal ideation.

Stress in interpersonal domains, meaning stress that occurs in the context of relationships with others, has consistently been identified as a significant correlate or predictor of suicidal ideation in adolescence (King and Merchant, 2008; Whitlock et al., 2014).

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For example, interpersonal events such as physical or sexual abuse, major family disruptions, and romantic break-ups were common precipitants of suicide-related behaviors in adolescence (Garber et al., 1998; Asarnow et al., 2008; Bruffaerts et al., 2010) and serious fights with family members in middle adolescence predicted risk of suicide-related behaviors into late adolescence and early adulthood (Johnson et al., 2002). Similarly, chronic, ongoing stress in interpersonal relationships was significantly associated with suicidal ideation in a sample of adolescents (Pettit et al., 2011) and ongoing difficulties in eight interpersonal domains were significantly associated with risk of suicide-related behaviors in late adolescence and early adulthood (Johnson et al., 2002). In contrast, evidence for an association between stress in non-interpersonal domains and suicide-related behavior has been less consistent, with some studies failing to find significant associations between episodic stressful events and chronic stress in non-interpersonal domains, on the one hand, and suicide-related behaviors, on the other hand (Johnson et al., 2002; Pettit et al., 2011).

Although evidence supports an association between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence, it remains unclear *how* interpersonal stress leads to suicidal ideation. That is, little is known about mediators of the association between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation. The identification of mediators of the association between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation could inform etiologic models of suicidal ideation as well as prevention strategies designed to reduce the risk of suicidal ideation following the occurrence of interpersonal stress.

1.2. The interpersonal psychological theory as an explanation of the association between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence

The interpersonal psychological theory of suicide (IPTs) provides a compelling framework to elucidate the relationship between interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation in adolescence. According to the IPTs, suicidal ideation results from a sense of thwarted belongingness (i.e., social disconnection) and a sense of perceived burdensomeness toward others (i.e., the belief that one is a burden or drain on others) (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010). Considerable evidence supports a significant association between perceived burdensomeness and suicidal ideation among adults (e.g., Hill and Pettit, 2014; Van Orden et al., 2010), and recent findings provide support for a significant association between perceived burdensomeness and suicidal ideation among adolescents (Hill et al., 2015; Venta et al., 2014). Evidence for an association between thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation has been mixed in adults (Van Orden et al., 2012; Woodward et al., 2014; O'Keefe et al., 2014); two published studies among adolescents found a significant association between thwarted belongingness and suicidal ideation (Hill et al., 2015; Venta et al., 2014). Thus, evidence is accumulating to support perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness as correlates of suicidal ideation in adolescents.

It is possible that interpersonal stress is associated with an erosion in one's relationships with others and a diminished quality and/or quantity of social interactions. The possibility of such an erosion is supported by findings that interpersonal stress is significantly associated with lower levels of social support (Auerbach et al., 2011) and higher levels of family disruption (Rudolph and Flynn, 2007) in adolescents. Erosion of relationships subsequent to interpersonal stress may be associated with a sense of social disconnection (i.e., thwarted belongingness) and a sense of social drain (i.e., perceived burdensomeness) that in turn, according to the IPTs, are associated with thoughts of suicide. Although such erosion may occur in the context of episodic, disruptive interpersonal events, it may be especially likely to occur when

interpersonal stress is chronic and ongoing. Repeated strains on interpersonal relationships, even more so than isolated events, may exert a cumulative effect on perceptions of social connectedness and social contribution.

We are not aware of published studies that have examined the associations between interpersonal stress, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness among adolescents. However, evidence consistent with significant associations between interpersonal stress, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness has been reported among young adults: Among 189 undergraduate students, retrospectively reported childhood emotional abuse was significantly associated with current levels of thwarted belongingness, perceived burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation (Puzia et al., 2014). Further, perceived burdensomeness, but not thwarted belongingness, significantly mediated the association between childhood emotional abuse and current suicidal ideation. These findings provide preliminary evidence that distal stress in interpersonal relationships is associated with a sense of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness, and that perceived burdensomeness may partially explain the association between distal interpersonal stress and suicidal ideation among young adults. Although they did not measure thwarted belongingness or perceived burdensomeness, Johnson et al. (2002) reported similar findings among 659 late adolescents and young adults: interpersonal difficulties in middle adolescence mediated the association between maladaptive parenting or abuse during childhood and suicide-related behaviors in late adolescence or early adulthood.

1.3. Present study

The purposes of the present study were to build on those promising preliminary findings by (a) examining the associations between stress, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation and (b) evaluating a conceptual model wherein interpersonal stress is associated with suicidal ideation via perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness in a sample of psychiatric inpatient adolescents. Based on past research and the IPTs, we made three sets of hypotheses. First, we hypothesized that interpersonal stress (episodic and chronic) would be significantly and positively associated with suicidal ideation. Second, we hypothesized that interpersonal stress would be significantly and positively associated with thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Whereas episodic interpersonal stress may strain interpersonal relationships in the short term, we tentatively expected chronic interpersonal stress would be especially likely to be associated with thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness due to repeated, ongoing strains on relationships with others. Third, we hypothesized that a model of indirect effects wherein the relationship between interpersonal stress (episodic and chronic) and suicidal ideation is accounted for in part by thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness would provide a good fit to the data. Findings in support of the proposed conceptual model would suggest the potential promise of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness as targets in prevention programs designed to reduce the risk of suicidal ideation among adolescents who experience high levels of interpersonal stress.

To evaluate whether the proposed conceptual model is specific to interpersonal stress or common to stress irrespective of domain, we also examined the associations between non-interpersonal stress, perceived burdensomeness, thwarted belongingness, and suicidal ideation. Based on past research findings (e.g., Johnson et al., 2002; Pettit et al., 2011), we did not expect non-interpersonal stress to be significantly associated with perceived burdensomeness, thwarted burdensomeness, and suicidal ideation.

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