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**USING INTERPERSONAL THEORY OF SUICIDE TO IMPROVE  
WELL-BEING OF LATINA COLLEGE STUDENTS**

by

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Using Interpersonal Theory of Suicide to Improve Well-Being of Latina College Students

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### Abstract

College students are at an increased risk for suicide. The federal government has gone to great lengths to try to implement suicide prevention programs, but few studies have been done to design, implement and assess the effectiveness of the programs. Latinas are at an especially high risk for suicide, and research suggests that interpersonal conflict is a potential risk factor for Latinas' suicidal behavior. Thwarted belongingness, as stated in Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide, may be a possible explanation for the higher rates due to the importance placed on interpersonal relationships based on Latino cultural values. Bicultural identity has been linked to better psychological adjustment and possibly well-being, so it will be assessed as well. The proposed study will have Latina college students (N=783) participate in group sessions that allow for the processing of interpersonal problems and learning communication skills to resolve conflicts. They will be asked to fill out measures of belonging, bicultural identity and general well-being. Measures of general well-being will be used as a proxy for suicidal behavior. It is predicted that participant scores of belonging and their well-being will increase following participation. Scores of belonging and well-being are expected to have an inverse linear relationship. Participants' scores of bicultural identity and belonging will be strong significant predictors of participants' score of bicultural identity and belonging will predict increases in participants' well-being. Limitations and future research are also discussed.

### **Using Interpersonal Theory of Suicide to Improve Well-Being of Latina College Students**

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young adults aged 15-29 (World Health Organization, 2014). College students in particular are at a high risk for suicide (Drumet al., 2009; Schwartz, 2011). Stressors such as interpersonal problems (romantic breakups) and job indecision (Field et al., 2009) leave college students at elevated risk. Because of this risk among college students, a federally funded grant program, known as the *Garrett Lee Smith* Campus Suicide Prevention grant program, has been established to help colleges and universities reduce the risk for suicide (Goldston et al., 2010). Research has shown that these federally funded programs have reduced the national suicide rates (Walrath et al., 2015). However, there is little empirical research regarding the causes of effectiveness of suicide prevention programs. Therefore, it is important researchers devote attention to empirically studying programs showing promise and begin to piece together an understanding of what makes these programs successful.

Latinas aged 15-24 exhibit a higher rate of suicide (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2008) and higher rates of suicidal behavior (Kann et al., 2018). According to research, Latinas are at an especially high risk for suicidal behavior due to internal and external forces (Guzmán, Koons, & Postolache, 2009). They are also at an increased risk for health problems due to the combination of stigma towards mental health and membership in an ethnic group that regularly faces discrimination (Gary, 2005). With Latinos being the largest minority group in the United States, comprising more than 35 million people (Nadeem et al., 2007), and one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the U.S, more research into the Latino population is needed now more than ever to address their health concerns (which will only continue to grow).

Thus, it is important to design prevention programs that are based on empirical research on factors that impact Latinas' risk for suicide and ways to lessen the risk.

Psychologists have gone to great lengths to try to study possible causes for such a large occurrence of suicide in such a specific subgroup of the population. Unfortunately, the research that has been conducted has been unable to pinpoint specific causes for the high rate of suicidal behavior among Latinas. Instead, the current literature offers potential factors that seem to be related to the high rates of suicide among Latinas: acculturative stress (Gomez, Miranda, & Polanco, 2011), family conflict (Céspedes & Huey, 2008) and issues specific to gender (Nolle, Gulbas, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2012). Given these potential risk factors, it appears the high rates of suicidal behavior among Latinas are tied to social environmental factors, mainly interactions with others, rather than some innate quality of Latinas. Thus, Latina suicidal behavior may best be understood within the framework of the interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner et al., 2002; Joiner et al., 2009; Joiner & Silva, 2012).

Joiner's theory addresses the factors that lead to suicidal ideation and those that lead to suicidal behavior (characterized as suicide attempts or completions). It is important to note Joiner makes a clear distinction between the factors that lead to suicidal ideation, and the factors that lead individuals to engage in suicidal attempts or self-harm. According to the theory, "perceived burdensomeness" and "thwarted belonging" are key factors that contribute to suicidal ideation in an individual (Joiner & Silva, 2012). According to Joiner (2005), perceived burdensomeness refers to the belief that one's presence, or existence, places a burden on others (i.e. family, friends, or society). Thwarted belonging refers to failed attempts at meeting the psychological need for connectedness in humans, or feelings of being socially isolated (Joiner, 2005). These risk factors are like the risk factors for Latina suicidal behavior presented in previous literature.

Acculturative stress, family conflict, and issues surrounding gender role beliefs have been shown to have a strong link with Latina Suicidal behavior (Goldston et al., 2008). Acculturative stress often stems from the difficulties with positively integrating with the host country's society, being accepted, and dealing with discrimination from members of the host society, being isolated, (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). It has been shown to be connected with increased risk for suicide among Latinos because of the resulting family conflict (Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005) due to differences in the rates of acculturation among family members (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). The differences in adherence to cultural values of the dominant and home culture, leads to misunderstandings and communication difficulties among parents and children (Cordova, Ciofu, & Cervantes, 2014; Garcia & Lindgren, 2009; Nolle et al., 2012; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001).

