

Effects of value strains on psychopathology of Chinese rural youths[☆]Jie Zhang^{a,b,*}, Sib0 Zhao^{a,b}^a Department of Sociology, State University of New York College at Buffalo, USA^b Central University of Finance and Economics School of Social Development, Beijing, China

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ABSTRACT

The Strain Theory of Suicide postulates that psychological strains usually precede mental disorders including suicidal behavior. This paper focuses on the effect of conflicting social value strains on the individual's psychopathology. We analyzed the data of 2031 respondents who were proxy informants for suicides and community living controls in a large scale psychological autopsy study in rural China, with the CES-D depression measure for the psychopathology. Individuals having experienced value conflicts between Confucian gender role and gender equalitarianism in modern society scored on depression significantly higher than the individuals who do not experience the value conflict, and it is also true when several other relevant variables were held constant in the multiple regression model. This study supports the hypotheses that people who confront value conflicts are likely to experience psychopathological strain, and the higher the level of strain, the stronger the depression.

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1. Introduction

The Strain Theory of Suicide postulates that psychological strains usually precede suicide (Zhang et al., 2009). As highly correlated variables (Roy, 1999), suicide and mental disorder might be independently predicted by psychological strains. However, no studies have been performed to test the relationship between psychological strains and mental disorder, although researchers have evidenced the link between psychological strains and suicidal behaviors (Zhang et al., 2011). This current study is designed to examine the relationship between psychological strains and psychopathology with the hypothesis that the social value strain is related to depression, as it is related to suicidal behaviors.

A single stress cannot be a strain and therefore does not necessarily put an individual into a detrimentally frustrating situation, based on the Strain Theory of Suicide. A psychological strain is formed by at least two stressors, pushing or pulling the individual in different directions, so as to let the individual be in a helpless, hopeless, and psychologically torturing situation (Agnew,

2006; Merton, 1957). For the Strain Theory of Suicide, a strain can be a consequence of any of the four conflicts: (1) differential values, (2) discrepancy between aspiration and reality, (3) relative deprivation, and (4) lack of coping skills for a crisis. The connection between suicide and psychological strains in the form of all the four sources has been tested and supported with a sample of suicide notes in the United States (Zhang and Lester, 2008) and through psychological autopsy studies in rural China (Zhang et al., 2011). The Strain Theory of Suicide forms a challenge to the psychiatric model popular among the psychiatrists in the world, because it argues, suicide, as well as mental disorders, can be preceded by psychological strains in the social structure (Durkheim, 1951). This theoretical conceptualization is based on the theoretical frameworks established by earlier sociologists, e.g. Durkheim (1951), Merton (1957), and Agnew (2006), and again, a source of strain must consist of two, or at least two conflicting social facts. If the two social facts are non-contradictory, there would be no strain.

Mental disorder and suicide are highly correlated. In the West, over 90% of the suicides can be diagnosed with at least one type of mental illnesses (Conwell et al., 1996). In China, the percentage of this type ranges from 30% to 70%, which is much lower than that in the West (Phillips et al., 2002; Zhang et al., 2010a). Nonetheless, mental disease is still the strongest predictor of suicide in China, in either bivariate or multiple regression studies. Therefore, psychiatrists who study suicidal behaviors tend to attribute mental problems to suicide. As of now, there have been few empirical studies to establish the causal relations from mental disorders and suicide. According to the Strain Theory of Suicide, mental disease

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^{*} Corresponding author at: Department of Sociology, State University of New York College at Buffalo, 1300 Elmwood Avenue, Buffalo, NY 14222, USA. Tel.: +1 716 878 6425; fax: +1 716 878 4009.

E-mail address: zhangj@buffalostate.edu (J. Zhang).

and suicide, although highly correlated, might be outcomes of some third variables in the social structure. In other words, mental disease and suicide could be independently predicted by psychological strains resulting from certain social facts and personal experiences. As one of the four series studies on strain and suicide/mental disorder, this study focuses on the effect of conflicting value strains on the individual's depression which is an important aspect of individual psychopathology.

