

Hopelessness, Family Functioning and Suicidal Ideation Among Chinese Adolescents in Hong Kong[§]

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Abstract: Based on the responses of 5,557 Chinese secondary students in Hong Kong, the relationship among hopelessness, perceived family functioning and suicidal ideation was examined in this study. Results showed that while hopelessness had a positive relationship with suicidal ideation, perceived global family functioning had a negative relationship with Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation. Different dimensions of family functioning were differentially related to suicidal ideation, with conflict and harmony, parental concern and parental control showing stronger prediction of adolescent suicidal ideation than did mutuality and communication. It was further found that family functioning moderated the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation. The present study underscores the importance of family functioning in the psychological well-being of Chinese adolescents. The theoretical and practical implications of the findings are discussed.

Keywords: Hopelessness, family functioning, Chinese adolescents, suicidal ideation, psychological well-being.

Previous research has shown that hopelessness was related to adolescent suicidal ideation. Several studies found that there was a significant relationship between hopelessness and suicidality [1-3] and hopelessness was found to be the strongest of cognitive variables in concurrent association with suicidal ideation [4]. Researchers also reported that hopelessness was the best predictor of suicidal ideation in students and adolescents experiencing bipolar disorder [5-7]. However, the existing studies are predominantly Western studies and there are no related systematic studies in the Chinese contexts.

Besides personal correlates, different family processes are expected to have significant relationships with adolescent suicidal ideation. According to different family models, dimensions of family functioning include cohesion, flexibility or adaptability and communication are theoretically linked to adolescent psychological well-being [8-10]. There are studies showing that adolescent suicidal ideation was related to family dysfunction, family discord, poor family environment, family rigidity, family conflicts and poor adaptability [11, 12]. Studies also showed that low levels of family cohesion and support as well as high levels of parent-adolescent conflict were positively related to depression and suicidal ideation [13, 14]. However, a study by Mitchell and Rosenthal [15] yielded inconsistent results. They evaluated families of both suicidal and non-suicidal psychiatric inpatient

adolescents and found no significant group difference in terms of the mean family rigidity score.

There are also some previous findings suggesting that family functioning may moderate the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation. A study of women infected with HIV showed that family cohesion moderated the effects of HIV-related symptoms on suicidal thoughts [16]. Family cohesion was also found to act as a buffer, which could moderate the negative effects of life stress and protect the adolescents from developing suicidal behaviors [17]. However, there was still much room for further exploration of the moderating role of family functioning on the relationship between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, there are several limitations intrinsic to the existing studies regarding the relationships amongst hopelessness, suicidal ideation and family functioning in the existing literature. First, very few studies have examined the linkages between different dimensions of family functioning and suicidal ideation. Theoretically speaking, it is important to examine whether different dimensions of family functioning are related to adolescent suicidal ideation. Second, few studies have included both personal as well as family correlates in a single study. From an ecological perspective, it would be important to include both personal and family variables in a single study. Third, the moderating mechanism of family functioning that links hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation has seldom been explored. The study of this aspect can generate a more dynamic picture regarding the relationships among hopelessness, family functioning and suicidal ideation.

Fourth, among the existing studies, the sample size was either too small or limited to a homogenous sub-sample. Fifth, most of the measuring instruments for the studies con-

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ducted in Hong Kong were adapted from the West, which may not be able to capture the essence of the Chinese culture. In particular, it is argued that the use of an indigenous measure of family functioning may be helpful. Finally, there is a predominance of western studies of the relationship between family functioning and adolescent suicidal ideation. A survey of the PsycINFO in June 2008 with the search term of "suicidal ideation" showed that there were 4,639 citations. In contrast, the use of "suicidal ideation" and "Chinese" showed that there were only 52 citations. As Chinese people constitute roughly one-fifth of the world's population, more research should be conducted [18].

In the study of the relationship between family functioning and suicidal ideation, it should be noted that there are differences in the cultural norms for "healthy" family functioning between Western and Chinese societies. According to a study on the attributes of happy families in Hong Kong [19, 20], Chinese parents and their children regarded the absence of conflict, interpersonal harmony, mutuality, connectedness, and positive parent-adolescent relationships as important attributes of a happy family. Moreover, face-saving is an important concern in Chinese family [21]. Although contemporary Western societies emphasize mutual respect among family members, Chinese wives are taught to be submissive to their husbands and children are socialized to obey their fathers, in accordance with the *wu lun* in traditional Chinese culture [22]. Hence, Chinese families are more hierarchical in structure than families in Western cultures [23, 24]. In view of the difference between Western and Chinese culture, it would be theoretically important to ask whether the hypothesized negative relationship between family functioning and adolescent suicidal ideation can be found in the Chinese culture.

