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### Growing up in the inner city: Exploring the adolescent development and acculturation of urban suicidal Latinas.

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## Oxford Handbooks Online

### **Growing up in the US Inner City: Exploring the Adolescent Development and Acculturation of Urban Suicidal Latinas**

Carolina Hausmann-Stabile, Lauren Gulbas, and Luis Zayas

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### **Abstract and Keywords**

This chapter examines how adolescent development and acculturation impact suicidal behavior among Latinas living in the US inner city. After providing an overview of conceptual and empirical premises underlying immigrant youth development, acculturation, and suicidal behaviors, the article discusses cultural influences on Latina adolescents and their families. Drawing on data collected between 2005 and 2009, it then explores the various individual and interpersonal changes that Latina teens go through as a result of developmental and acculturative processes and how these changes relate to risks for suicide attempts. Based on cases that illustrate the developmental and acculturation trajectories of Latina nonattempters and attempters, the chapter suggests that acculturation to street culture shapes the suicidal behavior of Latina teens growing up in urban poverty.

Keywords: adolescent development, acculturation, Latina, inner city, adolescent, suicide, attempt, street culture, urban, poverty

Rates of suicide attempts among Latina adolescents in the United States have been higher historically than those of their non-Latino White and African American counterparts (Center for Disease Control [CDC], 1996, 2013), and today approximately 15% of Latina adolescents report attempting suicide during the past 12 months (CDC, 2013).<sup>1</sup> Acculturation is a hypothesized precursor of some of Latinas' behavioral and mental health problems (Gonzales, Knight, Morgan-Lopez, Saenz, & Sirolli, 2002; Rogler, Cortes, & Malgady, 1991). Even though adolescent development and acculturation are suggested to be related to the suicide attempts of Latina adolescents (Zayas, Lester, Cabassa, & Fortuna, 2005), the process by which these factors impact suicidal behavior is not well understood.

In this chapter, we focus our attention on the various individual and interpersonal changes that Latinas living in the US inner city undergo as a result of developmental and acculturative processes and how these changes are associated with risks for suicide attempts. We frame our work within an ecodevelopmental model (Zayas et al., 2005) that embeds individual processes, such as development and acculturation, within their respective sociocultural environments. The conceptual model anchoring this project suggests that the suicide attempts of Latina adolescents give expression to the developmental and acculturative conflicts facing young Latinas. In this chapter, our purpose is to explore the development and acculturation processes of Latina teens to illustrate what the teens go through as they become adults, the diverse cultural values to which they acculturate, and how these transitions are integrated and moderate the girls' suicidal behavior. By doing so, we highlight the importance of context and assert that, for Latinas growing up in urban poverty, acculturation to street culture<sup>2</sup> shapes their developmental trajectories and contributes to their suicide attempts.

### **Conceptual and Empirical Premises**

To understand the high rate of suicide attempts among Latina adolescents, we build on the scholarship on immigrant youth development, acculturation, and suicidal behaviors. Our core premise is that the suicidal behaviors of Latinas are strongly influenced by the interplay of adolescent developmental factors and family dynamics, on one hand, and acculturation processes, on the other hand (Zayas, 2013; Zayas et al., 2005). We advance this thesis by highlighting the importance of context in shaping developmental and acculturation trajectories, as these trajectories are contextualized phenomena.

Traditional frameworks of adolescent development are informed by research conducted mostly in the United States with middle-class non-Latino White children (Arnett, 2008), leaving unanswered questions about what constitutes normative development among youth from immigrant backgrounds (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Grounded in immigrant child development theory and research, we suggest that development and acculturation are simultaneous and interdependent processes for Latina adolescents (see, for instance, Fuller & Garcia Coll, 2010; Sam & Oppedal, 2003). Along with Massey and Brodmann (2014), we posit that social and cultural environments are critical for human development. Thus, our work highlights the need to examine Latinas' development and acculturation within social and cultural contexts.

## **Cultural Influences on Latina Adolescents and Their Families**

The literature has indicated that Latino children, independent of their age of arrival to the United States or their generational status, must interact with multiple cultural worlds (see, for instance, Schwartz, Birman, Benet-Martínez, & Unger, this volume). These worlds include the Latino heritage that influences their interactions at home as well as the US culture that they experience through their participation in school and community environments and through their interactions with peers (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). These potentially contrasting cultural streams often propose different developmental tasks that present youth with value conflicts. As they develop, immigrant-origin children must acculturate, a process by which individuals learn and adapt to sociocultural contexts that have different cultural scripts (Smokowski & Bacallao, 2011). In their acculturation, people are not passive recipients of cultural messages; rather, they play an important role in negotiating their cultural worlds by actively bridging diverse cultural elements.

Unfortunately, much research on Latino acculturation places culture at the individual level by assessing individuals' degree of cognitive or behavioral endorsement of values thought to be culture-specific and ignoring the societal and historical aspects that may affect the endorsement of cultural orientations. As Suárez-Orozco (2003, p. 67) notes, this leaves unanswered "the basic question of 'acculturating to what?' Taking the United States as a point of reference, we can observe that American society is no longer, if it ever was, a uniform coherent system." Research on acculturation has ignored the degree of social inequality between immigrant and receiving groups and the important power differentials shaping acculturation processes and the diverse cultural values to which individuals adhere.

In this chapter, we present a study of acculturation that incorporates the ways in which individuals actively negotiate "culturally available meanings" (Lester, 2005, pp. 305). People are not passive agents in their acculturation processes, but rather exercise agency through action and choices that affect their acculturation. By incorporating contextual factors in our analysis, we highlight the societal and historical forces that shape what cultural meanings are available for Latina adolescents in the inner city and how the teens exercise their agency by actively bridging them. In doing so, we attend not only to cognitive and behavioral dimensions of acculturation but also to the importance of interpersonal relationships in shaping the cultural values to which adolescents gravitate.

The ways in which individuals engage in their relationships with others can be placed on a continuum from sociocentric to individualistic. In cultures positioned on the sociocentric<sup>3</sup> side of the continuum, people define themselves in relationship to others,

whereas individualistic cultures stress personal autonomy (Canino & Guarnaccia, 1997). There is empirical evidence that Latino<sup>4</sup> culture is more sociocentric, and US culture is more individualistic (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010). As argued by Canino and Guarnaccia (1997), cultural orientations have implications for child development and socialization practices. We extend the continuum by focusing our attention on the ways in which interpersonal relationships, gender roles, context, and family dynamics shape specific manifestations of collectivism and individualism. Instead of relying on cultural value labels, our analytic approach links the teens' behaviors, emotions, and cognitions with the prevailing ethos that, for instance, prioritizes specific interactional patterns among adults and children.

Because cultures define what matters most for people's well-being, there is great diversity in the ways people from different cultures experience and express what makes them happy or distresses them. Distress and suffering are expressed through accepted cultural idioms of distress (Kirmayer, 1989). As Zayas and Gulbas (2012) note, Latinas' cultural vulnerability to express emotional distress may take the forms of suicide attempts. In this chapter, we link Latina teens' cultural vulnerability to suicide attempts with the sociocultural contexts that frame their development and acculturation.

