

Sacrifice for the Sake of the Family: Expressions of Familism by Latina Teens in the Context of Suicide

Allyson P. Nolle, Lauren Gulbas, Jill A. Kuhlberg, and Luis H. Zayas
Washington University in St. Louis

Familism is a core value promoted by many individuals of Hispanic or Latino descent that emphasizes the primacy of the family over the individual. This study illuminates some aspects of the relationship between familism and adolescent suicidal behavior. Qualitative data from 24 female Hispanic teens with and without a history of suicidal behaviors and their parents were analyzed to understand the ways in which familism is expressed in their lives. Both suicide attempters and nonattempters demonstrate familism by making material or emotional (or both) sacrifices for the sake of their families. However, for those attempters who expressed 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, literally sacrificing themselves for the sake of family. Findings point to the complexity of familism in understanding the risks of suicide attempts among teen Latinas and to the value of mixed methods in studying deeply the cultural factors that influence problem behaviors.

Given that the Hispanic¹ population is the fastest growing sector of American society, it is important that service providers understand the ways in which Hispanic cultural values are expressed and how they impact individuals' and families' functioning. Between 2006 and 2008, the Hispanic population comprised about 15.1% of the total U.S. population. But the U.S. Census Bureau anticipates that people of Hispanic heritage will account for about 29% of all Americans by the year 2050. Because Hispanics are a relatively young group (with a median age of 27.6 compared with 36.6 years for the total population; U.S. Census Bureau, 2009), special focus should be given to the factors that lead young Hispanics to develop into healthy, productive adults. The Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System has indicated that Latino youth have particularly high risk for a number of problems, including suicidal ideation and attempts (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Because some studies (i.e., German, Gonzalez, & Dumka, 2008; Miranda, Estrada, & Firpo-Jimenez, 2000; Smokowski, Rose, & Bacallao, 2009) have posited that familism can be a

protective factor against several other risky behaviors in adolescence, we explore how this cultural value is expressed in the context of suicidal and nonsuicidal adolescent girls. By understanding the impact of cultural values upon the risk behaviors and the development of adolescents of diverse backgrounds, we can better tailor interventions and prevention efforts for these populations.

As large-scale studies and reviews of literature (Surgeon General, 2001; Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, CDC, 2010) have tracked the trend of higher incidence of suicide-related behaviors by Latina teenagers than their male or White or African American counterparts, the phenomenon has warranted further investigation in recent years. Trautman's pioneering study of suicidal behaviors of young Puerto Rican women in 1961 suggested that family relationship problems (particularly conflicts with close family members) had a great impact on the mental health of young Latinas and often preceded (or possibly triggered) suicide attempts. This idea, supported by later studies (Razin et al., 1991), points to the need to further examine how a young Latina's perception of family issues affects her mental health. This study explores whether or not young Latinas who attempt suicide demonstrate the same aspects of familism as their nonsuicidal counterparts. We focus especially upon those girls whose suicidal actions were driven by explicit intent to die in order to better understand how their endorsement of familism may be different from other girls.

The multidimensional value of familism (or *familismo*) is broadly defined as "prioritizing one's family over oneself" (Schwartz, 2007, p. 101), but also includes characteristics like family support, familial honor, loyalty, reciprocity, interdependence, family as referents, and obligation to the family (Lugo

¹The terms *Latino/a* and *Hispanic* are used interchangeably in this article.

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Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Allyson P. Nolle, Center for Latino Family Research, Washington University in St. Louis, Campus Box 1196, One Brookings Drive, St. Louis, MO 63130. Electronic mail may be sent to allysonpnolle@gmail.com.

Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Sabogal, Marin, Otero-Sabogal, Marin, & Perez-Stable, 1987; Schwartz, 2007). Because some investigators identify family support and cohesiveness as the most predominant factor of familism, these are often utilized as a proxy for familism (Hovey & King, 1996; Miranda et al., 2000; Sabogal et al., 1987). The value of familism has also been expressed by non-Hispanic groups, as well as likened to collectivism and filial piety, especially when demonstrated as “sacrificing one’s own needs to meet those of one’s family” (Schwartz, 2007, p. 113). As Fuligni, Tseng, and Lam (1999) point out, when children are socialized within the values of familism, they are “asked to make personal sacrifices by sublimating their wishes and desires for the greater good of the larger family” (p. 1031). This concept of *sacrifice* permeates familism research, and it is also linked with some other Hispanic cultural constructs.

