

**SUICIDAL IDEATION AMONG UNDERGRADUATES: THE PREDICTING  
ROLE OF LEARNED HELPLESSNESS, FEAR OF NEGATIVE EVALUATION  
AND IMPAIRED FAMILY RELATIONSHIP.**

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**Abstract**

In West Africa, the topic of suicide is often relegated to the background, spoken in hush tones with little or no understanding of the phenomenon and how best to study it and find solutions to it. While there are a lot of factors that could lead to the development of suicidal ideation, this study sought to understand the role of learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation, and impaired family relationship as predictors of suicidal ideation among young undergraduate students. A total of 332 participants, with 114 males and 218 females were recruited for the study, with all participants being undergraduates. The study was done using questionnaires arranged into 5 sections to measure the variables under consideration. A total of four hypotheses were tested using Pearson Product Moment Correlation and Regression analysis. Results show a correlation between all variables tested, with learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationship predicting suicidal ideation.

**Keywords:** Suicidal Ideation, learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation, family relationship, age.

### **Introduction**

The mere mention of the word “suicide” create a series of negative impressions, with so many negative connotations which readily comes to mind. This is because suicide, especially in Nigeria, West Africa, was not a subject of discussion which could be talked about comfortably, because it was seen as a taboo subject, which may partly be because the incidence of suicide was low and whenever it happened, it is often under reported or overlooked. It was therefore seen as a subject to be discussed in hushed tones and whispers because the shame that suicide supposedly brings upon family members of those whose members commit suicide is far-reaching and often viewed as a dent in the image of the family which remains even with time. Ordinarily, suicide should not be a cause for concern in this part of the world due to the perceptions and beliefs surrounding it, as it is still being considered a taboo in many cultures, a sin in all religions, a crime before the law, as a mental illness by the mental health professionals, a sign of weakness by the men and as a way of escaping or avoiding family responsibilities by the wives. This sadly, is no longer the case owing to the

recent upsurge in the rate of suicide in the last decade among the general population in West Africa (WHO, 2014) and in particular among adolescents ages 15-19 which constitute the undergraduate's population especially in Nigeria (WHO, 2012), thus merit closer attention. According to the World Health Organization (2018), Nigeria is placed fifth in the world in terms of suicide attempts and the act of committing suicide. This means that it is fast becoming a problem that has been wilfully pushed and relegated to the shadows because of how others in society perceive it.

Interestingly, suicide does not have a universal definition, but there is a convergence point in which most definitions agree, which is “taking one's life by oneself through any means”. However, for this paper, suicide is “a conscious act of self-induced annihilation, which is best interpreted as a multidimensional problem in a needful individual who believes that suicide is the best solution (Leenaars, 1999). Studies have shown that suicide is a response to overwhelmingly stressful conditions which could be personal or situational. This is why it is often perceived

as a possible means to solve several problems which may have accumulated over time (Klonsky & May 2015), or could also be a spontaneous and impulsive behaviour. Due to the complex nature of suicide, studies on suicide has been limited by the fact that the deceased can no longer help uncover reasons for carrying out the act, it is often very difficult to predict when it would happen, thus providing a serious challenge for care and research for mental health practitioners and social scientists globally.

In the last two-decade, suicide and suicidal behaviours have gradually pushed themselves to the limelight with their gradual year on year increases (Bertolote, 2009). Accordingly, for every one completed suicide, there are about 25 attempted suicides bringing the ratio of suicide-to-suicide attempts to a ratio of 1: 25 (Alabi et al., 2014: WHO, 2018). Interestingly, with suicide now accounting for over 1,000,000 deaths globally each year, suicidal ideation, suicidal thought or contemplation of suicide and its attempts have increased that number to 140 million, or about 140 for every death resulting from

suicide (Borges et al, 2008). Despite varying numbers from country to country, suicide remains a serious cause for concern to health workers and researchers around the world, with a unified consensus that it is indeed becoming a global problem. With increased economic difficulty and limited global resources, the competition that comes with it tends to widen the gap between social classes. While those who can compete have more resources and better placed economic and become more psychologically adjusted, those who do not have the economic and psychological resources to compete tend to be vulnerable, psychological weak and developed fear of negative evaluation and learned helplessness. it is therefore pertinent to look into the role of these variables (fear of negative evaluation and learned helplessness) on suicided and suicidal behaviour.

