

Hopelessness, Parent-Adolescent Communication, and Suicidal Ideation among Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong

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Based on the responses of 5,557 Chinese secondary students in Hong Kong, the relationships among perceived hopelessness, family functioning, and suicidal ideation were examined. Results showed that suicidal ideation was positively related to hopelessness, but negatively related to parent-adolescent communication. Compared with father-adolescent communication, mother-adolescent communication generally had a stronger association with adolescent suicidal ideation. It was further found that the linkage between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation was stronger under a low parent-adolescent communication condition, thus suggesting the moderating effect of parent-adolescent communication on the effect of hopelessness on suicidal ideation. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

A review of the literature shows that personal and family factors affect adolescent suicidal behavior. Studies have indicated that personal factors such as hopelessness are related to adolescent suicide (Rutter & Behrendt, 2004; Stewart, Kennard, Lee, Mayes, Hughes, & Emslie, 2005). Moreover, family processes have been regarded as a contributing factor to suicidal ideation. For example, Aldridge (1984) proposed the occurrence of suicidal behavior as a pattern of communication in families that associate change with hostility and conflict. Richman (1986) pointed out

that communication disturbances and an excessive secrecy within the family were characteristics of families with members showing suicidal potential. In addition, other family theories postulate that family processes affect adolescent developmental outcomes. For example, family systems theory underscores that the behavioral problems evident in any individual family members are best understood as manifestations of dysfunction within the broader family unit (McHale & Sullivan, 2008). Hence, the role of family systems and processes, such as destructive parent-child communication, in the development of the self is emphasized in the discussion of teenage suicide (Cottle, 2000).

Empirically, there are several problems intrinsic to the existing literature on the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent suicidal ideation. First, few studies have been conducted to examine parent-adolescent communication and psychological well-being (Landman-Peeters, Hartman, van de Pompe, den Boer, Minderaa, & Ormel, 2005; Shek, Lee, & Lee,

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2006). Second, sample size has been either too small or limited to a homogenous subsample in the existing studies, thus limiting the generalizability of the findings. Third, there have been inconsistent findings on the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent suicide, particularly with respect to gender and parental differences in the linkage between parent-adolescent communication and suicidal ideation. For example, on the one hand, Adams, Overholser, and Lehnert (1994) showed that perceived problems in communication with the mother but not with the father differentiated suicidal adolescents from nonsuicidal adolescents; on the other hand, King, Hill, Naylor, and Shain (1993) showed that suicidal adolescents reported less active and communicative relationships with fathers but not with mothers. Clearly, it is necessary to discern whether the linkages between these two domains are different in father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and mother-daughter dyads. Furthermore, whether father-adolescent communication exerts a stronger influence on adolescent suicidal ideation than mother-adolescent communication (e.g., Shek, 1999) should be examined.

Fourth, there is a predominance of Western studies on the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent suicidal ideation. A survey of the PsycINFO database in January 2009 employing the search term "suicidal ideation" showed that there were 4,804 citations. In contrast, the use of "suicidal ideation" and "Chinese" pointed to only 53 citations. Inasmuch as Chinese people constitute roughly one-fifth of the world's population, more research should be conducted on this subject matter. With reference to the uniqueness of the Chinese culture, one should also develop indigenous measures of parent-adolescent communication to examine related issues. It is noteworthy that there are several characteristics in Chinese culture that may make parent-adolescent communication difficult. Shek et al. (2006) pointed out that communication and emotional expressiveness were not emphasized in traditional Chinese families.

Parents and adolescents, especially fathers and sons, might feel uneasy or embarrassed to express emotional issues. Direct and open expression of feelings, particularly negative feelings, may be interpreted as blaming (Shek, 2007).

Furthermore, Chinese parents usually assume that their children should know what the parents want and desire. It is difficult for Chinese parents to listen to their children because they think that the children should listen to the parents' words instead. The children are taught to control their emotions and not to express grievances and dissatisfaction toward other family members, especially their parents. Parents like to use double bind messages rather than straightforward statements. Likewise, they assume that their children will understand the implicit meaning of those statements. They tend to use you-messages, name-calling and put-down words to discipline their children. Moreover, Chinese parents are more likely to blame the children on account of faults in their characters rather than focusing on specific misdeeds. Against this background, it would be theoretically interesting to examine how parent-adolescent communication might be related to the adolescent developmental outcomes of Chinese adolescents.