Children of immigrants are often acutely aware of the great sacrifices that their parents have made (i.e., departing from their social support networks in their home countries, enduring long, dangerous journeys to the United States, struggling to learn English, or working long hours), and so they feel a duty to repay their parents by supporting and assisting the family (Fuligni et al., 1999). Because familism is commonly viewed as an important Hispanic value, it follows that as Latin American immigrant families spend more time in the United States, this family centeredness may be slowly eroded by the American emphasis on individualism. Indeed, in studying acculturation processes of families, Marsiglia, Kulis, Parsai, Villar, and García (2009) found that Mexican-heritage families who had been in the United States longer reported lower levels of family cohesion than those who had arrived more recently from their countries of origin. However, studies have shown that even second- and third-generation Latin American youth support familism more strongly than their European American counterparts (Fuligni et al., 1999). Others propose that during periods of quiescence, familism may decline, whereas in periods of crisis, it is revived (Zayas & Palleja, 1988).

There is some debate about whether or not higher levels of family cohesion (i.e., familism) act as risk or protective factors. In a large study of Latinos in the United States, Rivera et al. (2009) found that family cohesion (sometimes used as a proxy for familism; see Hovey & King, 1996; Miranda et al., 2000; Sabogal et al., 1987) was significantly associated with lower levels of individual psychological distress, whereas family conflicts were linked to higher levels of distress. However, disparate levels of familism or different rates of acculturation between parents and their children can cause or aggravate family stress. Familism, if maintained by both generations (parent and adolescent), appears to help families buffer against family conflict and acculturative stress (Miranda et al., 2000). However, if children and parents acculturate at different rates, the structure of the family can be disrupted (Falicov, 1996), and family tension can escalate. It is important to consider the often incongruous ways in which adolescents and their parents view the function of the family and to consider also how youths’ and parents’ behaviors reflect the changing nature of familistic values and expectations across the process of acculturation.

A number of studies have highlighted that familism can mitigate young Hispanics’ high risk for negative behavioral out-

comes (e.g., substance abuse, high school dropout, sexual risk behaviors). For example, Smokowski et al. (2009) call familism a “cultural asset” (p. 20) that helps to curb Hispanic adolescents’ internalizing behaviors and to raise self-esteem. Romero and Ruiz (2007) suggest that familism increases parental monitoring, which may in turn result in fewer opportunities for adolescents to engage in risk behaviors. German et al. (2008) found that for teens who are exposed to deviant peers, having a strong sense of familism may prevent them from engaging in more externalizing behaviors. Other studies determined that a foundation of familism is associated with higher academic achievement (Valenzuela & Dornbusch, 1994), especially for youth with less educated mothers (Esparza & Sanchez, 2008). Gil, Wagner, and Vega (2000) discuss how familism is related inversely to acculturative stress and is a protective factor against alcohol abuse among Latino adolescents. Similarly, familism has been shown to reduce the negative effects of acculturating to U.S. society on the emergence of eating disorders (Bettendorf & Fischer, 2009). Familism, and specifically the construct of subjugation of self for the family (Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003), is reported to be negatively associated with sexual risk behaviors for Latina adolescent girls, although not for boys (Guilamo-Ramos, Bouris, Jaccard, Lesesne, & Ballan, 2009). The fact that subjugation or self-sacrifice was the strongest protective feature of familism reflects a need for more exploration of how Latina girls learn and experience this construct in their lives.

Some research shows that a moderate level of familism is a protector for adolescents, but that the endorsement of very high or very low levels of familism is linked with negative outcomes such as poor academic motivation and performance (Fuligni et al., 1999) or adolescent alcohol use (Marsiglia et al., 2009). Fuligni and his colleagues suggest that adolescents’ perceived duty toward their families often entails an obligation to do well in school. However, in cases where adolescents have an extremely high sense of obligation to the family, familism may actually have a negative effect, particularly when the family is also stressed by illness, financial hardship, or other challenges. The family’s urgent needs take precedence over the adolescent’s academic obligations (Fuligni et al., 1999). In contrast, young Latinos with very low levels of familism seem to lack the motivation to succeed academically in order to fulfill a responsibility to the family. Marsiglia et al. (2009) postulate that adolescent alcohol misuse is more prevalent in Hispanic immigrant families with very high levels of cohesion (which approach enmeshment) and with very low levels of cohesion (bordering on disengagement). Families with moderate levels of cohesion are more balanced and less strained (Marsiglia et al., 2009). Therefore, it stands to reason that families with high levels of familism may impose restrictions on individual autonomy and self-expression among family members. When subjugating the self to the family under conditions of high familism—seen as part of an enmeshing cohesiveness—dysphoric emotions may be turned inward, leading to depression, suicidal ideation, and other internalizing disorders.