Because the well-being of the family and family cohesion is highly valued in many Latino cultural groups (Baumann, Kuhlberg, & Zayas, 2010), the family disruption and decrease in family closeness causes severe emotional distress for Latinos, and it puts them at risk for suicidal behavior (Zayas & Pilat, 2008). In terms of gendered risk factors, Latinas are socialized to be care takers for the family, so being the cause of family conflict can be especially devastating (Gil & Vazquez, 1997). There is even some evidence to suggest Latinas may even attempt suicide "for the sake of their families", as a way to relieve the family of potential burdens (Nolle et al., 2012). In the context of the interpersonal theory of suicide, these risk factors due to cultural differences and communication difficulties can be viewed as thwarted belonging. These risk factors reflect situations of isolation from the support network most important to Latinas, the family. Although there is some research also suggesting that perceived burdensomeness appears as a precursor to Latina suicidal behavior, there is simply not enough

research yet to make a strong connection between the two. Thus, the proposed study will instead focus on sense of belonging as a predictive factor for Latinas' behavior.

### **Belonging and Suicidal Ideation**

Belonging to a group can have strong positive and negative implications for individuals. For Latinas in a college setting away from their family, a sense of belonging could be critical for their well-being on a college campus. A study conducted by (Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015) highlighted the relationship between college students' sense of belongingness and suicidal ideation. The study was conducted at a large midwestern university with a total of 249 participants (150 females). The researchers sought to examine the relationship of three domains of belongingness to suicidal ideation. The three domains included family, peers and academic institution. The results showed that sense of belonging in relation to family had the biggest impact on students' suicidal ideation, with students who scored high on a measure of family belongingness showing the least amount of suicidal ideation. The results are particularly interesting when considering them in the context of the cultural value of familismo.

Familismo is considered to be a cultural value found among people of Latin or Hispanic descent that places a large emphasis on the importance of the family, family cohesion and well-being of the family over the individual's needs (Baumann et al., 2010). Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib's (2015) study lacked a racially/ethnically diverse sample (222 White participants), but if the study were conducted with a sample of people of a Latin or Hispanic background, the relationship between family belongingness and suicidal ideation may be even stronger. Many researchers have found family conflict to be a contributing factor to suicidal ideation and attempts made by Latina adolescents (Arora & Wheeler, 2018; Baumann et al., 2010, 2010; Humensky et al., 2013; Lai, Li, & Daoust, 2017; Lui, 2015; Nolle et al., 2012). It would appear



maintaining healthy familial relationships is a potential protective factor from suicidal ideation in college students. However, it is important to remember the concept of “family” is defined differently by different people, and it may include people who are not blood relatives (i.e. friends).

People of Latin or Hispanic descent can also be described as collectivistic because of the importance put on the family’s (i.e. other people’s) well-being over the needs of the individual (Arevalo, So, & McNaughton-Cassill, 2016). Collectivism is defined as reliance on other members within a group through social roles, obligations and duties instead of acting mainly in the best interest of the individual (Watson, Sherbak, & Morris, 1998). Research has shown that Latino college students in particular act collectivistically toward nonblood related individuals more than their non-Latin peers (Arevalo et al., 2016). The researchers observed that Latino college students were more likely to help, meet and/or support people not related to them than their non-Latin peers. This research finding helps to suggest that the concept of familismo may extend beyond relatives and apply to Latino college students’ peers in university or college settings. If the university/college setting is also a place where family types of relationships occur for Latino college students, then the sense of belongingness on campus could be a major factor regarding Latino college students’ risk for suicidal ideation.

Some research has shown that despite evidence for familismo as a protective factor for suicidal ideation (Arevalo et al., 2016), Latino college students can still report low levels of belongingness on college campuses (Acosta, Hagan, & Joiner, 2017) putting them at an increased risk for suicidal ideation. Acosta et al.’s (2017) study compared Latino college students’ and White college students’ suicidal desire, perceived burdensomeness, and thwarted belongingness. Contrary to the research hypotheses, Latino participants did not report lower level

of thwarted belongingness than their White peers. Also, in comparison to their White peers, Latino participants had lower levels of perceived burdensomeness and suicidal desires. The authors argued lack of a diverse sample (254 White participants in comparison to 82 Latino participants), low response rate and lack of statistical power (336 participants) could explain the findings contrary to the hypotheses. It could be argued, however, that perhaps thwarted belongingness among Latino college students is more prevalent than the researchers had realized. It could also be argued that in terms of Joiner's interpersonal theory of suicide, thwarted belongingness could be a more prominent factor in Latino college students' risk for suicidal ideation.

