

FACTORS RELATED TO SUICIDAL IDEATION
IN ADOLESCENTS

by

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A Research Paper

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the
Master of Science Degree
With a Major in

School Psychology

Approved: 2 Semester Credits

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University of Wisconsin-Stout
May, 2002

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ABSTRACT

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Factors Related to Suicidal Ideation in Adolescents
(Title)

<u>School Psychology</u>	<u>Jacalyn Weissenburger</u>	<u>May, 2002</u>	<u>20</u>
(Major)	(Research Advisor)	(Month/Year)	(No. of Pages)

Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (5th Edition)
(Name of the Style Manual Used in this Study)

Suicide is a problem for students in today's high schools. It would be helpful if high school counselors had a more valid means of determining which students are at risk for suicide. The identification of personality traits and behaviors prevalent in individuals with suicidal tendencies, therefore, is needed. This paper reviews the literature to determine whether certain personality traits and other factors are related to depression and/or suicidal ideation in adolescents. One personality trait, high self-monitoring, was found to be linked to high self-esteem. The paper will conclude with a critical analysis of the existing literature related to personality traits, depression, and suicide in the adolescent population.

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Factors Related to Suicidal Ideation in Adolescents

Suicide is a very serious issue. Far too often, adolescents end their lives through suicide. According to Horowitz et al. (2001), adolescent suicides in the U.S. have tripled since the 1950's, and suicide now ranks as the 3rd leading cause of death in this age group. Also, according to Horowitz et al., 53% of children ages 13-19 have had suicidal thoughts. Each year, 250,000 adolescents attempt suicide, and 8%-10% of adolescents in the U.S. attempt suicide at sometime in their life. In 1997, 20.5% of adolescents thought about suicide, 15.7% had a plan, and 7.7% actually made a suicide attempt (Horowitz et al.). In another survey of 300 students, as many as 20% admitted that they performed suicidal behaviors in the past year (Rubenstein, Heeren, Housman, Rubin, & Stechler, 1989).

Adolescents at risk for committing suicide may not seek help. In order to help these at risk adolescents, they must first be identified as being at risk. This is not an easy task. In schools, counselors often have the responsibility of detecting warning signs to identify students at risk of committing suicide (King et al., 1999). King et al. also found that school counselors believe that it is their responsibility to recognize students at risk of suicide. Unfortunately, the findings showed that only 38% of counselors surveyed believed they could recognize a student at risk for suicide. With only 38% of counselors feeling confident in identifying students, it becomes increasingly important to aid these counselors in the identification process by giving them more information about what behavior and personality characteristics are typical of students at risk for suicide.

Suicide is a very complicated issue. There are many difficulties associated with the identification of individuals at risk for committing suicide. It can be difficult because

individuals resort to suicide for so many different reasons. No matter the reason, any individual thinking about suicide is considered to be in the at risk group.

Adolescence can be a difficult time in a person's life. There can be a lot of emotional upheaval and stress. Adolescents can experience stress from family discord at home as well as having difficulties with peer relationships at school. All of these may lead a person to suicide (Rubenstein et al., 1989)

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a relation between suicidal ideation and certain personality traits, including self-monitoring, in adolescents. If there is a link, then adolescents who display certain personality traits and their related behaviors could be identified as being at risk prior to their suicidal attempts. It is important to help adolescents at risk for committing suicide before they take their lives. To stop the high rate of suicidal ideation among adolescents, methods to detect and intervene to prevent suicides from occurring must be identified. "Because suicidal ideation logically precedes suicidal acts, the identification of true predictors of ideation would permit a better understanding of suicidal risk" (de Man and Leduc, 1993, p. 820).

To obtain more information about the relation between certain personality traits and suicidal ideation in adolescents, a review of the relevant literature follows. Four research questions guided this study:

1. What is known about suicide and suicidal ideation in the adolescent population?
2. What is known about the self-esteem of adolescents who are suicidal?
3. What is known about the link between stress and adolescent suicide?
4. What is known about the relation between adolescent depression and suicide?