Finally, very few attempts have examined the moderating effect of parent-adolescent communication on the relationship between adolescent hopelessness and suicidal ideation. Due to the significant influence of parents on adolescents in Chinese societies, parent-adolescent communication may moderate the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation. Recently, Lai (2008) showed that family functioning moderated the effects of hopelessness on suicidal ideation. Thus, it would be interesting to ask whether parent-adolescent communication would moderate the relationship between adolescent hopelessness and suicidal ideation where the relationship between the two domains would be stronger under a low parent-adolescent communication condition relative to a high parent-adolescent communication condition. Research findings in this

aspect have obvious clinical significance in family practice.

To respond to the above limitations in the existing studies, the present study has several unique features. First, Chinese adolescents were recruited in this study. Second, a large sample based on Secondary 1 to Secondary 4 students was employed. Third, locally developed and validated measures of hopelessness, parent-adolescent communication, and suicidal ideation were used. Fourth, relationships between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent suicidal ideation in the father-son, father-daughter, mother-son, and mother-daughter dyads were explored. Fifth, the relative influence of father-adolescent communication and mother-adolescent communication on adolescent suicidal ideation was examined. Finally, the moderating effect of parent-adolescent communication on the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation was assessed.

In summary, we sought to explore the relationships among hopelessness, perceived parent-adolescent communication, and Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation in Hong Kong. It was hypothesized that hopelessness would have a positive relationship (Hypothesis 1), while perceived qualitative parent-adolescent communication would have a negative relationship (Hypothesis 2) with Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation in Hong Kong. In addition, it was hypothesized that parent-adolescent communication would moderate the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation (Hypothesis 3). As previous findings on gender and parental differences on the relationship between family processes and adolescent psychological well-being were not conclusive, no specific hypotheses were proposed. A literature review shows that while the impact of fathers on adolescents was stronger in girls than in boys (Jaycox & Repetti, 1993; Shek, 1998), the mother-adolescent relationship had a stronger impact on adolescent developmental outcomes than did the father-adolescent relationship (e.g., Gould et al., 1998; Shek, 1999).

METHOD

Participants and Procedures

A cross-sectional survey was conducted and secondary schools were selected by convenience sampling through the help of agencies providing school social work service. From the 68 schools (out of a total of 426 secondary schools in Hong Kong) that were contacted, 42 schools (including self-financed, aided, and government schools) from Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories agreed to participate in the study. The participation rate was 62%, i.e., 62% of the schools contacted agreed to participate in the study. This is comparable to other similar studies on suicidal ideation and behavior. By the end of the survey period, a total of 5,557 valid questionnaires were collected. With reference to the total secondary student population in Hong Kong at the time the study was conducted (328,573 students), the sample size used (2%) can be regarded as adequate. In addition, the gender and form ratios in the sample were similar to those based on the population. The age of the respondents ranged from 11 to 18 years, with an overall mean of 13.87 years ($SD = 1.47$).

School, parental, and participant consent were sought prior to data collection. All students studying in the participating schools joined in the study. During the survey, a school social worker, a teacher, or a research assistant was present to give a short briefing on the general aims and the confidentiality of the study. They were present throughout the whole administration process to answer queries raised by the participants. The administration process took around 40 minutes to complete.

Instruments

Hopelessness. Hopelessness was assessed using the Hopelessness subscale of the Chinese Hopelessness Scale (C-HOPE) developed by Shek (1993) based on the work of Beck, Weissman, Lester, and Trexler (1974). The subscale has 10 items and the respon-

dents were asked to choose an answer from a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. A higher score indicates a higher degree of hopelessness. According to Shek and Lee (2005), the scale was able to discriminate adolescents with different paternal education and different marital status of parents. Parent-child relational qualities were also negatively related to hopelessness for the paternal and maternal variables. Furthermore, C-HOPE was found to correlate significantly with other measures of psychiatric symptoms and positive mental health. The scale was demonstrated to be reliable in this study ($\alpha = .88$).

Parent-Adolescent Communication.

