



# Why Latinas Attempt Suicide and What We Can Do About It

*Luis H. Zayas, Ph.D.  
Dean & Centennial Professor  
School of Social Work*

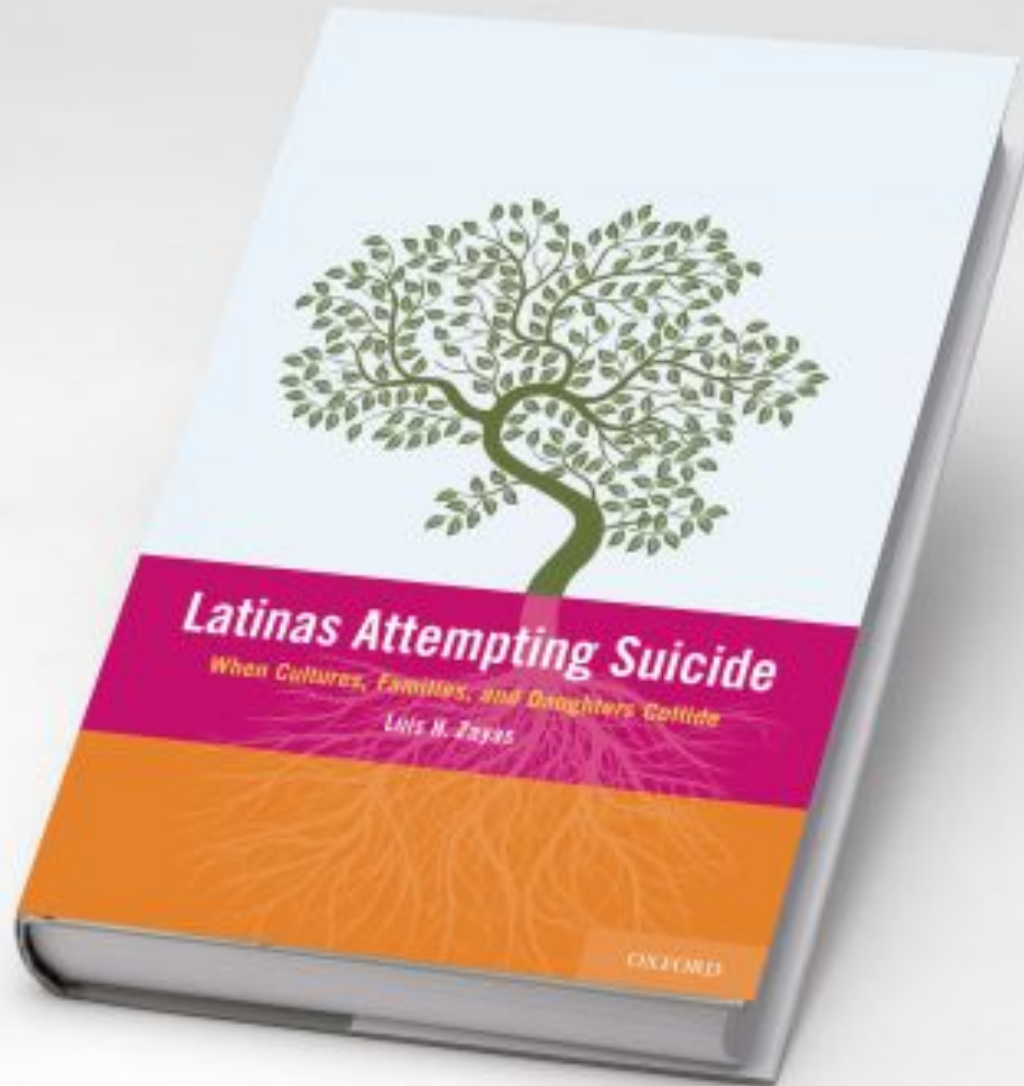
Texas Suicide Prevention Symposium

1 August 2012

San Marcos, Texas



- I. Background
- II. Research and Findings
- III. Prevention & Intervention
- IV. Lingering Questions





