Why Latinas attempt suicide and what we can do about it

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National Hispanic Latino ATTC Meeting
Santa Fe, NM
June 15, 2017
I. Background
II. Theoretical Perspectives
III. Empirical Perspectives
IV. Cultural and Social Hypotheses
Why it Matters:

Core Hispanic States (9)
Emerging Hispanic States (19)

Historical Core: >400,000 in 1990
New Hispanic: >200,000 from 1990-10
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>White</th>
<th>Black</th>
<th>Latinas</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1991</td>
<td>11.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1993</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>19.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1995</td>
<td>10.9</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1997</td>
<td>10.3</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1999</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2001</td>
<td>15.9</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005</td>
<td>14.9</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>14.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2009</td>
<td>11.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>11.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2011</td>
<td>13.5</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>13.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>15.6</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015</td>
<td>15.1</td>
<td>10.4</td>
<td>15.1</td>
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The Progression:
It starts with sadness or hopelessness, 2015

Source: CDC, 2016
Then moves to seriously considering suicide, 2015

Source: CDC, 2016
Followed by a suicide plan, 2015

CDC is planning to release 2015 YRBS reports in June 2016

Source: CDC, 2016
Culminates in an attempted suicide, 2015

Source: CDC, 2016
Suicide attempts of adolescent girls in core Hispanic states, 2009

Data on California and New Jersey not available
Data on African Americans in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)
Suicide attempts of adolescent girls in core Hispanic states, 2011

Data on California not available
Data on African Americans in Arizona, Colorado, New Jersey, New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)
Suicide attempts of adolescent girls in core Hispanic states, 2013

Data on California not available
Data on African Americans in Arizona, New Jersey New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)
Suicide attempts of adolescent girls in core Hispanic states, 2015

Data on Texas not available
Data on African Americans in Arizona, New Jersey New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)
It’s not a new phenomenon

- Earliest evidence of Latinas attempting suicide—late 1950s
- The “Suicidal Fit” South Bronx, NY (Trautman, 1961)
  - impulsive escapes from stressful situations
  - ingested pills or household cleansers
  - problems in family relations
    - spouse or mother
  - no thought of death
  - not aware of their thoughts
  - no psychotic symptoms
Underlying Reasons for Attempts

- **Underlying reasons**: circumstance teenager says she struggled with over a long period of time
  - Dysfunctional family: most commonly reported underlying reason for an attempt
  - Conflicts among family members; parental divorce
  - Drug or drinking problem by girl or family
  - Sexual abuse or molestation
Triggers of Attempts

- **Trigger**: Event occurring shortly before SA that girls says is acutely related to SA
  - Most common: relational conflict with family member, sweetheart, friend, other close person
  - Emotional experience: difficulty dealing with complex feelings; escalation of frustration and tension
Conceptual Model: Pathway

- **Family Sociocultural Environment**
  - Cultural Traditions
  - Adolescent Development
  - Family Functioning

- **Psychological Functioning**
  - Emotional Vulnerability

- **Subjective Experience of Crisis**
  - Trigger: Interpersonal conflict
Developmental Systems Theory

- Reciprocal interaction between person and environment
- Ecological Systems (micro, meso, exo, and macro) – Bronfenbrenner
- “Zone of Proximal Development” – Vygotsky
Adolescent Development

- Autonomy
- Relatedness/Connectedness
Family Systems Theory

- Cohesiveness
- Adaptability
- Communication
Cultural Psychology

- Variations in family structure, interactions, child-rearing
  - Provides context & rules for interactional processes
- Shapes psychological representations & affects
  - Sets limits of emotional tolerance (some salient, others hard to express)
- Provides lexicons for emotional expressions (“idioms of distress”)
Culture Shapes

- beliefs about etiology and explanatory models
- forms that illness experience take and social responses to distress and disability
- symptomatology & interpretation of symptoms
- modes of coping with distress and help-seeking

Kirmayer, 2001
Our Research Questions

- Why do some Latinas attempt suicide and others don’t despite similar characteristics?
- What are the elements in the suicide attempts of young Latinas?