Unfortunately, there are several barriers for Latino college students to have a sense of belonging on campus, including a deficit model approach to explain Latinos' lack of educational success (Donato, 1997; Nieto, 2010; Spring, 2012; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). The deficit model approach can best be described as a cognitive framework in which institutions of higher education attribute poor retention rates and academic success of Latino students to skills they inherently lack, and in the process, send a message to Latino students that they "don't belong" (Gonzales, Brammer, & Sawilowsky, 2015). To further highlight the presence of such a message, research has shown that interactions with faculty and peers outside the classroom positively impact students' sense of belonging (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). This is most likely due to students having positive social interactions with others while discussing academic material (judgement free setting). Perceptions of a hostile racial campus climate are a barrier to sense of belonging as well (Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Researchers conducted an analysis of participants' responses to the National Survey of Hispanic Students with 272 participants (Hurtado & Carter, 1997). The researchers measured

participants' sense of belonging, participation in academic activities and organization/club membership at the second and third year of college. The results showed that students who reported high levels of racial tension on campus reported less sense of belonging. However, of those students who reported high levels of racial tension, those who were part of racial-ethnic student organizations had higher ratings of sense of belonging. This study highlights the impact of Latino college students' relationships with their peers on their sense of belonging on campus. Even students who reported high levels of racial tension on campus could feel some sense of belonging to campus through their relationships with their peers.

Similarly, Samuolis, Griffin, Mason, & Dekraker's (2017) recent study on female college students provided evidence for a connection between perceived sense of belongingness and likelihood of seeking help for suicidal ideation. A total of 135 female participants completed surveys measuring help-seeking and connectedness to campus. The results showed "that connection to campus contributes to perceived likelihood of help-seeking". Sense of connectedness to campus was also compared with participants' "sense of togetherness with peers" and "presence of a supportive group of friends". The results also indicated participants who report strong connections with peers and supportive friend groups have both high sense of connectedness to campus and perceived likelihood of seeking help for suicidal ideation. This study is important because it demonstrates that women, like Latino college students, may also view their extended networks of peers and social support as important factors for establishing a sense of belonging on campus. Therefore, for Latina college students especially, relationships with peers could be an integral part of making them feel that they belong on campus, and a sense of belonging on campus could be a protective factor against suicidal behavior.

Overall, the research on belongingness and college students' suicidal behavior indicates that a sense of belonging to the college or university acts as a buffer against potential suicidal behavior. The literature also gives insight into factors that can impede or facilitate students' sense of belonging. For Latinas in particular, it would appear that positive social interactions with peers and supportive environments would increase their sense of belonging on campus, and it would potentially decrease their risk for suicidal behavior. The previous research also indicates perceptions of a hostile, or unwelcoming, racial climate prevents college students of color from feeling they belong on campus. Therefore, it would also be important to create spaces for Latinas to feel their ethnic and/or racial identities are accepted and welcomed

### **Well-Being as a Proxy for Suicidal Behavior**

Suicidal behavior impacts more than just an individual's mental health. Major depression is recognized as a high risk factor for suicide (Furr, Westefeld, McConnell, & Jenkins, 2001; Harwitz & Ravizza, 2000). The link for depression in college students has also been established by researchers (Furr et al., 2001). Some estimates suggest the risk for suicide in people suffering from depression is 20 times the risk of the general population, with one in 16 people diagnosed with depression predicted to die by suicide ("Links between Suicide and Depression," n.d.). Given the high rates of depression and suicide coexisting in the individuals who die by suicide, the somatic symptoms that accompany depression may also be present in people exhibiting suicidal behavior. The current criteria for major depression includes somatic symptoms, so evaluating for these symptoms is a logical step in determining the potential presence of depression in participants (Lewis-Fernández, Das, Alfonso, Weissman, & Olfson, 2005).

Some of the most common somatic symptoms include fatigue, loss of appetite, headaches and bodily pain, and some researchers have suggested depression may have a bigger impact on

people's overall health (Kapfhammer, 2006). In a research study with a nonclinical sample of 4864 white, Latino, and Asian American participants, researchers discovered the presence of three or more general physical symptoms proved to be a stronger predictor of mental health problems than the presence of medically unexplained symptoms (Escobar et al., 2010).

Furthermore, Kroenke and Price (Kroenke & Price, 1993) conducted a research study in which almost one third of the symptoms reported by participants were either psychiatric in nature or unexplained. They also found many of the reported symptoms were correlated with a "twofold increased lifetime risk of a common psychiatric disorder".

Latinos have been shown to report more somatic symptoms than their White, non-Hispanic counterparts (Canino et al., 1992; Escobar et al., 1987; Kolody et al., 1986; Mezzich & Raab, 1980). Kolody et al.'s (1986) study demonstrated the increased likelihood of Mexican Americans and their foreign born counterparts to report somatic symptoms and depressive symptoms at the same time compared to U.S. born, non-Hispanic Whites. Similar results have also been found with other Latino subgroups such as people of Puerto Rican descent (Canino et al., 1992). Researchers have also begun to find links between the somatic symptoms reported by Latinos and the occurrence of other psychiatric diagnoses (Escobar & Canino, 1989). Low self-rated health is also beginning to show a potential relationship with psychiatric co-morbidity (Kroenke, 2003).

