



Enculturation and Suicidal Ideation Among Korea and U.S. University Students

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Abstract

Previous research has shown that attachment to one's cultural roots is a protective factor against suicidal behavior. A questionnaire was administered to 325 South Korean and 356 U.S. university students to assess their suicidal ideation, reasons for living, and attachment to their cultural heritage. The results indicated that the attachment to one's cultural traditions and roots and having more reasons for living were protective factors against suicidal ideation in both cultures. The strength of the associations was much stronger, however, in South Korean students than in American students. Suicide prevention efforts should focus on increasing the ties of at-risk individuals to their cultural heritage.

Key words: Enculturation; Suicidal ideation; Korea university students; U.S. university students

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INTRODUCTION

Youth suicide is a growing problem around the world. According to the World Health Organization (www.who.int), for youths (those aged 15-24), suicide is a leading cause of death in both South Korea and the United States. In 2005, the latest year with data for both nations, the suicide rates for those aged 15-24 were 11.8 and 12.6 per

100,000 per year for men and women, respectively, in South Korea, and 16.1 and 3.5 in the United States. (The higher suicide rate for South Korean young women is unusual.) Youth suicide in both countries has increased in recent years, and the increasing number of youth suicides challenges society both in terms of understanding the cause and developing strategies for responding to this serious public health problem.

Durkheim (1897) argued that a low level of social integration raises the suicide rate. Social integration is the extent to which the people in a society are bound together in social networks. According to Durkheim, low levels of social integration result in *egoistic* suicide, a type of suicide caused by "excessive individualism" or egoism. Egoism reflects "a general condition of modern societies leading to social isolation of individuals from closely-knit relationship with others" (Giddens, 1971, p.98). When people have "excessive" freedom to pursue life as they see fit and do not feel connected to a group or community that commands their loyalty and participation, they are not provided with sufficient protective factors against suicide. As a result, if they encounter stressful life events or experience psychological or physical pain, they find it easier to consider suicide as an escape.

Durkheim's proposal that integration with others is a protective factor for suicide has been supported by empirical findings. In particular, studies of family networks have indicated that it is a protector against suicide (Breault, 1986; Danigelis & Pope, 1979; Stack, 1985). According to Stack (2000), marriage provides emotional support, makes the individual subordinate his or her egoistical tendencies to a spouse, and increases the meaning in life. Marriage, therefore, should function as a protector against suicide, whereas being single is a risk factor. In addition, a substantial amount of research has demonstrated a positive link between divorce and suicide (Pescosolido & Wright, 1990; Stack, 1980, 1985; Trovato, 1987), and suicide rates among divorced people are

particularly high (Stack, 1990, 1992; Wasserman, 1990). Stack (2000) also found that divorced persons more often exhibit suicidal risk factors such as depression, financial pressures, alcohol abuse, shame, and guilt. With regard to children, in a time series analysis of suicide, birth, divorce and marriage rates in South Korea for the period of 1983-2002, Park and Lester (2006) found, that a higher rate of births and marriages was associated with a lower suicide rate. In contrast, a higher rate of divorces in a year was associated with a higher suicide rate.

Studies also report that a higher level of religious involvement lowers the risk of suicide, probably, in part, through providing networks of social support. Religious structures promote integrative networking and this is likely to decrease the risk suicide (Stack, 2000; Pescosolido & Wright, 1990). Tubergen, Grotenhuis and Ultee (2005, p.812), using Dutch data, concluded that, “religious communities exert a protective effect on all members of a community, irrespective of their individual denomination” because the networks within religious groups provides social and emotional support to their members, which in turn counteracts suicidal tendencies.

Joiner (2005) argued that humans, being social animals, have a fundamental need to have a sense of connection with others. When this need is thwarted, one’s psychological well-being is threatened. His review of research on suicide thus led him to assert that “those who die by suicide experience isolation and withdrawal before their deaths” (Joiner, 2005, p.122).

Most of these studies, however, have focused exclusively on connectivity to contemporary groups or persons. Very little research has been conducted on the association of suicidality to cultural traditions and roots. Although individuals are affected by existing social relationships, bonds to one’s own lineage and cultural heritage may also be important in protecting people from acting on their suicidal impulses. It is plausible to assume that ties to one’s cultural heritages indicate a high level of integration with those who share the culture.