Learned helplessness and negative evaluation of the self has been seen to have adverse psychological effects on individuals who experience them (Leary & Kowalski 1995). Each of these could play a significant role in understanding suicidal

ideation with regards to its causes and possible relationships. Learning is a relatively permanent and persistent change in behaviour as a result of experience, while helplessness is a condition in which an individual considers an accomplishment outside his/her capacity. The recurring thoughts and negative feelings of this lack of capacity develop a new experience of “learned helplessness”. Adolescents are daily exposed to different challenges of life and living many of which result in negative feelings and emotion - Learned helplessness. Learned helplessness is a significant predictor of suicidality among adolescents (Bano, Aslam & Naz; 2019) and adolescent loss of interest and perceived learned helplessness further lead to various psychopathological issues (Butler, 2017).

Leary and Kowalski (1995) believed that evaluating oneself unfavourably may lead to the expectation that others will evaluate negatively as well: this may lead to fear of being evaluated by others negatively by others – fear of negative evaluation. Accordingly, Preston et al (2021) found that fear of negative evaluation is significantly

associated with suicidal ideation, while Leary (1983), concluded that individuals with high levels of fear of negative evaluation tend to experience more anxiety in social situations and attempt to avoid an interpersonal encounter that they perceive to be threatening. Other studies (Filippello, Sorrenti, Larcana & Rizzo, 2013; Peixoto & Almeida, 2010; Mache, Paechter, Papousek & Ruggen, 2012; Sorrenti, Filippello, Buzzai, and Costa, 2015b) have shown that a state of helplessness may affect the academic success of students because it is characterized by individual factors (e.g. beliefs, self-representation, explanatory styles etc.) that play an important role in learning. Helpless students have a lack of confidence in their abilities; they attribute their failures to personal inadequacy, low intelligence, poor memory or problem-solving ability and do not see the connection between their commitment and achieving success. They believe that successes are unlikely and failures likely. While Sharma's (2016) found that adolescent students from private schools recorded higher scores on measures of learned helplessness compare to their counterparts from a government school,

this result was attributed to the improved level of facilities available to the private school students and the fact that admission into private school is on affordability and influence but not merit. These, then encourage the giving of excuses and explanations to bad events and blame contexts.

A study by Brecko, (1995) investigated how family background influences students' achievement. The result revealed that there is a strong relationship between home background and student success at school, which in turn led to more positive affect and a brighter outlook despite challenges faced while at school. Also, Sarah et al (2006) discovered that poor parental relationships were positively associated with suicidal behaviours in both girls and boys, with parenting styles and poor parent-child relationships implicated for increased levels of suicidal ideations. This was corroborated by Metalsky and Joiner (1992) they emphasised that hopelessness would be mediated by attribution style in the presence of negative life events and would predict the onset of depressive symptoms later in life, or during the adolescent phase.

This study aims to examine the predicting role played by learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationships in predicting suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Based on the literature regarding learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation, impaired family relation and suicidal ideation, we hypothesized that:

1. Learned helplessness will predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates:
2. Fear of negative evaluation will predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates:
3. Impaired family relationship will predict suicidal ideation among undergraduates
4. Learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationship will jointly predict suicidal ideation.

### **Research Setting**

This research was carried out on the University of Lagos campus in Akoka - Yaba area of Lagos State. It cut across all undergraduate hostels, faculties, departments, relaxation centres and other

convenient places on campus. The University of Lagos is a federal public university established on the 22<sup>nd</sup> of October, 1962. The University has two separate institutions- the main university and medical school. The University of Lagos has the largest student population among the universities in Nigeria. The main campus is located at Akoka, Yaba while the medical campus of the college of medicine is located at Idi-Araba, Mushin

The University academic body consists of the full-time undergraduate programs, the Distance Learning Institute (DLI) and the school of Postgraduate studies (full-time and part-time programs). The University of Lagos has 12 faculties and over 150 departments.