Given the perceived relationship between somatic symptoms and mental health status among Latinos, it would be important for researchers to study somatic symptoms in relation to Latina suicidal behavior. The presence of somatic symptoms could indicate the presence of mental health problems such as depression. Therefore, when creating screening tools and designing preventative measures, researchers should pay attention to somatic symptoms as

potential signs of emotional or psychological distress among Latinas. By better understanding the role somatic symptoms play in the development of mental health problems related to suicidal behavior, researchers will gain a better understanding of the warning signs associated with this dangerous behavior. Researchers may also be able to develop more effective interventions by having a more holistic approach when treating Latina patients.

### **Bicultural Identity and Well-Being**

The definition of acculturation in the field of psychology is often contested and, at times, confusing (Escobar & Vega, 2000). For the purpose of the research being proposed here, acculturation will be defined according to Berry's (1980) work, "Acculturation as Varieties of Adaptation". Berry (1980) defined acculturation as a three-step process in which individuals can hold onto aspects of both cultures, aspects of only one, or other combinations. The first step in the process is contact, then most often followed by conflict (due to imbalances in power between the two groups), and always resulting in a type of adaptation. Berry's definition also included sociocultural and environmental factors. Each possible outcome under the adaptation part of the acculturation process can be influenced by external factors (i.e. society, historical context of group immigration). Berry also made the distinction between individual and group level processes of acculturation.

Although the overall process of acculturation for groups and individuals follows the three steps, the outcomes are different for individuals compared to groups. At the group level, the ability for the group to choose its outcome is considered. Whether or not a group can choose the type of adaptation it would like to employ makes a difference in the kind of outcomes available to the group and its members. For instance, if a group does not have the right to choose because society imposes limits on what the group can or cannot do, the group may be forced to

experience ethnocide. At the individual level, four outcomes are listed: assimilation, integration, rejection and deculturation. Assimilation has often been synonymous with acculturation and the preferred outcome ( Berry, 1980; Escobar & Vega, 2000), but researchers have also shown evidence for other outcomes and their benefits (Buriel, 1993).

Although in the past assimilation was believed to be the most preferred and obvious outcome of acculturation (Escobar & Vega, 2000; Malzberg, 1964; Gordon, 1964; Park, 1950), the process of acculturation is starting to be understood as a more complex concept with different outcomes ( Berry, 1980; Buriel, 1993; Escobar & Vega, 2000). Recent research has begun to identify a bicultural identity as another outcome of the acculturation process (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2007). According to Nguyen & Benet-Martinez (2007), bicultural identity refers to an individual who has been exposed to and internalized the values and beliefs of two different cultures. Instead of being pressured to assimilate, some individuals may face pressure to retain aspects of their traditional culture (Schwartz, 2011). Examples of this pressure include the home environment and place of settlement. If the individual is close to their family, and sees that closeness as a priority, it would be important to be able to relate to the family. This often takes the form of adopting the family's cultural values and norms, so if the family practices Latino cultural values, the individual will practice them as well.

Individuals may also face pressure to adhere to cultural norms while in college. Unfortunately, Latina college students face significant barriers to entering the college and/or university setting. Those who do manage to attend places of higher education find themselves to be part of the minority group on campus. As described earlier, personal relations are an important aspect of Latino culture and important to the well-being of Latinas, so Latinas will most likely seek out ways to establish and maintain social bonds with others. This often takes place with the

establishment of friend groups comprised of people who share similar identities, based on the assumption they will share similar cultural values and norms. These newly established friend groups may resemble the communities in which Latinas came from. Latinas would then be pressured to maintain the values from their home communities to maintain their new personal relationships as a form of support in the new social environment.

Using Berry's theoretical work on acculturation processes, adopting a bicultural identity can be an adaptation to the individual's situation. A circumstance in which an individual may be inclined to retain more values of the dominant culture while also maintaining values of their own culture could be entering a university or college setting. The process of acculturation begins with contact between two different groups. It could be said that Latinos entering the college setting are in fact encountering a different group of people. Latinos are considered to be collectivistic (Marin and Triandis, 1985; (Rinderle & Montoya, 2008; Segal et al., 2011). According to (Triandis, 1989), the United States as a whole can be considered to be individualistic in terms of cultural norms. As of 2015, of the 20 million students enrolled in postsecondary education in the U.S., only 3.4 million students were Latino, and 11.6 million students were White (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018a). Furthermore, in 2016, the majority of college faculty (professors, lecturers, instructors etc.) in the U.S were White as well (National Center for Education Statistics, 2018b). These numbers demonstrate a tendency for many colleges and universities in the U.S. to be predominantly White.

