

# Suicidal ideation, parenting style, and family climate among Hong Kong adolescents

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The prevalence of suicidal ideation and its relations with perceived parenting treatment and family climate was examined in 120 Hong Kong students aged 15–19 years. Fifty-two per cent of the participants reported suicide ideation. Suicide ideation was found to be significantly associated with perceived authoritarian parenting, low parental warmth, high maternal over-control, negative child-rearing practices, and a negative family climate. A positive family climate may act as a buffer against developing suicide ideation in adolescents.

La fréquence des pensées suicidaires et ses relations avec le climat familial et la perception du style sont étudiées chez 120 étudiants de Hong Kong, âgés de 15 à 19 ans. Cinquante-deux pour cent des participants rapportent avoir des idées suicidaires. De telles idées sont associées significativement avec la perception d'un style parental autoritaire, un niveau bas de chaleur parentale, une surprotection maternelle élevée, des pratiques négatives d'éducation des enfants et un climat familial négatif. Un climat familial positif pourrait servir de défense contre le développement des idées suicidaires chez les adolescents.

Suicide ideators are defined as those who consider ending their lives but have not yet fully implemented a suicide plan or performed any potentially lethal act. Suicide ideation may serve as an indicator of suicidal behaviour (e.g., Wetzel, 1975). Moreover, the intensity, pervasiveness, and current suicide intention predict later suicidal risk, and such suicide ideation reflects the degree to which the individual is susceptible to suicidal behaviour (A. Beck, Kovacs, & Weissman, 1979). Thus, suicide ideation can be a predictor of suicide acts (A. Beck et al., 1979; Bonner & Rich, 1987; Shaffer, Garland, Gough, Fisher, & Trautman, 1988).

The many factors involved in suicide behaviour and ideation in adolescents include depression, poor self-esteem, hopelessness, suicide of family members or peers, poor school performance, and family problems (T. Beck, Resnik, & Lettieri, 1974; Fong, 1993; Hawton, 1942; Patros, 1989; Wilde, 1963). Among these factors, family problems are consistently reported as characteristic of youth suicide in the West (Hendin, 1987). Because suicide ideation precedes suicide behaviour (Wetzel, 1975), these factors also correspond to suicide ideation.

The present study focused on perceived family problems in relation to suicide ideation in a non-Western sample, Chinese adolescents in Hong Kong. Chinese parenting has been characterized as relatively controlling and even hostile in some studies (for a review, see Chao, 1994), although different Chinese societies do not necessarily endorse the same parenting styles. For example, in one retrospective study (Berndt, Cheung, Lau, Hau, & Lew, 1993), Hong Kong parents were characterized as particularly lacking in

warmth relative to their Mainland Chinese and Taiwanese counterparts. In the present study, we tested the hypothesis that adolescent suicide ideation in Hong Kong is associated both with perceptions of parenting styles and practices (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Parents' child-rearing styles play an important role in the growth, personality development, and behaviour of children (Jessor & Jessor, 1974; Maccoby & Martin, 1983; Niemi, 1988). Two well-known parenting typologies identified by Baumrind are authoritarianism and authoritative. Authoritarian parents emphasize control, maturity, obedience, and conformity in their children, but they are characterized as low in nurturance and having little democratic communication with their children relative to authoritative parents. Authoritative parents tend to behave with high nurturance, have high maturity demands, and have more democratic communication with their children. They also emphasize the autonomy and self-direction of their children in responding to their individual needs.

These parenting styles tend to be associated differently with psychosocial variables. Authoritative parenting has been consistently associated with adolescents who are relatively high in self-esteem and independence (Lamborn, Mounts, Steinberg, & Dornbusch, 1991; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989). In contrast, authoritarian parenting is associated with lower self-esteem and less skilful peer interactions but higher obedience. Although some have argued that an authoritarian parenting style may have a more positive connotation of parental care in Chinese cultures than it does in Western cultures (e.g., Chao, 1994), Chen, Dong, and Zhou (1997) have shown that authoritarian parenting

is associated with negative social outcomes in Mainland Chinese children. They argue that authoritarian parenting, even in a Chinese context, reflects negative, power-assertive control.