### **Research Design**

The research design used in this study is the correlational research design. Correlational studies seek to establish the existence of relationships among variables or to make predictions. The design was adopted because the study seeks to investigate if learned helplessness, fear of negative, and impaired family relationships are predictors

of suicidal ideation among undergraduates of the University of Lagos.

### **Participants / Sample**

The sample size of the study is Three hundred (350) Undergraduate students. Participants consisted of 114 males and 218 females, this number was arrived at by the use of the sample size calculator, GPower. This enabled the researchers to use a sample size to ensure results would not be spurious.

### **Research Instrument**

The instruments for this research are divided into five sections of A - E.

#### **Section A: Socio-demographics**

This section is made up of a self-developed questionnaire by the researchers to collect information on the socio-demographic variable such as gender, age, level, department etc.

#### **Section B: Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS)**

Learned Helplessness Scale (LHS) is 20 items developed by Quinless and Nelson, (1988). It was developed to measure learned helplessness and it is made up of a

4-point Likert scale response format; strongly agree 4, agree 3, disagree 2, strongly disagree 1. The test has a test-retest reliability coefficient of 0.77. and the split-half reliability coefficient of 0.46.

### **Section C: Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale**

Fear of negative evaluation was measured in this research by using the Fear of Negative Evaluation Scale developed by Watson and Ronald, (1969). The scoring key indicates whether or not to assign a value for yes or no answers. The scale is a 30-item that measures discomfort and distress in interpersonal interactions. It is used to measure apprehension in individuals when they are negatively evaluated. The Cronbach alpha rating for the internal reliability is reported at .94 to .98. The test-retest reliability was .78 to .94 according to Watson. The FNE scale showed high validity to its strong correlation rating with several scales such as Taylor's Manifest Anxiety Scale, Jackson's Personality Research Form, anxiety measures and personality measures.

### **Section D: Index of Family Relations Scale**

Family relationship was measured in this research study by using the Index of Family Relations Scale developed by Hudson. The scale is a 25-item scale that measures the extent of family members' relationship problems. Each response was scored on a 7-point Likert scale with; none of the time 1, very rarely 2, a little of the time 3, some of the time 4, a good part of the time 5, most of the time 6, all of the time 7. A score of 30 indicates a clinically significant problem. A total score is obtained by reverse-scoring some items, adding the total, and subtracting 25. The scale has a mean coefficient alpha of .95 and a low standard error of measurement. Known –groups validity is reported at .92, indicating that the measure distinguishes individuals identified by their counsellors and themselves as having problems.

### **Section E: Suicidal Ideation Scale**

Suicidal ideation was measured in this research study by using an Adult suicidal ideation questionnaire (ASIQ; Reynold, 1991). A suicidal ideation questionnaire is used to measure suicidal cognition and

frequency of the cognitions. It is composed of 25 items that are scored on a seven-point scale ranging from 0 (I never had this thought) to 6 (almost every day). A study on 474 college students from two Midwestern universities indicated internal consistency coefficients range from .96 to .97; retest coefficients range from .85 to .95.

**Procedure**

The ethical approval for this study was

gotten from the ethics committee of the Department of Psychology, University of Lagos. The participant was met in groups at the different spots (classroom, relaxation centres, hostels etc) in the University. The researcher introduced themselves to the participant and explain the purpose of the research to the participant after which those who wish to participate in the research requested the questionnaire.

**Results**

**Hypothesis 1.**

**Table 1:** Test of Relationship between Learned Helplessness and Suicidal Ideation

<i>Model</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>F</i>	<i>2</i>
learned helplessness	35.8283	8.61307	1	
suicidal ideation	37.6898	14.41624	.279**	1

The table above shows the results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis carried out to test for the relationship between learned helplessness

and suicidal ideation The result reveals a significantly positive correlation between learned helplessness and suicidal ideation ( $r = .279^{**}$ ).

