

Psychosocial Predictors of Suicidal Ideation among School going Adolescents in Chennai

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Abstract

According to the National Crime Records Bureau (2020), Tamil Nadu ranked second in terms of student suicides in the country after Maharashtra. Student suicides spiked all over the country, contributing to 8.2% of deaths in India. It becomes necessary to understand predictive/risk and protective factors of Suicidal Ideation that might help in preventing adolescents from committing Suicide and empower them and their caregivers. The current study aims at understanding the influence of Emotional Intelligence, Quality of Interpersonal Relationships between parents and adolescents and Social Isolation on Suicidal Ideation among adolescents in Chennai. Furthermore, the study attempts to fill a relative dearth of culturally relevant studies. Earlier studies have suggested that Parenting, Interpersonal Relationships and Isolation were indicative of Suicidal Ideation while other studies posited that Emotional Intelligence was a protective factor against Suicidal Ideation. An ex-post facto research design was used for this research. Convenience sampling method was used to select samples from various schools across Chennai (n=196). The data was subjected to statistical analyses and the findings showed that dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Relationships with parents showed strong relationships with Suicidal Ideation among adolescents. Regression analysis showed that Specific dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Relationships with parents emerged as significant predictors of Suicidal Ideation.

Keywords: Adolescence, Suicide, Parenting, Quality of Interpersonal Relationships, Isolation, Emotional Intelligence, Suicidal Ideation

INTRODUCTION

Adolescence is a key period in any individual's life. They stand at the doorway of adulthood, transitioning from childhood. It is a period marked by drastic hormonal, biological and cognitive development and changes. As of 2015, there are 1.2 billion adolescents worldwide and as far as the Indian scenario is concerned, 21% of the population are adolescents, roughly 243 million (Sivagurunathan, Umadevi, Rama & Gopalakrishnan, 2015)¹.

However, India's adolescents face threats from all directions, one of the most frightening threats being that of Suicide. The statistics are both baffling and shocking, India accounts for one-third of all female suicides globally and one-fourth for all males. This was published in the Lancet's Global Burden of Disease Study in 2018, a study that aimed to understand Suicide between the years 1990-2016. What makes the results even more difficult to process is that a large portion of India's youth is a particularly vulnerable population. An interesting aspect about the results of the Lancet Global Burden of Disease Study (2018)² and the National Crime Records Bureau's data (2019)³ is that the results reported by Lancet were 2.30 lakh individuals who had lost their lives to suicide. The NCRB's data revealed that it was 1.35 lakh individuals who lost their lives to suicide. Given that there have been disproportionate findings, it calls into question, the number of suicides that have gone unreported.

Another point of note is that out of all the states in India, Tamilnadu ranks second in the number of student suicides in the country. The state saw an alarming figure of 953 students that had lost their lives to suicide. Given that adolescence is a time of vulnerability and confusion for adolescents and the fact that students face rigorous academic challenges and stresses, it becomes imperative for caretakers of adolescents, teachers, parents and even policy makers to understand Suicide.

The roots of the word Suicide lie in the words 'Sui', Latin for Self and 'Cidium' which is taken to mean 'to strike' or 'to kill'. Suicide is the act of taking one's own life.

Suicide has been a topic of discussion and study as it has existed from time immemorial.

Societies have had varying perspectives on the phenomenon of Suicide. While older civilizations have had less stringent views on suicide, the Renaissance period was responsible for more condescending attitudes on suicide where it was condemned.

As it is a pervasive problem that plagues societies and cultures around the world, various theories and models have attempted to explain the phenomenon through various theories and models.

One of the first approaches to Suicide was by Emile Durkheim and his revolutionary book published in 1897, *Le Suicides* where Durkheim described 4 different kinds of Suicides that he observed from a sociological perspective namely Altruistic, Egoistic, Anomic and Fatalistic. While this laid the foundation for understanding suicide in both, a sociological context or otherwise, it also influenced future research and models that came after.