Against the above background, several research questions were addressed in this study. (1) What is the relationship between hopelessness and Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation in Hong Kong? Based on the predictions of cognitive theories of Beck and Ellis [25, 26] and previous research findings [2, 4], it was hypothesized that hopelessness would have a positive relationship with suicidal ideation (Hypothesis 1). (2) What is the relationship between perceived family functioning and Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation in Hong Kong? Based on the predictions of family ecological models and previous research findings [9, 12], it was hypothesized that perceived family functioning would have a negative relationship with suicidal ideation (Hypothesis 2). (3) Are different dimensions of family functioning differentially related to adolescent suicidal ideation? (4) What is the role of perceived family functioning in the relationship between hopelessness and suicidal ideation? Based on the previous theories and findings [16, 17], it was predicted that perceived family functioning would moderate the relationship between hopelessness and suicidal ideation (Hypothesis 3).

In response to the limitations in the related literature, there are several unique features of the present study. First, Chinese adolescents were recruited in this study. Second, a large sample based on Secondary 1 to Secondary 4 students was used ($N = 5,557$). Third, indigenously developed and validated measures of hopelessness, family functioning and suicidal ideation were used. Fourth, the relative importance

of different dimensions of family functioning on adolescent suicidal ideation as well as the moderating effect of family functioning on the linkage between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation were examined.

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. Among 68 schools (out of a total of 426 secondary schools in Hong Kong) being contacted, 42 schools (including self-financed, subvented and government schools) from Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, and the New Territories agreed to join the study. The response rate was 62%, which is comparable to other similar studies on suicidal ideation and behavior [27, 28]. By the end of the survey period, a total of 5,928 questionnaires had been collected. Of the returned questionnaires, 5,557 were valid, while 371 were invalid. 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. There were slightly more males (53.1%) than females (46.9%) in the sample. The participants were quite evenly distributed among different forms (25.8% in Secondary 1, 24.7% in Secondary 2, 24.4% in Secondary 3, 25.1% in Secondary 4). 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. 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 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

Assessment of Hopelessness. Hopelessness was assessed using the Hopelessness subscale of the Chinese Hopelessness Scale (C-HOPE) developed by Shek [29]. The original English scale was devised by Beck, Weissman, Lester, and Trexler [30]. The subscale has 10 items (e.g., "it is very unlikely that I will get any real satisfaction in the future"; "there is no use in really trying to get something I want because I probably won't get it"). The respondents 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. The scale was reliable ($\alpha = .91$, mean item-item correlation = .41). According to Shek and Lee's study [31], the scale possessed adequate construct validity.

Assessment of family functioning. Family functioning was assessed using the Chinese Family Assessment Instrument (C-FAI), which is one of the first indigenous instruments designed to measure family functioning in Chinese families [32]. For each question, respondents were required to choose an answer from a 5-point Likert scale. There are five subscales: mutuality (e.g. family members accommodate each other), communication (e.g. family members enjoy getting

together), conflict and harmony (e.g. there is much friction among family members), parental concern (e.g. parents take care of their children), parental control (e.g. parents force children to do things). A higher score in the five subscales indicates a higher level of family dysfunction. A series of large-sample validation studies were conducted [33, 34] which provided strong support for the psychometric properties of the scale.

Assessment of suicidal ideation. Adolescent suicidal ideation was assessed using the Suicidal Ideation Sub-Scale (C-SIS) of the Suicidal Risk Scale for Hong Kong students developed locally by Tse [35]. The instrument is used as a screening tool to identify high-risk students so that effective intervention can be implemented. It is also used for assessment of suicidal risk during the intervention phase and evaluation of the effectiveness of intervention and treatment programs. The C-SIS contains 13 items (e.g., “I really want to put an end to all this so that I don’t have to continue to bear the pain”; “I think being dead may be better than what it is now”). 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 [35] showed that the C-SIS has high internal consistency ($\alpha = .92$), split-half consistency ($\alpha = .88$) and test-retest reliability ($r = .72$) and support for the construct validity and discriminant validity was found.