Given most college campuses have a student body and faculty that are predominantly White, Latino college students are most likely to encounter people whose views and cultural values are different from them. Also, because Latinos are considered the minority group on most college campuses, these two groups of people with different views are meeting each other on



unequal footing. Historically, Latino college students have faced significant barriers in education that make it difficult to succeed in academic settings (Donato, 1997; Nieto, 2010; Spring, 2012; Valdes, 1996; Valenzuela, 1999). This situation matches the first two steps of the acculturation process described by Berry (1980). If the model were to continue to be applied here, the next step in the process would be adaptation. Given the pressure to assimilate on college campuses, through institutional policies (Gándara & Contreras, 2009) and microaggressions from peers and faculty members (Minikel-Lacocque, 2013), and pressure to maintain cultural values (Schwartz et al., 2015), it would seem that the most appropriate course of action would be for individuals to choose a bicultural identity.

Bicultural identity also appears to be a preferred adaptation because of its link to better psychological adjustment (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; de Domanico, Crawford, & De Wolfe, 1994; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Phinney, Horenczyk, Liebkind, & Vedder, 2001; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980; Yamaguchi, Kim, Oshio, & Akutsu, 2016). A meta-analysis conducted by Rogler et al., (1991) compiled a series of studies on acculturation and well-being among Latinos, and the researchers determined “[g]ood mental health” comes from a blending of old and new cultural values. Some research has suggested this blended identity of two cultural sets of values allows for better navigation of social situations and more cognitive flexibility to problem solve (de Domanico et al., 1994). Given the psychological benefits of a bicultural identity, bicultural identity could also be linked to well-being. Research has demonstrated a link between bicultural identity and well-being within other ethnic groups (Yamaguchi et al., 2016), so it is likely to be linked to well-being within the Latina population due to Latinas’ tendency to display more somatic symptoms in relation to their mental health.

### **Proposed Study**

The literature suggests interpersonal problems are a potential risk factor for Latina suicidal behavior. Latina college students are at an especially high risk for interpersonal problems due to the importance placed on relationships with both peers and family, being placed in a new, unfamiliar setting, and having a lack of support in the predominantly White college or university setting. Sense of belonging has been demonstrated to act as a buffer for suicidal behavior, and it is a potentially important buffer for Latina college students due to their collectivistic cultural orientation. Researchers have also demonstrated a connection between Latinos' somatic symptom presentation and the simultaneous presence of mental health problems. Thus, it is possible to use the presence of somatic symptoms as a predictor of the presence of mental health problems in Latinas. Similarly, researchers have connected the presence of a bicultural identity to better health outcomes. Therefore, the lack of a bicultural identity orientation could also be seen as a predictor of mental health problems among Latinas.

Researchers have limited data on current theories of suicide, and they have yet to begin testing the applicability of those theories on different ethnic and/or cultural groups. Given the high rates of suicidal behavior among Latinas, it would seem that this population would be ideal for beginning the research on applying theories of suicidal behavior. Because the college years are a critical time for young adults in terms of psychological development and increased risk for suicidality, researchers should be expanding their work to include looking at suicidal behavior during the college years. The literature is also lacking information on how to potentially prevent suicidal behavior among adolescents and young adults.

The proposed study would seek to add to the current literature by examining the relationship between Latina college students' sense of belonging and level of bicultural identity

to overall well-being. The study would also be providing valuable information on how researchers could use existing theories of suicidal behavior to develop suicide prevention programs. As mentioned earlier, Latinas are at an especially high risk for suicide. Although much research has been devoted to Latina adolescents' risk for suicide, little is known about college aged Latinas' risk for suicidality. Given their high risk in adolescence, it would be important to do research looking at their potential risk factors in adulthood and ways to lessen their risk. Because suicidal behavior and ideation are sensitive topics, participants' overall well-being will be measured as a proxy for suicidal ideation. A series of group sessions will take place in which two counselors from the colleges' counseling centers will mediate conversations around belongingness on campus. The hypotheses are as follows:

Hypothesis #1: Participants' well-being and sense of belonging will increase after participating in the group sessions.

Hypothesis #2: Participant scores of belonging and well-being will have a moderate, linear relationship with participant scores of well-being.

Hypothesis #3: Participants' scores of bicultural identity and belonging will be strong significant predictors of participants' scores of well-being, such that increases in the scores of bicultural identity and belonging will predict increases in participants' well-being.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Based on a power analysis based on previous research, 783 participants will be needed to test for a small effect size (Cohen, 1992). Participant criteria will include that the participant be female, Latino self-identifying, in their first year and attending a predominantly white institution.

Therefore, only participants who meet these requirements will be included in the data analysis. Participants within the sample are expected to be of varying ethnicities and races, while still identifying as Latino. Therefore, it is estimated most participants will identify as being of Mexican descent, Puerto Rican descent and Cuban descent (Kann et al., 2018). Because the study will focus on first year college students, it is estimated that many participants will be between the ages of 18 and 20.

Participants will be recruited during the campuses' orientation weeks and the first two weeks of the academic semester. Recruitment info will be distributed through fliers posted around the campuses, fliers distributed via school wide email list serves, and fliers distributed by campus organizations and affinity groups. Compensation will include participants receiving communication skills training and building community ties by participating in the research study. There will be no direct compensation (i.e. money given to participants).