5. What is known about the self-monitoring personality trait and this trait's relation to depression, stress, self-esteem, and suicide in the adolescent population?

Review of Literature

This chapter begins with a description of the prevalence and nature of suicidal ideation and completion among today's adolescent population. Second, three factors (i.e., self-esteem, depression, and stress) thought to be related to suicidal ideation in the adolescent population are reviewed. The next section defines and explains the self-monitoring personality trait. Finally, a link between self-monitoring, self-esteem, depression, and suicide will be discussed.

Suicide and Adolescents

Although suicide is only the ninth leading killer among the general population, suicide is the second leading cause of death in adolescents; moreover, the rate of adolescent suicides has nearly tripled since the 1950's (King, Price, Telljohann, & Wahl, 1999). Fremouw, Callahan, & Kashden (1993) reported in 1987 that 4,924 adolescents committed suicide in the age ranges of 15-24. This accounts for 12.9 suicides for every 100,000 adolescents in this age bracket. This rate has tripled since 1957, increasing 222% in a 30-year period. The suicide rate of adolescents now equals that of the general population. The results of these studies illustrate just how frequently adolescents are considering or attempting suicide. The results seem frighteningly high.

According to Davis (1983), there are many very different motivations for individuals to commit suicide. He asserts that in order to help a suicidal person, one must first know the underlying motivation. One reason someone may commit suicide is to escape an unbearable situation. A second is to try to manipulate or change someone else's behavior. A third is to use suicide as a vehicle to communicate to significant

others just how unhappy they are and they need help. According to Davis, these people often have no intention of dying.

Davis (1983) states that there are more factors that may lead to suicide. One is an inherited familial susceptibility to suicidal tendencies. Poor mental health or having a mental disorder like depression or schizophrenia are other factors. Death or loss of a loved one could precipitate depression and lead to suicide. Issues with drug abuse and poor grades also can be precursors to suicide. For example, one study found that suicidal behaviors were higher among students who were potential dropouts, placing these students in the at risk category (Eggert, Thompson, Herting, & Nicholas, 1995).

Social isolation was mentioned by Davis (1983) as another factor in adolescent suicides. Having poor social skills and being unable to establish relationships can lead to social withdrawal and ultimately suicide.

Self-esteem

Research reveals that a common variable and related personality factor linked to suicide is self-esteem (Overholser, Adams, Lehnert, & Brinkman, 1995). Self-esteem refers to the appraisal a person makes of their value as a worthwhile individual. According to Overholser et al., people who have high self-esteem tend to be positive in their attitudes about themselves and are thought to be satisfied with their lives. Individuals with low self-esteem, on the other hand, tend to have a negative view of themselves and feel they are incompetent and unworthy. When a person has a negative view of himself or herself, suicidal tendencies generally increase (Overholser, Adams, Lehnert, & Brinkman).

Dori and Overholser (1999) also found that low self-esteem is a good indicator of suicidal ideation. Dori and Overholser did a study to determine whether the levels of hopelessness, self-esteem, and depression were different among the inpatients who committed suicide prior to being admitted versus those inpatients who had not committed suicide. They recruited 90 adolescents diagnosed with depression. These adolescents ranged from 13 to 18 years old, and they were in the middle socioeconomic category. Those who attempted suicide had significantly lower self-esteem as well as higher levels of depression and hopelessness than their non-suicidal counterparts, as assessed by Dori and Overholser. Self-esteem also was found to be a better indicator of suicide than a person's level of suicidal ideation in this study. Depressed and hopeless adolescents who were assessed as having adequate levels of self-esteem were less likely to demonstrate suicidal behaviors than those with low self-esteem (Dori & Overholser).