For the purposes of this research the following psychological theories of Suicide were considered:

Suicide as an Escape from an aversive state which include theories by Baechler (1975, Cited in Gunn and Lester 2014)⁴, Baumeister (1990, Cited in Gunn and Lester 2014)⁴ and Schneidman (1993, Cited in Gunn and Lester 2014)⁴

Interpersonal Psychological Theory of Suicide by Thomas Joiner (2005 Cited in Gunn and Lester 2014)⁴

Upon an analysis of these theories, it was insinuated that Emotional Intelligence, Quality of Interpersonal Relationships and Social Isolation were aspects that could affect the outcome of the variable of Suicidal Ideation. Suicidal Ideation is a major component in the act of Suicide.

Emotional Intelligence has become an essential area of research with a wide scope and an array of applications in day to day life. Joseph and Newman (2010)⁵ proposed that there were actually not one, but three models of Emotional Intelligence namely:

- Performance Based Ability Model
- Self-Report Ability Model
- Self-Report Mixed Model or Bar-On Emotional Quotient Inventory.

The Quality of Interpersonal Relationships was a result of research by Pierce, Sarason & Sarason (1991)⁶. It was taken to be a specific construct of Social Support which explained the quality of relationships between individuals. The Quality of Interpersonal Relationships is a global construct based on the interactional- cognitive model of Social Support with 3 dimensions namely Support, Conflict and Depth. Conflict is a part of the construct as it was observed that even healthy and happy relationships were not devoid of conflict. This becomes a necessary area of research as Social Support and Interpersonal Relationships extend to the family and parents as well.

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Shagle and Barber (1993)⁷ in a sample of 473 adolescents found significant relationships between Family Conflict, Parent-Child Conflict and Suicidal ideation. This indicated that higher levels of familial or parental conflict were related to Suicidal Ideation and thoughts in adolescents.

Johnson et al. (2002)⁸ in a longitudinal study of 659 families in New York discovered that Loneliness, Interpersonal Isolation, poor relationships with peers and lack of close friends were all significantly associated with the risk of Suicide

Lee, Wong, Chow and McBride-Chang (2006)⁹ in a study among adolescents in Hong Kong observed that lower levels of Familial Support and Cohesion had significant relationships with Suicidal Ideation. It was also observed that higher levels of Family Conflict also had a significant relationship with Suicidal Ideation.

Hazra and Dasgupta (2011)¹⁰ in their research found a significant negative relationship between Emotional Intelligence and Suicidal Ideation among a sample of undergraduate students, indicating that higher levels of Suicidal Ideation were observed in individuals with lower levels of Emotional Intelligence.

Miller, Esposito-Smythers and Lichtweis (2015)¹¹ in their research found that Parental and School Support, independently, had significant negative relationships with Suicidal Ideation among adolescents indicating that a lack of support from parents and the school system could lead to Suicidal Ideation among adolescents.

Fu, Xue, Zhou and Yuan (2017)¹² in their research found that children who had absentee parents experienced higher levels of Suicidal Ideation.

Domínguez-García and Fernández-Berrocal (2018)¹³ conducted a meta-analysis to understand the association between Emotional intelligence and Suicidal Behaviour. Results of the analysis indicated that higher levels of Emotional Intelligence acted as a protective factor for Suicidal behaviours. The study also recommended the inclusion of Emotional Intelligence in Suicide Prevention programs.

DEFINITIONS

After perusing through relevant literature and research, the variables of the current study were defined both conceptually and operationally as follows:

- Suicidal Ideation refers to thoughts of engaging in behavior intended to end one's life (Nock et al., 2008)¹⁴ Conversely, Suicidal Ideation has been operationally defined as the scores obtained on the dimension of Reasons for Living (RFL) on Brief Reasons for Living-Adolescents by Osman et al. (1996)¹⁵
- Salovey and Mayer (1990)¹⁶ conceptually defined Emotional Intelligence as a subset of social intelligence that involves the ability to monitor one's own and others' emotions, to discriminate among them, and to use this information to guide one's own thinking and actions. Emotional Intelligence has been operationally defined as the sum of the four dimensions of the Assessing Emotions Scale by Bhullar, Malouff and Schute (2009)¹⁷.
- Quality of Interpersonal Relationships has been operationally defined as the scores obtained on the dimensions of Support, Conflict and Depth on the Quality of Relationships Inventory by Pierce, Sarason and Sarason (1991)⁶
- Social Isolation is conceptually defined as having no or very limited social contacts with others (Gottman, 1977¹⁸; Laursen & Hartl, 2013¹⁹). Social Isolation is also conceptually defined as the scores obtained on the Classmates Social Isolation Scale by Alvernini and Manginelli (2016)²⁰

METHOD OF INVESTIGATION

The objective of the study was to understand whether the variables of Emotional Intelligence, Quality of Relationships with parents and Social Isolation had relationships and significant influences on Suicidal Ideation among adolescents in Chennai.