## **Latina Adolescents and the Inner City Sociocultural Context**

In the United States, Latinos are the largest urban minority (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011), and about half (45%) of all Latinos live in just 10 large metropolitan areas (Motel & Patten, 2012). About one-quarter of Latinos live below the federally defined poverty line (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, & Albert, 2011; Macartney, Bishaw, & Fontenot, 2013). Thus, urban poverty frames adolescence for many Latinas. Scholars (see, for instance, Bourgois, 1999; Greenberg & Schneider, 1994) have framed minority youth engagement in high-risk behaviors such as suicide, substance abuse, and violence, within the notion of "street culture." Street culture refers to the expression of the internalized discrimination and oppression that people experience in contexts charged with symbolic, structural, and everyday violence. At the core of street culture is a celebration of violence that ensures personal safety and dignity highlighted in the importance of street creed or "respect." In street culture, the celebration of violence is, in effect, a powerful means of conflict resolution and self-preservation during interpersonal conflicts. Although this appears to be counterintuitive, a person's willingness to exercise violence prevents her or him from becoming targets of violence by others. Although the threat of violence toward others may function as a self-presentation mechanism, the internalization of discrimination and oppression results in a great deal of violence toward oneself.

It is critical to understand how the practices of street culture shape acculturation processes, as these practices ultimately replicate the very patterns of exclusion experienced by the poor and the foreign-born in the first place (see, for instance, Portes & Rumbaut, 2001; Portes & Zhou, 1993). The concept of street culture is useful given its emphasis on understanding the contexts of the inner city, but it risks ghettoizing important social phenomena. Therefore, we borrow from this concept to emphasize the ways in which Latina teens and their families adapt to the stressors and challenges brought about by living in the inner city, which include poor and failing schools, crowded neighborhoods, and exposure to drug markets, among others (Suárez-Orozco, 2003). Similar issues may apply to other minority and immigrant groups in the United States and other countries as well.

Furthermore, our approach to acculturation does not assume a single dominant culture in the United States that youth of immigrant backgrounds must learn and to which they must adapt (see Rudmin, deCastro, & Wang, this volume). Because US inner-city areas are defined by local geography, population demographics, public transportation, and quality and type of housing, there are likely multiple types of street cultures defined by the local contexts in which Latino youth develop. Therefore, “street culture,” as we use the term in this chapter, should be understood as determined by the nature of the inner city in which the adolescent Latina is growing up. These young women must grapple simultaneously with the cultural vision of the “American Dream” and middle-class consumer culture, on one hand, and the specific spatial contexts in which they live, on the other hand. These issues form the central components of our analyses of Latinas’ suicidal behaviors. In this chapter, we focus our attention on the various individual and interpersonal changes that Latinas living in the US inner city undergo as a result of developmental and acculturative processes, and we highlight the sociocultural contexts within which these changes are situated to contextualize teens’ risks for suicide attempts.

## **Methods**

Data for this project were collected between 2005 and 2009 to study the sociocultural processes of Latina adolescent suicide attempters (R01 MH070689; Zayas, PI). The study methods and data have been described in detail elsewhere (Zayas, 2013). In this project, Latinas are defined as either females who were born in Latin America and immigrated to the United States or US-born females whose family background is Latin American. Data collection involved a questionnaire and an in-depth interview. A total of 139 adolescents were recruited for participation in the qualitative phase of the larger study, including 73 Latinas between the ages of 11 and 19 who had attempted suicide within 6 months preceding the interview and a comparison group of 66 Latina adolescents with no

reported lifetime history of suicidal behaviors. Suicide attempts were defined as nonfatal, self-inflicted destructive acts with the explicit or implied intent to die (Goldsmith, Pellmar, Kleinman, & Bunney, 2002). For this chapter, we conducted secondary qualitative data analysis of 55 in-depth interviews with adolescent Latinas between the ages of 11 and 19 who had attempted suicide (Table 1). We compared the suicide attempters' data with that from 49 interviews of Latina adolescents who did not have a history of suicide attempts.

Table 1 Demographics

	<b>Attempters (n = 55)</b>	<b>Nonattempters (n = 49)</b>
Age range	11 to 19	11 to 19
Country of birth		
<i>US</i>	30 (54.5%)	33 (67.3%)
<i>DR</i>	10 (18.1%)	5 (10.2%)
<i>Mexico</i>	5 (9.1%)	1 (2%)
<i>PR</i>	3 (5.5%)	4 (8.2%)
<i>Other</i>	7 (12.7%)	6 (12.2%)
Descent		
<i>DR</i>	20 (36.4%)	14 (28.6%)
<i>PR</i>	16 (29.1%)	16 (32.7%)
<i>Mexican</i>	9 (16.3%)	6 (12.2%)
<i>Other</i>	10 (18.2%)	13 (26.5%)
Living arrangements		
<i>With bio-mother</i>	43 (78.2%)	41 (83.7%)
<i>With both bio-parents</i>	14 (25.5%)	15 (30.6%)

The participants were growing up in inner cities located within a large metropolitan area in the East Coast of the United States. Participants who attempted suicide were recruited from a municipal hospital with psychiatric emergency and outpatient departments, a private psychiatric hospital, and a community-based mental health service agency serving Latinos. All participants who had attempted suicide were referred to the study by a clinician who assessed their capacity to complete the interview, so as to avoid imminent



risk or psychologically fragile participants. Participants with no history of suicide attempts were recruited from pediatric clinics and local community agencies that provided after-school, prevention, and/or youth development programs. Exclusionary criteria for participation among all participants in the study included severe mental illness (e.g., diagnosis of psychotic disorder). Adolescents provided assent and consent, and parents also consented to daughters' participation.

## **Qualitative Interview**

The in-depth interviews were intended to elicit from the girls as much description and insight as could be recalled, articulated, perceived, understood, and explained regarding their suicide attempts, their adolescent experience, and the cultural and social forces that shaped their lives. Interviews started with broad, nonthreatening questions and gradually proceeded to more specific, sensitive topics (Charmaz, 2002). Interviews covered a broad range of topics such as pubertal development, physical changes, peer relationships, academic performance, gender roles, plans for the future, recreational and work-related activities, dating and engagement in sexual practices, competencies and skills to deal with others, sense of self, ethnic identity, sexual identity exploration, developmental rites of passage, such as sweet sixteen or quinceañera parties, and so forth. Certain topics that were not systematically explored across participants only emerged in the qualitative interview when the participants volunteered them. All in-depth interviews were audiotaped, transcribed, and analyzed by a team of bilingual and bicultural researchers. Qualitative interviews lasted between 25 and 70 minutes.

## **Sampling and Grouping of Participants**

Sampling of participants for this project was completed in two steps. In the original project ( $N = 232$ ; 122 attempters and 110 nonattempters), participants were randomly assigned either to complete only the standardized questionnaire ( $n = 91$ ) or to answer both the questionnaire and the qualitative interview ( $n = 141$ ). For this project, only attempters and nonattempters ( $n = 73$  and 68 respectively) who completed the questionnaire and the interview were included. Participants' data were then grouped within 11 to 19 age cohorts. The interview transcripts of six 11-year-olds, ten 12-year-olds, twenty-three 13-year-olds, twenty-six 14-year-olds, nineteen 15-year-olds, twenty-three 16-year-olds, twenty-one 17-year-olds, eleven 18-year-olds, and two 19-year-olds ( $n = 141$ ) were imported into NVivo 9 (QSR, 2011) for data coding.