**Table 2:** Summary of regression analysis showing the contribution of Learned Helplessness to the Suicidal Ideation

Mode 1	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the estimate
1	.279(a)	.078	.075	13.86398



**Hypothesis 2**

**Table 3:** Test of Relationship between Fear of Negative Evaluation and Suicidal Ideation

<i>I</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
Fear of negative evaluation	13.2380	5.81959	1	
suicidal ideation	37.6898	14.41624	.209**	1

The table above shows the results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis carried out to test for the relationship between fear of negative evaluation and suicidal ideation. The result reveals a significant positive correlation between fear of negative evaluation and suicidal ideation (r = .209\*\*).

**Table 4:** Summary of regression analysis showing the contribution of Fear of Negative Evaluation to the Suicidal Ideation

Model	B	Beta	T	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F <sub>ratio</sub>	Pv
Fear of negative evaluation	.355	.143	2.771	.000				
Learned helplessness	.373	0.22	4.302		.209	.044	27.896	p<.05

b. Dependent Variable: *suicidal ideation*

Regression analysis in Table 5 above shows that fear of negative evaluation contributed to observed variance in suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Lagos. The joint influence of the variables yielded a low significant coefficient of regression (R<sup>2</sup> = .044). This implies that even though fear of negative evaluation reported a significant correlation with suicidal ideation but low value it does account for a low percentage in the observed variance in suicidal ideation. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted.

**Hypothesis 3**

**Table 5:** Test of Relationship between Impaired familyrelationship and Suicidal Ideation

<i>Model</i>	<i>Mean</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>1</i>	<i>2</i>
Impaired family relationship	53.2169	18.41289	1	
suicidal ideation	37.6898	14.41624	.282**	1

The table above shows the results of the Pearson Product Moment Correlation analysis carried out to test for the relationship between impaired family relationships and suicidal ideation. The result reveals a significant positive correlation between impaired family relationships and suicidal ideation ( $r = .282^{**}$ ).

**Table 6:** Summary of regression analysis showing the contribution of impaired family relationship to Suicidal Ideation

Model	B	Beta	T	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F <sub>ratio</sub>	Pv
Fear of negative evaluation	.355	.143	2.771	.006				
Family relationship	.221	.282	5.335	.000	.282	.079	27.461	p<.05

b. Dependent Variable : *suicidal ideation*

Regression analysis in the table above shows that impaired family relationships significantly contributed to observed variance in suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Lagos. The joint influence of the variables yielded a low significant coefficient of regression ( $R^2 = .079$ ). This implies that even though impaired family relationships reported a significant correlation with suicidal ideation but low value does account for a low percentage in the observed variance in suicidal ideation.

#### Hypothesis 4.

**Table 7:** Summary of regression analysis showing the contribution of learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationship on Suicidal Ideation

Model	B	Beta	T	Sig.	R	R <sup>2</sup>	F <sub>ratio</sub>	Pv
Fear of negative evaluation	.355	.128	2.771	.006				
Learned helplessness	.373	.223	4.302	.000				
Family relationship	.185	.040	4.607	.000	.398	.159	20.625	p<.05

b. Dependent Variable : *suicidal ideation*

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Regression analysis in the table shows that the variables learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationship significantly but at a low level contribute to observed variance in suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Lagos. The joint influence of the variables yielded a low significant coefficient of regression ( $R^2 = .159$ ). This implies that even though learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relationship reported a significant correlation with suicidal ideation but with low values, they do account for a low percentage in the observed variance in suicidal ideation. Therefore, the hypothesis is accepted.

### **Discussion**

This study was done to investigate the predicting role of fear of negative evaluation, learned helplessness and impaired family relationship on suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Lagos. Four hypotheses were proposed to examine the relationships between the four variables. Several pieces of literature have supported the finding of the study.