In the present study, we examined suicide ideation in relation to several measures of perceived parenting, including authoritative and authoritarian parenting styles, as well as parental care, over-control, conflict, and warmth, because all of these features have been described as elements of Baumrind's (1971) observed parenting style typologies (Darling & Steinberg, 1993; Maccoby & Martin, 1983). Several of these characteristics of parenting have been associated with adolescent depression and suicide ideation in the West. For example, adolescents with suicide ideation perceive their parents' child-rearing regimes as controlling and lacking in warmth (de Man, Labreche, & Leduc, 1993). Excessive parental control as perceived by adolescents may result in low self-esteem and a low internal locus of control as well as high levels of stress, depression, and anomie. These variables are in turn associated with suicide ideation (de Man, 1987–1988). Lower parent care is also associated with suicidal thoughts (Martin & Waite, 1994; Peck, 1983). For example, de Jong (1992) showed that students with a history of suicidality exhibited the lowest security of attachment, the least degree of individuation in their current relationships with parents, and a significantly higher degree of emotional absence during childhood from their parents as compared to those without a history of suicidality. Perceived lack of parental closeness and support has been found to have positive associations with depression and suicidal behaviour as well (Maris, 1981; Sands & Dixon, 1986). Indeed, in one study, family problems, including poor communication and parental conflict, were found to be the major factors leading to suicide ideation in high-school students (Grob, Klein, & Eisen, 1983).

In Hong Kong, the connection between perceptions of parents' styles of parenting and adolescent depression and suicide ideation is similar to that of the West. Chen (1994) noted that family conditions and factors are significantly associated with adolescent mental health and interpersonal relationships, which, in turn, affect vulnerability to suicide. Those factors include relations with parents, conflict with parents, family happiness, parent performance, control of parents, and concern for parents. For example, Fong (1993) examined the causes of suicidal ideation or suicide attempts among students. Three hundred and sixteen Form 1 and Form 2 students (equivalent to American grades 7 and 8) in Hong Kong were participants. Of these, 3.8% had attempted suicide before and 41.8% had reported suicide ideation. The study found that lack of parental care and understanding, a non-harmonious family, and conflicts with parents were all related to suicidal ideation in Hong Kong adolescents.

Lau (1994) examined fatal suicides among children and adolescents from 1992–1994 and showed that in 60% of the cases, there were prolonged family difficulties. Furthermore, emotional bonding and communication

with parents were inadequate. The absence of adequate parental support and communication led adolescents to have difficulty coping with their immediate problems as they considered themselves hopeless, worthless, and helpless. Chung, Luk, and Mak (1987), who examined 67 attempted suicide patients below age 16 years, also found that a poor relationship between parents and children appeared to be an important cause of attempted suicide. Thus, family and parenting style are associated with suicidal behaviour and ideation in Hong Kong, as in Western countries. The present study was designed to examine the prevalence of suicidal ideation among Hong Kong adolescents and its relationship with family and parenting style.

Adolescents' perceptions of their parents' parenting styles, parental caring, parental over-control, parent performance in child-rearing practice, and family climate of warmth and conflict were examined in relation to suicide ideation in the present study. Both parenting style and parenting practices were measured in the study because the method parents use to parent their children may differ from their attitudes about parenting, which in turn may result in different psychological attributes and behaviours of the children. According to Darling and Steinberg's (1993) model of parenting style in context, parenting practices affect adolescents' behaviours and attitudes directly, while parenting styles may affect their adolescents' openness to being socialized, which, in turn, affects adolescent outcomes. As a result, the development of psychological and behavioural characteristics may be due both to the practices parents use to attain specific outcomes and the effectiveness of their styles in influencing the child. Thus, predictions about behavioural and psychological development of children must take account of both style and practices (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Maternal and paternal parenting styles and practices were investigated separately as they serve different roles in the family (Wilson, 1974) that may have different impacts and relations to children's development (Lewis, 1986). We hypothesized that paternal styles would be perceived as less warm and more controlling than those of mothers in the Chinese family (Ho, 1987).