Parent-adolescent communication was assessed using the Father-Adolescent Communication Scale (FACS) and Mother-Adolescent Communication Scale (MACS) developed by Shek et al. (2006). Each instrument contains 25 identical items and assesses the quality of parent-adolescent communication with either the father or mother. A higher FACS or MACS score indicates a higher level of quality of parent-adolescent communication. Reliability analyses have shown that the FACS and MACS have high reliability ($\alpha = .93$ and $.92$, respectively). Moreover, Shek et al. (2006) reported that the two measures were able to discriminate adolescents with good and bad communication with their parents, thus lending support to the criterion-related validity of the measure. Reliability analyses showed that the FACS and MACS had high reliability in this study ($\alpha = .93$ and $.94$, respectively).

Suicidal Ideation. Adolescent suicidal ideation was assessed using the Suicidal Ideation Subscale (C-SIS) of the Suicidal Risk Scale for Hong Kong students developed locally by Tse and Bagley (2002). The C-SIS contains 13 items. For each item, respondents were required to choose an answer from a 4-point Likert scale ranging from *strongly agree* to *strongly disagree*. A higher score indicates a higher level of suicidal ideation. Previous findings based on a validation study (Tse & Bagley,

2002) have shown that the C-SIS has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$), split-half consistency ($\alpha = .88$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .72$). In the study of construct validity by Tse and Bagley, C-SIS displayed significant relationships with other related measures and the C-SIS scores were able to discriminate suicidal and nonsuicidal students. The scale is demonstrated to be reliable in this study ($\alpha = .93$).

RESULTS

The mean total scores for the C-HOPE, FACS, MACS, and C-SIS were 20.28 ($SD = 5.96$), 60.45 ($SD = 13.49$), 69.27 ($SD = 13.92$), and 22.54 ($SD = 8.64$), respectively (Table 1). The findings showed that the variability of the FACS and MACS scores were similar in the male, female, and total samples.

Pearson correlation analyses with Bonferroni-corrected alpha levels were performed (Table 2). As there was significant positive correlation between adolescent suicidal ideation and hopelessness, Hypothesis 1 was supported. The findings also supported Hypothesis 2, that perceived parent-adolescent communication would have a negative relationship with adolescent suicidal ideation. Further analysis showed that the relationship between father-adolescent communication and suicidal ideation in the male respondents was weaker than that in the female respondents ($r = -.33$ vs. $r = -.40$, $t = 2.99$, $p < .01$). The relationship between mother-adolescent communication and suicidal ideation was higher than father-adolescent communication and suicidal ideation in the male sample ($r = -.42$ vs. $r = -.33$, $t = 4.65$, $p < .001$) and the total sample ($r = -.42$ vs. $r = -.36$, $t = 4.34$, $p < .001$).

Standard regression analysis with hopelessness as the independent variable showed that hopelessness predicted adolescent suicidal ideation ($\beta = .68$, $R^2 = .47$, $f^2 = .89$), and no gender differences in the relationship were found. Standard regression analysis also showed that father-adolescent communication ($\beta = -.23$, $p < .001$) and mother-adoles-

TABLE 1
Means and Standard Deviations of Different Variables

	Hopelessness	Father-adolescent communication	Mother-adolescent communication	Suicidal ideation
Male	20.53 (SD = 6.09)	60.35 (SD = 13.45)	69.23 (SD = 13.37)	22.49 (SD = 8.63)
Female	19.79 (SD = 5.71)	60.49 (SD = 13.58)	69.58 (SD = 14.44)	22.59 (SD = 8.64)
Total	20.28 (SD = 5.96)	60.45 (SD = 13.49)	69.27 (SD = 13.92)	22.54 (SD = 8.64)

cent communication ($\beta = -.34, p < .001$) predicted adolescent suicidal ideation, explaining 23% of the variance in the total sample.

However, some gender and parental differences in the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and suicidal ideation were identified. First, father-adolescent communication exerted a stronger effect on daughters ($\beta = -.27$) than sons ($\beta = -.19; z = 4.71, p < .001$). Second, parental differences in the linkage between the two domains were found. In the male respondents, mother-son communication had a stronger linkage with suicidal ideation than did father-son communication ($t_H = 4.78, p < .001$). Among the female respondents, mother-daughter communication similarly had a stronger linkage with suicidal ideation than did father-daughter communication ($t_H = 1.99, p < .05$).