## **Materials**

**Demographic Information.** Participants will be asked a series of questions regarding their race, ethnicity, gender, age, and year in college. Categories for race will include Black, Latino, Asian, White and other with the option to write in their race. Participants will be presented with the option to write in their ethnicity. Categories for gender will include Female, Male, and Other (with the option to write in their gender identity). Participants will also be asked to write in their age. Lastly, participants will be asked to write in their year in school.

**Measure of Belongingness.** To measure participants' sense of belongingness, the *Psychological Sense of School Membership Scale* (Goodenow, 1993) will be used. The scale measures participants "perceived belonging or psychological school membership". The scale was originally designed for use with adolescents, but it will be revised to fit with the university

setting (i.e. changing school name to that of university and changing “teacher” to “professor”). The scale contains 18 items with responses given on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1=completely false, 5=completely true). Higher scores are correlated with a higher sense of belongingness. Research has demonstrated an acceptable Cronbach’s alpha of .875 (Goodenow,1993).

**Measure of Well-Being.** The *General Health Questionnaire-28* (Goldberg & Hillier, 1979) will be used to measure participants’ overall well-being. The scale contains 28 items measuring four domains of well-being: somatic symptoms, anxiety/insomnia, social dysfunction and severe depression. The test was originally designed for screening purposes, so its original function matches the intended function of the proposed study. Respondents mark their responses based on a scale from 0-3 (0= Not at all, 3=Much more than usual). The total possible score ranges from 0-84. A score of 23 or 24 indicates the presence of distress. Lower scores on the questionnaire indicate better well-being. Researchers have shown acceptable reliability with Cronbach’s alpha for the measure being from 0.9-0.95 (Failde, Ramos, & Fernandez-Palacin, 2000).

**Measure of Bicultural Identity.** The *Bicultural Involvement Questionnaire-Short Version* (Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980) will be used to assess participant’s level of bicultural identity. The measure is comprised of 24 items, with half of the items measuring participants’ orientation to American values and the other items measuring their orientation to Hispanic values. The domains for cultural orientation include language use and behavior. Respondents answer on a 5-point Likert-type response scale (1=not at all, 5=very much). The scores for each scale are summed, and then the two subscales are added together to create one

score for level of bicultural identity. Larger scores signify higher levels of bicultural identity. The researchers have found reasonable reliability with Cronbach's alpha ranging from 0.75-0.96.

**Manipulation Check.** Within the post survey, an open-ended question will ask participants, "How many group sessions did you attend?". Participants will then write in how many sessions they attended. If a participant answers with a number lower than eight or higher than nine, their data will be removed from the analysis.

**Group Sessions.** The group sessions will be adapted from a group therapy model designed for Black women attending predominantly white institutions, called Invincible Black Women (Jones & Pritchett-Johnson, 2018). The therapy model is designed to occur over the course of a traditional semester in the U.S. and specifically address issues related to Black women's experiences in college. Therefore, only the length of each session and the weekly occurrence of the session will be kept the same. The group sessions will be 90 minutes each, take place once a week for nine weeks and be comprised of 6-12 members. The content of the sessions will be tailored to address the risk factors for Latina suicidal behavior. The literature suggests three possible risk factors for Latinas' suicidal behavior: acculturative stress, family conflict, and differences in gender role beliefs (Goldston et al., 2008).

Because the majority of these risk factors involve miscommunication and inefficient perspective taking, the group sessions will be heavily guided by discussions of interpersonal conflicts (disagreements with family, friends, peers etc.) and communication skills training to learn how to resolve conflicts. A New York based program, Life is Precious, has shown significant decreases in suicidal behavior of its participants due to efforts to increase the communication skills of its participants ("About Life is Precious™ | Comunilife," n.d.; Humensky et al., 2013). By giving Latinas the tools to navigate difficult interpersonal issues,

they should be able to reduce the amount of interpersonal conflict in their lives and reduce the risk for suicidal behavior, Also, by giving Latinas the space to discuss their interpersonal problems and obstacles with other women going through similar experiences, they are most likely to form connections with fellow peers and increase their sense of belonging on campus.

The first session will begin with a discussion about confidentiality and respect for others. The counselors will remind participants of the confidentiality form they signed prior to participating in the group sessions. The Counselor will then outline the purpose of the group sessions: to give space for people to process interpersonal problems and belonging on campus, while also learning effective communication skills to be able to navigate difficult conversations and reduce conflict. Group members will then introduce themselves until the end of the session. Sessions two through eight will begin with a weekly check-in, and then participants will be able to share any interpersonal problems they may be experiencing, and the group will collectively attempt to come up with solutions for them. The counselor will mediate the conversations and relate the topics back to the theme of belonging. When necessary, the counselors will intervene and provide psychoeducation on effective ways for communicating. The final session will be a closing discussion to allow participants to share what they have learned while participating and to discuss how the theme of belonging may have come up during their participation.