We also anticipated that adolescents' suicidal ideation would be positively related to perceptions of parental over-control, or negative control, as characterized by Lin and Fu (1990), and negatively associated with perceptions of parental warmth. Thus, we hypothesized that suicide ideators would be more likely to view their parents as high in authoritarian parenting, low in authoritative parenting, low in parental care, high in parental over-control, ineffective in parental child-rearing practices, and fostering a negative family climate (with less warmth and more conflict). We hypothesized that authoritarian parenting would be positively associated with suicide ideation because our measure of this style tends to emphasize the "negative" control element of parenting (e.g., Chen et al., 1997) characteristic of suicide ideation in some studies (e.g., de Man, 1987–1988), whereas authoritative parenting tends to be

associated with “positive” control (Lin & Fau, 1990) and warmth. However, it should be noted at the outset that this study could not distinguish causal relations among parenting perceptions and adolescents’ suicide ideation.

## METHOD

### Participants

One hundred and twenty secondary-school students (45 males, 75 females) aged 15–19 years in Forms 3–7 participated ( $M = 16.1$ ,  $SD = 1.6$ ). Adolescents aged 15–19 years were selected because the suicide or attempted suicide rate is much greater for them as compared with those below age 14 (Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong, 1995).

### Procedure

Once parental and student permission were obtained, students were asked to complete a variety of questionnaires, including the Scale of Suicide Ideation (A. Beck et al., 1979), during a single class period at school. Students were debriefed following the questionnaire administration, and were given the opportunity to ask questions and talk about their feelings with the questionnaire administrators if desired. Students were also reminded of a 24-hour hotline service available to anyone feeling depressed or suicidal.

### Measures

Where applicable, questionnaires were translated into Chinese and back-translated into English to ensure accuracy. The following questionnaires were administered (all in Chinese):

#### *Suicide ideation*

The Scale of Suicide Ideation (SSI; A. Beck et al., 1979) was used to assess the severity or intensity of suicidal ideation among adolescents. In the present study, the SSI was modified into a self-report form following Schotte and Clum (1982). Following previous research (A. Beck et al., 1979), suicide ideators were defined as those with a score of 1 or more on the SSI. Across all participants, the mean on this scale was 4.56 with a standard deviation of 6.26.

#### *Parenting style*

The Parental Authority Questionnaire (PAQ; Buri, 1991) was used to measure Baumrind’s (1971) authoritarian and authoritative parenting styles. The questionnaire consists of 10 authoritarian and 10 authoritative items presented in a 5-point Likert scale ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. Scores on each style can range from 10 to 50. The higher the score, the greater the level of the measured parenting style.

#### *Parental bonding*

The Parental Bonding Instrument (PBI; Parker, Tupling, & Brown, 1979) was used to assess adolescents’ relationships with parents during the first 16 years of life. This is a 25-item self-report measure assessing two dimensions, care and over-control. The care scale measures dimensions of care versus rejection whereas the over-control scale measures dimensions of control versus encouragement of independence. A Likert-type scale from 0 to 3 was used for each item. The score for the care scale ranged from 0 to 36 and that of over-control ranged from 0 to 39.

#### *Parenting practice*

A questionnaire measuring performance of child-rearing practice (Chen, 1994) was used to assess parents’ performance as perceived by adolescents. In this instrument, 12 questions are included with 6 concepts: concern and support, communication, love, trust, independence, and discipline. Questions are presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The scores range from 12 to 60.