To determine the moderating effect of parent-adolescent communication on the personal correlate (hopelessness) of adolescent suicidal ideation, hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. Demographic variables (including participants' age, father's and mother's jobs, father's and mother's education, parents' marital status, monthly

family income, recipients of comprehensive social security allowance), personal correlate (hopelessness), family correlates (father-adolescent and mother-adolescent communication), and interaction terms were entered in hierarchical blocks. The father's education and parents' marital status were significant predictors of adolescent suicidal ideation, although the related effect size was small. Mother-adolescent communication was found to buffer the negative impact of hopelessness on adolescent suicidal ideation in the total sample (Table 3). The moderating effect of mother-adolescent communication on the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation is shown in Figure 1.

Hierarchical regression analysis was also performed separately for the male and female sample. For male adolescents, both interaction terms (i.e., hopelessness \times father-adolescent communication and hopelessness \times mother-adolescent communication) were significant (Table 3). Similar to the findings based on the total sample, father-son communication and mother-son communication were found to buffer the negative impact of hopelessness on male adolescent suicidal ide-

TABLE 2
Correlations Between Parents-Adolescent Communication, Adolescent Suicidal Ideation, and Hopelessness

Suicidal ideation	Father-adolescent communication	Mother-adolescent communication	Hopelessness
Male	-.33*	-.42*	.68*
Female	-.40*	-.43*	.70*
Total	-.36*	-.42*	.68*

* $p < .006$ (Bonferroni-corrected alpha level)

TABLE 3
Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Adolescent Suicidal Ideation in the Total Sample, Male and Female Samples

Step	Predictors	Total sample		Male sample		Female sample	
		<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ² change	<i>B</i>	<i>R</i> ² change
1	Demographic characteristics						
	Age	.03	.02	.05*	.02	.01	.02
	Father's job	-.01		-.01		-.02	
	Mothers' job	-.01		-.002		-.02	
	Fathers' education ^a	-.07***		-.07*		-.08**	
	Mother's education	-.01		-.02		-.02	
	Parents' marital status ^b	.08***		.09***		.08**	
	Monthly family income	.002		.04		-.04	
	Comprehensive Social Security Allowance (CSSA) recipient	-.02		-.08**		.04	
2	Personal correlate						
	Hopelessness	.65***	.45	.64***	.44	.66***	.48
3	Family correlates						
	Father-adolescent communication	-.04*	.03	-.04	.03	-.05*	.04
	Mother-adolescent communication	-.13***		-.13***		-.13***	
4	Interaction term						
	Hopelessness × Father-adolescent communication	-.15	.02	-.24*	.01	-.06	.02
	Hopelessness × Mother-adolescent communication	-.21**		-.35**		-.01	

B = Standardized regression coefficient

^aFather's education (1 = Primary education or below, 2 = Secondary education, 3 = Tertiary education or above)

^bParents' marital status (1 = intact family, 2 = non-intact family, i.e., single-parent family due to death of a parent, divorce, or separation)

p* < .05; *p* < .01; ****p* < .001

ation. For the female sample, both interaction terms were insignificant.

DISCUSSION

Both correlation and regression analyses showed that a higher level of hopelessness was associated with a higher level of adolescent suicidal ideation. These findings are consistent with previous literature (Smith, Alloy, & Abramson, 2006). Similarly, both correlation and regression analysis showed that a higher level of parent-adolescent communication was significantly related to a lower level of adolescent suicidal ideation.

This observation is in line with previous research findings that there was less frequent and less satisfying parent-adolescent communication among suicidal adolescents (Everall, Bostik, & Paulson, 2006). Moreover, this observation is consistent with the predictions of different family theories, including the Beavers model, the Circumplex model, and the McMaster model of family functioning (Walsh, 1993), and family systems theory (McHale & Sullivan, 2008) that parent-adolescent communication is a determinant of adolescent psychological well-being.