This study examines this possible relationship between strong endorsement of familism, self-sacrifice, and suicide-related behaviors. Whereas most of the aforementioned studies have utilized quantitative methods to examine the ways in which familism manifests in the attitudes of Latino youth, few have

used qualitative methods to illustrate the ways in which familism is demonstrated by their behaviors. In this report, we examine qualitatively how behavioral familism (specifically, the idea of sacrificing one's needs for those of the family) appears in the daily lives of Latina teens with and without a history of suicide attempts and their parents.

Method

Overview of Study

The data were drawn from a larger study that examined suicide attempts among adolescent Latinas in New York City between July 2005 and July 2009. One goal of the study was to examine familial, developmental, and sociocultural experiences that distinguish adolescent girls who attempt suicide from girls who do not engage in suicidal behavior, following a conceptual model that suggests that "a girl's perception of causing a breach in family integrity may be a precondition for her suicide attempt" (Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005, p. 279). As a multi-informant, mixed method study, we conducted in-depth interviews and administered multi-measure questionnaires with all research participants, including Latina adolescents who attempted suicide and their parents, in addition to a similar group of adolescents with no history of suicide attempts and their parents. By including nonattempters in this project, we were better able to identify variations between the two similar groups of adolescents and their parents to understand how different life experiences may or may not shape suicidal behavior.

Participants

Participants in the larger study were Latina teens between the ages of 11 and 19 years who had attempted suicide up to 6 months prior to the interview ($n = 122$) and their parents ($n = 86$ mothers, 19 fathers). A comparison group of Latinas of approximately the same socioeconomic background who reported no lifetime history of suicide attempts ($n = 110$) and their parents ($n = 83$ mothers, 17 fathers) also participated in this study. All girls were recruited from four of the five boroughs of New York City. Over half of the sample comes from areas in New York City where Latinos make up 50% of the neighborhoods, and many are from neighborhoods where Latinos are more than 80% of the population. The girls self-identified as being Puerto Rican ($n = 79$, 34.96%), Dominican ($n = 64$, 28.32%), Mexican ($n = 27$, 11.95%), and Colombian ($n = 23$, 10.18%), with the remaining portion of the participants ($n = 33$, 14.59%) reporting as being from other Hispanic cultures and ethnic groups including Venezuelan, Cuban, Honduran, Ecuadorian, Salvadoran, Nicaraguan, or a combination of two groups. The education level of their parents ranged from 1 year of formal schooling to over 17 years, although the average educational attainment for parents of girls with no history of suicidal behavior was slightly higher ($M = 11.01$, $SD = 3.46$) than the parents of suicide attempters ($M = 10.17$, $SD = 3.81$). The majority of participants live in areas where one in three families lives under the federal poverty line. Those girls who had attempted suicide were recruited from mental health services associated with a large Latino-serving agency,

one municipal hospital, a private psychiatric hospital, and a private general hospital with psychiatric emergency and outpatient departments. Nonattempters were recruited from local community agencies (e.g., after school, prevention, and youth development programs) and primary care medical clinics.

Sample criteria for attempters required that the girl had attempted suicide during the preceding 6 months. In order for an action to be defined as a suicide attempt (known as a "suicide-related behavior" under the revised nomenclature suggested by Silverman, Berman, Sanddal, O'Carroll, & Joiner, 2007a,b), two conditions were required: (a) The attempt was an intentional nonfatal self-injury, regardless of lethality; and (b) The girl, immediately following the attempt, described her actions as having suicidal intent (O'Carroll et al., 1996), characterized by "connoting a conscious desire or wish to leave (or escape from) life as we know it" (Silverman et al., 2007a,b, p. 254). All girls were cleared for participation by a clinician. Exclusionary criteria for all participants included being outside the age range, having a diagnosis of mental retardation or major mental illness (e.g., schizophrenia), and being in foster care at the time of the suicide attempt or the research interview. In both groups, girls and their parents provided consent for participation in the study. All procedures were approved by our institutional review boards for the protection of human subjects of our university and cooperating research sites.

To assess ways in which family members interpret and give meaning to the ideology of familism in this article, we utilized a subsample of 12 adolescent attempters ($n = 12$), their parents ($n = 12$ mothers, 2 fathers), 12 nonattempters ($n = 12$), and their parents ($n = 12$ mothers, 2 fathers). This group was selected by the investigators on the basis of the richness of descriptions of the suicide attempts and family relationships. These 24 girls were about 15 years of age on average. They did not differ significantly from the remaining sample of attempters ($n = 98$) in any other demographic variables, and most girls in our subsample (88%) were born in the United States or Puerto Rico, a U.S. territory. In general, most of the adolescent participants of our subsample ($n = 24$) chose to complete the interview in English (92%), and most of their mothers and fathers completed the interview in Spanish (71% and 75%, respectively).