#### *Family climate*

The Family Climate Questionnaire (Kurdek & Fine, 1993) was used to assess the family climate. This questionnaire consists of 20 statements with 5 items each for warmth, supervision, conflict, and order in the family to be rated on a 7-point Likert-type scale. Only the subscales of warmth and conflict were used in the present study.

## RESULTS

In this subject sample, the score of the Suicide Ideation Scale ranged from 0 to 22. Fifty-eight participants were considered as non-suicide ideators (scoring 0 on the scale) and 62 were categorized as suicide ideators (scoring 1 or above on the scale). There were 24 (53.0%) male suicide ideators and 38 (50.7%) female suicide ideators, and the ages of these groups did not differ. Finally, there was no significant sex difference in the degree of suicide ideation reported for males and females.

Table 1 shows means, standard deviations, ranges, and internal consistency reliabilities obtained for all measures in the present study. All subscales were above .70, indicating adequate reliability.

### **Differences in maternal and parental style in Hong Kong**

Paired *t*-tests were used to examine whether there were differences in subjects’ perceptions of parenting styles of fathers and mothers. Perceived parenting styles of authoritativeness, care, and overprotection were significantly different for mothers and fathers. Table 2 shows that fathers were perceived to be lower in care, less over-controlling,

**TABLE 1**  
Means, standard deviations, and reliabilities of scales

	N	Mean	SD	Reliability
SSI	120	4.56	6.26	.92
<i>Authoritarian</i>				
Mother	120	28.80	5.71	.73
Father	120	28.28	5.78	.77
<i>Authoritative</i>				
Mother	120	32.56	5.19	.79
Father	120	31.21	5.52	.80
<i>Care</i>				
Mother	120	21.45	5.75	.86
Father	120	18.86	6.76	.90
<i>Overprotection</i>				
Mother	120	14.23	5.42	.77
Father	120	12.67	5.29	.76
<i>Performance of child-rearing practice</i>				
	120	44.48	4.83	.75
<i>Family climate</i>				
Conflict	120	14.14	6.66	.86
Warmth	120	5.24	24.43	.85

**TABLE 2**  
Mean scores for the parental and maternal treatment styles of total sample

Variable	Mother	Father	t(119)
Authoritarian	28.80	28.28	1.24
Authoritative	32.56	31.21	2.94*
Care	21.45	18.86	-4.25*
Overcontrol	14.23	12.67	-2.95*

\*  $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 3**  
Suicide ideator and parenting style: Subscale means (SD in parens)

Parenting style	Suicide ideator	Non-suicide ideator	t(118)
<i>Authoritarian</i>			
Mother	30.11 (5.53)	27.40 (5.60)	2.67*
Father	30.11 (5.89)	26.31 (5.00)	3.80*
<i>Authoritative</i>			
Mother	32.06 (5.54)	33.09 (4.78)	-1.08
Father	30.61 (5.63)	31.84 (5.38)	-1.22
<i>Care</i>			
Mother	19.92 (5.89)	23.09 (5.15)	-3.13*
Father	17.19 (6.54)	20.64 (6.60)	-2.87*
<i>Overcontrol</i>			
Mother	15.79 (5.65)	12.57 (4.65)	3.40*
Father	13.29 (5.30)	12.00 (5.24)	1.34
<i>Performance of child-rearing practice</i>			
	43.29 (4.48)	45.74 (4.92)	-2.86*

\*  $p < .05$ .

and lower in their authoritative parenting style than mothers. Similar patterns in parenting style were found for the suicide ideators and nonideators separately.

