



# Latinas Attempting Suicide: Findings from a Decade of Research

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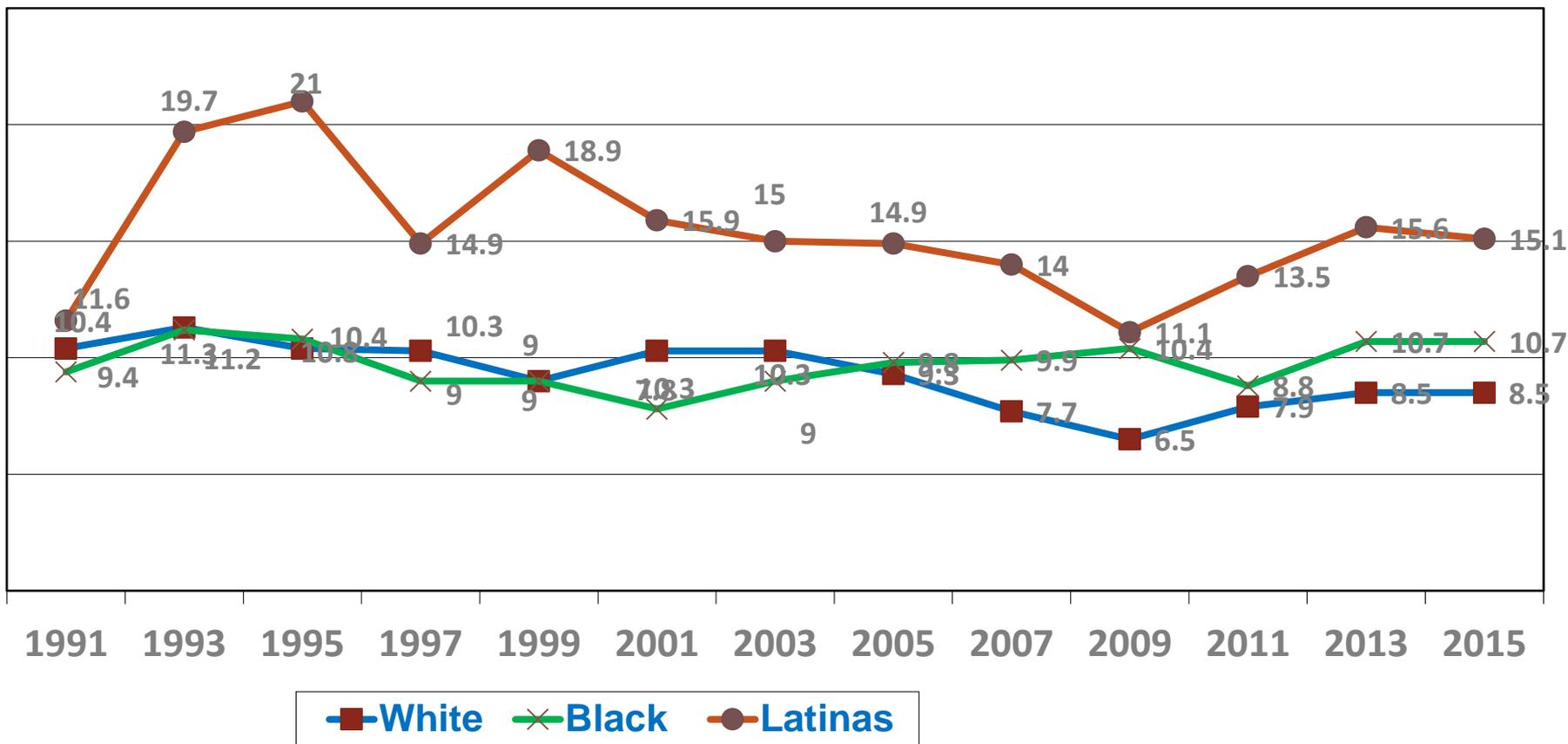
Life is Precious Comunilife