## **Analytic Strategy**

The analytic strategy involved a continuous shifting between individual case, comparisons across cases, and comparisons between suicidal and nonattempter adolescents. Our analytic goal was to detect patterns that could be linked to different developmental and acculturation transitions throughout the adolescent years. This comparison focused on similarities and differences between attempter and nonattempter teens within and across age groups in order to explore the relationship among development, acculturation, and suicidal behavior.

## **Data Analysis**

We analyzed the transcripts using a thematic analysis approach (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). The thematic analysis was divided into two steps: (1) data coding and (2) development and analysis of a matrix of coded text. We developed a coding framework that relied on a mixed deductive and inductive approach to maintain a reciprocal relationship between previous knowledge and data analysis (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). The constructs of interest were derived from the literature on adolescent development and acculturation as well as themes that emerged from the data. Under the broad theme of developmental issues, we focused on adolescent autonomy and independence, relatedness, relationships with family members and peers, and conflict negotiation. Concerning acculturation, we concentrated on the various ways in which collectivistic and individualistic cultural orientations were expressed within different sociocultural domains, including family interactions, interpersonal relationships within the home and among peers, and ideas and practices related to gendered norms. Specific attention was directed to the ways in which teens applied cultural labels to these various domains. For example, we highlighted how participants described patterns of family interaction as an expression of Latino culture, mainstream US culture, and/or street culture.

The coding of the data followed two general phases: preparation and organizing. The preparation phase involved becoming familiar with the literature informing the project, and getting “immersed in the data” (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008, p. 109) by reading it through several times (Polit & Beck, 2004). The organizing phase involved coding the data. In a mixed deductive and inductive analytic approach, this step required developing codes informed by existing knowledge as well as using open coding, which involved reading the transcripts and creating codes based on the data. We kept records on the creation of new codes within the codebook, to monitor thematic coverage and data saturation.

After the transcripts were coded, multiple matrices of coded text (Miles & Huberman, 1994) were generated. Matrices of coded text are an essential step that facilitates analysis of qualitative data across cases (Ayres, Kavanaugh, & Knafl, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994), because, among other things, they allow researchers to identify patterns across cases. The matrices contained data such as short segments of text, phrases, or quotations. The code matrices were constructed in Microsoft Excel, and data were organized by suicide condition and participants' age. Each spreadsheet listed participant units (columns) and coded text (rows). Author 1 first carried out all deductive and inductive coding using digital spreadsheet software (Meyer & Avery, 2009), after which Author 2 independently reviewed the coding. Any discrepancies or concerns were brought to the attention of team members, discussed, and revised according to group consensus (Guest, MacQueen, & Namey, 2013). Internal validity was derived through systematically and carefully documenting the contexts in which themes were mentioned—and validity was facilitated through a team-based approach (Sobo, 2010).

Through this process, the researchers identified similar configurations of themes (such as similar ways to deal with developmental stressors) and developed thematic profiles for conditions/age. Several themes emerged as salient to understanding the acculturative profiles of participants in our study. These themes included, for instance, *respeto*, obedience, independence, importance of family, and importance of peers. This approach allowed for comparisons across participants and across condition/age and for identification of developmental and acculturation change patterns across ages and condition and their relationship with suicide attempts. Data analyses indicated three common developmental and acculturation patterns among attempters and nonattempters during early (11 to 14), middle (15 to 16), and late adolescence (17 to 19). Using a team approach, we discussed the potential for participants' stories to be used as case vignettes to describe the main themes (Sobo, 2010). Following a team discussion and consensus, the profiles of six participants were chosen as representative. In the case vignettes presented in the next section of the chapter, we draw attention to the different ways in which the themes were expressed by participants to describe the broader ways in which acculturative processes were enacted.

## **Results**

The developmental and acculturation trajectories of Latina nonattempters and attempters are illustrated with cases selected on the basis of how well they represented the patterns observed at early, mid-, and late adolescence. The case presentation begins with nonattempters, follows with suicidal teens, and concludes with a brief summary.

## **Nonattempters Entering Adolescence**

Yubelkis, a 12-year-old girl, lived with her mother and spent most of her time in the company of aunts, uncles, cousins, and other relatives in her extended family. Her narrative centered on her relationships with her mother and other family members. Yubelkis describes a life centered on the adults in her family, a world with clear routines and expectations that she had fulfill. *"I go to school, walk with my friends, when I get back from school I do my homework. When my mom arrives from work I greet her, hug her, give her a kiss, and after, around 10 or 9 pm, we all go to sleep."* On weekends, Yubelkis shadowed her mother doing chores, visiting and caring for relatives, and running errands. These activities were in tune with typical socialization practices for Latina girls, which stress the importance of learning household chores (Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004) and how to care for others (Gil & Vazquez, 1996). By enacting an ethos that emphasized the centrality of family, Yubelkis displayed a behavioral manifestation of collectivism.

Asserting her autonomy was less important to Yubelkis than being obedient and meeting her caregivers' expectations. For instance, her mother chose the peers deemed adequate for Yubelkis to socialize with, and closely monitored their interaction. Yubelkis reported that she was allowed to be with friends within the boundaries of her home or on the way to school. Although she sometimes expressed frustration with not being able to go out to play with her friend, she accepted the rules. *"I tell (mother), can I go with my friend over there to buy something? She is going to ask me where will I go, and I must tell her."* Although Yubelkis did not draw on the cultural discourse of *respeto*, which encourages obedience toward adults, her acknowledgment of rules and responsibilities suggests that she behaved according to this ethos. On occasion she would resist the authority of her parents. For example, in the face of unmet requests for permission, Yubelkis's frustration escalated, and she sometimes resorted to temper tantrums. She would not, however, infringe on the rules set by her caregivers.

Yubelkis's apartment was located in the heart of the inner city. At 11, she viewed the neighborhood as dangerous for children, especially girls, because of their vulnerability to sexual predators. *"(There are) many rapes ... here. In the park close to my home there was a girl ... but they had killed her, and thrown her body in the park ... (in the US) they like to sexually abuse boys and girls."* Perhaps this perspective reinforced Yubelkis's desire to stay close to caregivers and discouraged her from disobeying her mother.

## **Nonattempters Mid-Adolescence**

As a 14-year-old, Kamila's daily experiences were marked by her liminal position. She was not only between childhood and adulthood but also between Latino and American

cultures. Kamila lived with both her parents and an older sister with whom she had a conflictual relationship. As a primary manifestation of this liminality, Kamila's life took place between her family and her peers. These two dimensions were rarely in contact with each other. Life at home felt gloomy at times, in part due to her feelings of alienation from family members. *"(Life at home) is boring because there is nothing to do there. It is only me and my sister, and I really don't talk to my sister."* Peers offered an alternative to her feelings of isolation, and she had recently started spending time after school with a close friend.