Studies on suicide among aboriginals in North America and Australia reveal some insights on the link between cultural identity and suicide. Chandler, Lalond, Sokol and Hallett (2003) studied Native Americans who were struggling with an epidemic of suicide among young people and concluded that people who fail to sustain a continuity of their self with their past, present, and future are at a higher risk for suicide. More importantly, their research revealed that individual self-continuity is strongly associated with cultural continuity. Aboriginal communities that successfully preserve or recover their heritage and culture and which exercise some control over their future have significantly lower youth suicide rates than those communities that fail to recover and maintain their own cultural heritage and the traditional governance of their institutions. People who fail to sustain a workable sense of personal persistence in the context of transitional

culture are at high risk of stress and psychopathology and have a greater likelihood of engaging in self-destructive behavior. Furthermore, Clayer and Czechowicz (1991, p.684) studying aboriginals in Australia concluded that those indigenous people who “maintained traditional attitudes and way of life” were far less likely to become suicidal (both fatally and non-fatally).

The primary aim of the present study was to explore the relationship of attachment to one’s own cultural roots or tradition to suicidal ideation in both South Korean and American university students. This study also examined the relationship of two other variables (reasons for living and affinity with grandparents) to suicidal ideation. Having reasons for living is associated with vulnerability to suicide (Linehan, Goodstein, Nielsen, & Chiles, 1983), and a study on self-reported reasons for living among college students found that those who reported fewer reasons for living were more vulnerable to suicide (Westefeld, Scheel, & Maples, 1998). For the present study, it was hypothesized that those who are less connected to their cultural heritages will hold fewer reasons for living and will be more predisposed to an increased risk of suicide. Grandparents not only play a role in connecting younger generational members to the past or cultural heritage, but also provide a source of bonding within the family network. Thus, it was hypothesized that those youths who have a close relationship with their grandparents will be less likely to become suicidal.

1. METHOD

1.1 Sample

This study used self-report data collected in the United States and South Korea in the spring of 2010. The sample included 296 South Korean university students (105 men and 191 women) and 323 American university students (132 men and 191 women).¹ The samples were restricted to those aged less than 24 years. The mean ages were 21.0 ($SD = 1.4$) for the Korean students and 19.8 ($SD = 1.3$) for the American students. The questionnaires were administered anonymously to undergraduate students in social science and liberal arts course. The research was approved by the Institutional Review Boards of both universities.

¹ The study was given institutional review board approval (IRB#32736). Each participant was informed that s/he would be administered a questionnaire that included questions about her or his behavior and thoughts about cultural roots and suicide. Each participant was provided with a consent form which stated that consent for study participation was presumed upon completion of the anonymous questionnaire. Participants were informed that participation in the study could cease at any time and referral to the university counseling center or national hotline for free services would be available, if needed. None of the participants requested a referral for psychological services or demonstrated imminent risk for danger.

1.2 Measures

Attachment to Cultural Heritage: The respondents' attachment to cultural roots, perceived to be valuable to one's life, was measured with the following 7 items: (1) "I think I have inherited a cultural legacy that I am proud of;" (2) "I feel I have a close affinity with my ancestors;" (3) "I believe I have inherited traditional values in me that I must keep;" (4) "I have a lot of interest in cultural traditions such as in music, dancing, legends, tales, etc.;" (5) "I am proud of my family tradition passed down for many generations;" (6) "I am fascinated with listening to folk tales of any kinds;" and (7) "I am interested in studying the cultural history of my family." Respondents rated each item using a 5-point Likert-type format from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The Cronbach alphas were 0.81 for the South Korean respondents and 0.85 for the American respondents.

Perceived Barrier of Culture: The measure of perceived barrier of culture denotes the respondents' negative attitude toward their cultural traditions that were perceived to be barriers to one's advancement in life. The scale consisted of 3 items: (1) "Traditional ideals or values become barriers for me to move forward in this competitive world;" (2) "Focusing on or having an interest in the past traditions can be a barrier to my advancement;" and (3) "I think my parents are too obsessed with traditional values." The Cronbach alphas were 0.72 for the South Korean respondents and 0.68 for the American respondents.

Suicide Ideation: Reynolds' (1987) eight critical items from his Suicide Ideation Questionnaire (such as "I thought about killing myself.") were used to measure suicide ideation. Respondents rate each item using 6-point scale from 7 (almost every day) to 1 (I never had this thought). Cronbach alpha coefficients measuring the inter-item reliability of the scales were 0.97 for the South Korean participants and 0.92 for the American participants.