- Background and conceptual model
- Empirical and theoretical framework



# Percentage of Adolescent Girls' Reporting Suicide Attempts (1991-2015)



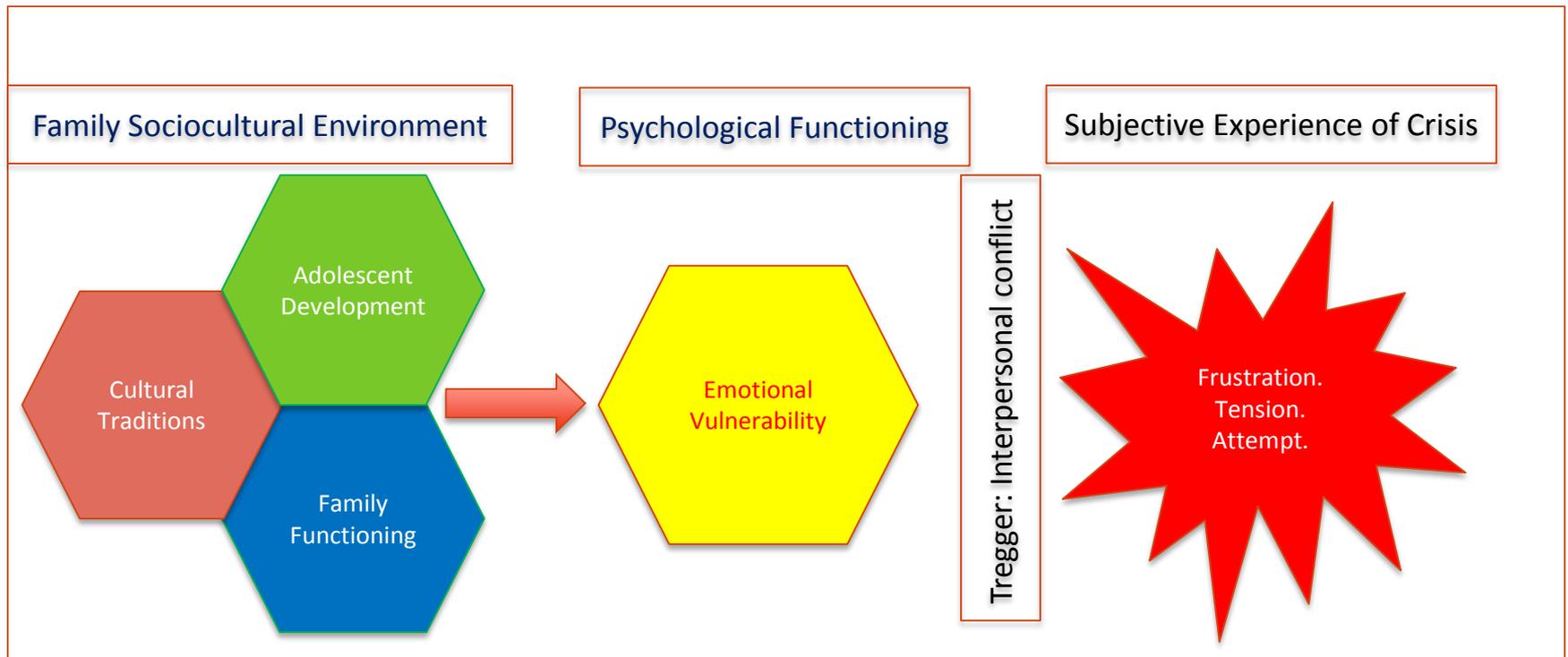


## It's not a new phenomenon

- Earliest evidence of Latinas attempting suicide—late 1950s
- The “Suicidal Fit” South Bronx, NY (Trautman, 1961)
  - impulsive escapes from stressful situations
  - ingested pills or household cleansers
  - problems in family relations
  - spouse or mother
  - no thought of death
  - not aware of their thoughts
  - no psychotic symptoms



# Conceptual Model: Pathway



Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005; Zayas, 2011.



## Underlying Reasons for Attempts

- *Underlying reasons*: circumstance teenager says she struggled with over a long period of time
  - Dysfunctional family: most commonly reported underlying reason for an attempt
  - Conflicts among family members; parental divorce
  - Drug or drinking problem by girl or family
  - Sexual abuse or molestation



## Triggers of Attempts

- *Trigger*: Event occurring shortly before SA that girls says is acutely related to SA
  - Most common: relational conflict with family member, sweetheart, friend, other close person
  - Emotional experience: difficulty dealing with complex feelings; escalation of frustration and tension



## Developmental Systems Theory

- Reciprocal interaction between person and environment
- Ecological Systems (micro, meso, exo, and macro) – Bronfenbrenner
- “Zone of Proximal Development” – Vygotsky



# Adolescent Development

- Autonomy
- Relatedness/Connectedness



# Family Systems Theory

- Cohesiveness
- Adaptability
- Communication



## Cultural Psychology

- Variations in family structure, interactions, child-rearing; context & rules for interactions
- Shapes psychological representations & affects
  - Sets limits of emotional tolerance (some salient, others hard to express)
- Provides lexicons for emotional expressions (“idioms of distress”)
- symptomatology & interpretation of symptoms
- modes of coping with distress and help-seeking



## Research Questions

- *Why* do some Latinas teens attempt suicide and others don't despite being very similar to each other?
- *What* are the elements in the suicide attempts of young Latinas?