Although Kamila described her parents as not very emotionally involved with her, their emotional distance did not translate into a lack of adult supervision. She asked her mother for authorization to spend time with friends, and after describing her plans, was given a curfew. This process was not, however, free of negotiation tactics and resistance. Although Kamila acknowledged the need to be obedient, she tested mother's rules. *"Last Friday (I asked) 'Mommy can I go to some place?' And she says, 'Yes, but come back at this time, early.' So, I was like 'It's Friday, I don't want to come back early,' but I have to ... I was like 10 minutes late and (mother) went to go get me."* If Kamila broke a rule, her mother punished her by not letting her go out. Even when unsupervised, she observed her punishment. Examples such as these show how Kamila enacted a careful balance between individual autonomy and *respeto*.

Kamila shared that the quality of the relationship with her parents had diminished in recent years, due to economic constraints, developmental conflict, and acculturation processes. Kamila's parents were required to spend most time working to make ends meet, limiting their ability to provide her with much-needed emotional support. This relational strain was exacerbated by emerging developmental conflicts that centered on issues of autonomy. Developmentally, Kamila felt alienated from the world of children, although she had yet to find her place among adults. *"Sometimes I go to family parties, but I don't really want to go. It is little kids parties, the grown ups on one side and the little kids on the other side and I'm there, doing nothing."*

Ultimately, these relational tensions played out at a cultural level. Kamila, in tune with normative developmental processes for adolescents in the United States, wished to exercise autonomy. Clothing shopping was an opportunity to explore her sense of style and to learn to make financial decisions. *"When you are a teenager, your parents are supposed to give you money, and then you go shopping by yourself. My mom does not do that, she takes me shopping."* Kamila's narrative reflects mainstream American socialization norms, in which parents provide children with allowances to develop financial management skills. Even though Kamila expressed a greater level of acculturation regarding the economic socialization of US teenagers, she did not challenge

her mother's picking up and purchasing her clothes. In the face of developmental and cultural conflicts, Kamila's endorsement of *respeto* meant more to her than her need to assert herself. Furthermore, because she was able to understand that her desire to shop was developmentally and culturally appropriate in the United States, her reluctance to engage in a conflict signaled Kamila's careful balance of conflicting developmental models and protected her relationship with her mother. At 14, Kamila's sense of obligation and submission toward adults, anchored in collectivistic cultural values, might have been too strong for her to disregard.

Kamila described the inner city as dangerous, and she thought that the dangers of the street could reach her through associating with deviant peers. This perspective aligned Kamila with her mother's beliefs about the street. *"My mom is really strict so she doesn't really want us going out places ... I think it is because of my older sister, she is always going outside. She's the one that smokes, drinks and all that ... that is why she does not want to let me either because she thinks I am (going to) do the same."* Kamila's dualistic categorization of womanhood framed her self-definition. *"I do not like partying. Drinking, smoking, none of that. My sister is the party, I am the party pooper. I just like staying home sometimes."* Although her family relationships lacked warmth, she saw that her place was at home.

Kamila saw that the violence in the streets only led to more violence, and she was aware of the potential harmful consequences that this violence could carry for her. For instance, after a conflict with a classmate, her sister offered to help, but Kamila turned down the offer. *"(My sister) would trouble with that girl. I'm like 'Stop! I do not want to start any trouble because after you do whatever you are going to do, they are going to come after me.'"*

### **Nonattempters Late Adolescence**

The story of Tonya, an 18-year-old participant, helped illustrate the blending and alternation of collectivistic and individualistic cultural values observed among nonattempter teens toward the end of their adolescence. Tonya had just recently moved back to her parents' apartment, after almost a year of living at her ex-boyfriend's grandmother's home. Her move out of the parental home was prompted by the constant arguments with her father around her friendships and her desire to make decisions about her leisure time. She considered these choices to be developmentally appropriate among older adolescents growing up in the United States.

Tonya conveyed an understanding of development milestones as suggested by her peers' developmental expectations. She framed her struggles with her father within broader conflicts between American and Latino cultures. *"I think that's the reason why (father) is*

*like that, he is still in the Spanish culture, and I'm like in the American culture."* Her father disapproved her socialization with peers and understood Tonya's actions as violating the ethos of collectivism, as signaling her distancing from the family. *"(He) doesn't like when I go out because he thinks that I'd rather would choose (my friends over) my family."*

After Tonya was expelled from her home, she moved to her boyfriend's grandmother's apartment, and interpreted the bonds with her boyfriend's family as being family ties. *"They actually saw me as a family member, because I used to always go there and hang around them."* Interestingly, Tonya framed her relationship with her boyfriend's family in terms of the importance of the family, aligning with the patriarchal values expressed by her father. Tonya was able to appeal to the ethos of family—in this case, the family of her boyfriend—to justify her distancing from her family of origin.

After leaving her parents' home, Tonya understood her move to her boyfriend's grandmother's apartment as preserving her sense of morality and values. She also deferred moving in with a partner so she could engage in activities that signaled the transition to young adulthood, such as working, going to college, and developing a career. Her desire to work and have a career was in line with individualistic cultural orientations that emphasize independence and equate personal development with career trajectories. During the year that Tonya lived with her boyfriend's grandmother, she experienced a new sense of autonomy, earning an income and making decisions for herself. *"I'm growing up, I (have to) be independent for myself."*

Her year of independence ended after Tonya decided to return home to care for her increasingly ailing mother. *"We found that my mom had cancer, and didn't want to leave my mother alone."* In order to preserve family harmony, she decided to be more passive, obedient, and avoidant of conflicts by not challenging her father's rules. *"I'm home again, so I'm just trying to manage (the conflicts with father) ... Like try to listen to him and just agree whatever he says."* By coming back home, Tonya's behaviors displayed her endorsement of traditional collectivistic family, interpersonal, and gendered values. More importantly, returning to her parents' home signaled a reorientation of her sense of well-being: Caring for her mother in a time of crisis was more important than her newly acquired independence.

Tonya shared that her parents were very concerned about safety issues in the inner city, especially for women. *"(Father) sees on TV like the news always about girls getting raped, getting robbed, or like so many dumb stuff they do on the streets ... he's afraid I guess, afraid that anything could happen to me."* Context and people were considered a source of potential risks for Tonya, and she avoided associating with deviant peers and

was open to be both supervised and offered protection by her older male sibling. *“(My older brothers) saw that I was not in the wrong place with the wrong people.”*

## **Summary**

This brief summary aims to highlight the main developmental and acculturation patterns detected among Latina nonattempters in early, mid-, and late adolescence. During early adolescence, Latina nonattempter teens' behaviors were mostly defined by their caregivers' expectations and guidelines. The girls' behavioral endorsement of collectivistic cultural values regarding family and interpersonal relationships informed their understanding of their relationships within and outside the family. For the most part, strong emotional ties linked young nonattempters and caregivers, and strong bonds were especially characteristic of the relationship between the girls and their mothers. The intense and often emotionally rewarding relationships helped to reinforce the incorporation of collectivistic cultural values. The teens saw dangers in the inner city where they were growing up. Their perception of their adult family members as protectors and the risks in their neighborhoods made them more willing to submit to adult supervision.