## From a Case to a *Cause*

Practice as the source of discovery

- Curiosity
- Persistence



## History: “Suicidal Fit” of Puerto Rican Women

Lincoln Hospital ER, South Bronx, late 1950s

- impulsive escapes from stressful situations
- ingested pills or household cleansers
- disturbances in family relations spouse or mother
- no thought of death
- not aware of their thoughts
- no psychotic symptoms

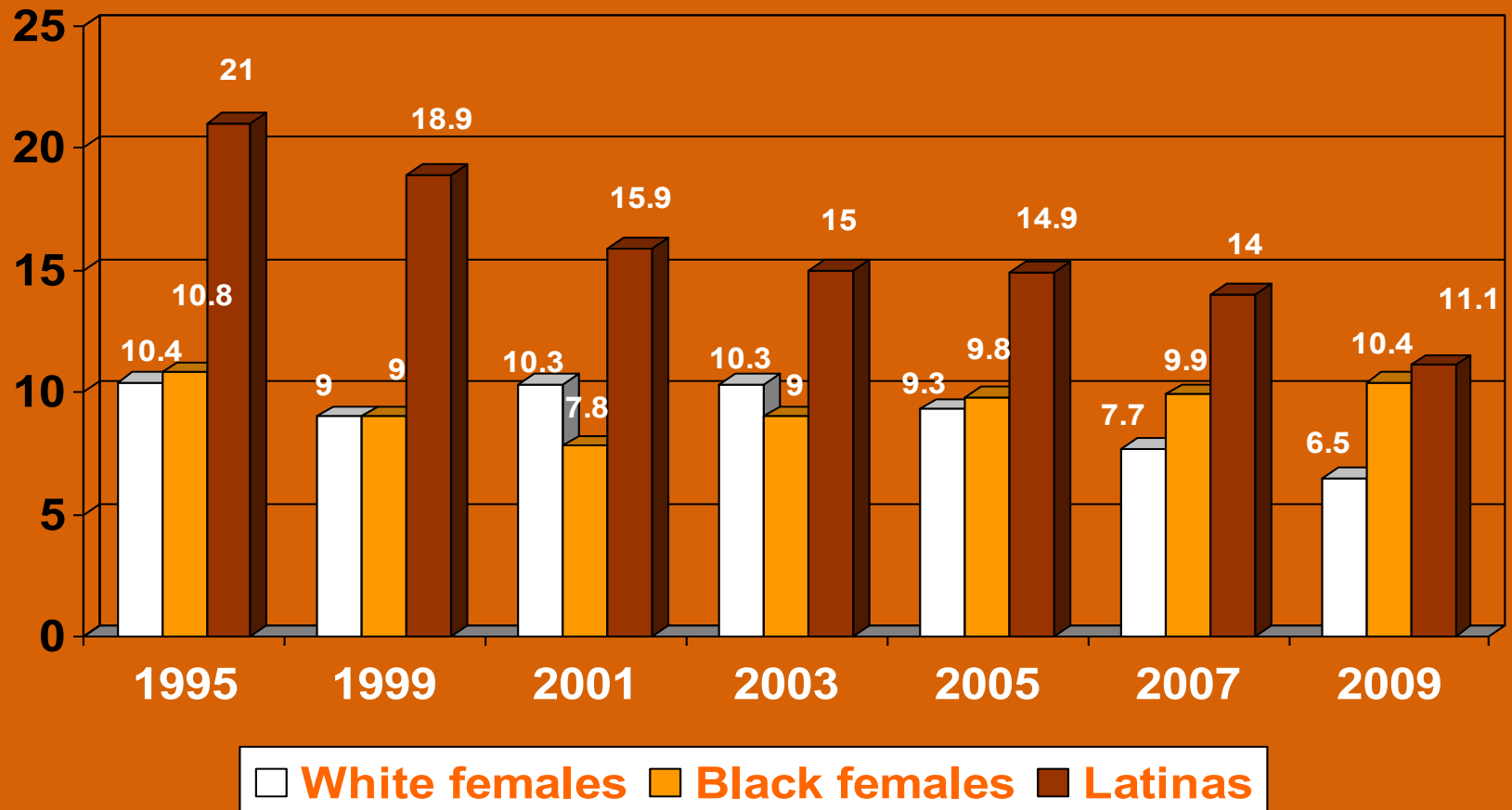


## More History

- **1987, Bronx, NY:** of 382 high schoolers, most attempters were Latinas
- **1991, Bronx, NY:** 25% of all attempters hospitalized were Latinas
- **1995: *Miami Herald* (Dec):** Miami-Dade public schools had 22% Latinas yet 35% of attempts and 30% of suicides were Latinas
- **1996: *Southern California:*** In one hospital, 66% of attempters were Latinas
  