### **Procedure**

The study will be conducted at the counseling center of each predominantly white institution included in the study. Participants will be emailed an online survey link containing an informed consent form, confidentiality agreement, and a survey with demographic questions. Those who meet participant requirements will be emailed a link to another online survey

containing the scales previously mentioned. They will receive the email ten days prior to the first group session and asked to complete them before attending the first session. Participants will then attend the weekly sessions led by the two licensed counselors from the campus counseling center. Ten days after the last session, participants will be emailed a link to an online survey containing the scales and asked to complete them. They will then be debriefed and thanked for their participation.

### **Ethics**

The proposed study will expose participants to minimal risk with no deception. Participants will be asked to talk about topics related to campus belongingness, a topic that may come up in normal conversation on any given day. Topics of discussion may include how to better communicate with others, experiences of feeling isolated on campus, and instances in which students feel they have had negative interactions with others (i.e. faculty or students). The topics could be potentially sensitive areas of discussion for some participants. Participants who are struggling to build connections with others on campus, or those who are feeling distressed about the perceived campus climate, may find the topic of belongingness to be especially uncomfortable or emotion provoking.

While the topics may cause some level of discomfort and have participants share somewhat sensitive information, both their positive and negative personal experiences, the discussions are necessary to bring about ways in which the participants can break down belongingness and find ways to increase their sense of belongingness on campus. Participants will be able learn useful skills to improve their connectedness to campus and to others, both their peers and faculty members, while in a supportive environment. To create that supportive



environment, each session will be led by two licensed counselors from the college's counseling center. In addition, it will be mandatory that the counselors have multicultural training to help ensure they are accessible and understanding in the mediated conversations.

The participants will also be given information on how to contact and set up appointments at the college's counseling center. By having counselors from the college's counseling center, participants will be more likely to have some familiarity with the counseling center and be more likely to reach out to the counseling center should they need extra support during or after the study. All data collected will be anonymous to protect participants. The online surveys will not collect IP addresses so that the information given by participants cannot be traced back to them. Also, the survey data will be stored in a survey program that only the researcher has access to. To help further protect participants, participants in the study will be asked not to interact with one another outside of the group sessions. This will help ensure their privacy.

To ensure participation in the study is voluntary, the participants will be reminded at the beginning of the study and throughout the group sessions that participation is voluntary. Recruiting information for the study will be dispersed in communal campus spaces and via email list serves. Given that the sample will be comprised of first year students, they may feel pressured into participating in the study, fearing lack of participation could impact their grades. Therefore, faculty and professors will not be asked to disseminate the information directly to students to avoid possible coercion. The researcher will also reach out to student organizations and student affinity groups to pass along the recruiting information to their peers.

The proposed society would add to our knowledge of suicide prevention for college students. Because suicide is one of the leading causes for adults aged 18-25, psychologists have

put forth many theories and approaches to address suicide among this age group, and the general population. This study would add to our understanding of what protective factors could be bolstered in people to prevent them from considering suicide. In terms of benefit to society, the proposed study could lead to more effective suicide prevention programs for people of all ages.

### **Results**

Before the analyses of the hypotheses, outlier analyses will be conducted to exclude outliers from the data. In the case of missing data, SPSS will remove the incomplete data before running the analyses of the hypotheses. It is hypothesized that participant scores of well-being and belonging will increase after participating in the group sessions. Therefore, a t-test will be conducted to compare participants' scores of well-being before and after participating in the group sessions. The mean differences are expected to be significant, with participant well-being increasing after participating in the group sessions. Because the *General Health Questionnaire-28* measures better well-being as a lower score, the mean for participants' scores should be lower after participating, indicating better overall well-being by demonstrating little to no presence of distress. In addition, another t-test will be conducted to compare participants' scores of belonging before and after participating in the group sessions. The mean differences are expected to be significant, with participant belonging increasing after participating in the group sessions.

To test the hypothesized relationship between belonging and well-being, a Pearson's correlation will be conducted to examine the relationship between participant scores of belonging and well-being. The expected value for  $r$  should be negative and of moderate size, showing an inverse linear relationship between the two variables. Because lower scores on the measure of well-being indicate better participant well-being, as the well-being scores decrease, participants'

scores of belonging will increase, demonstrating a connection between sense of belonging and increased well-being of the participants. The third hypothesis will be tested using a linear regression analysis. Both participants' scores of bicultural identity and belonging will be strong significant predictors of participants' scores of well-being, such that increases in the scores of bicultural identity and belonging will predict decreases in scores of well-being. Together, they will account for a significant amount of the variance in scores of well-being. For every one unit increase in scores of bicultural identity, we would expect a decrease in well-being. Likewise, we would expect the same pattern with scores of belonging and well-being within the model.