The results of the first hypothesis revealed that learned helplessness predicted suicidal ideation among undergraduate students of the University of Lagos. This result is supported by Bano et al; (2019) who found learned helplessness to be a significant predictor of suicidality. While Bates (2006) posited that Suicidal ideation is a common problem among adolescents. Adolescents are continually besieged with many challenges like academic stress, relationship difficulties, financial constraints, parenting and peer influences. These challenges can constitute stress and become stressors on the part of the adolescents, with suicidal ideation being one of the many psychological consequences which could be precipitated from this stress. Learned helplessness is characterized by individual factors (e.g. beliefs, self-representation, explanatory styles etc.) that play an important role in learning, helping to form the core of an individual's thought processes when faced with challenging situations. Individuals with learned helplessness often have a severe lack of confidence in their abilities; they attribute their failures to personal inadequacy, low intelligence, poor memory

or problem-solving ability and do not see the connection between their commitment and achieving success. thus, thinking or looking for the easy way – suicide ideation and suicide.

Furthermore, the study found that fear of negative evaluation is a predictor of suicidal ideation among undergraduates. This finding is supported by Preston et al (2021) who found that fear of negative evaluation is significantly associated with suicidal ideation among college students. Therefore, young people with an unhealthy fear of being negatively appraised are prone to depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideations which in turn could lead to suicide. Another study by Leary and Kowalski (1995) showed that evaluating the self unfavourably may lead to the expectation that others will evaluate them negatively as well, which in turn creates negative cognitive processes which could be traced as the root cause of suicidal ideation.

The finding of Metal sky and Joiner (1992) in a longitudinal study on helplessness and hopelessness mediated by attribution style showed that the aforementioned are

vulnerability (trait) factors that cause depressive symptoms. They concluded that hopelessness would be mediated by attribution style in the presence of negative life events and would predict the onset of depressive symptoms. This finding is also supported by Leary (1983), who posited that individuals with high levels of fear of negative evaluation tend to experience more anxiety in social situations and attempt to avoid an interpersonal encounter that they perceive to be threatening, thereby leading to suicidal ideation. In addition to these findings, Wells et al (1995) also found out that those behaviours which avoid negative evaluation provide securities that have three negative effects: first, the individual cannot see that their fears are not realistic. Secondly, it can cause an increase in anxiety symptoms in some cases and lead to suicidal ideation. Thirdly, it may lead to receipt of negative feedback from other people. These have the potential to trigger suicidal ideation among university students.

The study also found impaired family relationships as a predictor of suicidal ideation among undergraduates. Several

studies have demonstrated that individuals who have suicidal ideation may have been exposed to inappropriate parenting styles including being scolded and physically punished by parents and poor association with their folks. Other studies have additionally inferred that suicidal ideation is subjected to poor parenting methods (Sarah et al., 2006). These findings further highlight the role of family and family environments in the formation of suicidal ideation and lend further evidence to [Lineman's \(1993\)](#) notion that impaired family environments may contribute to Suicidal ideation. Based on these findings, feelings of neglect and perceived shunning from family and friends could become a precipitant of suicidal ideation, which could, in turn, lead to the act of suicide itself ([Selby et al., 2008](#)).

Finally, the study found that the four variables jointly predict suicidal ideation among university undergraduates. Seeing how each variable had its own significant albeit low prediction of suicidal ideation, this goes to show that multiple factors significantly account for or influence the manifestation of suicide ideation.

### **Conclusion & Recommendation**

Suicidal ideation is now a common phenomenon among university undergraduates owing to the challenges of life and living being faced by the undergraduates in the university. Several factors have been adduced to for this experience some of which is learned helplessness, fear of negative evaluation and impaired family relation. The findings of this study imply that since the university community is largely made up of adolescents who are within the age bracket as most of the studies cited on suicidal ideation in this study, it has become increasingly imperative for both private and public universities and experts in the field of mental health to nip this budding problem in the bud. While it may not be entirely possible to prevent all suicides; proper and regular psychoeducation could be organised on campuses to help these undergraduates understand and become more aware of their thoughts and emotions, and also how these could negatively impact their mental health. Families also have a big role to play, as suicide is a topic which needs to be discussed with a more open mind in family settings, as well as ensuring that the

family circle is a physical and cognitive safe space in which these adolescents can grow and thrive, instead of it being a breeding ground for suicidal ideation as a result of neglect by the family institution.

Nevertheless, it is important to be exercise care and caution in generalizing the results of this study due to the influence of culture; it is a correlational study, and the data used for the study was collected from the campus of a university thus there is no bases causal relationship between and among the variables.

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