Interview

In-depth qualitative interviews were conducted with all participants. Interviews were conducted in either English or Spanish, depending upon the participant's preference, and audio-taped, transcribed, and entered into NVivo 7 (QSR International Americas, Inc., Cambridge, MA) for analysis. Interviewers were bilingual, bicultural master's or doctoral-level social workers or psychologists, trained to encourage the participants to talk freely, spontaneously, and in-depth about the topic areas included in the interview. They facilitated the flow of information about issues and events primarily through broad questions followed by neutral probes, unstructured questions, and focusing on specific topics raised by respondents, thus encouraging elaboration and clarification. This process enabled the participant's story to unfold spontaneously, in context, with minimum input or influence from the interviewer (Merton, Fiske, & Kendall, 1956).

To ensure the adequacy and quality of data obtained through the focused interviews, carefully designed interview guides were used to maximize the validity and reliability of the data. The possibility of interviewer bias was further limited by thorough training of interviewers, including intense practice through piloting and role-playing with the interview guides (Carey & Ge-laude, 2008). The following topics were explored with each participant: relationships with other family members, including extended kin; roles and responsibilities; rules and discipline; conflict and conflict resolution; life outside the family and home, including peer networks, dating, school activities, and future plans; and a retrospective, detailed account of the suicide attempt, if applicable.

To elicit information about the suicide attempt, interviews with attempters and their parents were intended to draw out as much description and insight as could be recalled, articulated, and understood. We explored the suicide attempt from both the girls' and their parents' perspective, asking about the social, emotional, and interpersonal experiences they had prior to, during, and after the suicide attempt. Questions were asked to explore social interactions between family members in moments leading up to the attempt, including what words were said by whom. Because the nature of the suicide attempt experiences of adolescent Hispanic females is unclear, we elicited information from attempters about the meanings, motivations, sensations, perceived causes, and internal experiences of the suicide attempt. Interviewers asked each girl to detail the very moment she was making the attempt, what her body felt like, how she felt, or what she was thinking about, at what point she knew what was happening to her, and what happened to her after the attempt. Girls were invited to share their perspectives on the attempts and why they thought they did it. The interview often ended by asking participants to add anything else that they would want to share about the attempt that had not been covered.

Data Analysis

The coding process was both deductive and inductive, allowing theoretical constructs to be central to thematic coding while also accounting for themes that emerged from the data (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). This approach was necessary for two reasons. First, it complemented the overall research goal to examine familial, developmental, and sociocultural experiences that distinguish adolescent Latina attempters and their parents from nonattempters and their parents. Second, it allowed the mixed methods design to be mutually supported by incorporating variables from quantitative measures into the coding of qualitative data.

The coding process proceeded in two distinct phases. First, we coded text related to the broader theme of familism. Drawing from the characterizations of familism made by previous investigators (Hovey & King, 1996; Lugo Steidel & Contreras, 2003; Sabogal et al., 1987; Schwartz, 2007), we defined familism as the perceived relation between the family and self, including references to putting individual needs either before or after family needs, patterns of family governance (rules, discipline, hierarchy), distribution of household responsibilities, and engaging in activities with family members (including extended kin). We

then tested the applicability of this construct to the data by having two independent coders read an interview transcript independently and broadly code text important to the construct of familism. After coding, we discussed differences in the application of familism and revised our definition to incorporate aspects, such as emotional responses to family interaction. We then coded remaining interviews and indexed all coded statements.

The second phase of coding followed procedures outlined by Barkin, Ryan, and Gelberg (1999). To identify subthemes under the construct of familism, we completed pile-sorting tasks on indexed statements associated with familism. By using pile sorts as the basis for categorization of subthemes, we reduced the likelihood that subthemes were identified simply because they were of interest to the investigators (Barkin et al., 1999). Four new coders, all of whom were naive to the study, sorted statements into piles based on perceived likeness of the statements. After pile sorting was completed, the results of the pile sorts were entered into ANTHROPAC 4.0 (Borgatti, 1996) for non-metric multidimensional scaling analysis (MDS). MDS displayed what text was sorted similarly by all four coders, and these results were used to identify subthemes during a team meeting. Subthemes included "interconnectivity," "CRRD" (Chores, Responsibilities, Rules, and Discipline), and "family before self." A unique subtheme was identified in parent interviews only, which we labeled "threats to familism." Based on these subthemes, we constructed a codebook that delineated the code name, its definition, and rules on when to apply and when not to apply the code. Using the codebook, the coders independently coded the statements. This ensured that the subthemes could be utilized as independent constructs. Percent agreement was used to calculate intercoder reliability, and only statements that received a ranking of .75 or above were retained for analysis (Barkin et al., 1999).

