

# Cross-cultural Attitudes towards Suicide Ideation and Attempts in South Korea

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**ABSTRACT:** *Recently, suicide has become a hot research issue that is gaining attention in the interdisciplinary fields of public health, psychiatry, social work, sociology, and psychology. However, little is known about the risk of university students' suicidal attempts, and the role of attitudes towards life and suicidal attempts. The study explored the role of cross-cultural attitudes towards suicide among Korean and international students in Korea. The recent studies published in the peer-reviewed journal on suicidal attitudes published since 2005 were identified and analyzed from broader perspectives. The study key terms were "suicide", "attempts" "attitudes", "cross-culture", "University students", & "Korea". A variety of studies indicated that negative attitudes towards self has ultimately influence on suicidal ideation and subsequent action. Societal beliefs, values, and perceptions also play an important role and need attention in moderating suicidal problems. Suicide has become a serious social, economic, public health phenomenon in Korea and needs further empirical studies and comprehensive prevention strategies to reduce the highest suicidal risks.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Cross-culture, Attitudes, Suicide, University, Students, Korea*

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing body of literature that recognizes every 40 seconds a person dies by suicide; more than 800 000 people die due to suicide every year (WHO, 2018; Lindsay et al. 2016). Above 1.2 million adolescents die every year in the world, from largely preventable/avoidable causes (WHO, 2017). One of the leading causes of death around the world is suicide, in particular, the most leading cause of death among young adults (Anderson & Smith, 2005). It causes of death on an individual aged 15–29 years of productive young people worldwide (WHO, 2016).

Suicide rates have increased by 60% within the last 45 years in the world (WHO, 2014). It is one of the top causes of death among young people because they are significantly less likely to die of "diseases of affluence" and age, such as cancer and heart disease than of intentional and unintentional injuries, such as suicide and automobile accidents (Schwartz, 2006; Dogra et al. 2008). A considerable literature has grown up around the theme of suicide behavior, it is becoming extremely cause of injury and death worldwide.

South Korea has the highest suicide rate among the OECD nations (Sungwon et al. 2016; Hyeyoung et al. 2018). Adolescent suicide is a sad phenomenon all over the social aspects. Also, the suicide rate has been increasing, showing a total of 47%, which is 5th among the OECD nations (NSO, 2013). In Korea, students seem to feel suicide ideation due to diverse reasons such as school tests/

exams, low self-esteem, and external conflicts such as insecure relationships (Korean Youth Counseling Institute, 2006). (Kim et al. 2008) were recommended further research to make clear the role of attitudes in Korean's suicide problem.

The previous studies (Gutierrez et al. 2000; Mo, 2011) on attitudes have shown that suicidal attitudes have an important force on suicidal ideation and suicidal attempts. University students of today are studying various subjects to be lawyers, economists, psychologists, nurses, engineers, physicians, dentists, pharmacists, historians, public and business administrators, etc. and the future scientists of the world. However, problems such as depression, anxiety, and other emotional problems are leading students to a loss of confidence, and the severe manifestation of suicide.

Studying students' current attitudes towards suicide may be helpful to prevent suicidal ideation at an early stage and in providing appropriate mental/psychological counseling to reduce suicidal risks. The study, therefore, aimed to address the literature gap in and to discover the role of attitudes towards suicide among foreign and Korean university students in Korea (Erbacher, et al. 2014).

## METHODS

The study method was based on the study themes and objective to gain a comprehensive evaluation of the literature. A search was performed of the latest journals articles from PubMed, Global Health, Google Scholar, Summon, Academic Journal Database, (WHO, 2008) and PsychInfo data sources. The search method contained the key terms of "suicide", "cross culture", "attitudes", "college students", "University", & "Korea". The searches and

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analyses were focused on studies conducted in the university context and title, abstract, and the whole texts were examined. The full-text journals were examined and assessed for relevance from broader perspectives.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

As per the researcher's knowledge, this is the first study that investigates the aspect of suicidal attitudes among university students in Korea. Attitude plays in the way students think about and relate to suicide, and no previous study has compared the Korean and international students' attitudes towards suicide in different cultures. The study highlights the significant issues and contributed to the field. In this section, the researcher stated the findings which help to fill the gaps in the literature that had not been previously analyzed. The researcher described possible implications and explored potential study areas to further empirical studies and the cross-cultural concerns are also suggested to conduct more prevention programs and studies from broader perspectives.

**SUICIDE TRENDS AND ATTEMPTS IN KOREA:** Since the economic crisis in 1997, in Korea, suicidal deaths have increased very rapidly. It is regarded as one of the most serious public health and social problem in Korea. It also attributed to the surge financial crisis which needs policymakers' involvement in implementing several national suicide prevention strategies. The death in the younger age group has a greater socioeconomic impact than other common causes of death in the older age group (Jin et al. 2006). From 2003 suicide rate in Korea is the highest among the OECD countries. It has risen significantly in the last decade. A high rate (33.3) deaths per 100 000 in 2011 compared to the OECD average of 12.4 and recently released data shows 29.1 (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2013). This progress of rate shows yet, suicide is a hot social problem in the country (Goldman-Mellor, et al. 2014).

Furthermore, nearly 33.5 suicides per 100,000 committed in Korea in 2016, two times higher than the OECD average (Kim and Park, 2015). About half of violent deaths (45.8%) not associated with illness or natural causes, it caused by suicide in Korea. Suicide gains the highest cost after cancer (14 trillion won) in 2012, which is a higher socio-economic burden in Korea (National Health Insurance Corporation, 2014) (National Statistical Office, 2013).

