Engaging Communities to Reduce Stigma of Suicide in Three Diverse Ethnic Groups in California

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Overview

Rationale:

- Suicide is a **leading cause of death** among African American and Latino youth/young adults

- All three ethnic groups (African-American, Latino, and Lao) *underutilize* mental health treatment for suicide.

Overview

Purpose:

1) Describe **culture-specific** forms of stigma of suicide among three ethnic groups in California

2) Apply an **open-ended interview** guide to enhance community engagement

3) Identify **culturally-indigenous forms** of stigma of suicide to address suicide

Our Four Statewide Partners

Study Methods

For each ethnic group:

- **Focus group** of 5-10 'key informants' were sampled (3 groups total)
  - e.g., community elders or mental health staff
- **Individual interviews**
  - 12 participants + 12 friends/family members from each ethnic community. [24 interviews per community; 72 interviews total]

- Interviews: stigma + cultural acceptability of suicide

- Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed, and coded

  by 5 MA-level RA's using a "grounded theory" open coding framework
  and supervised by Lawrence Yang

Semi-Structured interview

- Do you think suicide is becoming a *significant problem* in the community?

- Who do you think is most **at-risk** for suicide?
  - Are there certain kinds of people that die by suicide more often than others?
  - What leads people to contemplate suicide?

- **Are there any circumstances that it is considered acceptable for people to commit suicide?**
  - How, if at all, are mental health challenges related to suicide?

Semi-Structured interview

- **How are those who attempt suicide, but do not complete it, treated by others? Sympathy? Exclusion?**
  - How should we approach the problem of suicide?

- If you worried about a person thinking of killing him or herself what type of help, if any, would you get for that person?

- To what extent has a suicide prevention program been implemented in your community?

- What would an *effective* suicide prevention program in your community look like?

COMMUNITY

OBSERVATION

Learning from lived experience of cultural experts

African American Cultural Barriers and Stigma

- Religion--Unacceptability of Suicide as a Sin

 "But there's another small piece going back to the church, that there's this belief, conditioning…if you commit suicide, you're going to hell. So we go to church, so we ain't gonna do that."

- Perceived Dangerousness to Others

 *"**Cause if they didn't succeed with themselves, they might wanna kill someone else and release the anger** that they couldn't do it to themselves. Or they may do themselves, try and do themselves again. I just think it's a scary situation either way. I would steer clear of them."*

- Losing Support Systems

 *"If that person was friends with him [person who had attempted suicide], then maybe they would stop being friends with him. Stop talking to him…They [people who attempt suicide] get **looked at as less than [others]**, you know. Like because I tried to take my life then **I'm not good enough**. So that's why I had to work twice as hard…So I feel punished."*

African American
Cultural Expressions of Suicide

- ## "Slow Suicide"

  - Rather than conceptualizing suicide as a single act

  the concept of *killing oneself* by participating in high-risk activities

    - By cop, through unprotected sex, through drug use and selling drugs, through prostitution, and through gang life

  Cycles of **high-risk decisions**, **hopelessness**, and **systematic injustices**

    - *"We need to expand the terms. There's something called "slow suicide" that a lot of us engage in…People don't articulate that "I kill myself," but they're acting with that possibility by being engaged in things they engage in. Black people are just not killing themselves in large numbers deliberately in the way Don [other focus group participant] said, but we've had a whole lot of young men engaging in this 'slow suicide.'"*

Lao
Cultural Barriers and Stigma

- ## Elders teach youths to keep their problems to themselves:

  "Our elder will teach our children to keep problems to themselves rather than talk it out, rather than resolve other issues."

- ## Suicide violates religious teachings:

  "In Buddhism there is also the teaching that if you take your own life you will come back again and again (550 times). If temple teaches this it might prevent youth from suicide- thinking they will come back again and again…"

- ## Fear to reach for outside resources:

  "We like to create peace and harmony amongst our community members and the other issue is that we like to be isolated and we don't tend to engage in civic activities…this is why local policy makers don't recognize the community…When we tend to live in isolation it is harder to get our issue across to mainstream community. That means we don't get our services that we deserve as taxpayers, so this is different being in Lao community."