Once coding was complete, we constructed a conceptual matrix of coded text (Miles & Huberman, 1994) to analyze similarities and differences within and across attempters, nonattempters, and parents. The matrix display contained reduced data, including phrases and quotations, to view the data set as a whole. Data were organized by subthemes (columns) and participants (rows). Using the matrix, we identified similar configurations of themes (or patterns) across participants, focusing upon the subtheme of "family before self," which we likened to the construct of putting one's personal needs below those of the family. We paid special attention to girls' accounts of the ways that they sacrificed for their families' needs, as well as the ways in which parents transmitted this value to their daughters. We also consulted original interview transcripts and summaries of family cases in the event that more information was needed to fully understand the context of the coded text.

Results

Several themes emerged from analysis of the construct of sacrifice for the family in the interviews of Latina teens. Some girls demonstrated examples of putting the family's material needs before their own. The actions of other girls hinged upon emotional sacrifice. Often, teens exhibited a combination of material and emotional sacrifices. (A unique group of girls did not indi-

cate a willingness to sacrifice for their families, but it was discovered that each of these cases had experienced some sort of breach of family support in the past.) Each of these categories seemed to be unaffected by suicidal history in that both attempters and nonattempters were found in each cluster. One critical difference, however, was that girls who had attempted suicide and who had expressed a clear intent to kill themselves felt that they were a burden on the family, and they wished to sacrifice themselves so as to alleviate that burden on the rest. Although our study did not systematically measure participants' intent to take their lives, for the purposes of this analysis, we only classified an attempter as having a clear intent to kill herself if she explicitly expressed it during the interview. As Silverman and colleagues defined, intent "connotes a conscious desire to leave (or escape from) life as we know it" (2007a, p.254). In an effort to further corroborate the girls' intent, we also consulted the parents' interview transcripts to determine whether a girl's intent to die was also reported by her parent (following Shea's suggestion to consult as many sources and formats as possible to determine if intent is present, as referenced by Silverman et al., 2007a,b). The following sections illustrate how Latina teens (with and without a history of suicide-related behaviors) differentially interpret—and demonstrate—familism.

Daughters as Breadwinners: Narratives of Material Sacrifice

A large number of teens ($n = 15$) described experiences of sacrificing their material needs for the sake of the family or prioritizing their time so as to contribute to the family's material needs. This trend is illustrated by girls who either contribute financially to the family's resources or make a special effort not to spend money on themselves. For example, a 12-year-old nonattempter of Dominican descent said that she tries to save any money that she receives so that her family will be able to use it in case of emergency or bills. The theme of providing for the material needs of her family also appears in this girl's future aspirations: "I wanna be a lawyer for crime, 'cause you win a lot of money and I want to help my family with the situation 'cause they are, like, very broke at this moment. So I wanted to be a lawyer where I could win money to help them." Sensing the financial pressures in her own house, a young daughter of Mexican immigrants (nonattempter, age 11) said that she prefers not to have a *quinceañera* (Latin American tradition of celebrating a girl's 15th birthday), because "I don't want my mom and dad to spend a lot of money on those parties."

Another nonattempter of Colombian descent, age 18, expressed that she routinely chooses not to buy things for herself, like sneakers or movie tickets, because she knows that her mother needs the money. She discloses that her mother struggles with multiple health issues, and her parents are separated, saying, "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]." At age 15, this young woman had already sacrificed part of her education, dropping out of school to obtain a job and help pay the bills.

A 15-year-old Puerto Rican girl who had attempted suicide portrays an equally challenging role in her own home. Lying

about her age, this teen obtained a job at a factory when she was only 12 years old to help pay the household expenses, and she still worries about the bills at home. She also took on a very high level of responsibility within the household, becoming the primary caregiver for her two young cousins when she saw how much her aunt was struggling. She says, "I feel like I took the role on just being their mother. 'Cause the one that's 3, when he was born, I was the one who, like, raised him. I was the one waking up at three in the morning, getting his bottles and everything."

