ABSTRACT

The association between depression and suicide ideation and attempts is well-documented, and differences in this relationship may exist among ethnic groups.

Understanding how risk and protective factors function within each ethnicity is important for the prevention of suicide, and for the provision of effective treatment.

We examined the potential moderating effects of hopelessness and trait hope on the relationship between depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation and attempts in an ethnically diverse college sample.

Our findings may have implications for suicide prevention.

HYPOTHESES

- Increased depressive symptoms will be related to a greater likelihood of suicide ideation or attempts.
- Hopelessness and trait hope will moderate the relationship between depression and suicidal activity.
- Exploratory analyses examined moderation across ethnic subgroups.

INTRODUCTION

Depression and suicide are significant public health problems, and some ethnic groups may be at increased risk (Greenberg et al., 2003; Iwata et al., 2002; Oquendo et al., 2001).

Rates of suicide differ between ethnicities. In 2004, suicide rates were: Hispanics (5.9/100,000), Whites (12.9/100,000), Blacks (5.3/100,000), Asian and Pacific Islanders (5.8/100,000) (NIMH, 2007).

Likewise, differences may exist in risk and protective factors for suicide across ethnic groups (Oquendo et al., 2005).

Depression and hopelessness appear to be significant risk factors for suicide across ethnic groups (Durant et al., 2006; Colucci et al., 2007).

METHODS

Participants:
- Undergraduates (N = 339); 69% Female
- 27% Black, 47% Hispanic, 20% White; 6% Asian
- Mean Age 19.66 (SD = 3.27)

Measures:
- Beck Depression Inventory-II (BDI-II)
- Goals Scale (Trait Hope)
- Beck Hopelessness Scale (BHS)
- Suicide Behaviors Questionnaire (SBQ)

RESULTS

- Thirty seven participants (11%) reported a previous suicide attempt; 20% reported past suicide ideation.
- Depressive symptoms were significantly associated with suicide ideation and attempts across all ethnic groups, t = -2.69, p = .01, Un β = .19.
- With hopelessness in the model, there was a trend toward trait hope as a moderator of the association between depression and suicidal behavior (p = .059).
- Without hopelessness in the model, trait hope moderated the association between depressive symptoms and suicide ideation and attempts, t = -1.89, p = .01, Un β = -.01. [See Interaction Figure].
- In ethnically stratified analyses, trait hope moderated the association between depression and suicidal activity for Whites, with hopelessness in the model, t = 3.22, p < .01, Un β = .02, and without, t = 3.24, p < .01, Un β = -.02. For Hispanics, trait hope moderated this association without hopelessness in the model, t = -2.01, p < .05, Un β = -.01.

LIMITATIONS

- Cross-sectional data preclude the ability to examine causal effects of trait hope on the relationship between depression and suicidal thoughts and attempts.
- College sample limits generalizability; future research should utilize clinical and community samples.

IMPLICATIONS

- In the treatment of suicidal behavior, clinicians may want to promote protective factors, such as trait hope, while reducing risk factors such as hopelessness and depression.
- Differential approaches may be required depending on the ethnic and cultural background of the patient.
- Future research is necessary to better understand ethnic and cultural variations in risk and protective factors for suicide, and to facilitate improved medical, functional, and psychological outcomes.