### Suicide ideation and parenting style

Table 3 presents mean scores for parenting variables separately for suicide ideators and non-suicide ideators. The mean scores for suicide ideators on mother authoritarian, father authoritarian, and mother over-control were significantly higher than those of non-suicide ideators, whereas the mean scores for suicide ideators on mother care, father care, and performance of child-rearing practice were significantly lower than those of non-suicide ideators. There were no significant differences on mother authoritative-ness, father authoritative-ness, or father over-control between suicide ideators and non-suicide ideators. Finally, *t*-tests ( $df = 118$ ) comparing suicide ideators with non-ideators on conflict ( $t = 3.13$ ) and warmth ( $t = 3.72$ ) from the Family Climate scale were significant. Suicide ideators perceived more conflict ( $M = 15.92$ ;  $SD = 6.77$ ) and less warmth ( $M = 22.79$ ;  $SD = 5.63$ ) in the family, relative to non-suicide ideators ( $M = 12.24$ ;  $SD = 6.04$ , conflict;  $M = 26.17$ ;  $SD = 4.17$ , warmth).

### DISCUSSION

The present study found a relatively high proportion of adolescents who expressed suicide ideation in this Hong Kong sample. Both suicide ideators and non-ideators also tended to perceive fathers as stricter than mothers. Finally, suicide ideation was found to be associated with authoritarian parenting styles, less parental warmth, higher maternal overprotectiveness, more negative child-rearing practices, and more negative family climate. These findings are discussed next.

The high proportion (52%) of subjects considered as suicide ideators was somewhat higher than previous findings that approximately 42% (Fong, 1993) of Hong Kong adolescents reported some suicide ideation. The students included in the present study (Forms 3–7) were older than Fong's sample (Forms 1–2), however. Given previous reports (Samaritan Befrienders Hong Kong, 1995) that older adolescents tend to report suicide ideation more than younger adolescents, the reported rate of suicide ideation in our sample is probably fairly accurate. The classes we sampled had proportionately more females than males, however. It is possible that the uneven sex ratio had some effect on overall suicide ideation reports. However, there were no overall sex differences in severity of suicide ideation, and approximately equal proportions of both males and females reported some suicide ideation. Future studies should seek to replicate this proportion of suicide ideation across males and females.

Across participants, fathers tended to be perceived as lower in care, less over-controlling, and less authoritative than mothers. With the exception of the perception that fathers are less over-controlling than mothers, the results

were consistent with previous findings that paternal parenting style ratings tend to be negative relative to those of maternal parenting style in Chinese families (Shek, 1995). Fathers tend to be perceived as more strict and disciplining and more concerned with the demands of propriety and necessity than with feelings, while mothers tend to be viewed as more kind, warm, affectionate, and lenient (Ho, 1987; Shek, 1995).

The over-controlling factor of the PBI is defined as perception of the parent as controlling, intrusive, and interfering with the autonomy of the child (Adam, Keller, West, Larose, & Goszer, 1994). The perception of mothers as higher in over-control may be because Chinese mothers in Hong Kong are more concerned than fathers with regulating the everyday events of their children, while fathers have less contact with the children because of their long working hours (Yau & Smetana, 1996). Thus, mothers may be perceived to be more over-controlling by their children because they may be viewed as more interfering with the autonomy of the child. In addition, as the role of father has traditionally been of a more restrictive parent (Ho, 1987), adolescents may have been habituated to the over-control or restrictive style of fathers, which might then have less effect on the development of adolescents.