- **2003: *National Household Survey on Drug Abuse (SAMHSA)***
  - Latinas ages 12-17 at higher risk for suicide attempt than other youths
  - US-born Latinas at higher risk than foreign-born
  - Highest risk in small metropolitan areas

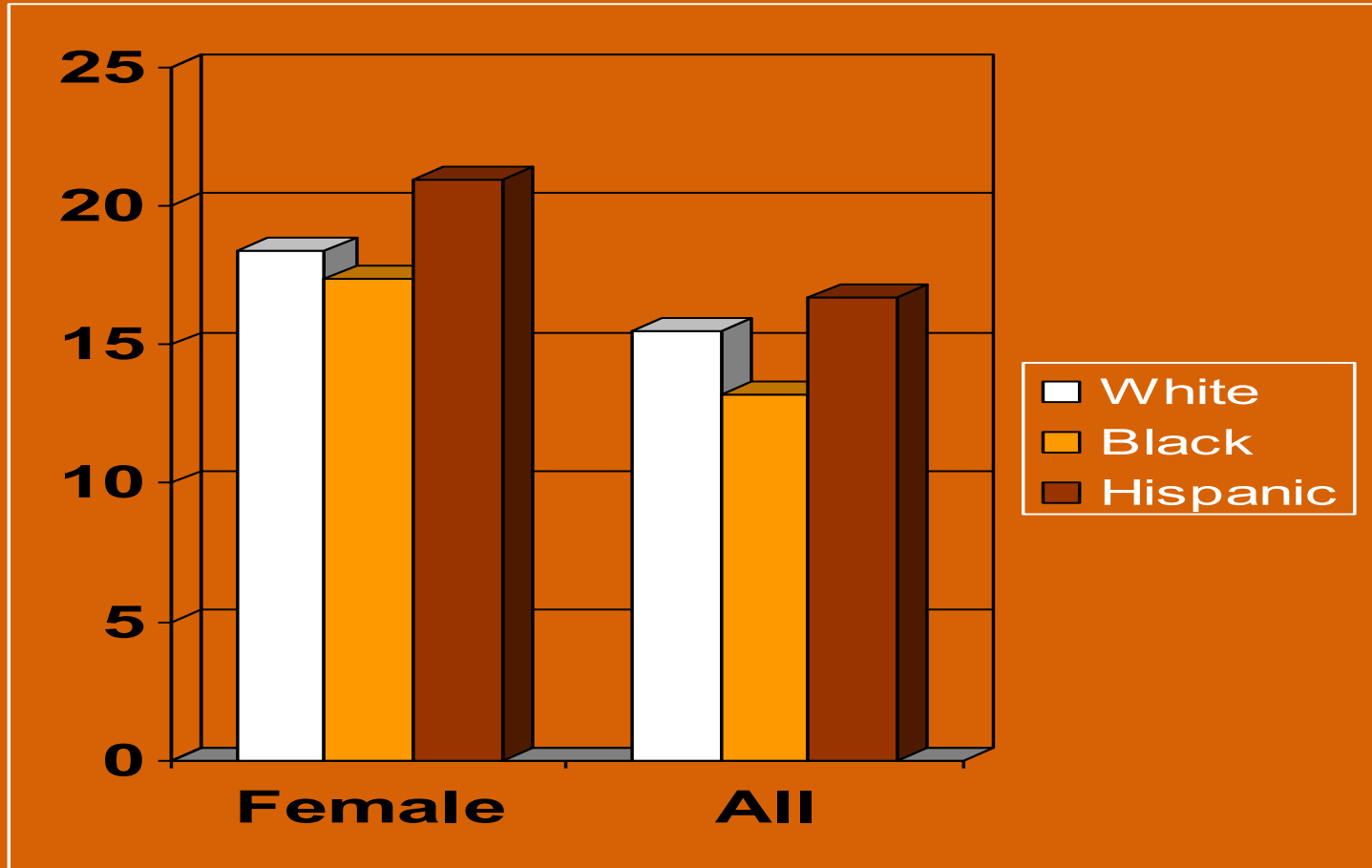


# Adolescent Girls' Suicide Attempts 1995-2009