Rasmussen, Negy, Carlson, and Burns (1997) conducted a study of 242 eighth grade adolescent Mexican Americans regarding their suicidal ideation and the associated risk factors. The study was done to determine whether acculturation levels, specific risk factors, depression, and self-esteem could predict suicidal ideation. They found that Mexican Americans had many more suicidal risk factors than the White Americans of the same age. Some of these risk factors included acculturation, poverty, and substance abuse. Within this study, suicidal ideation was found to be significantly correlated with depression and self-esteem.

A study by Garnefski and Diekstra (1997) focused on the emotional effect of children raised in one-parent or stepparent homes. The participants in this study were 13,953 secondary students, ages 12 to 19 years old, from the Netherlands. The

participants filled out self-report questionnaires under the guidance of a teacher. In general, children of one-parent or stepparent families reported more emotional problems, including low self-esteem. Children of these families also had a significantly higher rate of suicidal behavior over their lifetime. Once again, the low self-esteem of these adolescents was significantly correlated with suicide.

More studies show a correlation between self-esteem and suicidal ideation. Dukes and Lorch (1989) gave a Youth Lifestyles Survey to 9,752 students who were in the 12th grade. They found a disparity between the importance of academic achievement and the importance of personal satisfaction related to doing well academically. These factors were linked with suicidal ideation through the variables of self-esteem, purpose in life, alcohol use, and eating disorders. These authors found that doing well academically was not enough to maintain high self-esteem; personal satisfaction due to doing well must be a component. In their study, Dukes and Lorch also found that low self-esteem was found to be a good predictor of suicidal ideation among these high school students.

Vella, Persic, and Lester (1996) did a study that explored whether self-reported self-esteem was associated with suicidal ideation after controls for depression were introduced. The Beck Depression Inventory and the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale were given to 131 social science undergraduates. These researchers found that suicidal ideation was negatively correlated with self-esteem. As self-esteem declined, suicidal ideation increased among this college population.

Stress

Along with having issues with self-esteem, those going through adolescence find it to be a very stressful time in a person's life (Davis, 1983). Stress might be another factor related to suicidal ideation.

Overholser et al. (1995) asserts that adolescence often is a time of self-criticism and turmoil. These stresses may put a strain on a young person's self-concept and self-esteem. According to Overholser et al., adolescence also is a stage that is correlated with a great number of life changes. Frequent daily negative experiences and negative life events are common in an adolescent's life. Overholser et al. assert that adolescents begin dealing with lives that are unscheduled and non-normative, with new experiences of heterosexual events, peer events, school events, and extracurricular activities. Another stress for adolescents, according to these authors, is that they are starting to become more aware of conflicts, especially family conflicts. Their awareness and perception of these events and conflicts tends to increase as a function of their age.

Adams and Lehnert (1997) reviewed studies to examine the relation between prolonged traumatic stress and suicidality as it relates to child abuse and trauma associated with combat. According to Adams and Lehnert, stressful events such as divorce, death, relocation, family arguments, and legal problems are important risk factors that can lead an individual to suicide. These acute and chronic stressors can have additive effects on adolescents, which may lead them to engage in suicidal behaviors. In their review, Adams and Lehnert also found that traumatic stresses such as child abuse and natural disasters may be linked to suicide. Their literature review also implies that there may be a relation between child abuse and suicidal behavior later in life. For

example, among college students who were sexually abused, 16% admitted to making a suicide attempt compared to a 6% rate among of those not sexually abused (Adams and Lehnert).

Depression

Depression also appears as a factor related to suicide. Early in the 20th century, it was believed that children and adolescents could not suffer from depression. Later in the century, psychologists changed their minds and accepted that children can get depressed; however, many agreed childhood depression is different from adult depression (Clarizio, 1989). Some typical symptoms of depression in adolescents are melancholy, suicidal ideation, aggressive behavior, sleep disturbances, changes in school performance, diminished socialization, and changes in appetite (Clarizio).