A value strain is formed by two conflicting social values internalized in an individual's daily life. When two conflicting social facts or beliefs are competing in an individual's value system, it usually results in discomfort, frustration, or even hopelessness (Zhang et al., 2011). For example, a cult member may experience strain if the mainstream culture and the cult religion are both considered important in the cult member's daily life. In some developing countries, young people might confront value conflicts between modernity and traditionalism, and if the values have been both internalized, they must experience the values strains. A young second generation immigrant in the United States who has to abide by the ethnic culture rules enforced in the family while simultaneously adapting him/herself to the American mainstream culture with peers and school can be another example. In rural China, young women appreciate gender egalitarianism advocated by the communist government, but at the same time, they are trapped in cultural gender discrimination as traditionally cultivated by Confucianism. If the differential values of traditional collectivism and modern individualism are considered equally important, the person should experience a great strain. However, if one value is considered more important than the other for an individual, there is then little or no value strain.

In today's rural China with rapid economic growth and social change, one major social value conflict is between traditionalism and modernity, as in most other developing countries. The rural young people most likely socialize with different values at school and home, and therefore acquire and internalize different thinking which may lead to conflicting social values. Confucianism, deeply rooted in the Chinese culture, downplays the role of women, upholds filial piety, and prioritizes harmony in the family, community, and society (Hsu, 1998; Hwang, 1999). Obviously the Confucian value in gender role goes against the modern value of

gender egalitarianism. If a young person scores equally high on both social values and cannot give up either, he or she has a value strain, and the strain, when it is strong enough, may lead to depression as a result of frustration.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects and data collection

Data for the study were obtained from 16 rural counties of three provinces (Liaoning, Hunan, and Shandong) in China. It was a large psychological autopsy project investigating correlates of completed suicide in comparison with a group of community living controls. Face to face interviews were performed at the household in villages. In each selected county, suicides and living controls were enrolled and two informants (one family member and one friend or neighbor) were interviewed for each suicide case or control. The controls themselves were also interviewed with the same protocol to obtain further information for the study. We interviewed 784 informants for 392 suicides and 1247 informants for 416 community living controls. While we collected the proxy data for the target person from the informants, we also obtained structured information from the informants and living controls about themselves. In this study, 2031 informants were recruited for the analysis. For the specific procedures in sampling and interviewing and our protocol for the human subjects protection, please refer to our previous publications (Zhang, 2010; Zhang et al., 2010b). Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample as well as the major independent and dependent variables for the study with gender comparisons.

2.2. Measures

The Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale (CES-D) was used to evaluate the depression level of the respondents (Radloff, 1991). For each of the 20 items in the full version of the scale, respondents were asked to indicate the frequency of the symptom using a 4-point scale: 0 = less than a day, 1 = 1–2 days, 2 = 3–4 days, and 3 = 5–7 days against a time frame of the past week. The four negatively formulated items (items 4, 8, 12 and 16)

Table 1
Descriptions of the sample for all the major variables and their gender comparisons.

Variable	All subjects (N=2031)		Males (N=983)		Females (N=1048)		Gender comparison statistics		
	Mean or frequency	SD or percentage	Mean or frequency	SD or percentage	Mean or frequency	SD or percentage	df	t/ χ^2	P
Age, years (mean and SD)	37.09	13.92	37.62	14.28	36.58	13.556	2024	1.688	0.092
Gender									
Male	983	48.4%							
Female	1048	51.6%							
Marital status							1	12.229	<0.001
Never married	377	18.6%	213	21.7%	164	15.6%			
Ever married	1654	81.4%	770	78.3%	885	84.4%			
Family annual income RMB ^a							2	23.07	<0.001
Low (<=10,000)	1100	54.2%	484	49.2%	617	58.8%			
Middle (10,001–19,999)	520	25.6%	263	26.8%	257	24.5%			
High (>=20,000)	411	20.2%	236	24.0%	175	16.7%			
Religion							1	14.867	<0.001
No	1885	92.9%	935	95.3%	950	90.7%			
Yes	138	7.1%	46	4.7%	97	9.3%			
Value strain							1	0	0.989
No	1313	71.9%	634	71.9%	679	71.9%			
Yes	514	28.1%	248	28.1%	266	28.1%			
CES-D depression							1	2.405	0.121
Low (<16)	1614	80.2%	794	81.6%	820	78.8%			
High (>=16)	399	19.8%	179	18.4%	220	21.2%			

^a RMB is the abbreviation of Ren Min Bi, the Chinese currency. At the time of data collection in China 2005–2008, \$1 US was equal to about 6.5 RMB.

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