Based on the studies by Domínguez-García and Fernández-Berrocal (2018) and Hazra and Dasgupta (2011), the following hypothesis was framed:

Hypothesis 1: The dimensions of Emotional Intelligence would have a significant relationship with Suicidal Ideation among Adolescents.

Based on studies by Shagle and Barber (1993), Lee, Wong, Chow and McBride-Chang (2006), Miller, Esposito-Smythers and Lichtweis (2015) and Fu, Xue, Zhou and Yuan (2017), the following hypothesis was framed:

Hypothesis 2: The dimensions of the Quality of Interpersonal Relationships would have a significant relationship with Suicidal Ideation among Adolescents.

Based on the study by Johnson et al. (2002), the following hypothesis was framed:

Hypothesis 3: The dimensions of Social Isolation would have a significant relationship with Suicidal Ideation among adolescents.

Hypothesis 4: The dimensions of Emotional Intelligence, Quality of Relationships and Social Isolation will have a significant influence on Suicidal Ideation.

Research Design

A multivariate ex-post facto research design was used for the study with the predictors being Emotional Intelligence, Quality of Relationships and Social Isolation and Suicidal Ideation being taken as the criterion variable.

Sample

Convenience sampling was used to select adolescents from 2 matriculation schools in Chennai for this research. The Research Committee from the University of Madras had thoroughly scrutinized the methodology of the research and raised no objection. Consent was obtained from the school authorities and guardians to conduct the study and distribute questionnaires. Participants were informed of the research and that they were free to drop out if they wished to at any point in the study. Participation in this study was completely voluntary and was left to the students. There were no ethical violations of the Helsinki declaration. A pilot study conducted to estimate the reliability and validity of the tools used on a sub sample of 30 adolescents. It must be noted that those students who were participants in the pilot study were not a part of the main study. Students whose response sheets had missing data and responses were also eliminated from the study. For the final study, out of 252 adolescents, 196 were chosen, between the ages of 16-17 years. The English versions of all the tools were used as they were English medium schools. It was not possible to effectively obtain socio-economic status of every student in the sample. However, it was fairly obvious that a majority of students belonged to neither very low nor very high-income groups. Therefore, to an extent homogeneity with regard to their socio-economic background could be ensured. The tools were screened by the teachers and authorities who had no objections and allowed the research to proceed as planned.

Tools Used

Assessing Emotions Scale by Bhullar, Malouff and Schute (2009) measures Emotional Intelligence on four subdimensions namely:

1. Perception of one's own Emotions (POE),
2. Management of One's Own Emotions (M(own)),
3. Management of Others' Emotions (M(others)) and
4. Utilization of Emotions (UoE).

A composite score indicates overall Emotional Intelligence (EI) and higher scores on this scale indicate higher levels of Emotional Intelligence. The highest possible scores obtainable on the dimensions mentioned above are 50, 45, 40 and 30 respectively. The highest possible score obtainable on overall Emotional Intelligence is 165. For the purpose of this research, overall Emotional Intelligence was not used as the investigators wished to see which sub-dimensions specifically had any relationships with Suicidal Ideation.

The Quality of Relationships Inventory by Pierce, Sarason and Sarason (1997) assesses the perception of the quality of interpersonal relationships that exist between individuals. The tool asks respondents to fill in the persons' name they would like to assess their relationship with. In this case, students were asked to fill the responses while taking into account, specifically the

relationships with their parents. Responses are scored on three parameters or subdimensions namely Support, Conflict and Depth. Higher scores on all the three parameters indicate higher levels of Support, Conflict and Depth indicate in the relationships. Maximum possible scores for these three dimensions were 28, 48 and 24 respectively for Support, Conflict and Depth.

Classmates Social Isolation Questionnaire (CSIQ) by Alivernini and Manginelli (2016) measures the level of Social Isolation in adolescents both within the classroom setting and outside the school. This questionnaire measures Student’s social Isolation Within the Classroom (SIWC) and Student’s social Isolation Outside School (SIOS). Higher scores on the tool denote that the respondent is less isolated. Maximum possible scores for both sub-scales, the SIWC and SIOS were both 20 each.