A major cause or trigger of depression in adolescents is thought to be stress. A predisposition to depression may also play a role; nonetheless, the additive stresses of everyday adolescent life often appear to trigger depression (Clarizio). “There is a complex relationship between depression and suicide. Many depressed patients are suicidal, and, conversely, most but not all suicidal individuals manifest depressive mood and symptoms if not depressive illness” (Pfeffer, 1989, p. 63).

In a study of 254 adolescent psychiatric inpatients and 288 high school students, Overholser (1995) examined the relation between self-esteem deficits and suicidal ideation. These researchers found that low self-esteem was related to feelings of depression, hopelessness, and suicidal ideation. An important note from this study was that high school students with high self-esteem had low levels of depression and were

less likely to report feelings of suicidal ideation. This study demonstrates that self-esteem can play an important role in depression and suicidal ideation among adolescents.

In a study by Rubenstein et al. (1989), 300 high school students out of 1,124 in grades nine through twelve volunteered to be in a study that intended to detect risk and protective factors in suicidal and non-suicidal high school students. Depression and life stress were found to be risk factors for suicide. It was determined that family cohesion can offset life stressors. They also found that moderate to severe levels of depression posed an internal risk factor for suicidal behavior in adolescents. Further, those who scored in the clinically depressed range on the Beck Depression Scale were at a greater risk for suicidal ideation.

Self-monitoring

The personality trait of self-monitoring may be a key to the early identification of individuals thinking about committing suicide. The term self-monitoring refers to an intrinsic personality trait. A person's orientation of being either high or low self-monitoring may explain why an individual makes particular behavioral choices in assorted social contexts (Snyder, Berscheid, & Glick, 1985). According to Snyder (1987), self-monitoring describes how concerned people are about what others think of them. High self-monitors are particularly sensitive to cues related to the situational appropriateness of their social behavior. They use these cues as guidelines for monitoring their behavior and self-presentation. High self-monitors are people who are very sensitive to the expressions of others and the self-presentations of others in social situations. They use these cues as guidelines for how to act. In contrast, low self-monitors pay less attention to the expressions of others, and their social presentation is

controlled from within. Low self-monitors generally act the same way no matter what group of people they are with in a social situation (Snyder, 1974). According to Beers, Lassiter, and Flannery (1997), high self-monitors adapt to different social situations so they are able to present the most positive impression. These people also tend to act like different people in different situations depending on what groups of people are in the social situation and the social context.

According to Snyder, (1974) high self-monitors monitor social situations and the actions and reactions of others so they will behave in an appropriate manner. Low self-monitors act in a manner that suites them. It could be hypothesized that a person who actively checks the social situational appropriateness of their behavior would get stressed out while trying to act appropriately.

A study done by Tomarelli and Schaffer (1985), however, demonstrates that the opposite is likely to be true. Tomarelli and Schaffer hypothesized that high self-monitoring people would produce higher scores on many sub-scales of the Self-Consciousness Scale. The sub-scales include measures of public and private self-consciousness as well as social anxiety. The results showed that the high public and private self-consciousness subscales were positively correlated with high self-monitoring. A surprising discovery was that high self-monitoring was negatively correlated with social anxiety. The inverse was true of the self-consciousness sub-scales and low self-monitoring. What emerged from the findings was the fact that the high self-monitors tended to be comfortable in social situations and the low self-monitors experienced higher anxiety and stress in social situations (Tomarelli & Schaffer).

A child's self-monitoring tendencies tend to be consistent over a period of time (Musser & Browne, 1991). In the Musser and Browne study, personality traits and family variables were correlated to learn more about peer relationships among children. In the study, 93 students in the 1st, 3rd, and 5th grades completed the Junior Self-Monitoring Scale, the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, a Pictorial Scale of Perceived Competence and a Social Acceptance for Young Socioeconomic Scale. After measuring self-monitoring as well as personality and family variables, it was found that self-monitoring was stable over time in these children, regardless of whether the children were low or high self-monitoring. Despite transitions from grade to grade or from elementary school to middle school, the students' self-monitoring tendency levels remained consistent.