Reasons for Living: The original Reasons for Living Inventory (Linehan, Goodstein, Nielsen, & Chiles, 1983) consisted of 48-items that assess attitudes toward committing suicide. For the present study, the Brief Reasons for Living Inventory (Ivanoff, Jang, Smyth, & Linehan, 1994) consisting of only 12 items was used. Respondents rate each item on using 6-point Likert scale form ranging from 1 (not at all important) to 6 (extremely important). Each item proposes a reason for not killing oneself if he or she were to feel suicidal. Higher scores are indicative of more reasons to live and a relatively low likelihood of suicidal risk. The Cronbach alphas were 0.86 for the South Korean participants and 0.76 for the American participants.

Affinity with Grandparents: The respondents' relationship with their grandparents was measured with the following question, "Evaluate your relationship with grandparents (if they are dead, at the time they were alive) and mark in the appropriate box below using the following categories: 5 = very close; 4 = close; 3 = just so-so; 2 = not at all close; and 1 = very distant.

2. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The mean scores of the South Korean and American participants are shown in Table 1: The South Korean students had lower scores on the attachment to culture scale and higher scores for perceived barrier of culture, reasons for living, suicidal ideation and attachment to grandparents.

The correlations of the variables with suicidal ideation are shown in Table 1, along with the results of the multiple regression analyses. For students in both cultures, both attachment to one culture and having stronger reasons were protective factors for suicidal ideation. For the South Korean students, higher scores on the perceived barrier of culture also predicted higher suicidal ideation scores. The R^2 for the Korean students (0.216) was higher than that for the American students (0.065).

Table 1
Comparisons Between the South Korean and American Students

	South Korean students	American students	<i>t</i> -test	two-tailed <i>p</i>
Age	mean (SD)	mean (SD)		
Attachment to cultural heritage	21.0 (1.4)	19.8 (1.3)	11.31	< .001
Perceived barrier of culture	21.3 (4.7)	23.5 (6.1)	5.90	< .001
Reasons for living	7.3 (2.5)	6.3 (2.3)	5.36	< .001
Suicidal ideation	55.3 (10.1)	53.3 (9.7)	2.37	.02
Affinity with grandparents	12.7 (8.3)	11.1 (5.8)	2.86	.004
	3.7 (1.2)	1.8 (1.0)	21.54	< .00
Correlations with suicidal ideation				
Age	0.06	0.05		
Sex	0.03	0.05		
Attachment to cultural heritage	-0.15*	-0.11		
Perceived barrier of culture	0.11	0.12*		
Reasons for living	-0.36***	-0.18**		
Affinity with grandparents	-0.15*	0.03		
Regressions to predict suicidal ideation (beta coefficients)				
Age	0.03	-0.01		
Sex	0.13*#	0.14*#		
Attachment to cultural heritage	-0.13*#	-0.12*#		
Perceived barrier of culture	0.10	0.11#		
Reasons for living	-0.37***#	-0.19***#		
Affinity with grandparents	-0.11#	0.03		
R^2	0.182	0.071		

Note. * $p < .05$. ** $p < .01$. *** $p < .001$, # significant in the backward multiple regression

The present study found that the reasons for living scale was the strongest and most consistent correlate and predictor of suicidal tendencies of university students in both South Korea and United States. Attachment to cultural roots, and sex were also significantly associated with suicidal ideation for both groups, while affinity with grandparents was a significant predictor of suicidal ideation only for the Korean students. Thus, despite the cultural differences between South Korea and the United States, and despite the significantly different scores obtained by the Korean students on most of the scales, the predictors of suicidal ideation in the two societies were quite similar. The similarities are notable also because, as stated earlier, the suicide rates in 2005 were 12.2 per 100,000 for Korean youths aged 15-24 and 9.8 for American youth, respectively. Moreover, in Korea, by 2009, the rate had risen alarmingly to 15.5 (<http://kostat.go.kr>) compared to only 10.1 in the United States. The significance of the predictor of affinity with grandparents for the Korean students may be a result of the greater prevalence of three generation families in Asian societies compared to American society.

The results of this study are limited by the use of university students since many young people in this age range (18-24) in both countries do not attend college or university. It would also be useful in future research to explore social support variables such as affinity with grandparents with better psychological inventories.

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