During mid-adolescence, Latina nonattempters occupied a transitional place between childhood and adolescence and between collectivistic and individualistic cultural orientations. Their life now, due to developmental issues, had evolved from being family-centered to taking place within parallel worlds: the one around their families and that of their peers. Some of the girls tried unsuccessfully to import individualistic cultural values into their family dynamics, for instance, questioning their parents' behaviors or criticizing their collectivist views. Others demanded more independence. This did not translate, however, into an open display of resistance, and for the most part the girls were obedient at home. Their efforts did erode some of the warmth and reciprocity in the relationships with their caregivers, and during this period of time, conflicts between teens and parents were more common. The teens' perception of the dangers of the inner city partially shifted from being about context to being about relationships with deviant peers.

During late adolescence, most Latina nonattempters were more autonomous and independent. The cultural balance was tipped toward collectivistic cultural values, as these values framed the relationships that the adolescents valued the most—those with their caregivers and family members. Furthermore, relationships with people outside the family were for the most part interpreted in terms of family affiliations. Overall, the teens' incorporation of sociocentric cultural values reshaped the meaning of the individualistic-oriented values acquired as they developed. For instance, they displayed their independence by choosing to care for others in the family, and by avoiding conflicts to ensure the family's unity and harmony. At this point, they had learned to take care of themselves, primarily by staying close to the family.



## **Attempter Teens**

Following the format of the previous sections, we illustrate the developmental and acculturation processes of Latina suicidal adolescents with three cases of participants at early, middle, and late adolescence. We focus on patterns of developmental and acculturative change, which we later integrate when comparing teens by age and suicidal status.

### **Attempters Entering Adolescence**

The case of Jennyfer, a 12-year-old participant, illustrated some of the issues shaping a Latina attempter's transition from childhood to the adolescent years. Jennyfer lived with her mother and three brothers, and her extended family was nearby. She described a home filled with arguments and tensions. She spent most of her time, however, with peers. Her relationships with both her family members and her peers were filled with altercations ranging from arguments to physical fights.

Jennyfer described a life in turmoil, in part because she asserted her needs and expected an immediate response. The driving forces behind Jennyfer's decision-making processes were her impulses: what she wanted and needed right at that moment. The centrality of the self in her interactions suggests her endorsement of individualistic cultural orientation. She had difficulties managing frustration, especially in the face of conflicts and limit setting. *"I get mad, real mad, and I don't know what I do when I'm mad."* Thus, her relationships with adults, siblings, and peers were tumultuous and filled with altercations that often escalated into screaming matches, temper tantrums, physical fights, and more recently, a suicide attempt. When her environment did not respond to Jennyfer's demands, she felt shortchanged and neglected. Her mother was often the source of her frustration. *"Every time I tell (my mother that) I want to do something, she will be like, 'Oh no, no, no, no.'"* In Jennyfer's account, the constant arguments with her mother confirmed her perception that she was not loved. Not surprisingly, she attempted suicide after an argument with her mother. *"Me and my mother got into an argument because I didn't clean the bathroom. I got mad cause my temper is real high ... and I threw everything on the floor ... I went straight to my room (and took the 31 pills)."*

She did not see adults as a source of authority or wisdom, and she relied on her own skills to solve the issues she encountered in her daily life. *"Some people give me advice, but I don't go for it because I need to learn my own advice ... Because nobody is going to be there for me."* Her feelings of tension, inadequacy, and discomfort in relationships were probably combined with a deeply rooted sense of loneliness and mistrust.

Jennyfer's mother and adult relatives endorsed sociocentric cultural values regarding family and gender roles. For instance, her mother prepared and delivered meals for her male relatives. Adult family members maintained close contact with each other. Furthermore, Jennyfer felt unloved because her mother's care and attention was focused on her extended kin instead of on her. However, it appears that these cultural values had not been passed down to the younger generation. Among adolescents such as Jennyfer, collectivistic cultural values emphasizing obedience and *respeto* appeared to have had little impact in helping to improve their relationships.

It might also be the case that the dysfunction that Jennyfer described for her family precluded the development of family bonding critical for the process of enculturation. For instance, Jennyfer reported that her mother did not model alternative conflict management techniques for her to learn. When they argued, her mother yelled and insulted her. This might suggest that Jennyfer's mother's behavior and conflict negotiation skills may have contributed to escalating rather than reducing their disputes.

Jennyfer was failing academically, and often engaged in fights at school. *"I go to school I always start fights. They say that I am the bully in school."* The environments in which Jennyfer was developing were a source of discomfort and tension. *"I don't feel right in school. I don't feel comfortable ... Like everywhere I go I don't feel comfortable. Like uncomfortable at my own house."* Jennyfer sought refuge from home and school in the streets, cutting classes. She spent large amounts of time in the company of other teens who like her, had conflictive relationships with caregivers and were failing academically. More importantly, she spent her time without positive adult supervision.

Cutting classes and being outside the family home with little adult supervision, combined with lack of experience, placed Jennyfer in dangerous situations that, in line with conflict-resolution styles modeled within street culture, she attempted to solve through violence. She shared her fear of being assaulted by groups of peers, "jumped," and discussed her regular engagement in physical fights with others. Her mother was marginally involved in caring for the girl's safety. For instance, she sometimes approached potential rivals in the neighborhood with suggestions of one-to-one fighting instead of gang attacks. *"Like if I want to fight somebody, like if somebody wants to jump me, and I don't have nobody (to help me fight), my mother is always there telling them not to jump me, (and asking) why they cannot fight me one on one."* This suggested that there were no places for Jennyfer to develop safely, and that the adults in her life were likely unfit to protect and help her overcome the challenges she faced. Furthermore, the conflict-resolution models offered by Jennyfer's mother suggest the mother's endorsement of street culture.

### **Attempters Mid-Adolescence**

The case of Virna, a 15-year-old adolescent, illustrates the developmental and acculturation issues that Latina suicide attempters face at mid-adolescence. Virna was born overseas, and along with her mother and extended maternal family, her experiences growing up reflected transnational movements between the Caribbean and the United States.

