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Strain, depressed mood and suicidal thoughts among maltreated adolescents in the United States



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ABSTRACT

Almost one-fourth of maltreated adolescents report they have thought about killing themselves in the last two weeks. We draw on Agnew's strain theory to develop a model to account for variability in suicidal thoughts among this high-risk group. We used data from a nationally representative sample of 572 maltreated adolescents, aged 11–15. One dimension of relational strain (poorer relationship with peers) and greater depressed mood were directly related to whether adolescents did or did not think about suicide. Depressed mood mediated the relationship between two strain variables (relationship with caregiver and with school) and suicidal thoughts. Child maltreatment strain (being severely harmed) and substance use were not directly related to suicidal thoughts; however, depressed mood appeared to mediate the relationship between drug use and suicidal thoughts. Adolescents who experience child maltreatment and who appear to be disconnected from caregivers, friends and school should be screened for depression and suicidal thoughts.

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According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC, 2012), suicide is a leading cause of death among young people ages 10–24 years old. In a nationally representative study, approximately 16 percent of high school students considered suicide within the last year (CDC, 2012). Adolescent victims of child maltreatment appear to be at a substantially higher risk of suicidal thoughts than adolescents in the general population. McMeel (2009), using a nationally representative sample, reported that 23 percent of adolescents involved in the Child Protective Services (CPS) system had thought about killing themselves within the last two weeks. Although most adolescents who think about suicide do not attempt suicide (USDHHS, 2012), thinking about killing oneself suggests adolescents are experiencing substantial emotional pain—pain that could be lessened by early intervention.

To develop interventions that prevent suicide attempts among adolescents who have been maltreated, we need to have a better understanding of the precursors to suicidal thoughts within this population. For example, we know very little about whether variability in the maltreatment experience is related to whether maltreated adolescents' think about committing suicide. The paucity of research on maltreated adolescents and suicidal thoughts can be attributed, in part, to the difficulty in identifying a representative group of maltreated adolescents. This barrier was surmounted in 2006 when the first waves of data from the National Survey on Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW) were released (Kohl, Barth, & The NSCAW Group, 2005). In our analyses, we use NSCAW data to account for variability in suicidal thoughts among maltreated adolescents.

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To generate hypotheses for our analysis, we primarily draw on strain theory (Agnew, 1992). Agnew (1992) writes that strain occurs when people fail to achieve goals (viz. status), anticipate or actually lose positive stimuli, or anticipate or actually are exposed to negative stimuli. While research on status strain among adults has focused on career achievement, we focus on academic achievement as an age-specific status strain among adolescents. For positive stimuli, we evaluate adolescents' relationships (relational strain). To clarify which types of relationships are important in understanding suicidal thoughts, we distinguish between adolescents' relationships with their peers, with their caregiver, and with their school. Finally, for adolescents who are maltreated, we are concerned with the nature of this negative stimuli, namely severe maltreatment (maltreatment strain). In the Literature, we describe what is known about the direct relationship between suicidal thoughts and academic achievement, adolescents' relationships and severity of maltreatment. We also review literature on two potential mediators of the potential strain-suicidal thoughts relationship: depressed mood and substance use.

Literature

Relational strain

Relational strain occurs when a person experiences stress while striving for, but not achieving, positive relationships with other people. Important relationships for adolescents include their relationships with their peers, with their caregivers, and with their schools.

With peers. Adolescence is a time when primary attachments shift from caregivers to peers (Kidd et al., 2006) and is a part of a normal development process (Fuligni & Eccles, 1993). Thus, when adolescents have poorer relationships with their peers, their well-being may be adversely affected and the likelihood of suicidal thoughts may increase. In both community and clinical samples, researchers have found that poorer peer relationships were positively related to suicidal thoughts among adolescents (Fergusson, Beautrais, & Horwood, 2003; Lewinsohn, Rohde, & Seeley, 1996; Prinstein, Boergers, Spirito, Little, & Grapentine, 2000).

With caregivers. Although adolescence is a stage when many young people focus on their relationships with peers, caregivers remain an important source of approval, support and caring. Accordingly, it is not surprising that researchers have found that adolescents who had poorer relationships with their caregivers were more likely to report suicidal thoughts. Most of what is published about the adolescent-caregiver relationship and suicidality comes from analyses of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health (Add Health, 2002) data, a representative, longitudinal sample of adolescents. The results from the Add Health study have been consistent across analyses and waves: adolescents who have felt less connected to their caregivers were more likely to report suicidal thoughts (Hannah, 2004; Resnick et al., 1997) regardless of gender (Watt & Sharp, 2001). Results reported by Fergusson et al. (2003) and Perkins and Hartless (2002), two additional studies with very large samples from the general adolescent population, are consistent with these results.

With schools. Young adolescents spend a substantial amount of time in school where they interact frequently with teachers, classmates and others. Therefore, it seems reasonable that their connection to and sense of belonging while at school could affect their well-being. When adolescents do not feel like they fit in at school, they may experience more relational strain. There are relatively few studies on the relationship between adolescents connection to school and suicidal thoughts, and again, most of what has been published relies on Add Health data. For instance, Kidd et al. (2006) did not find a relationship between adolescents' perception of their connectedness to school and suicide attempts; however, Resnick et al. (1997) did. Using a large sample and a measure similar to the school connectedness measure used in the Add Health study, Perkins and Hartless (2002) found adolescents who had a poorer relationship with their school were more likely to report thoughts of suicide.

Status strain

Status strain occurs when a person experiences stress while striving for recognition but not achieving it. For adolescents, not doing well academically may result in status strain. Researchers have used grade point average (GPA) as an indicator of status strain. GPA was negatively related to suicidal thought in two studies (suicidal thoughts: Lewinsohn et al., 1996; combined thoughts and attempts: Hallfors, Cho, Brodish, Flewelling, & Khatapoush, 2006). Using Add Health data, Watt and Sharp (2001) found that GPA was related to suicide attempts for adolescent girls but not for boys. Richardson, Bergen, Martin, Roeger, and Allison (2005) found that perceived academic achievement was not related to suicidal thoughts after controlling for depressive symptoms among a large sample of adolescents.

Child maltreatment strain

Among adolescents in the general population, child maltreatment strain could be defined as stress related to anticipating, trying to avoid, or experiencing abuse or neglect. In the NSCAW study, however, all of the adolescents were involved in the CPS system because of suspected child maltreatment and, in our analysis, CPS workers confirmed that abuse or neglect

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