

## Towards a model of suicidal ideation for Hong Kong Chinese adolescents<sup>☆</sup>

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### Abstract

This study tested a model of suicidal ideation with family cohesion, expressiveness, conflicts, teacher support, teacher–student relationships and peer support as antecedents, and self-esteem and depression as mediators. Data was collected from survey questionnaires with 433 Hong Kong Chinese adolescents. The results showed that only family cohesion, conflicts, teacher support and peer support significantly predicted self-esteem and depression, with depression being a strong mediator of suicidal ideation. Implications of the findings for future research were discussed.

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*Keywords:* Suicidal ideation; Depression; Self-esteem

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### Introduction

Suicide was found to be a leading cause of death for young people (Kalafat, 1997). Although the adolescent suicide rate in Hong Kong was not as high as those reported in the Western countries, like the USA and Canada (World Health Organization, 2004), an upwards trend has been observed (Yip, 1998; Yip & Yu, 1993). To understand the complex problem of adolescent

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suicide, investigations on psychological autopsies (Houston, Hawton, & Shepperd, 2001) or testing causal models of suicidal ideation (Perkins & Hartless, 2002; Shagle & Barber, 1995) have been conducted in the West. However, such research has rarely been conducted in non-Western context, particularly in Hong Kong. Except Stewart, Lam, Betson, and Chung (1999), which found the Chinese adolescents were more likely to develop suicidal ideation when they felt depressed and encountered an accumulation of family, peer, school and social stress. Therefore, this study intended to investigate the simultaneous relationships of family relationships, school support and peer support to suicidal ideation, as well as the mediating relationships of self-esteem and depression, for Hong Kong Chinese adolescents.

#### *The relationships of family, school and peers to suicidal ideation*

Understanding adolescent development is closely related to their living environment, there have been an increasing number of studies (e.g. Apter, 1982; Henry, Stephenson, Hanson, & Hargett, 1993) highlighting the importance of adopting the human ecological framework (Bronfenbrenner, 1979) to look at the familial and extra-familial factors simultaneously in examining adolescent suicide. Family relationships embrace cohesion, expressiveness and conflict (Moos & Moos, 1986), which have often been found to associate with adolescent suicidal ideation directly (Garrison, Addy, Jackson, McKeown, & Waller, 1991; Huff, 1999; Meneese & Yutrzenka, 1990; Zhang & Jin, 1996) and indirectly (Meneese, Yutrzenka, & Vitale, 1992; Shagle & Barber, 1993). Moreover, family cohesion was found to act as a buffer, which could moderate the negative effects of life stress and protect the adolescents from developing severe depression (Feldman, Rubenstein, & Rubin, 1988; Reinherz et al., 1989) and suicidal behaviours (Rubenstein, Halton, Kasten, Rubin, & Stechler, 1998). Besides, the effectiveness of teacher and peer support in moderating adolescents' distress and suicidal tendencies was recognized (Davidson & Range, 1999; Sandoval & Brock, 1996; Wastell & Shaw, 1999; Wodarski & Feit, 1997). Furthermore, some studies have attempted to show the significance of both school and peer factors, in addition to the salient family influences, as antecedents in the prediction of adolescent suicidal ideation (Perkins & Hartless, 2002; Shagle & Barber, 1995). In short, family relationships, school support and peer support are associated with adolescent suicidal ideation.

#### *The relationships of self-esteem, depression, hopelessness and suicidal ideation*

Within the adolescents' psychological system, Beck (1967) stated that feelings of worthlessness and hopelessness are contributory to depression, which may lead to suicidal thoughts as a way out. Among these three psychological factors, hopelessness was suggested to better predict suicidal ideation at a severe clinical level (Schotte & Clum, 1982; Strang & Orlofsky, 1990), whereas depression has been supported to be a more significant predictor of suicidal ideation in the community settings, noting that not all depressed adolescents were suicidal (e.g. de Man, 1999; Kandel, Raveis, & Davies, 1991; Meneese et al., 1992). Some studies did not include depression in their investigation, and found that low self-esteem was an independent predictor of suicidal ideation (Overholser, Adams, Lehnert, & Brinkman, 1995; Shagle & Barber, 1995). Generally, most of the studies with adolescents from the community settings investigated self-esteem and depression, rather than hopelessness, as the psychological predictors of suicidal ideation (Jin &

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