Virna's suicide attempt followed a period of depressive symptoms that limited her ability to deal with everyday stressors. She did not have a history of mental health treatment use, and was not able to link her depressive symptoms with her difficulties at school or with her suicide attempt. She was, however, able to describe the root of her mother's depression in the challenges of single parenthood in the inner city. *"It is depressing to be in (city) without a husband by herself ... in a one-bedroom apartment with three kids. You have a job, you have to wake up at 5.30 am, make food for them, wake us all up, try keep us as best as she can ... (all) by yourself. That is depressing. She does not have any fun."*

Virna's suicide attempt took place on a Sunday night, after she had an argument with her mother about her homework and failing grades. Virna blamed herself for her poor school performance. *"I do try, just not hard enough ... If I don't do homework, it's impossible to pass."* Virna was concerned about the long-term effect that failing school may have on her future, perhaps informed by the realities of her low-educated mother's life. *"Like if I'm not going to be anything ... I would just rather die ... you see people that are in the streets ... I do not want to be that."*

The relationships that framed Virna's development and acculturation were with her family, school, and peers. Virna was able to see that, even in the face of difficulties, *"(family) keep you up sometimes."* The idea that family interactions, even when challenging, are a source of support is one of the core notions of collectivistic cultural orientations. Peers, however, offered Virna something that was not available at home: fun. *"When I go out with my friends I have fun, like after school I have fun, during school you have fun."* While at home Virna was, for the most part, compliant with rules and responsibilities, her peer relationships allowed her to explore rule-breaking behaviors, such as cutting classes. The relationships with these peers were described as her most meaningful, rewarding, and gratifying. To preserve her relationships with friends, she started lying to mother about her whereabouts. For instance, in order to get her approval to go out, she would tell mother that she would go to see a movie with a girlfriend, while she actually planned to attend a party with friends. *"We went to a party, if it would have been a house party I would have like not lied to my mom like that, but we went to a high school party ... so she thought that I was at the movies."*

School, with its structured interactions and group tasks, threatened Virna's sense of adequacy and competence by highlighting her poor academic performance. Virna's exchanges with her schoolmates were filled with tensions and rivalry. For instance, she shared that she had made girls at school cry. *"I have made girls cry because of the way I am ... the girls that are always trying ... like 'I can help you with your homework?' they are annoying ... my friends will just be like 'whatever'."* Furthermore, her aggressive behavior and poor performance at school put her at odds with academically inclined peers, teachers, and counselors, and she had been targeted for disciplinary measures in the past. This, in turn, contributed to her sense of inadequacy and alienation.

Virna's interpersonal relationships and behaviors were informed by different cultural orientations. At home, and when it came to family relationships, she was respectful for the most part. Her behavior outside the home, however, represented the street culture prevalent in the inner city. She was oppositional, poorly adjusted to the school environment, and engaged with deviant peers who cut classes and did not fare well academically. Her alternation between collectivistic and street-culture orientations helped her protect the relationships at home but failed to assist her in the process of adjusting to the demands of school. By stopping her from establishing positive relationships with teachers and academically successful peers, street culture was precluding Virna from acquiring the educational skills and social capital needed to overcome the poverty and environmental lack of opportunities she described at home and in her neighborhood. What from a distance appeared as Virna's dysfunctional adaptation to the school environment might actually be related to an attempt to establish connections with peers who, like her, were adopting an "oppositional street identity" (Bourgois, 1999, p. 27). The irony here was that Virna's oppositional behavior, academic performance, and educational perspectives were a source of personal distress and—at the same time—of connection with deviant peers.

### **Attempters Late Adolescence**

Yokasta's case is useful to illustrate the developmental and acculturative processes of Latina late-adolescent suicide attempters. Yokasta was 17 and lived with her mother, father, and a 14-year-old sister. Yokasta attempted suicide at a park after learning that she would not graduate from high school because of her failing grades and poor school attendance. Lab results indicated traces of cocaine, alcohol, benzodiazepines, and marijuana in Yokasta's blood.

Yokasta's life was in turmoil, and her relationships with family members were charged with conflicts. She described a painful sense of personal failure and of betrayal of her parents' expectations. *"(I am) not getting into college (because) I have been to school just to go hang out and do what I want ... (my parents) think that I am doing whatever I want just to make them mad ... I just feel like (I am) always such a failure."* At school she felt

incapable of keeping up with the work. *"My teacher it's just she works too fast and I'm not used to her style of teaching and on top of that I'm a procrastinator and I get lazy."*

Yokasta pointed out that the conflicts with her parents started in mid-adolescence, and were related to her autonomy and independence. What started with small infractions to her parents' rules evolved into the creation of a parallel life kept private from her caregivers. *"At 13 or 14, I had a cell phone that I would hide from (my parents) ... it is not a big thing, but it is that how everything starts, with all the secrets, hiding everything."* She went from cutting classes in early adolescence to being absent from school altogether for months at a time by her junior year. Although she told her parents that she was attending school, she was actually meeting friends. *"I just (want to) meet my friends and stuff like that ... I won't tell (parents) what's going on ... my mother think that I don't have any respect for her ... I don't know how to tell them certain things, I don't want them to meet everybody cause not everybody is somebody that I want bring into my house. Some people are just people I just hang out with just for the (sake) of it."* She stole from her parents and family members, and used that money to purchase alcohol for herself and her peers. In addition, Yokasta was also involved in petty crimes, such as attacking romantic rivals, shoplifting, and property damage to settle disputes. Her engagement in these risk behaviors threatened her future ability to secure employment.

On the personal side, Yokasta had difficulties accepting adult supervision, and due to the level of conflict in her relationships with her mother and father, spent most of her time outside the home. *"I just do not want to be home ... most of the time I like being out."* The public spaces in Yokasta's neighborhood offered a myriad of temptations: alcohol, drugs, and sex were all readily available for unsupervised teens to experience. Her display of autonomy as she strolled the public space also put her at odds with family members and alienated her from more socially adjusted peers. *"(Parents) compare me to anybody that is messing up in their lives."* Thus, she ended up in the company of those who were, like her, failing school and in turmoil.

Developmentally, Yokasta described herself as in charge of her life. *"I am used to keep everything to myself, I'm used to not going to others just dealing with everything by myself."* Culturally, Yokasta endorsed the street culture described among minorities living in America's inner cities. Through its celebration of oppositional attitude, people gain a sense of dignity that otherwise is denied by the world outside their ethnic enclaves, and for Latina teens, by their parents and schools. Individuals endorsing street culture often describe themselves with a deep sense of failure for not meeting the expectations of the large society. One could not help wondering whether her suicide attempt, along with her use of drugs, was not an expression of the self-hatred that characterizes the self-images endorsed by street culture. This negative self-perception of

minority individuals does not stop at the personal level, but extends to those within a person's family networks. Most likely, Yokasta's disregard of her parents' rules was in part informed by her internalization of the denigration by the dominant culture of the values and practices they endorsed. Lastly, what had started as Yokasta's split life within two cultural worlds, that of her family and the one of the street, had evolved into her importing the street culture into her family and school interactions. This transition most likely would have long-term negative consequences for her development, as demonstrated in her academic failure and conflictive relationships.

### **Summary**

The early adolescent experiences of most young Latina suicide attempters were centered in the teens' needs and unmet desires, and characterized by the display of a myriad of problematic behaviors and challenging emotional states, including cutting classes, being aggressive, and feeling sad and inadequate (see Table 2). The emotional links between the majority of teens and their caregivers were, for the most part, tenuous, and arguments were common. Per the girls' narratives, parents did not provide appropriate supervision and mentorship, and were often unable to properly care for them and to express warmth and support. These relationship patterns left the girls feeling angry, confused, sad, and lonely. The interactions with caregivers described by the teens suggest that some of the families of young Latina suicide attempters had incorporated the cultural values associated with local street culture.