Shouldering the weight of important household duties, a number of girls care for younger siblings or cousins, cook all of the family meals, clean the house, or administer medication and attend to sick family members. These tasks all indicate a sacrifice by the girls so that the material and physical needs of their kin might be met. One 17-year-old Puerto Rican with a history of suicide attempts dropped out of school so that she could care for her bedridden mother. She says, "I know that I'm the only one she has to attend to her," and she worries that her mother will fall down some day if she is home alone. Likewise, when a 13-year-old Puerto Rican girl's grandmother came home after a stay in the hospital, the girl volunteered without prompting by her parents to stay with her for several weeks to take care of her. Not only does this example illustrate a type of material sacrifice, it also recalls the familism values of respecting one's elders and living in close proximity to extended family members.

Being the Strong One: Narratives of Emotional Sacrifice

Other adolescents' sacrifices seem to hinge more upon emotional subjugation. In many cases ($n = 12$), this manifests in situations where the girl suppresses her own feelings or hides her problems out of concern for her parents or family members. A nonattempter of Mexican descent (age 15) hesitates to tell her mother about her problems because "she gets too hyped, and she gets—her [blood] pressure goes so much higher and she cries and cries and cries. And that's bad for her." An attempter who has witnessed her mother being abused by her stepfather expends her emotional energy worrying about coming home someday to find her mother dead. She says that in order for her to be happy, she needs to see her mother happy first. Still another young woman (age 16, nonattempter) whose parents were born in El Salvador states that she feels that it is her duty to "be there" for her mother. Putting her own romantic exploration on hold, a 12-year-old Dominican girl says, "I don't have to be thinking about having a boyfriend when I have to be thinking about my education and helping my mom." All of these cases present sacrifices that daughters make out of concern for their mothers.

It should be noted that in many families, adolescent daughters exhibit a combination of material and emotional sacrifice. They put their own material desires or emotional needs on hold while they focus on the mental health of their parents or while they pay the bills and put food on the table. For example, one 17-year-old Puerto Rican girl feels she must "be the strong one in the family," because of her mother's struggle with depression. The girl tries to protect her mother, scolding her sister if she misbehaves, because she does not want her to upset their mom. This girl has also sacrificed materially for her mother, working part-time to help financially as well as assuming responsibility

for most of the housework during her mother's depressive episodes. Or, in another case, the daughter of Dominican parents says that she works hard because she does not want her mother to feel like she failed as a mother. She is compelled to sacrifice her time and energy to contribute to the family's resources in an effort to protect her mother's feelings.

On My Own: Choosing to Put Individual Needs First

Some teens in this subsample ($n = 4$) appear to be outliers in the sense that they did not reflect obligatory impulses to put their families' needs before their own. However, in each of these cases, it was revealed that the girl had experienced some type of breach of confidence or lack of support from her own mother or other family members during a time of great need—in essence a deficiency of familism. After her parents learned that she was dating a 16-year-old boy, a 12-year-old attempter (of Dominican descent) says that her mother and stepfather humiliated her in front of the neighborhood, her stepfather dragging her out of the boy's house and “strangling her.” This same girl had been sexually abused from age 8 to 10 by a member of her extended family. She recounts feeling that her privacy had been invaded because her mother began to search through her things, worried about the changes in her daughter's behavior. Another teen (who identifies as Puerto Rican) with suicidal history felt disillusioned by her family's inability to band together after a member of the extended family passed away. She says, “Since her [girl's mother] brother passed away, we are supposed to be getting closer, but we are getting further apart so I was like, I was really depressed.” Finally, a 13-year-old of Dominican and Puerto Rican heritage who had suffered sexual abuse felt betrayed when her mother failed to respond strongly enough in defense of the girl. The fact that the theme of putting the family's needs before one's own needs does not emerge during any of these teens' interviews could be related to the sense of betrayal or at least the failure in the familism of other relatives that they have each felt. Because they were not supported or respected by a family member, they do not feel obligated to reciprocate by upholding their duty toward the family.

The Ultimate Sacrifice: Alleviating the Burden on the Family

Throughout the analysis of these various manifestations of sacrificing one's needs for the sake of the family, few differences emerged between the girls with suicide attempts and those girls with no history of suicide. Indeed, attempters and nonattempters alike describe material and emotional sacrifice, often in strikingly similar ways. However, one theme of sacrifice surfaced in a cluster of interviews with attempters ($n = 4$), each of whom expressed (during her interview) that she had a clear intent to die at the time of her suicide attempt (whereas the other attempters in this sample were more ambivalent about their intent, often utilizing suicide-related behaviors as a form of mood regulation). At some point, each of these young women had felt that she was somehow a burden on her family, that she was to blame for the problems that they had, and that the best solution was to take her life, so that she would no longer cause pain for her family.