### **Discussion**

Researchers have established the need for empirically based and culturally sensitive prevention programs for Latina suicidal behavior (Goldston et al., 2008; Humensky et al., 2013; Walrath et al., 2015). The literature on risk factors for this behavior has identified interpersonal conflict as a driving force for suicidal behavior among Latinas (Céspedes & Huey, 2008; Gomez et al., 2011; Nolle et al., 2012). While the research on theories of suicidal behavior is limited, Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide appears to conceptually explain the factors leading to Latina suicidal behavior. Researchers have also demonstrated links between sense of belonging and suicidal behavior (Ploskonka & Servaty-Seib, 2015), which would be an important factor in Latina suicidal behavior given Latinos' collectivistic upbringing (Arevalo et al., 2016). The literature also reveals connections between somatic symptoms and mental health (Escobar & Canino, 1989), as well as links between having a bicultural identity and better psychological adjustment among Latinos (Chen, Benet-Martínez, & Bond, 2008; de Domanico, Crawford, &

De Wolfe, 1994; Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991; Szapocznik, Kurtines, & Fernandez, 1980; Yamaguchi, Kim, Oshio, & Akutsu, 2016).

The expected results from the proposed study are that participant belonging and well-being will increase after participation in the group sessions. There will be a moderately sized, inverse relationship between belonging and well-being, in which increases in belonging will be correlated to decreases in scores of well-being, indicating improved participant well-being. Bicultural identity and belonging will both be strong predictors of well-being but belonging will be a stronger predictor of well-being compared to bicultural identity. The proposed results will be a result of the group sessions' focus on processing and resolving group members' interpersonal conflicts. The setting will allow for Latina college students to carve out space for themselves on a campus in which they may not feel that they belong. By effectively communicating with others and building stronger interpersonal ties with the people around them, the women who participate will have increased their sense of belonging, reducing their risk for suicidal behavior and improving their overall well-being.

As was stated earlier, this proposed study will help add to researchers' understanding of risk factors for suicidal behavior among Latina college students. It may also help set an example of a culturally sensitive prevention program, something previous literature has said is missing from empirical studies (Goldston et al., 2008; Humensky et al., 2013; Walrath et al., 2015). The lack of empirical studies on suicide prevention, culturally sensitive ones or otherwise, is due to a lack of a conceptual framework to understand suicidal behavior and guide research. Using Joiner's Interpersonal Theory of Suicide gives researchers an opportunity to conceptually approach and better research Latinas' suicidal behavior. Therefore, researchers will be able to use

their better understanding of the underlying causes and mechanism of Latina suicidal behavior to create better treatment and prevention models.

The proposed study highlights the potential for effective programs for Latinas to be implemented on college campuses. As the U.S. becomes increasingly diverse, programs for intervention and prevention must grow to meet the needs of the diverse people who will be accessing mental health services. In terms of colleges and universities, they too have an obligation to meet the needs of the diverse students who are entering institutions of higher education at increasing rates. From a business standpoint, attending college is similar to a transaction of services, people pay to attend, and they expect to receive an education and college experience equivalent to the amount they paid. Looking at it from this point of view, colleges should be working to expand programs designed to improve the experience of their students, this also includes the well-being of their students. Programs for Latina students should include programs aimed at building inclusive campus climates, increasing access to on campus academic and mental health resources, and providing students with a positive academic and social experience as they work towards their degrees.

The study, however, is not without its limitations. Because the proposed study is a quasi-experimental design, no causal conclusions can be drawn with complete certainty. The conclusions must take into account potential confounding variables such as external factors that could have improved the well-being of participants. Because the proposed study is the first of its kind, we do not yet know what kind of external factors to control for, but future researchers could potentially control for socioeconomic status or generational status. These variables could potentially be related to lower rates of belonging and well-being due to decreased access to resources. Also, the proposed study relies on more generalized risk factors for Latinas, when, in

fact, Latinas are an incredibly diverse group with varying cultural backgrounds and differing cultural views and practices. The current research has not yet begun to look into the nuances among the cultural expression of different ethnic groups that fall under the category of Latino. However, this study may encourage future researchers to study the differences among these groups, so researchers can better tailor programs to be more culturally sensitive and effective with different ethnic groups.

Future researchers should also take into consideration the history of different ethnic groups' integration into the U.S. For Latinos, the context in which they develop psychologically has much to do with their history of migration and integration into the U.S., especially depending on the region they settle in and the way they are received by members of the dominant society. Groups that are more easily integrated into the U.S. society could have a higher sense of belonging due to their easier transition into the dominant culture. For example, groups who have easier pathways to citizenship upon migrating to the U.S., could have more access to resources and face less discrimination. Thus, they may have less interpersonal conflict and better well-being to begin with. Yet, until researchers begin to examine the social and historical context these individuals live in, we will not have a comprehensive understanding of the psychological development or functioning of Latinos in the U.S. Also, psychologists will be unable to provide effective mental health services to this growing population.

The proposed study offers a conceptual approach and potential solution to a growing issue in the United States. Universities and colleges are becoming increasingly diverse and must meet the demands of a changing student demographic. This proposed study is a first step to providing more effective preventative measures to a population in need. By applying our current understanding of suicide through Joiner's theory, the proposed study will improve the well-being

of Latina college students by increasing their sense of belonging on campus via an interpersonal processing group designed to meet their needs. It will also give researchers a clearer understanding of the relationship between bicultural identity, belonging and well-being, factors that may also play a role in the well-being of other ethnic groups that have yet to be researched.

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