**Table 2 Developmental and Acculturation of Latina Attempter and Nonattempter Teens**

	<b>Early Adolescence</b>		<b>Mid-Adolescence</b>		<b>Late</b>
	<b>Nonattempters</b>	<b>Attempters</b>	<b>Nonattempters</b>	<b>Attempters</b>	<b>Non</b>
<b>Autonomy and independence</b>	Almost none. Decisions are made by the caregivers.	Personal wishes and impulses drive behaviors. Lies used to conceal life outside adults' supervision.	Display of autonomy, mostly along with peers. Introduction of lies to protect autonomy and independence.	Proto-autonomy at home, and fully autonomous in the public sphere.	Able to make decisions, although preferences obtained from peers.
<b>Relatedness</b>	Caregivers are the source of knowledge and experience.	Difficulty relating to caregivers and adults.	Proto-emotional reversibility.	Limited emotional reversibility.	Emotional reversibility.
<b>Relationships with family members</b>	Girls' most valued relationships.	In turmoil.	Very valued, even in the face of conflicts.	In turmoil.	Highly valued, even in the face of conflicts.
<b>Relationships with peers</b>	Secondary and dependent on caregivers' approval and monitoring.	Primary sources of emotional support, although sometimes conflictive.	Peers as gateways to explore the outside world. Associations because of common interests.	Very important sources of support and understanding. Associations because of common deviant behaviors.	Peer relationships are important to family interactions.

<b>Conflict negotiation</b>	Solved by displaying obedience.	Ranging from lies and cover-ups to open displays of aggression.	Negotiation. Failure to get what is desired from caregivers may lead to lies and cover-ups.	Solved mostly by displaying aggression.	Subo- obe- mea- main- unit-
<b>Dating and sexuality</b>	Understood as not developmentally appropriate.	Dating and choosing mates.	First romantic relationships, mostly supervised by caregivers.	Actively dating, and mostly sexually active.	Allo- with- app-
<b>Obedience</b>	High endorsement of obedience and hierarchical relationships.	Low endorsement.	Multiple behavioral manifestations, although challenged at times.	Low endorsement.	End- trad- inte- cult-

The majority of young attempters displayed their autonomy and independence with great force, and their impulsivity often resulted in fights with siblings and peers. Their peer relationships, even when they offered the emotional support that was not available at home, were also characterized by conflicts and turmoil. Their academic performance suffered due to the young attempters' behaviors and aggression, and they often had disciplinary problems at school because of cutting classes and engaging in fights. Because they cut classes, they spent a lot of time in the street, learning to defend themselves using violence. As a consequence, there were few environments in which young attempters felt safe, competent, or accomplished. Their behaviors suggested an endorsement of individualistic cultural orientations, perhaps resulting from their enculturation to street culture within their families and later reinforced in their peer relationships.

During mid-adolescence, Latina adolescent suicide attempters' lives further gravitated toward the relationships and spaces outside the family, and their behaviors continued to align with individualistic orientations. For some girls, mostly those who displayed low impulse control and behavioral difficulties, the outside world offered freedom and excitement not available at home. For others, relationships outside the family, primarily with peers, offered the emotional support they lacked in their relationships with their primary caregivers. The teens sought to alleviate their feelings of loneliness and being



misunderstood at home by establishing strong bonds with peers in the street. This may appear as a shift from family to peers as their most important context of their lives, with peers becoming like family. Their interactions with friends, in contrast with collectivistic cultural orientations, were transient, marked by conflicts, and for the most part, lacked reciprocity. Peers were there to prevent the risks that come with being a young girl alone in the streets.

In order to protect their relationships with peers, most girls lied to their parents, whereas others simply did as they pleased. In mid-adolescence, most attempter teens did not see in their parents a source of comfort and support during personal crises, and they faced challenging instances mostly alone or in the company of peers. Per the girls' narratives, parents were not able or had little investment in monitoring the girls' lives, and only attempted to restore their authority when the girls violated expectations at home (e.g., chores), and sometimes at school (e.g., cutting classes). Thus, their parenting was inconsistent. These teens rarely censored their feelings of mistrust or rejection of the adults' attempts to control them, and they often verbalized them in their interactions with caregivers.

During mid-adolescence, most teens resolved their conflicts with adults with verbal clashes, and those with siblings and peers by resorting to physical confrontations. Periodic displays of aggression are crucial to maintain a sense of dignity and safety among teens growing up in the inner city, and these aggressive outbursts represent conflict-resolution models characteristic of the street culture. Several attempters also reported dealing with the conflicts at home by running away or moving to the homes of friends or relatives.

Among some attempters, the endorsement of individualism emerged from the need to fend for themselves in the street and at home. Individualism is at the core of the oppositional street identity, as it creates spaces for personal dignity in contexts shaped by risks and personal denigration. Potentially, the way in which Latina attempters experienced and reproduced street culture—by skipping classes, engaging in physical fights, stealing, lying to caregivers, failing school, drinking alcohol and using drugs, and so forth—precluded them from breaking the circle of oppression and marginalization that placed them at the margins of American society in the first place.

By late adolescence, Latina attempter teens' thinking was mostly informed by their immediate needs and desires. This state of affairs limited their ability to engage in nurturing relationships, either with family members or with peers. Their lives were in constant turmoil, and they experienced a sense of personal failure across developmental tasks. For instance, most of the girls had experienced academic disruptions, and in their peers' graduations, they saw proof of their own defeat. Their dreams of moving away to

attend college, which they had seen as their ticket to escape the tensions and conflicts at home, were now unlikely to materialize, and they were left hopeless. In addition, most saw themselves as ill-prepared to assume adult roles. This overall sense of defeat and personal failure, as well as the way they coped with stressors, were characteristic of the street culture.

Overall, the developmental and acculturation trajectories of Latina suicide attempters across the adolescent years suggested a movement from chaotic relationships in the home to chaotic lives within peer networks. These transitions reflected the effects of street culture on the development of minority youth in the United States' inner-city ghettos. For the most part, Latina adolescent suicide attempters grew up in dysfunctional families that were unable to provide sound developmental environments (Gulbas et al., 2011; Peña et al., 2011). The attempters' survival and sense of personal dignity depended on their ability to be tough and strong and on building a sense of respect among peers by asserting the capacity for violence. Friends offered the girls the sense of belonging and protection they lacked in their relationships with primary caregivers. Through these peer relationships and their exposure to the inner city, the attempters further incorporated the values of the street, internalizing its messages of despair. Potentially, their endorsement of street culture gave suicidal teens a place at the margins of society that perpetuated their exclusion, as well as a sense of belonging alongside other excluded youth. Although street culture allowed these teens a sense of inclusion among the excluded, internalizing street culture involved the acquisition of its messages of self-destruction and conflict resolution through aggression. The exposure to street culture's model of conflict resolution through violence shaped the teens' management of the emotional distress they experienced during interpersonal conflicts. Street culture, in combination with Latinas' cultural vulnerability to suicide attempts, reproduced street-culture violence in their suicidal behaviors.

## **Conclusion**

Our conceptual model explains suicide attempts among Latina teens as emerging from the teens' developmental and acculturative challenges, and as contextualized by family dynamics and sociocultural processes. Because development and acculturation are contextualized phenomena, we highlight the cultural meanings that are available to Latina youth growing up the inner city, both at home and in the street. We suggest that street culture conflict-resolution models, based on violence, may reinforce Latinas' cultural vulnerability to suicidal behavior in the face of interpersonal distress.