Our Study

- 122 attempters, 88 mothers, 19 fathers
- 110 non-attempters, 83 mothers, 17 fathers
- Girls’ average age: 15 years
- Parents’ average education: 10th - 11th grade
## Familism, Parent-Adolescent Conflict, & Self-Esteem

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Sample (N=226)</th>
<th>Attempters (n=121)</th>
<th>Non-Attempt (n=105)</th>
<th>( t/\chi^2 ) Values</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
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<td><strong>SD</strong></td>
<td><strong>M</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Parent-Adol. Conflict</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>4.61</td>
<td>6.59</td>
<td>4.84</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internalizing</td>
<td>20.67</td>
<td>11.13</td>
<td>25.98</td>
<td>10.70</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Self-Esteem</td>
<td>29.28</td>
<td>5.72</td>
<td>26.85</td>
<td>5.29</td>
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</table>

*\( p<.05 \)  **\( p<.01 \)  ***\( p<.001 \)
Results

- **Acculturation**
  - Attempters and Non-Attempters did not differ
  - Teens more acculturated than parents

- **Familism**
  - Attempters and Non-Attempters did not differ
  - Teens less familistic than parents

- **Affection, Communication, & Support**
  - Attempters reported lower levels than Non-Attempters
  - Attempters rated mothers significantly lower than non-attempters rated their mothers
Mother-Daughter Mutuality/Reciprocity

- Mutuality with mothers
  - Attempters lower in mutuality with moms than Non-Attempters
  - Girls generally rated mothers lower in mutuality
  - Gap greater between attempters/mothers than between non-attempters/mothers

- All moms perceive selves to be attuned to daughters
- But differences in daughters’ perceptions
  - Attempters disagree: mothers not attuned
  - Non-attempters agree: mothers pretty much attuned
Why Mother-Daughter Mutuality Matters*

- A one-point increase in measure (MPDQ) of mutuality is associated with a 57% decrease in the probability of being an attempter

* insufficient data on fathers
Mutuality with Fathers

- Insufficient data from fathers
- Attempters expressed greater mutuality with fathers than with mothers
- Attempters expressed more communication, affection, and support from fathers
- But many fathers were absent in attempters’ lives
Prolonged tension between girl and parents
- Relations with divorced parents
- Household chores; breaking house rules
- Perceived favoritism for sibling

Often about a boyfriend, dating, sexuality—developmental struggle of autonomy
- Privacy and boundaries
- Romantic relations
- Personal attire

Intense argument with parents just prior
Felt guilt at threat to family integrity
### Meaning of the Suicide Act

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Concept</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-Punishment</td>
<td>“I was thinking, ‘Oh, I should just kill myself. I’m not worth it anymore.’” [16 year-old; blade from a pencil sharpener]</td>
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<td>Self-Blame</td>
<td>“I wanted to kill myself. I didn’t want to cause any more problems. I felt so bad for everything.” [14 year-old; pills]</td>
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<td>Emotional Release</td>
<td>• “I have so much pain inside, it’s kind of like I cry inside...I guess when I cut myself, I feel like I’m letting endless words or anything through the blade. I’m taking out my pain.” [16 year-old; razor blade]</td>
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<tr>
<td>Revenge</td>
<td>• “I went to rub it in my mom’s face. I was like, ‘that’s why I went in to the bathroom and swallowed the bottle of pills.’” [13 year-old; 11 Tylenol with Codeine]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Control</td>
<td>• “It was like a breath of fresh air for me, cause it’s like my mom wasn’t the one who was hurting me, like she didn’t have control over the hurt I felt.” [15 year-old; razor blade]</td>
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Implications for Parents

- How are you handling your daughter’s development and growth?
- How far apart or near do you feel with your daughter? Does she agree with you?
  - Talk about it
- How well do you know what your daughter faces in school and at home every day?
- Has conflicts with her escalated over time?
- Help is available. Seek it. Use it
Implications for Interventions

- Prevention starts in middle-school
  - Youth groups, girls and boys
- Parent groups in school
- Utility and limitations of individual therapy
- Family-oriented prevention programs and family therapy
  - Perspective-taking
  - Narratives & story-telling
  - Family rituals
Thank you.

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