Most of these cases include instances of material and emotional sacrifice as well, but the strongest theme is that of sacrificing oneself in the most extreme manner—by taking one's life for the good of the family. It is important to note that these families do not seem to differ from the rest of this subsample in that they also struggle with financial issues, family conflicts or interpersonal crises, and other stressors.

For one 15-year-old girl of Mexican heritage, an overriding sense of guilt led her to overdose with acetaminophen. At the time, she was living with her mother and siblings in a shelter, having fled an abusive father. The girl expressed that she suddenly felt that she was really to blame for her parents' separation. Prior to this incident, her father had berated her for not being a better daughter, saying things like, “We have a daughter that's worthless and she's only getting us in trouble.” The girl had been compelled to disclose her father's abusiveness to the authorities, but she felt conflicted about this situation, believing that she had instigated the abuse, or that the conflicts were indeed her fault. At the time of her suicide attempt, the girl recalls,

Like, I blamed the things on me. Like, if I would've done things differently, what if my father—what if I didn't argue so much with my father? My parents would still be together. If I was different, my father would've been different, and my sisters would've been different, and it would have been a whole different situation.

Feeling that she was a strain on the family, this girl wanted to kill herself to relieve the problems facing them.

A young Ecuadorian girl also recalled feeling very guilty at the time that she drank bleach in an attempt to kill herself. When her parents immigrated to the United States, she was left in the care of relatives, seemingly passed around from house to house. She was thinking about how she had been sexually abused at age 6, feeling that it was her fault that terrible things happened to her. She remembers thinking that if she killed herself, “Everyone would be happy because, like, I don't matter to anyone, they wouldn't even realize that I don't exist anymore.” The girl commented that all of her family members seem to take out their anger upon her, to the point where she feels that she is really at fault for their problems. She has attempted suicide several times, always feeling that they will be better off without her. “I will be less of a weight on my parents.” She also reported that she spends much of her time taking care of her nephew, not wanting to ask her brother to help: “I prefer to sacrifice myself.” Thus, she exemplifies several types of sacrifice.

In another case, a 15-year-old girl from the Dominican Republic was struggling to complete a project for school and fighting with her mother about her academic performance prior to her attempted suicide. Feeling that she was going to be a failure and that she was going to let her family down, this teen swallowed a handful of pills. Her sense of obligation seems to extend beyond even her family, as this girl does not want to end up a burden on society: “Like, if I'm not gonna be anything or, like—I don't want to be just like another piece of scum on earth. I don't wanna be that, so I'd just rather just die, I guess.”

Discussion

By locating Latina teen suicide attempts within personal and familial narratives of sacrifice, our aim was to give more

in-depth meaning and understanding to the nature of suicidal behavior. Our results illustrate a complex interaction between individual psychology and interpersonal functioning within the family. We see that sacrifice can be imbued with positive meanings, as it provides a metaphor by which adolescents make sense of their roles and responsibilities within the family. Yet for some, the word *sacrifice* takes on an unfortunate and harmful connotation, where young Latinas see suicide as a solution to their perceived failure to adequately fulfill their family roles and obligations. Given this, Latina teen suicide attempts must be viewed in a way that takes seriously the nuanced ways in which individual well-being and family dynamics intersect.

Our results contribute to our understanding of familism and its impact on adolescent Latinas. Where aspects of attitudinal familism did not differ between suicide attempters and nonattempters (Zayas, Bright, Alvarez-Sanchez, & Cabassa, 2009), we observed subtle differences in the sample, especially among those girls with an expressed intent to die. These findings highlight the complexities of the cultural value of familism itself and the complications involved in researching its expression in relationship to distinct risk behaviors in Latino adolescents. By utilizing qualitative analyses to disentangle the sacrificial aspect of familism, these results provide a possible explanation for the positive relationship between familism and internalizing behaviors and suicide-related behaviors in adolescent Latinas that was previously reported (Zayas et al., 2009).