Kwon et al. indicated that gatekeeper training is a major strategy in the national suicide prevention plan and has the aim to bring the number down to 17 deaths per 100,000 by 2022. The strategy includes training one million people to be "suicide gatekeepers" by quickly detecting symptoms of depression and referring people to appropriate professional services. Likewise, the Korean government has planned to provide depression tests as part of national health checkups free of charge and establish a department to manage and execute the national suicide prevention tasks (Paik, et al. 2014).

**SUICIDAL ATTITUDES:** How students recognize suicide influences the suicidal behavior of other students on a specific campus. For instance, some students believed that it is possible to prevent suicide, but they do not believe it is ethical in Korea (Kristen and Jong, 2014). There is no study was conducted on the role of attitudes toward suicide among University students. This permissive and less pro-prevention attitude may hamper the

prevention efforts and increase suicide risks in the country. There is a consensus among social scientists that suicide in college increased due to various risk factors such as academic struggles, harsh parenting, adolescent mental disorders and problems with peer relations (Mortier et al. 2017; Hawton et al. 2012).

Researchers attempted to examine college students' experience and frustration because of the pressure of competition for high grades and fear of future careers (Wu, Su, & Chen, 2009). As noted by the researchers, when students become disappointed and pressured at school, lastly, commit suicide. (Park & Kim, 2018) concludes that students in Korean universities must study hard, and low score/mark is considered as a shameful for themselves and their families. It has been related to low educational attainment (Mortier et al. 2017; DeLuca et al. 2016) and unwillingness to help-seeking from professionals for mental health specialists (Hom et al. 2015). Academic stress and depression were considerably associated with suicidal ideation and a risk factor for student suicide in universities.

It has been demonstrated that college students had considered suicide issues seriously and some had attempted suicide while in university (Wilcox et al. 2010; Westefeld et al. 2005). The most common reasons for suicide attempts in the studies were stress about school, relationship concerns, family problems, financial concerns, hopelessness, anxiety, and depression. University students have a probability to experience serious psychological disorders and other life events, which often precede suicide (Suicide Prevention Resource Center, 2010). An empirical study on the relationship between suicide and negative attitudes toward suicide at the individual and population level is recommended to assess the existing situation in universities.

However, (Harry et al. 2013) claim that suicide risk is less related to negative attitudes among students across India, Australia, and Italy. A study conducted by (Wilcox et al. 2010) has shown that 12% of college students had thought about suicide at least once in their lives and made a plan to attempt during college. Students know someone who has attempted or died by suicide affects others' attitudes towards life and death. On-campus suicide or suicide attempt could have a profound effect on roommates, classmates, faculty members, and the university community to engage in risky behaviors. When someone is in danger of suicide, his/her peers also influenced and made a plan to attempt suicide. An academic pressure during university, expose students to anxiety, loneliness, and depression which have negative effects in their life and a probability to mental disorders (Zong, 2015).

Several studies (Tomasula et al. 2012; Keefe et al. 2017; Anderson et al. 2015) also found that there is an increased risk of suicide among college students related to sexual assault/partner violence, depression and consider suicide as a legitimate option. These findings have shown there is a high relationship between sexual assault, suicidal thoughts among college students and due to fear cultural values /the shame-based resistance in seeking help and discussing with others about mental illness and suicidality (Chen, et al. 2011).

The study carried out by (Westefeld et al. 2005) reported that 24% of a sample of 1,865 college students has thought about attempting suicide. (Wolford et al. 2016) also found that suicidal risks in college are likely to increase with more frequent harassment, physical abuse, and emotional abuse. The relationship between intimate partner violence and the likelihood of suicidal thoughts are

among the major cause of suicide in college. An intimate partner abuse (physical, emotional, harassment) in relationship results psychosocial problems expose to suicidal thoughts (Wolford et al. 2016). For instance, emotional abuse is believed to be the strongest predictor for suicide among women college students. It has conclusively been shown important to find ways to reach out to students with higher levels of psychological distress to seek out mental health services (Baumeister, 2013).

Even if there is no previous direct comparison on attitudes towards suicide in Korean and international students, the main difference obtained in the study suggesting that students in Korean culture hold more acceptable attitudes towards suicide than others culture. The study result is consistent with the reports shown that the higher suicide rates in Korea. Cultural beliefs are different in countries, which may influence the way students understand events and life differently. Some cultures may discourage suicidal attempts and form negative suicide attitudes compared to other cultures. A stressful university environment is also exposing students' to more frustration from academic performance, so they form negative attitudes towards the future even towards life, which may increase the risk of suicide (Curtin et al. 2016).

## CONCLUSION

The current study discussed the various attitudes on suicide and the role of personal attitude influences suicidal behavior. Each suicide is a heartbreak that affects families, communities and the country. It has conclusively been shown that suicide is a serious social, economic, and public health phenomenon in Korea. An empirical study has yet to be conducted that examines university students' attitudes and perceptions of intervening with someone who is suicidal characteristics might be associated with attitudes about suicide. It needs regular scientific studies and comprehensive prevention strategies to help those at the highest suicidal risks on and off-campus. Further efforts are required to develop several reliable data and novel studies indices in Korean's circumstances to improve suicide prevention programs. Therefore, further studies should be performed to identify potential misconceptions and attitudes that might have a negative influence on suicide.

## DECLARATIONS

The author declares there are no competing interests.

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