Lao
Cultural Expression of Suicide

- Mental illness is believed to be caused by spirits:
  - *"There is also a strong belief in Lao that their spirit might contribute **so people might see images in their head that comes in a form of spirit**."*

- Those that commit suicide are denied burial rites:
  - *"After you die... Over here (in the U.S.), **for people who commit suicide we just bury them without any ceremony**"*

- Community members refuse to acknowledge the death as a result of suicide:
  - *"They'll [the community will] **just treat it as if a normal death**...They just wonder why he did it or why she... It's treated no differently than a regular death."*

Latino
Cultural Barriers and Stigma

- **Negative community attitudes** toward suicide tied to religion and family
  - ○ ”They (Latino families) think they (those who commit suicide) are selfish and not considering about the suffering they have caused to the family.

  - ○ Hispanic people, like in our culture… we think [suicide] is like a big sin and you're gonna go to hell. I've seen so much, like my family spent so much time trying not to live in sin and [suicide is] like the ultimate sin”

- **Intergenerational conflict**: perception of weakness
  - ○ "Latinos you know they struggle so much. My dad is like, "What the hell does she have to be sad about? She has a roof over her head, she has food in her stomach clothes on her back. That is more than we had coming from Cuba."

  - ○ "…So it's a real invalidation of depression and sad feelings…so say I'm depressed, I'm on my way to being suicidal and the whole time I'm hearing, "Your feelings aren't valid. You're a silly girl. You need to just shake it off. Stop being so timida you know, and get out there." And then it's not until [*smacking sound with hand*] a crisis hits and then it's like oh god."

Latino
Cultural Expression of Suicide

- Strict expectations of gender roles lead to social exclusion and directly impacts *self-esteem*
  - *"A lot of suicides come from self-esteem problems. So, embracing who you are first...really 95% of people who have taken their own lives [the reason] comes from within their family, especially in the Hispanic culture. For example, two gay friends of mine took their lives because of that. That's another strong part of Mexican culture – we don't accept gay people. For example, if I was to be gay, I know exactly what my dad would say to me: "f--- you echa... joto*." So what I'm saying is that bullying starts within the family, especially in the Hispanic culture, where we are raised up to be these macho men... we don't cry, we go work...It's self-worth, self-esteem."*

- Colloquial expressions were used by Latino men to express hopelessness and depression
  - Latino focus group member: *"I had a client who said that, the [suicidal] guy said, [Spanish], "I wanna fly with the birds". And I'm like, what do you mean? "You know, I just wanna kill myself."*

Recommendations

Overview: Consider the ways that

- *racism*
- *historical trauma*
- *structural inequality*

shape the experience of **personal and social distress** and **stigma**

Includes **Language barriers**

Recommendations

African American

- Be aware of the concept of "*Slow suicide*"

- Bring together churches and faith-based institutions with community-based organizations

- Target interventions at the community level to improve economic and structural opportunities (i.e., safe parks to play in)

Recommendations

Lao

- Open community dialogues to address and to "legitimize" suicide to break community silence

- Work with cultural strengths—e.g. the value of "*generosity*" to support cohesiveness and social wellbeing— to initiate these dialogues

- Interventions should take place through established institutions in the community (i.e., temples, community center and cultural workshops/events)

Recommendations

Latino

- Mistrust/ A belief that psychiatric services do harm and prevent reconnection with families.

- The family is a key opportunity for intervention.

- Interventions should specifically target intergenerational conflict among parents and their children who grow up in the U.S.
  - Promote willingness to discuss emotional issues in the family.

- The vast network of churches and faith-based organizations partner with existing community organizations

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Partners

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Questions?