Li (1997) did a study to determine whether differences in age produce differences in scoring on Rotter's Internal and External Locus-of-Control Scale and Snyder's Self-Monitoring Scale. These instruments were used to measure differences between 164 junior high school students, 121 college students, and 46 adults. In this study, high school and college students scored higher on the measure of self-monitoring than the adults. This study demonstrated a link between high school students and the attribute of high self-monitoring.

A form of self-monitoring called the interpersonal monitor has been linked to self-esteem in a study done by Leary, Tambor, Terdal, and Downs (1995). It was found that exclusion by others can result in lower self-esteem. A person's level of self-esteem is thought to be based heavily on the perceptions of others. Most individuals want to be perceived as being accepted. In general, people seem to seek inclusion or approval of

others to promote the enhancement of their self-esteem. Leary et al. concluded that people maintain their high self-esteem by behaving in ways that maintain their connections with other people. This behavioral pattern may be linked to self-monitoring as self-monitoring is concerned with being sensitive to cues related to the situational appropriateness of a person's social behavior (Snyder, 1987). High self-monitors may use situational cues to act appropriately in social situations, thereby gaining social acceptance and increasing self-esteem. Interpersonal monitors attempt to behave in ways that lead to social inclusion, which can result in higher self-esteem.

Another study focused on whether high or low self-monitors would be more likely to successfully integrate within a community college setting (Guarino, Michael, & Hocevar, 1998). It was found that high self-monitors integrated better than the low self-monitors. Social integration was found to be important to a student's success, and students who failed to integrate socially were found to have a higher dropout rate (Guarino, Michael, & Hocevar).

Musser and Browne's (1991) study, involving 93 students in the 1st, 3rd, and 5th grades, examined the relation between self-esteem and self-monitoring. In the study, these researchers measured various personality traits and family variables. The relation of these factors to self-monitoring also was examined. It was found that high self-monitoring was associated with higher self-esteem in these children.

Discussion

This literature review was done to identify indicators related to suicidal ideation and suicide among adolescents. Self-esteem, stress, depression, and the self-monitoring personality trait were discussed as factors related to suicide.

Based on the incidence rates, it is obvious that suicide is a problem in high schools. Slowing the suicide rates is very important to high school counselors, but it is difficult to determine which students are most at risk for suicide.

This literature review has shown that stress has been found to be positively correlated with suicidal ideation and negatively correlated with self-esteem. The personality trait of high self-monitoring appears to be positively correlated to self-esteem. Also, there is evidence that self-esteem is negatively correlated with both depression and suicidal ideation.

Because self-esteem seems to be negatively correlated with suicidal ideation and high self-monitoring appears to be positively correlated with self-esteem, one might infer that a low self-monitoring person may be at risk for suicidal ideation. If this is the case, high school counselors may be advised to look for behaviors indicative of the low self-monitoring personality trait to help them identify students at risk for suicide.

Before beginning the literature review, a hypothesis was proposed. It appeared logical that high self-monitoring students would be predisposed to be at risk for suicidal ideation. Because high self-monitoring students are concerned about what others think about them, it was assumed that high self-monitors were under more stress. This stress could result in lowered self-esteem or even depression. However, the contrary was found

to be true in the literature. Interestingly, high self-monitoring individuals appear to be more comfortable in social situations because they know how to act. Low self-monitoring individuals appear to become stressed because they apparently are less likely to act appropriately in social situations.

Implications for Practice

This literature review should help counselors understand there are many complicated factors related to suicidal ideation among adolescents. The depressed student is not necessarily the only type of student most likely to commit suicide. A student with low self-esteem may be contemplating suicide. Being stressed appears to be another potential indicator of suicidal ideation. Even a personality trait like low self-monitoring may prove to be a predictor. There likely are a vast number of indicators of suicidal ideation. Counselors should become aware of the various potential factors that can predispose a student to commit suicide.

