

Research report

Variability in suicidal ideation: A better predictor of suicide attempts than intensity or duration of ideation?

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Abstract

Background: Much of the suicidology literature focuses on establishing contextual risk factors for suicidal behavior. However, the study of the parameters of suicidal behavior (e.g., intensity, duration, and variability) has been somewhat neglected [Joiner, T., Rudd, M.D., 2000. Intensity and duration of suicidal crises vary as a function of previous suicide attempts and negative life events. *J. Consult. Clin. Psychol.* 68, 909–916]. Having previously established a relationship between variability in suicidal ideation and a previous history of suicide attempts [Witte, T.K., Fitzpatrick, K.K., Warren, K.L., Schatschneider, C., Schmidt, N.B., submitted for publication. Naturalistic Evaluation of Suicidal Ideation: Variability and Relation to Attempt Status], we felt it important to assess the liability conferred by a variable pattern of ideation compared to the intensity and duration of suicidal thoughts. We also examined if there was an interaction between gender and the parameters of intensity, duration, and variability. **Method:** One hundred eight participants (54 non-attempters, 35 single attempters, and 19 multiple attempters) completed the Suicide Probability Scale every day for 4 weeks, allowing us to measure the parameters of interest. These variables were entered into a regression model as predictors of previous suicide attempts.

Results: Consistent with prediction, high variability of ideation was the only significant predictor of previous attempt status. In addition, an interaction between gender and variability in suicidal ideation suggested that variability appeared more critical in predicting previous attempts for males.

Limitations: The limited number of multiple attempters in our sample and the use of college students limit the current study.

Conclusions: Variability appears to be the most potent predictor of attempt status among the parameters of suicidal ideation examined in the current study. This relationship appears to be particularly important in males, suggesting that fluctuating levels of suicidal ideation may confer future risk for suicide.

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Considerable research has focused on attempting to better understand the risk factors of suicide. Although this is clearly an important task, reframing our focus toward elucidating the parameters of suicidal behavior, such as the duration and intensity of suicidal ideation, represents an important and relatively unstudied area. The intensity of suicidal ideation, which was conceptualized by Joiner and Rudd (2000) as the severity of suicidal symptoms, has a relatively obvious association with risk factors. It seems logical that thoughts about suicide could be the beginning of a trajectory toward suicide completion for some people. Intensity of ideation has been associated with a history of previous suicide attempts (Joiner et al., 2000), future suicide attempts (Lewinsohn et al., 1996), and future suicide completion (Beck et al., 1999).

Sustained levels of ideation have been posited to create “wear” on an individual by depleting their resources and allowing for an increase in resolve and commitment to a suicidal act (Joiner, *in press*). Consistent with this idea, the duration of suicidal crises has also been related to suicide attempts (Joiner and Rudd, 2000; Neuringer, 1982). However, this relationship appears to be moderated by the presence of negative life events. For example, Joiner and Rudd (2000) found that the duration of a suicidal crisis was considerably longer only for multiple suicide attempters experiencing negative life events.

Variability in suicidal ideation not only likely captures elements of both intensity and duration but also likely contains elements of affective lability (Harvey et al., 1989). Affective lability might also contribute to feelings of a lack of control, which has been associated with thoughts about death and suicidal ideation (Orbach et al., 2001). In fact, there is evidence that affectively unstable individuals utilize suicidal behavior as a means of controlling their fluctuating emotions (Zlotnick et al., 1997).

Sex differences in suicidal behavior are important to consider, including their relation to the parameters of variability, intensity, and duration. Sex differences in phenomena related to overt suicidal behaviors have been relatively well-established (Andrews and Lewinsohn, 1992; Townsend et al., 2001). However, no study has yet examined the interaction between gender differences on the one hand, and the parameters of intensity, duration, and variability of sui-

dal ideation on the other, in relation to suicide attempts.

The primary aim of the current study was to examine the three ideation parameters described above (i.e., intensity, duration, and variability) in order to determine their unique relations to suicide attempt status. A unique aspect of the current report was the utilization of daily, longitudinal data collection to provide a more accurate picture of the nature and changes in ideation. The second study aim was to explore the relationship between these parameters and gender, due to the prominent differences in pathways to suicidal behavior between the sexes. Our predictions were as follows. First, we predicted that variability, because it contains elements of intensity, duration, and affective lability, would be the best predictor of prior suicide attempts. We also predicted an interaction between gender and variability based on Winkler et al.’s (2004) recent demonstration that depressed females experience higher levels of affective lability, although we make this prediction with caution given that Winkler and colleagues studied depressed inpatients, whereas our sample consists of college students.

1. Method

1.1. Participants

Participants (60% female; mean age=19.3, SD=3.06) were selected from introductory psychology classes and received course credit for their participation. Individuals were selected for participation following a screening with the Beck Suicide Scale (BSS; Beck and Steer, 1993), which includes an item assessing past suicide attempts. Participant selection occurred in two waves. In the first wave, all participants who responded to screening criteria were enrolled, regardless of attempt history. The second wave of participant selection focused on targeted recruitment of those endorsing one or more suicide attempts. As such, participants with past suicide attempts were oversampled from the subject pool. Attempt status was later confirmed during a structured clinical interview, which includes a suicide history and risk assessment. Of those screened, 133 entered the study, but only 108 had complete data and were

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