Overall, the results of the present study were consistent with previous studies that perceptions of negative parenting styles and practices are associated with adolescent suicide ideation (e.g., Martin & Waite, 1994; Peck, 1983). Suicide ideation was related to ratings of higher parental authoritarianism, higher mother over-control, lower parental care, and poorer child-rearing practices, similar to results found in previous studies (de Man, 1987–1988; Lamborn et al., 1991). Among Chinese, as among Westerners, authoritarian parents can be characterized as high in “negative” control (Lin & Fu, 1990) and obedience of the child. They tend to use power-assertive, prohibitive, and punitive strategies on their children and they are relatively low in care and have little communication with the children (Chen et al., 1997). Prohibition and power assertion have been found to be related to fear, anxiety, and frustration in children, leading them to have low self-esteem and negative attitudes towards the world (Coopersmith, 1967; Lempers, Clark-Lempers, & Simon, 1989; Weiss, Dodge, Bates, & Pettit, 1992). Some negative attitudes and low self-esteem may contribute to the development of adjustment problems and antisocial and impulsive behaviour, such as suicide ideation (Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Eisenberg & Murphy, 1995; Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, & Burt, 1992; Lamborn et al., 1991). Over-control tends to interfere with the autonomy of the child. The failure to achieve psychological and social autonomy among adolescents has been linked to suicidal behaviour in previous studies (Asch, 1980; Masterson, 1980, 1983). Interestingly, perceptions of authoritative parenting were not associated with suicide ideation, however, perhaps because the authoritative scale is not sensitive enough to autonomy-granting and reasonable control.

The present study found that suicide ideation was related to lower parental care, consistent with previous

findings that lack of parental warmth and support were related to a wide range of psychological problems such as lack of self-esteem, depression, and also suicidal behaviour (Dukes & Lorch, 1989; Maris, 1981; Sands & Dixon, 1986). According to Rohner (1975), indifferent parents generally provide limited social support and ignore their children’s bids for attention and comfort; they also show limited concern for their welfare. Suicidal children have been found to suffer from social neglect (Peck, 1983), and social isolation (Martin & Dixon, 1986), and to experience a dissolution of close and meaningful relationships (Curran, 1986). Indifferent parents cannot provide a close and meaningful relationship with their children.

Parenting practices were also found to be associated with suicide ideation. Suicide ideators tended to perceive their parents as more negative in their parenting behaviours than non-ideators. This finding is consistent with the idea that both styles and specific practices may be associated with adolescent psychosocial outcomes (Darling & Steinberg, 1993).

Finally, higher levels of conflict and lower levels of warmth in the family were related to suicide ideation, consistent with previous findings (e.g., Williams & Lyon, 1976; Hepworth, Farley, & Griffiths, 1988). In homes with high emotional instability, adolescents are unable to develop the coping skills to manage their difficult environment and interpersonal skills in the development of successful friendships. In addition to the lack of family support and help, children of such families feel despair and hopelessness (Maris, 1981). They might consider suicide as a way of escaping from unavoidable family problems (Campbell, Milling, Laughlin, & Bush, 1993). Conflict in families thus may contribute to the development of suicide ideation.

The present study had some limitations. First, the distribution of females relative to males was uneven in the present sample. Future studies should strive to get a more even number of males and females. In addition, there may be differences in suicide ideation among students of different school bandings (academic levels) and in those who remain in school relative to those who drop out. Such differences should be examined in future research. Most importantly, future studies should include ratings of parenting style and practice from parents, siblings, and other family members in addition to those from students themselves. Past research (e.g., Yau & Smetana, 1996) has indicated that Hong Kong adolescents and their parents differ in perceptions of parenting style.

It should be pointed out that this study examined correlations of perceived parenting styles and practices with suicide ideation. Thus, the direction of causality between perceived parenting ratings and suicide ideation is unclear. It may be that parents who are relatively harsh foster thoughts of suicide in their adolescents. It is also likely that adolescents who are suicide ideators, because of their unhappiness, tend to perceive their parents more negatively than do non-suicide ideators. There may also be a bidirectional interaction across adolescents and parents, in which a negative family climate arises because of unhappiness on the part of both children and parents. Future work

should attempt to examine the directional relations of perceptions of parents and suicide ideation.

Nevertheless, despite the differences in culture (Western and Chinese), different parental treatment (style or practices), and methodology (clinical interview, self-report, ratings by parents) previous studies have used, the findings are consistent that negative parental treatment and family climate are correlated with adolescent suicide ideation. It may be that family warmth and parental care tend to act as buffers against social deviance such as suicide and suicide ideation (Zhang & Jin, 1996).

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