



A test of the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide among arrested domestic violence offenders



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ABSTRACT

Little is known about risk factors for suicide ideation and attempts among domestic violence offenders. Guided by the interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide, this cross-sectional study examined risk factors for suicide ideation and attempts among 312 men and 84 women arrested for domestic violence and mandated to attend batterer intervention programs. Men reported greater capability for suicide, but no gender differences were found in perceived burdensomeness and thwarted belongingness. After controlling for correlates of suicide ideation, perceived burdensomeness—but not thwarted belongingness or its interaction with perceived burdensomeness—associated with suicide ideation. Suicide attempters exhibited greater perceived burdensomeness, drug use and problems, borderline personality disorder symptoms, depressive symptoms, and suicide ideation, but not capability for suicide, than nonattempters. Gender did not moderate the associations of the IPTS constructs with suicide ideation and attempts. These findings parallel tests of the interpersonal-psychological theory in other samples. Additional work is needed to identify factors that distinguish risk for suicide ideation from risk for suicide attempts among domestic violence offenders.

1. Introduction

Criminal offenders experience heightened risk for suicide ideation, attempts, and deaths compared to the general population (Pratt et al., 2006; Webb et al., 2012). Offender research has primarily focused on incarcerated persons, demonstrating that risk factors mirror those in the general population, including psychiatric symptoms, drug and alcohol use, and aggression (Sarchiapone et al., 2009; Swogger et al., 2014). Individuals arrested for domestic violence and mandated to attend batterer intervention programs (BIPs) are a subset of offenders who have received relatively less empirical attention, despite their high prevalence rates of suicide ideation (e.g., 22% in past two weeks; Wolford-Clevenger et al., 2015a) and attempts (15% in past year; Henning et al., 2003). Identified risk factors for suicide ideation and attempts among offenders in BIPs, such as depressive and borderline personality disorder (BPD) symptoms (Wolford-Clevenger et al., 2015b), fail to provide sufficient specificity for suicide risk assessment efforts. Furthermore, no developments have been made regarding what distinguishes domestic violence offenders who experience suicide ideation from those who attempt suicide. Identifying additional risk

factors, especially those specific to suicide ideation versus attempts, will refine suicide prevention efforts for this population.

The *interpersonal-psychological theory of suicide* (IPTS; Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2008) is an empirically supported theory of suicide that proposes specific risk factors for suicide ideation and attempts that may guide suicide prevention efforts among offenders in BIPs. The IPTS advances that suicide ideation results from the concurrent presence of thwarted belongingness, defined as feelings of disconnectedness and low reciprocal care—and perceived burdensomeness, defined as feelings of self-hatred and liability (Van Orden et al., 2008). The theory further holds that those who deliberate suicide are not capable of engaging in lethal self-injury unless they are sufficiently fearless about death and tolerant of physical pain (Van Orden et al., 2008). This theory may be particularly appropriate to test within this clinical population, as it employs an “ideation-to-action” framework that proposes constructs that distinguish risk for suicide ideation from risk for suicide attempts (Klonsky and May, 2014).

According to the IPTS, domestic violence offenders may be especially vulnerable to suicide ideation, as the interpersonal and legal consequences of their domestic violence involvement may disrupt their

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social relations (i.e., thwarted belongingness) and generate feelings of self-hatred and liability (i.e., perceived burdensomeness). Indeed, interpersonal and legal problems have been linked to suicide deaths (Cook and Davis, 2012), and research has supported thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness as risk factors for suicide ideation in other criminal populations (e.g., prison inmates; Mandracchia and Smith, 2015). Furthermore, domestic violence offenders may have greater capability for suicide, as such capability has been linked to aggression (Ribeiro and Joiner, 2009; Smith et al., 2016; Swogger et al., 2014). However, tests of the IPTS on criminal offenders have thus far focused on men. It is important to test whether these findings generalize to women offenders, especially given that more women offenders attempt suicide than men (Henning et al., 2005). In adult populations, studies have consistently found higher levels of capability for suicide in men (Granato et al., 2015; Wolford-Clevenger et al., 2015b), with no gender differences in thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness (Joiner et al., 2009; Van Orden et al., 2008). A test of the IPTS and possible gender differences in its constructs will advance efforts to improve suicide prevention in domestic violence offenders.