Implications for Future Research

Further studies related to self-monitoring among the adolescent population are warranted. This trait appears to be stable over time in young children. This implies that people may be either low self-monitoring or high self-monitoring throughout their lifetime (Musser & Browne, 1991). If people wavered back and forth between being low and high self-monitoring, it wouldn't matter if self-monitoring correlated well with a disorder or personality trait because self-monitoring as a predictor would be unreliable. The self-monitoring trait would be so inconsistent that it wouldn't be a good indicator of suicidal ideation. Conversely, if a personality trait like self-monitoring is resistant to

change, it poses a problem for school counselors who seek to modify the coping skills and behavioral patterns of at-risk adolescents.

Another avenue of research could be to examine the relation between self-monitoring and depression. In this literature review, no study was found that tried to examine the relation between depression and the self-monitoring personality trait. If a study was done that indicated a strong correlation between low self-monitoring and depression, then further research could determine if there is a link between these constructs and suicidal ideation.

Another study could be conducted by using a random sample of high school students as participants to determine whether there is a negative correlation between suicidal ideation and high self-monitoring. The Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation and the Self-Monitoring Scale by Snyder could be administered to the student participants. If adolescents are low or high self-monitors and at risk for suicide, school counselors would be able to use this information as they attempt to identify these at risk adolescents. If there is a significant negative correlation between suicide ideation and self-monitoring, school counselors would know they have to watch out for students who never seem to be overly concerned about what others are doing or how they present themselves to others. In contrast, if there is a positive correlation with self-monitoring and suicide ideation, then school counselors would know that they may need to intervene with students who always seem concerned about what their classmates are doing and how they are being perceived. If there is no correlation, then school counselors will know that high and low self-monitoring personality traits are not good predictors of suicide ideation.

Although studies such as these may be helpful, there may be ethical issues involved. If the Beck Scale for Suicidal Ideation is given to a random group of high school students, it is likely that some of the students are going to score in the at risk range for suicidal ideation. What would then be done with these students? It would be unethical to not intervene. They would need to receive professional counseling services. However, in order to get the best data with the fewest confounds, it is best practice to inform the participants that their responses would remain confidential. Unfortunately, if the study were to be ethical, the participants would have to be informed that their responses would not remain confidential if they were found to be at risk for suicide. These procedures may bias the responses of the participants.

Conclusion

Further research needs to be conducted to determine whether self-monitoring and other factors are indicators of suicidal ideation in the adolescent population. Conducting studies like these are not important in themselves, but important as we attempt to develop strategies to identify individuals at risk for suicide. High school age students are killing themselves at an alarming rate. Helping counselors and other educational personnel save the lives of students is very important. It is important to conduct further investigations to further our knowledge base in the area of suicide detection and prevention.

Limitations

There are limitations when one conducts a literature review. The first limitation deals with investigator bias. When choosing articles, there is a tendency to select articles that support the theme of the literature review. Contrary information was not intentionally left out; however, contrary articles may not have been pursued as diligently.

Thus, the result may have been that some of the data from related studies may not have been reported.

The second limitation comes from the nature of the study. It is simply just a literature review. Although it is important to compile the relevant research on a common topic, it would be better to complete an experiment and further psychology's knowledge base with empirical data.

Summary

Suicide is a problem for students in today's high schools. It would be helpful if high school counselors had a more valid means of determining which students are at risk for suicide. The identification of personality traits and behaviors prevalent in individuals with suicidal tendencies, therefore, is needed. This paper reviewed the literature to determine whether personality traits are related to depression and/or suicidal ideation in adolescents. One personality trait, high self-monitoring, was found to be linked to high self-esteem. The paper concluded with a critical analysis of the existing literature related to personality traits, depression, and suicide in the adolescent population.

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