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Preventing help-negation for suicidal ideation: Implications for thwarted belongingness, social network size and frequency of social interaction

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Abstract

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Help-negation is seen when the severity of an individual's suicidal ideation increases and they become less likely to seek help as a result of their condition. Research has implicated distorted affect regulation and perceptual processes related to social support in the development of help-negation among suicidal individuals (Wilson et al., 2013). Future research needs to focus on psycho-social factors that can be linked to neurological processes that differentiate suicidal individuals from controls and are directly implicated in the help-negation processes associated with suicidal ideation. As suicidal individuals have interpersonal needs rejected they may cease to seek or accept help. The Interpersonal theory of suicide proposes that in people who think about suicide, the need to belong is not being met (Joiner, 2005). This state is referred to as Thwarted Belongingness (TB). TB is a construct which is theorised to reflect both self-report perceptions of not belonging and reductions in objective social variables such as social networks size and frequency of social interaction. Observable indicators of TB include characteristically smaller social networks and less frequent interaction with network members compared to controls (Veiel et al., 1988, Steinhausen et al., 2006). Biased information processing facilitated by suicide schemas coupled with an inability to assign accurate value to the social environment may influence whether self-report TB corresponds with reductions in objective social variables. This paper presents results of a structured literature review that examined the degree to which TB has been implicated in help-negation following suicidal ideation. The review found that social network size and frequency of social interaction have received relatively little focus in suicide research. No published studies had investigated whether network size and interaction rates are observable indicators of TB. Implications for prevention and directions for current research are discussed.

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Background

Help-negation is the processes of withdrawal that occurs for many individuals **as suicidal ideation becomes more intense** [1].

Perception of social support and distorted affect regulation are associated with the development of suicidal ideation, and implicated in the development of help-negation [2].

As suicidal individuals have interpersonal needs rejected they may cease to seek or accept help [3].

The **Interpersonal Theory of Suicide (IPTS)** [4,5] proposes that suicidal ideation is, in part, caused by **Thwarted Belongingness (TB),** a construct which is theorised to reflects both:

- Self-report perceptions of not belonging, *and*
- Reductions in objective social variables such as social networks size and frequency of social interaction.

Reduced social network size and frequency of social interaction has been found to differentiate suicidal individuals from controls [6,7].

Biased information processing facilitated by suicide schemas [8] and an inability to assign accurate value to the social environment [9] may influence whether self-report TB corresponds with reductions in objective social variables

Research Questions

1. Has previous research implicated TB in help-negation following suicidal ideation?

2. Has previous research investigated the relationship between self-report TB and objective social variables such as reduced social networks size and frequency of social interaction?

3. Is this relationship effected by changes in the severity of suicidal ideation?

Help-negation (Suicidal ideation)

Self report TB x Reduced social networks size and frequency of social interaction

TB

Figure 1 : Proposed relationship between TB, intensity of suicidal ideation and help-seeking for suicidal thoughts. **Hypothesis: Self-report TB, reduced social network size and frequency of interaction will *strengthen* the help-negation relationship for suicidal thoughts**

Method

Guided by the PRISMA statement [10], a systematic review of 4 electronic databases was conducted from January to February 2013. Data bases were: Cochrane Library, MEDLINE with FullText, PsycINFO and PubMed Central.

Search terms used in the review were:

"interpersonal theory of suicide", "perceived AND belongingness", and "belongingness AND suicid*".

Records were exluded during screening if they did not discuss the IPTS or TB.

Articles were included in the review if they assessed the relationship between TB, suicidal ideation or behaviour, and help-seeking or objective social variables.

Records identified n=585

Records identified outside the formal search n=19

Records after duplicates removed n=454

Records screened based on title and abstract text n=454

Records excluded n=322

Full text articles assessed for eligibility n=132

Full text articles excluded:
- *Not available electronically* n=9
- *Review articles* n=20
- *Did not measure TB* n=58
- *Did measure TB but not help-seeking or objective social variables* n=40

Articles included in review n=5

Results

Most studies find a significant association between self-report TB and suicidality. Six studies examined the relationship between self-report TB and objective social variables.

Lower TB has been associated with more hours spent volunteering [11] and club participation [12]. One study found TB to correlate moderately with indicators of social network size and social interaction. However, limitations of this study included small sample size (n=69), using a single score to represent both size and interaction, and restricting nomination of network members to those living within 1 hours travel [13].

Proxy measures of belongingness have been associated with parental displacement [14] and extracurricular activities [15]

The review found no evidence that previous research has assessed whether:
- TB is implicated in help-seeking for suicidal ideation OR
- Objective social variables are related to self-report TB, as the severity of suicidal ideation changes.

The results suggest that objective characteristics of peoples' social networks have received relatively little attention in suicide research.

Implications and future directions

- Assess the relationship between self-report TB and objective social network characteristics among suicidal individuals compared to non-suicidal individuals.

- Investigate psycho-social factors that may be directly implicated in the help-negation processes associated with suicidal ideation.

This will substantiate the IPTS, as well as determine whether resources aim to promote help and support seeking for suicidal thoughts, should be focused on changing subjective feelings of belonging or on mending and building actual interpersonal relationships.

Research to explore these questions is currently underway – depicted in Figure 1

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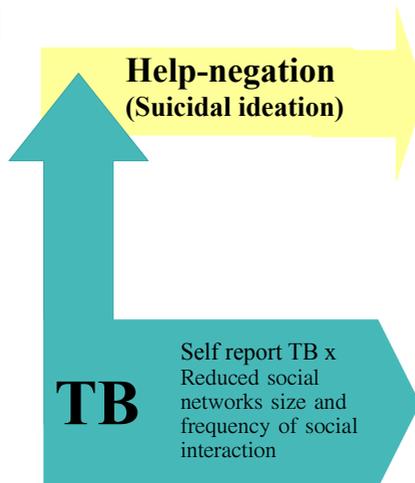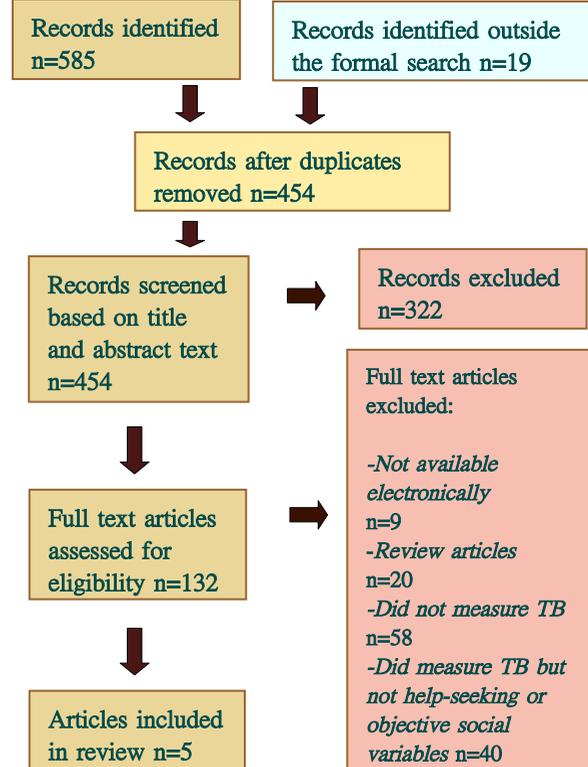
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