Thus, the purpose of the present study was to test whether the IPTS constructs associate with suicide ideation and attempts among men and women arrested for domestic violence and mandated to BIPs. First, given prior research, we hypothesized that men would report greater capability for suicide than women (Granato et al., 2015), and given the lack of gender differences found in the literature, we aimed to explore potential gender differences in thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. Second, we hypothesized that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness would interact to positively associate with suicide ideation, such that as thwarted belongingness increases, the relation between perceived burdensomeness and suicide ideation would strengthen. We hypothesized that this relation would remain after controlling for demographic and other empirically supported correlates of suicide ideation, including depressive symptoms, BPD symptoms, alcohol use and problems, drug use and problems, and suicide attempt history (Swogger et al., 2014; Wolford-Clevenger et al., 2015b). Within this hypothesis, we also aimed to explore potential gender differences in the associations of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness with suicide ideation. Third, we hypothesized that suicide attempters would report greater capability for suicide than nonattempters, after controlling for demographic correlates, depressive symptoms, BPD symptoms, alcohol use and problems, drug use and problems, thwarted belongingness, and perceived burdensomeness. Within this hypothesis, we also aimed to explore potential gender differences in the association of capability for suicide with suicide attempt history.

2. Method

2.1. Participants

312 men and 84 women who were arrested for domestic violence and mandated to attend BIPs in Rhode Island were recruited for a larger study. Participants' average age was 34.55 ($SD=10.73$) years old. Participants primarily identified racially and ethnically as Caucasian/Non-Hispanic (67%), with 10% identifying as Black/African American, 13% as Hispanic/Latino(a), 8% as "Other," 2% as American Indian/Alaska Native, and 1% as Asian/Pacific Islander. Most participants were employed (67%). Participants reported having 12.19 ($SD=2.06$) years of education. Participants reported having attended 9.99 ($SD=6.84$) BIP sessions prior to data collection.

2.2. Procedures

An Institutional Review Board approved study procedures. Participants were recruited from three BIP sites that administered

forty-hour, open enrollment, group interventions that were similar in content (i.e., cognitive-behavioral and Duluth model components). Men and women attended separate groups. Participants completed measures in small groups. Participation was voluntary, anonymous, and not compensated.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. BPD symptoms

BPD symptoms were measured using the total score of the BPD subscale of the Personality Diagnostic Questionnaire-4, a 9-item, yes (1)-no (0) scale designed to screen for personality disorder symptoms (PDQ4; Hyler et al., 1988). One item that assessed for history of threats to harm or kill oneself was removed given the likely redundancy between this item and the suicide attempt variable. The PDQ-4 has demonstrated good internal consistency in prior samples (Hyler et al., 1989) and the present sample ($\alpha=0.76$).

2.3.2. Alcohol use and problems

Alcohol use and problems were assessed using the Alcohol Use Disorder Identification Test (AUDIT; Saunders et al., 1993), a 10-item screener that assesses the degree of and problems related to alcohol consumption in the year prior to BIP entry. Items were summed to create a continuous score of alcohol use and problems (Babor et al., 2001). The measure has demonstrated good internal consistency, test-retest reliability, and construct validity (Babor et al., 2001; Saunders et al., 1993) and excellent internal consistency in the current study ($\alpha=0.91$).

2.3.3. Drug use and problems

Drug use and problems one year prior to BIP entry were assessed using the Drug Use Disorders Identification Test (DUDIT; Stuart et al., 2004). This measure consists of 14 items which assess the frequency and problems associated with the use of substances (e.g., cannabis, cocaine, and hallucinogens). The total score is the sum of the scores on each item. The DUDIT has been shown to be reliable and valid in other samples of men and women attending BIPs (Stuart et al., 2004) and demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the current study ($\alpha=0.87$).

2.3.4. Depressive symptoms

The depression subscale (excluding the six suicide ideation items) of the Psychiatric Diagnostic Screening Questionnaire (PDSQ; Zimmerman and Mattia, 2001) measured depressive symptoms experienced during the two weeks prior to program entry. The depression subscale has demonstrated reliability and validity in psychiatric outpatients (Zimmerman and Mattia, 2001). The 15-yes (1) – no (0) items demonstrated excellent internal consistency in the present study ($\alpha=0.92$).

2.3.5. Suicide ideation

The six yes (1) – no (0) items pertaining to suicide ideation in the PDSQ depression subscale were summed to assess suicide ideation occurring two weeks prior to program entry (Zimmerman and Mattia, 2001). The items assess both passive and active ideation. The subscale has exhibited good internal consistency in a prior sample of men attending BIPs ($\alpha=0.88$; Wolford-Clevenger et al., 2015b) and in the current sample ($\alpha=0.89$).

2.3.6. Thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness

The Interpersonal Needs Questionnaire (INQ; Van Orden et al., 2012) assessed current feelings of thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The scale consists of 15 items on a 7-point Likert scale and has separate subscales for thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness. The INQ has demonstrated reliability and validity in samples of young and older adults (Van Orden et al., 2012).

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