When the male and female respondents were compared, father-adolescent communication appeared to have a stronger im-

Effect of hopelessness on adolescent suicidal ideation,
moderated by mother-adolescent communication

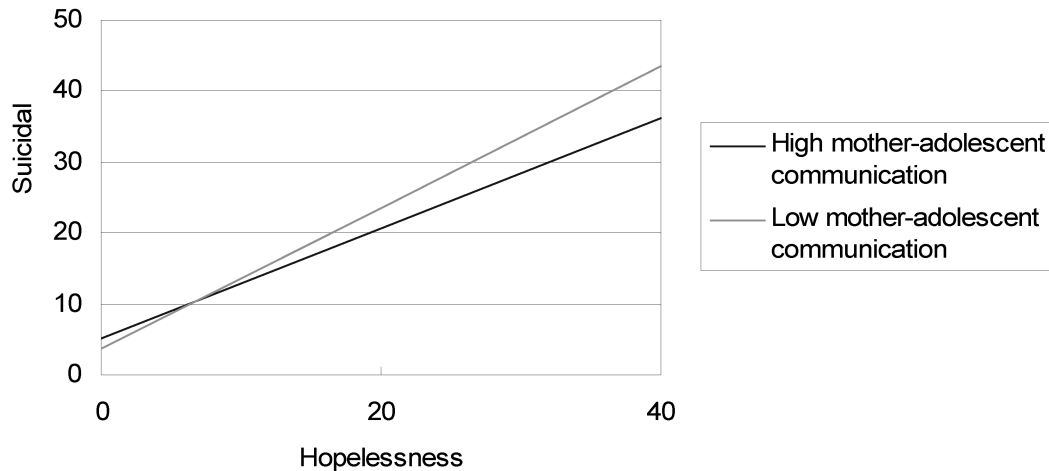


Figure 1. Moderation effect of parent-adolescent communication on the effect of hopelessness on adolescent suicidal ideation.

pact on girls than boys. This finding is consistent with previous research findings. Herrera, Dahlblom, Dahlgren, and Kullgren (2006) reported that the absence of the father in the family contributed strongly to the daughters' suicidal behavior. Studies also have shown that adolescent girls are more susceptible to the influence of family than are adolescent boys (e.g., Jaycox & Repetti, 1993; Shek, 1998). This observation is probably due to the fact that the relationship of the girls with their fathers was closer than that of the boys with their fathers. Therefore, negative parent-adolescent communication would exert a stronger impact for girls than for boys. This finding suggests the need to take into account the gender of children in understanding the impact of fathers on child developmental outcomes such as suicidal ideation.

For both male and female respondents, mother-adolescent communication correlated more highly with suicidal ideation than father-adolescent communication. This is in line with previous findings that perceived problems in communication with mothers, but not with fathers, differentiated suicidal adolescents from nonsuicidal adolescents (Gould et al., 1998). Traditionally, fathers

perform the breadwinner role, while mothers play the socialization and caregiving roles in Chinese society. Furthermore, Chinese women are more encouraged to express their emotions than men, who use nonverbal rather than verbal means of expression. Hence, mothers are more competent to communicate with their children. These cultural conditions may explain why mother-adolescent communication was regarded as more important for the adolescents than father-adolescent communication (Shek et al., 2006). Theoretically speaking, the findings underscore the complexity of the relationship between parent-adolescent communication and adolescent suicidal ideation; gender and parental differences must be taken into account.

Moreover, the results showed that parents' marital status was also an important predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation, although the related effect size was not strong. It is also consistent with the theoretical proposition that non-intact families (i.e., single parent families due to death of a parent, divorce, or separation) impair the mental health of adolescent members in the family. This is in line with overseas and local findings (Herrera et al., 2006; Yip et al., 2006).

For example, Shek (2008) showed that compared with intact families, adolescents growing up in non-intact families displayed a higher level of hopelessness.

The result that father's education affected adolescent suicidal ideation corroborated previous findings (e.g., Goodman, 1999). Zeng (1999) found that fathers with more education were more confident in parenting, more respectful of their children, and more warm and involved in child rearing. Furthermore, parents with higher educational levels have been found to have less parenting stress (Deater-Deckard & Scarr, 1996). Given that suicidal adolescents perceived their parents to be significantly more critical and less caring (Allison, Pearce, & Martin, 1995; Martin & Waite, 1994), parents with better parenting methods and less parenting stress would inevitably have a better relationship with their children (Shek, 2005). As a result, it would lead to a positive impact on the adolescents' psychological well-being and lower their suicidal ideation.