# Sample

Attempters	
Teens	122
Mothers + Grandmothers	(86 +2) 88
Fathers	19
Non-Attempters	
Teens	110
Mothers	83
Fathers	17



## Characteristics of girls and parents in our study

	Attempters	Non-Attempters
Age (avg)	15.5	15.3
Parent education (avg)	10.5 years	10.1 years
Puerto Ricans	43	36
Dominicans	38	26
Mexicans	17	10
Others	23	33



# Familism, Parent-Adolescent Conflict, & Self-Esteem

	Total Sample (N=226)		Attempters (n=121)		Non-Attempt (n=105)		<i>t</i> / $\chi^2$ Values
	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>M</i>	SD	
<b>Parent-Adol. Conflict</b>	5.20	4.61	6.59	4.84	3.72	3.85	<i>t</i> (206)=-4.70***
<b>Internalizing</b>	20.67	11.13	25.98	10.70	14.95	8.47	<i>t</i> (212)=-8.31***
<b>Self-Esteem</b>	29.28	5.72	26.85	5.29	31.94	4.95	<i>t</i> (209)=7.20***

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



## Findings

- Majority: lifetime history of 2 to 6+ prior attempts
- *Acculturation*
  - Attempters and Non-Attempters did not differ
  - Teens more acculturated than parents
- *Familism*
  - Attempters and Non-Attempters did not differ
  - Teens less familistic than parents
- *Affection, Communication, & Support*
  - Attempters reported lower levels than Non-Attempters
  - *Attempters rated mothers significantly lower than non-attempters rated their mothers*



## Findings: Means, Lethality, and Intent, and Psychiatric Diagnosis

- Means: most common, cutting with household item
- Majority: low-lethality methods
  - >50% stated intent to end lives
  - Few stated no suicidal intent but used highly lethal means (overdosing, severe self-cutting)
- Many denied or minimized suicidal intent



## Findings: Psychiatric Conditions

- >66% in borderline clinical or clinical range on internalizing and externalizing scale
  - Scales showed girls 7x more impulsive and oppositional than clinicians' assessed
- Clinicians
  - Diagnosed 2x as many mood disorders as depression scale
  - Did not deem suicide attempt to be a serious symptom
  - Did not assess girls as severely mentally ill
- Described symptoms and clinical presentations in majority of sample as “moderate.”



## Findings: Generational Status

- Generation matters
  - Second generation girls were more likely to be suicide attempters than first generation girls
  - Third generation girls reported higher internalizing and externalizing behaviors but less likely to attempt suicide



## Findings: Familism

- Mothers differ significantly than their daughters in familism values
  - Gap in familism values related to lower mother-daughter conflict.
- Familism values may not reflect only positive aspects of family dynamics



## Findings: Reciprocity/Mutuality

- Low parent-daughter reciprocity or mutuality predicted higher internalizing and externalizing behaviors
  - Further, predicted suicide attempts
- Gaps in familism between girls and parents:
  - Predict less mother-daughter mutuality
  - Predict more externalizing behaviors in girls



## Findings: Familism and Family Environment

- Attempters
  - higher family conflict
  - lower family cohesion
- Three family types by adolescent reports

	<b>Cohesion</b>	<b>Conflict</b>
<b>Tightly knit</b>	HIGH	LOW
<b>Intermediately knit</b>	MODERATE to LOW	MODERATE to HIGH
<b>Loosely knit</b>	LOW	LOW



## Findings: Familism and Family Environment

- High familism associated with greater likelihood for Latinas to be in
  - A tight-knit family vs an intermediate-knit family.
  - A tight-knit family vs a loose-knit family
  - A intermediate-knit family vs a loose-knit family
- Tight-knit families significantly less likely to have suicidal teen compared to intermediate-knit families and loose-knit families



## Findings: Themes of family, culture, and suicide

- Subjective Distress
  - Interpersonal Discord
  - Emotional Isolation
- 9 of 10 families with suicide attempter had all themes



## Subjective Distress: Example

“I guess I started thinking about, like, my life, like about school. I’m not doing so good. I’m like, ‘What am I doing with my future?’ I guess it made me kind of sad. [My mom] screams at me. She’s like, ‘Why don’t you do better? Why don’t you try?’ I do try.”



## Interpersonal Discord: Example

“My mom was scared ‘cause she didn’t have her papers. She was scared to call the police on my dad ‘cause my dad was a citizen. And she was like, ‘If he’s not here, who’s gonna pay the bills?’ And my dad would always tell my mom, ‘I’ll call the cops and say you’re an immigrant, and you’ll get deported.’”



## Emotional Isolation: Example

“I was thinking about why he died, and me and him used to be best friends. He used to take me out. So that day I wanted to die real bad, ‘cause I wanted to be with my father, to see how my father was doing, to see how hard it is for my father to be there and not me.”