RESULTS

The mean total scores for the Chinese Hopelessness Scale, Chinese Family Assessment Instrument, and Suicidal Ideation Sub-Scale (C-SIS) were 20.28 (SD= 5.96), 118.72 (SD= 24.34) and 22.54 (SD=8.64), respectively. Pearson correlation analyses with Bonferroni-corrected alpha levels were performed. There was support for Hypothesis 1 that hopelessness would be positively related to adolescent suicidal ideation in all samples (Table 1). Besides, there was support for Hypothesis 2 that perceived family functioning would be negatively related to adolescent suicidal ideation

(Table 2). Generally speaking, adolescent suicidal ideation was positively related to poorer family functioning.

Table 1. Correlations Between Hopelessness and Adolescent Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal Ideation	Male	Female	Total
Hopelessness	.68*	.70*	.68*

* $p < .0167$ (Bonferroni-corrected alpha level).

Among the five dimensions of family functioning, standard regression analysis showed that except communication, mutuality, conflict and harmony, parental concern and parental control were significant predictors of adolescent suicidal ideation (Table 3). Further analyses showed that standard regression coefficients on the relationships between conflict and harmony, parental concern and parental control and suicidal ideation were significantly higher than those between mutuality and communication and adolescent suicidal ideation (Table 4). Hence, relative to mutuality and communication, conflict and harmony, parental concern and parental control were stronger predictors of adolescent suicidal ideation.

To determine the moderating effect of family functioning on the linkage between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation, hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed (Table 5). Demographic variables, personal correlate (hopelessness), family correlate (family functioning), and interaction term were entered in hierarchical blocks. Father’s education and parents’ marital status were significant predictors of adolescent suicidal ideation, although the related effect size was small. The interaction term of hopelessness with family functioning was insignificant for the whole sample. Hierarchical regression analysis was also performed separately for the male and female samples. For female adolescents, the interaction effect of hopelessness and family functioning was significant. Family functioning was found to buffer the negative impact of hopelessness on female adoles-

Table 2. Correlations Between Family Functioning and Adolescent Suicidal Ideation

Suicidal Ideation	Mutuality	Communication	Conflict & harmony	Parental Concern	Parental Control	Total
Male	-.36*	-.33*	-.44*	-.40*	-.38*	-.43*
Female	-.43*	-.39*	-.44*	-.39*	-.41*	-.48*
Total	-.39*	-.36*	-.44*	-.39*	-.39*	-.46*

* $p < .0083$ (Bonferroni –corrected alpha level).

Table 3. Prediction of Adolescent Suicidal Ideation from Family Functioning

Suicidal Ideation	Family Functioning						R^2	Adj. R^2
	Mutuality	Communication	Conflict & Harmony	P Concern	P Control			
Male	-.02	-.01	-.23***	-.19***	-.15***	.24	.24	
Female	-.18***	-.01	-.13***	-.14***	-.20***	.27	.27	
Total	-.10***	-.00	-.18***	-.16***	-.17***	.25	.25	

Pconcern= parental concern Pcontrol= parental control.
*** $p < .001$.

Table 4. A Comparison of the Beta Coefficients on the Relationships Between Different Dimensions of Family Functioning and Suicidal Ideation (Total Sample)

	Mutuality	Communication	Conflict & Harmony	P Concern	P Control
Mutuality	-				
Communication	-.10 vs -.00, t=20.70***	-			
Conflict & harmony	-.10 vs -.18, t=16.55***	-.00 vs -.18, t=39.18***	-		
P concern	-.10 vs -.16, t=9.08***	-.00 vs -.16, t=23.88***	-.18 vs -.16, t=2.65	-	
P control	-.10 vs -.17, t=10.60***	-.00 vs -.17, t=25.38***	-.18 vs -.17, t=1.32	-	-

Pconcern= parental concern Pcontrol= parental control.
***p<.001.

cent suicidal ideation (Fig. 1). Further analyses using the different subscales to build the interaction terms revealed similar findings, although the interaction effect of conflict and harmony and parental control were consistent across samples.