Suicidal Ideation was measured using the Brief Reasons for Living- Adolescents. The scale measures Suicidal Ideation on 5 sub-scales- Family Alliance, Peer Acceptance, Future Optimism, Self-Acceptance and Suicide Related Concerns. An overall score indicating Reasons for Living (RFL) is obtained after calculating the mean of the all the items or subscales. Higher scores on this inventory indicate lesser or lower Suicidal Ideation. For the purpose of this research, only the composite score was considered. The maximum possible score was 192. The mean was considered for analysis.

As all the scales as per the pilot study were found to have relatively high reliability ranging from 0.57 to 0.94 with a fairly high index of reliability as well. The tools were used in the main study without any modifications. And were scored as per instructions given in the respective manuals.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Upon collection of data the response sheets were examined and the ones that had missing responses were not included as a part of the analysis and study. It was seen that out of 252 students who were given the response sheets, 56 had missing responses and were therefore excluded. 196 was the final number of students who were included in this analysis. The final sample comprised of 138 boys and 58 girls. The data was tested for normality, skewness and kurtosis and found to be normally distributed.

Pearson’s product moment correlation was used to find relationships between the variable in the present study, the details of which are given in Table 1.

Table 1- Correlation Analysis of Quality of Interpersonal Relationships, Emotional Intelligence, Social Isolation and Suicidal Ideation

	PoE	M(Own)	M(Others)	UoE	Support	Conflict	Depth	SIWC	SIOS	RFL
PoE	1									
M(Own)	.470**	1								
M(others)	.530**	.444**	1							
Uoe	.487**	.592**	.490**	1						
Support	.282**	.253**	.351**	.310**	1					
Conflict	-0.012	0.102	-0.024	0.067	.184**	1				
Depth	.164*	.206**	.272**	.297**	.747**	.185**	1			
SIWC	0.123	-0.016	0.011	-0.007	-0.064	-0.137	-0.14	1		
SIOS	.148*	0.119	0.078	0.124	0.079	0.074	0.034	.376**	1	
RFL	.303**	.218**	.190**	.264**	.252**	0.043	.164*	0.046	-0.01	1

Upon a careful examination of the variables, it was found that all sub-dimensions of emotional intelligence namely Perception of one's own Emotions, Management of One's Own Emotions, Managing Other's Emotions and Utilization of Emotions were all significantly related to Suicidal ideation ($p < 0.01$). Based on these findings, **Hypothesis 1** was accepted.

It was also observed that the dimensions of Support and Depth had significant relationships with Suicidal Ideation. Support at the ($p < 0.01$) level and Depth at the ($p < 0.05$) level. Conflict did not have any significant relationships with Suicidal Ideation. This indicated that higher levels of parental support and higher levels in the depth of relationships between parents and children were linked with lesser levels of Suicidal Ideation. Based on these findings, **Hypothesis 2** was partially accepted.

Both the dimensions of Social Isolation namely, Student Isolation Within Classroom and Student Isolation Outside School did not have any significant relationships with Suicidal Ideation. Based on these findings, **Hypothesis 3** was not accepted.

Other significant relationships between the variables were also observed.

Lesser levels of social isolation outside school were seen to have a significant positive relationship with perception of emotions. Depth and support in parent-adolescent relationships were both seen to have strong significant positive relationships with every dimension of emotional intelligence. These findings further underpin the importance and necessity of emotional intelligence across day-to-day relationships as well.

The data was then subjected to regression analyses, both linear and stepwise regression. The reason 2 analyses were used was to test the consistency of data and understand whether it could be more effectively generalized. Table 2 and Table 3 discuss the findings of the data after using Linear and Stepwise Regression Analysis respectively.