## Aspirations of Attempters

- See few personal, educ'l, prof'l opportunities
- *Want* material goods, to be “independent”
- Believe women should have children early (after HS); help, stay close to family

## Aspirations of Non-Attempters

- Complete education, pursue careers, create financial capital
- Gain new experiences
  - e.g., travel
- Settling into a perceived traditional family life



## Parents' Aspirations

### Attempters

- Delay dating, education
- Express fear in losing children in the future

“I wish my daughter never gets married, my fear when she gets married...giving her up to someone else.”

### Non-Attempters

- Fulfill educational, professional, material goals
  - What parents don't have
- Start family with right partner

“If she does not study, what will she depend upon? Welfare? Food stamps? If you don't become a professional, you will marry a man you would depend upon. When you depend on a man, this man abuses you.”



## Thwarted aspirations of a suicidal girl

“You know, like what nothing is? Like you graduate high school maybe, or probably get a GED and like, you stay home living with your parents and I guess it’s just like, you work at McDonald’s or Burger King, and you do that for the rest of your life. Like that scares me; I don’t want to do that.”



## Aspirations of Non-Suicidal Latinas

- Hold realistic perspective of opportunities and challenges they will encounter
- Understand that they will have to struggle to accomplish their dreams.
- Have defined their aspirations as well as the steps needed to accomplish them.



## Aspirations of Non-Suicidal Latinas

“That is one of my dreams...it is to go to college, far away college and see that there is more people than just people (from the Bronx), you know. So that’s why I think the way I think...and I notice that things are hard but you have to fight and get out of it.”

“I went to clinics, like teenager clinic and I got birth control and stuff like that because that’s one thing I don’t wanna have kids. I don’t wanna be stuck in welfare, carrying, I don’t wanna live like that.”



## Material or Emotional Sacrifices, or Both

- All girls displayed familism by making material or emotional (or both) sacrifices for the sake of the family
- Attempters with a clear intent to die, a third type of sacrifice emerged: girls expressed a desire to kill themselves in order to make things better for their families.



## Narrative of Emotional Sacrifice

- “I don’t have to be thinking about having a boyfriend when I have to be thinking about my education and helping my mom.”
- “[I must] be the strong one in the family”



## Narrative of Material Sacrifice

- “Like, if my dad gives us money, it’s for the house. If I keep it to myself that would be greedy, so I give it to my mom; she has no income whatsoever, she doesn’t work. She’s in process for disability, like, for 3 years already, so there’s no [income].”



## Findings: Non-suicidal Self-Injury

- Suicide attempts came from feeling of powerlessness
- NSSI behaviors motivated by a desire
  - For emotional regulation
  - To feel physical pain
  - To enact influence over or punish parents
  - For a sense of control



## NSSI: Emotional Regulation

“It was in my hand [the nail file] and I was thinking, ‘What I’m going to do with this? I’m not going to kill myself because I do not want to die. I want to just stop feeling angry.’ Inside me was screaming. I was feeling really, really angry.”



## NSSI: Additional Need to Feel Physical Pain

“I just wanted to feel physical pain. I feel like part of me already felt pain, so I need the other part to feel more pain.”



## NSSI: Punishment or to Enact Influence Over Parents

“I was like, you know what? I should drink [the pills] ‘cause she broke the rules three times, not twice, but three times.”



## NSSI: A Sense of Control

“I hate the feeling that other people can make me cry so it’s a relief that they are not controlling me crying this time. I can do it myself.”



## Suicide Attempters Feeling of Powerlessness

“The reason I took the [acetaminophen] was ‘cause I just couldn’t take it anymore. It’s like, everything got out of control. I kept thinking, ‘This is not my life. This is not my life. I do not want this to be my life.’ I saw the bottle of [acetaminophen] lying on my bookshelf, and I just, I just, I took out all the pills. I started counting them. I counted 14 pills. And I took the whole bunch.”



# Are suicide attempts by adolescent Latinas a cultural idiom of distress?

Four dimensions salient to an *ataque de nervios*:

1. Emotional expressions: nervousness, fear, sadness, hopelessness, anger, suicidal thoughts
2. Altercations in consciousness: fainting.
3. Bodily sensations: blurred vision, shaking, trembling.
4. Actions



## Consistency in phenomenology: attempt to ataque

- Overwhelming, contradictory emotions
- Urgent need to escape: intense, rush of emotions
- Feelings of intense anger/rage, hopelessness, despair, sadness, feeling trapped, intense guilt
- Describe attempts as to suggest altered states of consciousness
  - With bodily sensations of trembling, shaking, and physical numbness



- Likelihood of having an *ataque* is strongly correlated to the experience of specific life events (marital disruption, death of a family member, exposure to interpersonal trauma, and childhood trauma)
- What may trigger suicidal behavior among Latina adolescents: disruption in family structure due to migration, divorce, or death, along with intense conflicts among family members.



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