There are several limitations to our study that warrant acknowledgment. In the recruitment for the larger sample, we drew only from the New York City area, and thereby, the generalizability of the findings to Latinas from other regions of the country cannot be assumed. Also, the 24 girls whose interviews were analyzed for this report were nonrandomly selected from the full sample and this may compromise their representativeness. Likewise, as we did not include young women from other racial and ethnic groups (e.g., non-Hispanic Whites, African Americans, Asian Americans), we are limited in what we can say about the influence of familism in their lives, the sense of sacrificing for their families, and the relationship to suicide attempts. Finally, future studies about familism and adolescent suicidal behaviors may benefit from a more structured assessment of the economic status of families. It is not surprising that, in times of financial insecurity or other family crises, expressions of familism may be more salient—family members recognize their role in helping the family to overcome obstacles. However, it is important to consider that there are degrees of intensity with regard to sacrifice. Our results reflect that familism can be expressed in different ways by Latina adolescents who share similar backgrounds (economically, culturally, etc.), but when a girl sees her own presence or actions as the cause of family suffering (rather than as contributing to the family's well-being), we find that the most serious suicide attempts occur (in terms of intent to die).

Limitations notwithstanding, it seems that some young Latinas feel that the family's needs are a burden for them to shoulder, whereas others view themselves as the burden upon the rest of the family. It is in the latter situation—in which the girl feels that the best solution is to sacrifice her own life—that the value of familism is taken to an extreme and could have tragic consequences. Just as some other scholars suggest that familism

operates as a protective factor against negative behaviors and outcomes at the moderate level, but that extremely high or low levels are associated with negative consequences (in areas such as academic achievement, Fuligni et al., 1999, or adolescent alcohol misuse, Marsiglia et al., 2009), so does this study point to a need for moderation. The way in which these young women interpret their actions is influenced by their family interactions and the messages that they receive from their parents. However, their idea of being a burden to their families is indeed complex. Fuligni et al. (1999) aptly remark in the context of adolescent familism that “the link between beliefs and behaviors is not always strong and the demands of adolescent life in American society may make it difficult for youths to fulfill their perceived obligations” (p. 1042).

Without such in-depth analysis of interviews with Latina teens and their parents, there is little chance we would have been able to determine the types of familistic behaviors most commonly enacted by this population. Quantitative measures provide a great foundation for understanding how individuals support familistic values, but they often do not capture the varied, often textured differences in behaviors that embody this value in daily life and its meaning and effect within functional and dysfunctional families. Although our study found only a few differences between samples of attempters and nonattempters in measures of familism, the qualitative analysis of interview data has illuminated that the girls with a history of serious suicide attempts, those who clearly wanted to kill themselves, all felt that killing themselves was their way of putting their needs aside for the sake of their families' well-being. The example of these Latinas' self-sacrifice gives us pause in our understanding of familism as a protective factor against many other risk behaviors.

Sometimes these sacrifices are material and emotional, sometimes mild, and sometimes severe. The important roles that the girls play within the family—as caregivers and economic providers—are not met with a corresponding high status in the family, one that would befit an adult, such as a mother or father. The worst cases are those who feel that they are the burdens that families are bearing, for which the girls take responsibility and must therefore make the ultimate sacrifice to eliminate the hardships they bring to their families by attempting suicide. How girls interpret familism is based not only on their interactions with family members but also on individual psychological factors. Future research is needed to learn more about the complexities of what makes some girls think and truly believe that they are so burdensome to their families as to want to take their lives.

Our findings offer a window into the familistic beliefs of Hispanic families in the United States and the manner in which this value plays out in their lives. It is also a dynamic construct and can be a source of reward as they feel secure, loved, belonging (protective factor), or an ongoing struggle that raises internal conflict and self-deprecation (risk factor) for adolescent Latinas. Latinas, both suicide attempters and nonattempters, in this sample do not differ on measures of familism and acculturation that are also not strongly associated with suicide attempts (Zayas et al., 2009). However, those Latinas who report high levels of conflict with their parents also show more internalizing behaviors and lower self-esteem, which is associated with a higher risk

for suicide (Kuhlberg, Pena, & Zayas, 2010). In short, high levels of familism seem to blunt girls' conflict with their parents, suggesting that familism is an indirect protector against suicide attempts within low-conflict families.

By extending research on familism using qualitative approaches rather than only quantitative methods, we have captured a portrait of the sacrifices that young Latinas make in the name of their families. Specifically, quantitative approaches provide valuable information about the many correlations among familism, suicide attempts, and internalizing behaviors, among other relationships such as predictors or mediators. In-depth qualitative interviews extend the value of quantitative methods by filling in the picture, demonstrating the subtleties that belie the numbers, filling in what numbers cannot fully describe. This report underscores the value of mixed method designs for understanding family sociocultural experiences.

Keywords: Latina adolescents; parents of Latina adolescents; suicidal behavior; familism; material sacrifice; emotional sacrifice

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