DISCUSSION

Both correlation and regression analysis showed that a higher level of hopelessness was associated with a higher

level of adolescent suicidal ideation. This observation is consistent with previous literature [5-7]. Adolescents feeling hopeless might regard suicidal ideation or suicidal behavior as the only alternative available and mistakenly put their hopes on life after death [35, 36]. Conceptually, the sense of hope consists of “certainty about the future” and “future expectation”. Results of studies showed that hopelessness was significantly and inversely related to purpose in life, existential well-being, life satisfaction and self-esteem [29, 37]. The present study provides further evidence that hopelessness is

Table 5. Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analysis for the Prediction of Adolescent Suicidal Ideation

Step	Predictors	Total Sample		Male Sample		Female Sample	
		B	R ²	B	R ²	B	R ²
1	Demographic Characteristics						
	Age	.03	.02	.05*	.02	.01	.02
	Father’s job	-.01		-.01		-.02	
	Mothers’ job	-.01		.002		-.02	
	Fathers’ education ^b	-.07***		-.07*		-.08**	
	Mother’s education	-.01		-.02		-.02	
	Parents’ marital status ^c	.08***		.09***		.08**	
	Monthly family income	.002		.04		-.04	
Comprehensive Social Security Allowance (CSSA) recipient	-.02		-.08**		.04		
2	Personal Correlate						
	Hopelessness	.65***	.47	.64***	.46	.66***	.50
3	Family Correlates						
	Family functioning	-.08***	.50	-.04	.49	-.10**	.54
4	Interaction Term						
	Hopelessness x Family functioning	-1.44	.52	.12	.51	-.46***	.56
	Hopelessness x Mutuality	-.05		.11		-.21**	
	Hopelessness x Communication	.06		.12*		-.02	
	Hopelessness x Conflict & harmony	-.12***		-.11**		-.16***	
	Hopelessness x Parental concern	-.09***		-.08**		-.12***	
Hopelessness x Parental control	-.02		.02		-.07**		

Note: B= Standardized regression coefficient.

^bFather’s education (1= Primary education or below, 2=Secondary education, 3= Tertiary education or above).

^cParents’ marital status (1= intact family, i.e. family with both parents present, 2= non-intact family, i.e. single-parent family due to death of a parent, divorce or separation).

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

positively related to adolescent suicidal ideation, showing the important role of hope in contributing to adolescents' positive mental health and psychological well being.

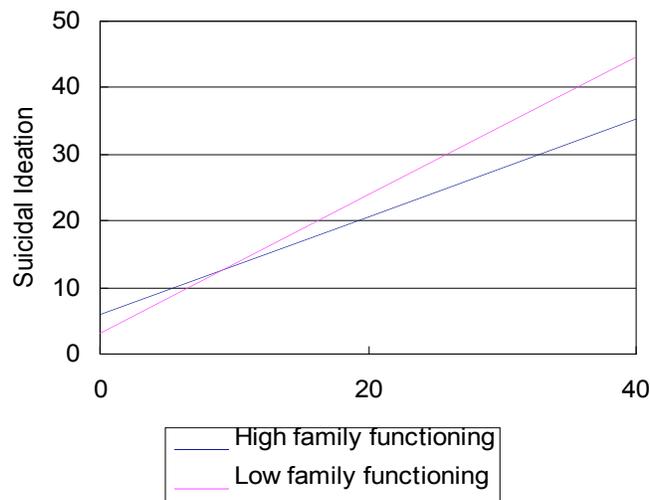


Fig. (1). Effect of hopelessness on female adolescent suicidal ideation, moderated by family functioning.

Results supported the hypothesis that perceived healthy family functioning is negatively related to adolescent suicidal ideation. Since family is a shelter which provides concern and emotional support for most adolescents in Hong Kong where mutuality, communication, harmony and parental concern in the family are valued and treasured by the adolescents, this may contribute to a decrease in adolescent suicidal ideation.

The finding that conflict and harmony factor has a stronger relationship with adolescent suicidal ideation is in line with overseas and local findings [14, 38]. Traditionally, Chinese people emphasized avoidance of interpersonal conflict and cultivation of interpersonal harmony, as revealed in the Chinese cultural sayings of “jia he wan shi xing” (if a family lives in harmony, everything will prosper) and “jia shuai kou bu ting” (a family will wither if there are many quarrels). Confucianism emphasized social and family harmony [39, 40] and Chinese families were generally thought to be highly cohesive. Obedience and respect for the authority were valued and conflicts in the families were also suppressed [41]. Hence, overt conflict in the family, particularly parent-adolescent conflict, would cause disturbance and stress to the adolescents, affecting their psychological well-being (e.g. sense of hope, satisfaction with life), thus increasing their suicidal ideation [42].