Hierarchical regression analysis further showed that although both father-son and mother-son communication moderated the relationship between hopelessness and male adolescent suicidal ideation, no similar effects were found in the female sample. This finding may be explained by the fact that the parent-adolescent relationship was lower in boys than in girls. As such, more parent-adolescent communication would be more powerful in reducing suicidal ideation in adolescent boys. As this finding has not been reported in previous research, this study is pioneering in revealing the moderating role of parent-adolescent communication between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation in Chinese adolescent boys. Again, the findings suggest that it is important to look at the differential effects of parents on male and female adolescents.

Practically speaking, the present findings suggest that family practitioners might help family members and parents to cultivate hope in their adolescent children so that adolescent suicidal ideation could be reduced. For example, workshops and programs can be conducted to help adolescents build up

hope and belief in the future, as well as develop positive attitudes to exploring possible options in life (O'Hanlon, 1999; Shek, Ma, & Merrick, 2007).

The present findings also suggest that enhancement of parent-adolescent communication might be useful in dealing with the problem of suicidal ideation in adolescents. Programs such as parallel groups for both parents and adolescents to enhance their communication skills (Chan, Yeung, Chu, Tsang, & Leung, 2002), manual-based parenting programs such as the Systematic Training for Effective Parenting Program (Kwok, 1994), and parenting groups (Shek et al., 2007) can help parents to learn effective ways of relating to their children and how to change dysfunctional relationships with their children.

Furthermore, family counseling or family therapy can be carried out to address suicide-related behavior in adolescent members of the family. In most situations, focusing on the strength of different family members, being specific, avoiding name-calling, expressing feelings in reaction to the problem but not the person, and avoiding blame toward others are the common therapeutic foci. In addition, the present findings suggest the importance of considering gender and role differences among parents and children in the family therapy process. This is a concept that is also advocated by family therapists (e.g., McGoldrick & Gerson, 1985; Nichols & Schwartz, 2005).

Based on the above discussion and the literature on Chinese family intervention, it is suggested that parent education programs for Chinese parents will benefit by including the following elements: (1) understanding communication in Chinese families, including the related cultural beliefs and typical patterns of communication; (2) knowledge of different communication barriers (e.g., name-calling, threats, criticisms, ordering) and their impact on the adolescents; (3) development of appropriate communication attitudes, such as trust, respect for the adolescents, and belief in their right to express their feelings and opinions; and (4) acquisition of effective communication skills; that is, the

parents learn different vocabularies of feelings, ways to become good listeners, to use encouragement effectively, how to express both primary and secondary feelings, use I-messages to express parents' care and concern, be empathetic and reflect the adolescents' feeling and content, and have open, clear, specific, and direct communication. In particular, it is important for the program organizers and parents to understand the Chinese notions of parental control and how such attributes would affect parent-adolescent communication (Shek, 2007).

It is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the present study. First, the weaknesses of convenience sampling should be noted. In particular, generalizing the present findings to the broader secondary school population should proceed with caution. Second, as self-reported questionnaires were used, the information collected was based on the adolescent informants only. If resources permit, the use of multiple informants would give a clearer picture of the problem area. Third, the present research predominately used quantitative methodology, which has a disadvantage—namely, it cannot explore the subjective experiences of adolescents. Fourth, as only the personal correlate (hopelessness) and family correlate (parent-adolescent communication) were selected, other personal

factors (such as self-esteem), as well as factors in different microsystems (such as school performance, peer relationship) and the macrosystem (mass media, social integration, cultural factors), can also be included in future studies of adolescent suicidal ideation. In particular, because of the constraints on the length of the questionnaires and resources implications, the mental health status (such as the presence of mental disorders) of the respondents was not examined in this study. Inclusion of a large number of variables implies that a survey of a larger scale has to be conducted. Fifth, the use of a cross-sectional design means that it is not possible to claim a causal relationship between the antecedents and adolescent suicidal ideation. Hence, a longitudinal research design should be used in future studies. Despite these limitations, the present study can be regarded as a stimulating and interesting addition to the literature which has enriched our understanding of the relationships among hopelessness, parent-adolescent communication, and adolescent suicidal ideation, taking into account gender differences. The present findings are important because thus far there have been few attempts to examine the role of parent-adolescent communication in adolescent suicidal ideation in either Western or Chinese communities.

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