As we progressed in analyzing our data, a metaphor helped us to organize the developmental and acculturative trajectories of Latina adolescents. *Nonattempters and attempters had different gravitational centers*. The gravitational centers that gave meaning to teens' experiences and organized their behaviors were different. Nonattempters gravitated around their families, whereas attempters were, for the most part, focused on their selves. These gravitational centers align with Canino and Guarnaccia's (1997) description of culture orientations within a continuum ranging from *sociocentric* to *individualistic*. We suggest that the incorporation of a sociocentric value orientation prevented Latina nonattempters from acculturating to street culture. We also posit that, for most attempters, the dysfunctional family dynamics they experienced at home prevented their endorsement of collectivistic values and fostered their acculturation to street culture.

Obedience, as a behavioral manifestation of *respeto* and of collectivistic cultural orientations, was found to be a critical element informing the developmental trajectories of Latina nonattempter teens. Their obedience helped these teens to adjust more successfully to the demands posed by their caregivers and by school, and thus they were, in general, well behaved at home and academically proficient at school. Our results also provide an understanding of how Latina nonattempters interpreted their increasing autonomy as they grew older. For these girls, their definition of autonomy reflected a collectivistic cultural orientation. Thus, maturity was linked with assuming active roles as daughters and caregivers, and they perceived their personal and professional goals as contributing to the family's well-being. We suggest that the study of acculturation needs to include an understanding of youth's developmental and enculturation trajectories. Prior research on acculturation has focused on individuals' acquisition of cultural values in situations of cultural contact (see, for instance, Berry 1992, 1997). This body of work highlights the dichotomy between heritage culture and receiving culture, and each cultural orientation is understood to operate independently. Recent scholarship has been critical of this approach to acculturation, drawing attention to the fact that individuals draw on multiple systems of meaning to actively select, endorse, or resist new cultural values (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). Research has consistently demonstrated how individuals combine cultural values into new cultural formations through processes such as hybridity, bricolage, and creolization (see, for example, Lamphere, 2007). Findings from our study support these more recent conceptual perspectives on acculturation. For Latina nonattempters, their incorporation of collectivistic cultural values into their worldviews gave new meaning to perceptions of individualism. For instance, they valued personal independence not so much as a vehicle for self-realization, but as a vehicle to help their families.

Findings from our project expand previous research on the protective effect of collectivistic cultural orientations in reducing the risk for suicidal behavior among Latinas (Peña et al., 2011), especially for those growing up in the inner city. By linking teens' behaviors with cultural orientations, we add to the understanding of the behavioral manifestation of culture among immigrant children and describe how a sociocentric cultural orientation shapes their development, preventing their engagement in activities that pose risks for their short- and long-term well-being.

Latina attempters and nonattempters agreed on the dangers of the inner city. In their descriptions, children and women were especially vulnerable to enduring physical and sexual violence. The way these two groups of teens dealt with the dangers posed by the inner-city environment differed, however. For most nonattempters, adult supervision was accepted as either necessary or unavoidable and provided some sort of protection from the risks outside their homes. As they grew older, nonattempters endorsed patriarchal gender definitions that suggest that the place for women is in the home.

Suicide attempters, for the most part, lacked positive adult supervision, and often sought relief in the streets from the chronic conflicts they experienced at home or school. In line with previous research on street culture, these teens' ability to ensure their safety required them to become aggressive in the face of interpersonal conflicts. Latinas' cultural vulnerability to expressing distress through suicide attempts was augmented by the violent conflict-resolution models available in street culture. It is not surprising, then, that in the face of interpersonal tensions that preceded most suicide attempts (Zayas, Gulbas, Fedoravicius, & Cabassa, 2010), suicidal adolescents resorted to violence to others, in the form of verbal and physical altercations, or directed it toward their own bodies, in the form of suicide attempts.

As reported by Gulbas and colleagues (2011), most suicide attempters came from families with higher levels of conflict and violence. We suggest that the dysfunctional family dynamics reported by attempters may have been further exacerbated by the presence of a local street culture. For instance, most suicide attempters' caregivers were emotionally neglectful and—at times—physically and sexually abusive. Most likely, then, suicidal teens' gravitation toward street culture starts in the context of their family interactions and is reinforced by their peer networks.

By including the sociocultural factors that shape Latina teens' development and acculturation, we move away from framing their suicidal behaviors exclusively in terms of individual-level culture or mental health. Furthermore, we purposely avoided relying on psychiatric labels to describe the teens' behaviors. The behavioral strategies that attempter adolescents used were adaptive to the environments of violence and despair in which they were growing up. Our findings suggest that previous research on Latina teen

development and acculturation have generated static understandings of the cultural values that inform acculturation by neglecting the sociocultural contexts within which acculturative processes are situated. Our approach has implications for Latina suicide prevention and treatment efforts, which, along with delivering services for individuals, should address structural inequality issues that are at the root of their behavioral, mental health, and suicide outcomes.

The arguments we present in this chapter should be considered in light of several limitations that restrict the generalizability to Latinas in the United States as a whole. One limitation is that the study was undertaken in primarily inner-city sections of two/three boroughs of New York City. There is not only one type of street culture in the United States or, by extension, in other contexts with large numbers of minority inhabitants and marked by concentrated urban poverty, such as the Red Belt area in Paris or Bradford and Oldham in London. Therefore, the depiction of street culture in this chapter must be considered as unique to this city with possible similarities to other large, vertical metropolises in the Northeast but different from cities in the Midwest and Southwest. Nevertheless, we employ the street-culture concept for its utility in emphasizing the ways in which Latina teens adapt to the challenges brought about by living in urban poverty, as well as ways in which urban poverty influences their family dynamics.

Despite these limitations, this study contributes to the understanding of the developmental and acculturation processes of Latina adolescents with and without a history of suicide attempts, highlighting the discontinuities they experience as they transition from childhood to adulthood and their struggle to reconcile Latino culture values with those of the host society, including street culture. The project contributes to the literature on the Latino Paradox by suggesting that intergenerational acculturation to street culture may explain some of the negative mental and behavioral outcomes observed in late-generation children of immigrant backgrounds. Moreover, it is hoped that this project will encourage further work to better understand the interplay between acculturation, developmental trajectories, and psychosocial well-being among Latino adolescents. Given the paucity of literature on the developmental and acculturation processes of youth of immigrant backgrounds such as Latinas, as well as these processes' relationship with the youth psychological outcomes, this study provides a platform for future studies focusing on the developmental and acculturation dynamics across other minority ethnic groups and contexts.

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## **Notes:**

(1) About 6.9% of Latino adolescents attempt suicide (CDC, 2013).

(2) Our work advances the conceptualization of street culture put forth by Philippe Bourgois (1999).

(3) We use “sociocentric” and “collectivistic” interchangeably in this chapter.

(4) In the United States, the term “Latino” is a panethnic label used to generically describe people either born in Latin American and who immigrated to the United States, or US-born individuals whose family background is Latin American.

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