Results showed that parental concern was also a strong predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation. Since adolescents experienced a period of storm and turmoil, they still needed a lot of emotional support from their parents. Hence, parental concern was important and positively related to adolescents' psychological adjustment and well-being [43], which would also affect their suicidal ideation. Furthermore, parental control was another important predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation. It is understandable that adolescents who strive for freedom and independence would resist parental control. A local study also found that parental psychological control was negative related to adolescent psychological well-being, though there was a positive relationship between parental

behavioral control and adolescent psychological well-being [44]. Hence, parental control would affect adolescents' psychological well-being, which contributed to suicidal ideation.

It is interesting to note that communication in the whole family was not a significant predictor for adolescent suicidal ideation. Some of the items in the instrument asked the respondents whether their family members usually arranged family activities, enjoyed getting together and talking to one another. Since adolescents at their developmental stage usually enjoy getting together and having activities with their peers rather than family members, family activities might not be regarded as important. This explains why communication in the family is not an important predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation. However, whether dyadic communication is a significant predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation remains to be explored.

Result showed that parents' marital status was an important predictor of adolescent suicidal ideation. This is in line with overseas and local findings [36, 45]. 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 psychological well-being of adolescent members in the family. Result also showed that father's education influenced adolescent suicidal ideation. Since fathers were the breadwinners in traditional Chinese families, those who took up the homemaker roles would feel stressful and losing face, which would probably lead to strain on father-adolescent relationship. This would in turn increase adolescent suicidal ideation. However, it is noteworthy that the effect size associated with the effect of demographic variables was small.

Regression analyses further showed that family functioning moderated the relationship between hopelessness and female adolescent suicidal ideation. This is in line with previous study which found that family cohesion could moderate the relationship between the negative effects of life stress and adolescent suicidal behavior [17]. This is also consistent with the local studies that family has a stronger impact on females than males because Chinese women tended to use their family to define their identity and maintain a closer relationship with the family members [29, 46]. Hence, the effect of personal correlate on adolescent suicidal ideation was partially dependent on the family correlate in the family microsystem. This study is pioneering in finding the moderating role of family functioning between hopelessness and adolescent suicidal ideation.

Since this study underscores the important roles of hopelessness, family functioning, (particularly parental concern, parental control, conflict and harmony) in adolescent suicidal ideation, they should be considered as the key building blocks in theoretical models for adolescent suicidal ideation. The present findings are important because there are few theoretical models on the family determinants of adolescent behavior in the Chinese context [18].

Since hopelessness is positively related to adolescent suicidal ideation, it is important to cultivate the sense of hope in adolescents. Local studies had found that family functioning and perceived parental control were significantly related to hopelessness [44, 47], so the family or parents should play a role to enhance the sense of hope among ado-

lescents. Some adventure-based counseling can be introduced so that adolescents can learn to persevere in face of hardship. 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 [48]. In addition, some positive traditional Chinese beliefs about adversity can be reinforced, e.g. 'Chi de ku zhong ku, fang wei ren shange ren' (hardship increases stature), 'You zhi zhe shi jing cheng' (when there is a will, there is a way), 'Zhi zu chang le' (happy is he who is contented).

With reference to the family correlate, the results indicated that family functioning, particularly parental concern, parental control, conflict and harmony and mutuality, were significantly related to adolescent suicidal ideation. Hence, it is important to enhance parental concern, harmony and mutuality, while minimizing parental control and conflict within the family. The Positive Parenting Program (Triple P) for parents, which was effective in reducing conduct problems in children and in promoting more harmonious family relationships in Chinese families in Hong Kong, could be organized to strengthen family functioning [49]. Nevertheless, care should be taken that excessive parental concern is not mistaken by adolescents for control, so parents should be guided to give an appropriate level of concern to their teenagers.

It is noteworthy that there are several limitations of the present study. First, the weaknesses of convenience sampling should be noted. In particular, generalization of the present findings to the secondary school population should proceed with caution. Second, as self-administered questionnaires were used, the information collected was based on the adolescent informants only. If resource permits, the use of multiple informants would give a clearer picture of the problem area. Third, the present research predominately used quantitative methodology. One disadvantage of this methodology is that it cannot explore the subjective experiences of adolescents. Another drawback is that it is less process-oriented and difficult to apply the generalized data to individual cases. Fourth, only the personal correlate (hopelessness) and family correlate (family functioning) were selected, based on a review of empirical findings and the theoretical framework. Other 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. 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. There may in fact be a bi-directional relationship between the variables, or a third variable may be present. Hence, a longitudinal research design can 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 relationship between hopelessness, family functioning, particularly the moderating role of family functioning, and Chinese adolescent suicidal ideation. The present findings are important because there are few related studies in the Chinese literature [18].

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