Table 2 – Linear Regression Analysis of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Interpersonal Relationships among Adolescents

Variable	Standardized β Coefficients	t	Sig.
(Constant)		5.8	0
POE	0.204	1.932	0.055
M(own)	-0.052	-0.501	0.617
M(others)	0.207	2.4	0.017
UoE	0.029	0.333	0.739
Support	-0.05	-0.577	0.565
Depth	0.122	1.338	0.182

NOTES

r - .367

r² - .135

F – 4.918

N – 196

Table 2 discusses the findings of the data after subjecting it to a Linear Regression analysis. Only the variables and sub-dimensions that had significant relationships with Suicidal Ideation were considered. It was observed that Management of Others' emotions emerged as a significant predictor of Suicidal Ideation. Perception of Emotions was not considered as a major predictor as $p > 0.05$. The R^2 value was found to be .135 indicating a predictive percentage of 13.5% with the given variables.

Table 3 – Stepwise Regression Analysis of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Interpersonal Relationships among Adolescents

Variable	Standardized β Coefficients	t	Sig.
(Constant)		7.802	.000
POE	.252	3.587	.000
SUPPORT	.181	2.572	.011

NOTES

r - .349

r² - .122

F – 13.414

N – 196

Table 3 shows the results of the Stepwise Regression analysis of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Relationships. As is the case with Stepwise regression the model with the highest R^2 value was considered as the most appropriate. From above table, in the current model, Perception of one's own Emotions and Support in relationships emerged as significant predictors ($p < 0.01$). The R^2 value of this model was found to be .122 indicating a 12.2% predictive percentage with the given variables.

From both the regression analyses as dimensions of Emotional Intelligence and Quality of Relationships to an extent predicted Suicidal Ideation in adolescents, **Hypothesis 4** was partially accepted.

From the above analyses it becomes clear that higher levels of Emotional Intelligence are related with lesser Levels of Suicidal Ideation. These results are relevant to the current cultural context as it now becomes essential for teachers, caregivers and parents to inculcate and develop Emotional Intelligence in their wards' lives. It was also observed that in relationships between parents and adolescents, higher levels of Support and Depth were related with Suicidal Ideation. As higher scores on this scale indicate lower levels of Suicidal Ideation, Higher levels of parental support and better depth in relationships with parents can potentially reduce Suicidal Ideation in adolescents. While Social Isolation is usually a major predictive factor for Suicide and/ or Suicidal Ideation, the findings suggested otherwise. One reason that could be responsible is the fact that India, like most collectivistic cultures emphasizes a group's

needs over individualistic ones and interconnectedness between people within groups and even outside it, play a major role in curbing the sense of Isolation.

IMPLICATIONS

- This study will enormously benefit those involved in the field of Suicide research as well as prevention.
- This study can help parents, policy makers, teachers and administrators understand the necessity of better social and parental support.
- The study also falls in line with Joiner's theory where the theory speaks of Social Isolation caused by certain factors. This becomes critical as teachers can now be observant of students who have been isolated.
- Emotional Intelligence can be fostered through better training programmes or initiatives to make children and adolescents mentally competent to handle emotions during difficult times.

CONCLUSION

The study sought out to understand the relationships between Emotional Intelligence, Social Isolation and Quality of Interpersonal Relationships between parents and adolescents with Suicidal Ideation and also the Influence the Predictors had on Suicidal Ideation. The study showed that higher scores or levels of Emotional Intelligence and Parental support within relationships were indicative of higher Reasons for Living or lesser Suicidal Ideation. The additional findings also highlight how important the aspect of emotional intelligence is necessary for the functional of even day-to-day familial relationships. This research will hopefully provide perspective to educational institutions, policy makers and parents, on how to proceed with safeguarding their wards safe from the threat of Suicide.

LIMITATIONS/ SUGGESTIONS

- The study being Ex-post factor in nature could not effectively establish cause and effect relationships despite using multivariate statistics and multiple regression methods. Other statistical methods could throw more light on interpreting the data.
- A non-random sampling technique, convenience sampling was used due to practical difficulties. Other sampling techniques taking into account more demographic data and a larger sample size can be used.
- Gender differences were not taken into account for this research. Future research can look into this aspect as well and provide gender-specific perspectives and directions that could also be culture-specific as well.
- Schools and other educational institutions can inculcate Emotional Intelligence as a part of their curriculum and provide training on effectively utilizing emotions.
- The promotion of safe spaces in schools with the involvement of parents and teachers can also give adolescents respite from academic stresses and other issues that they may be facing.
- Involving parents in school related activities and keeping them apprised of their wards' behaviour as well as promoting better home environments and relationships can also reduce the risk of Suicide.

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