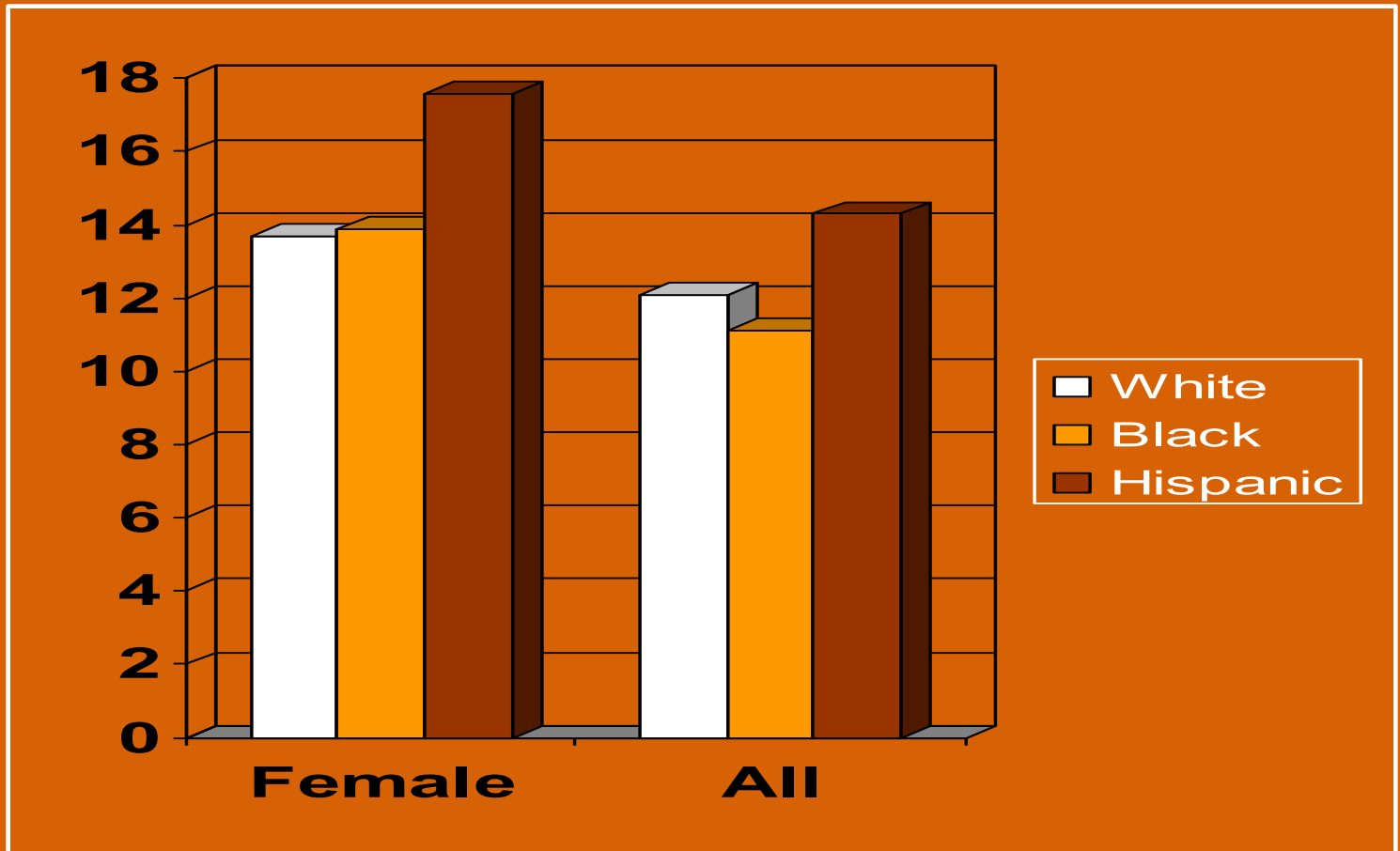


## Seriously Considered Attempting Suicide, 2011





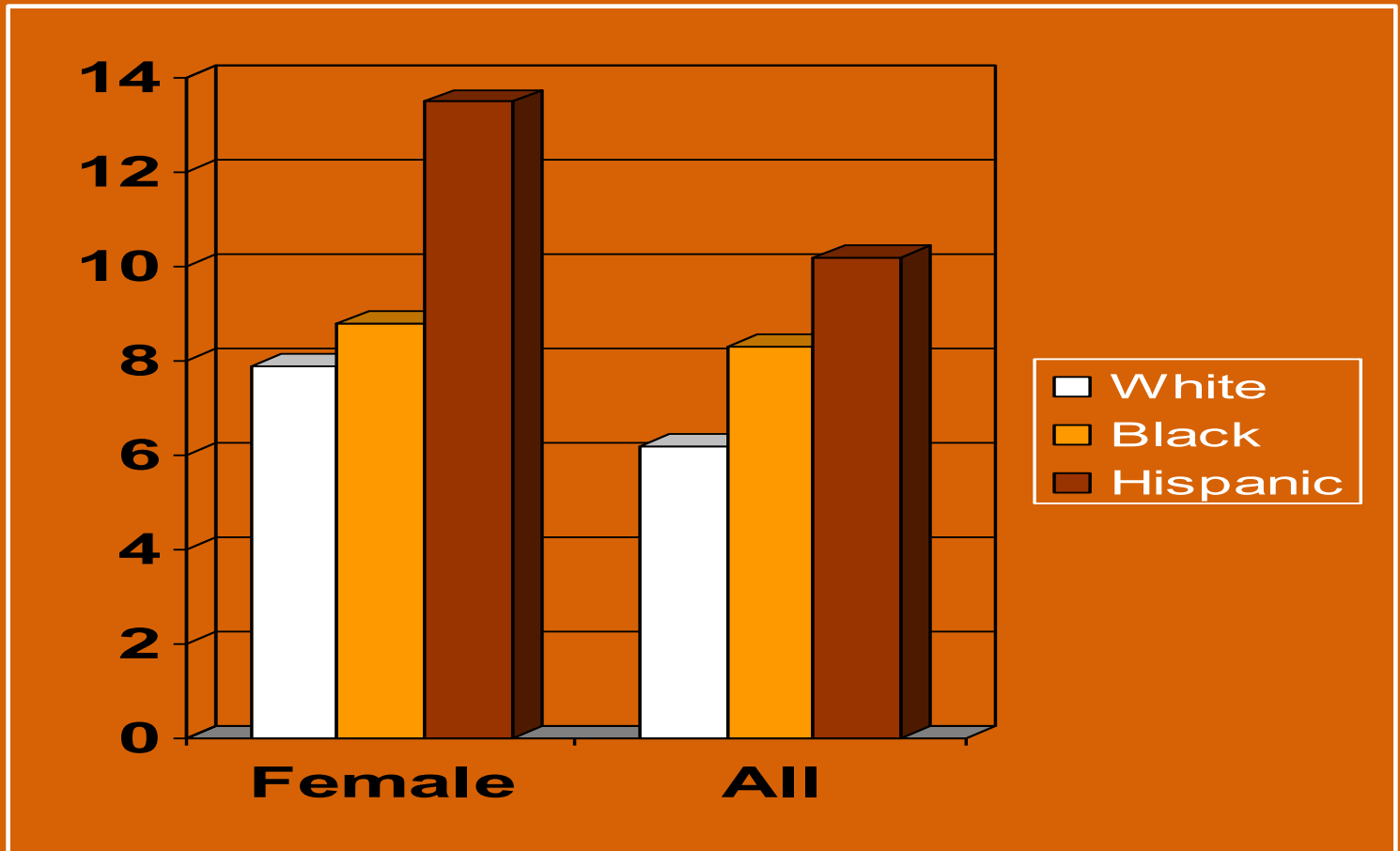
## Made a Suicide Plan, 2011





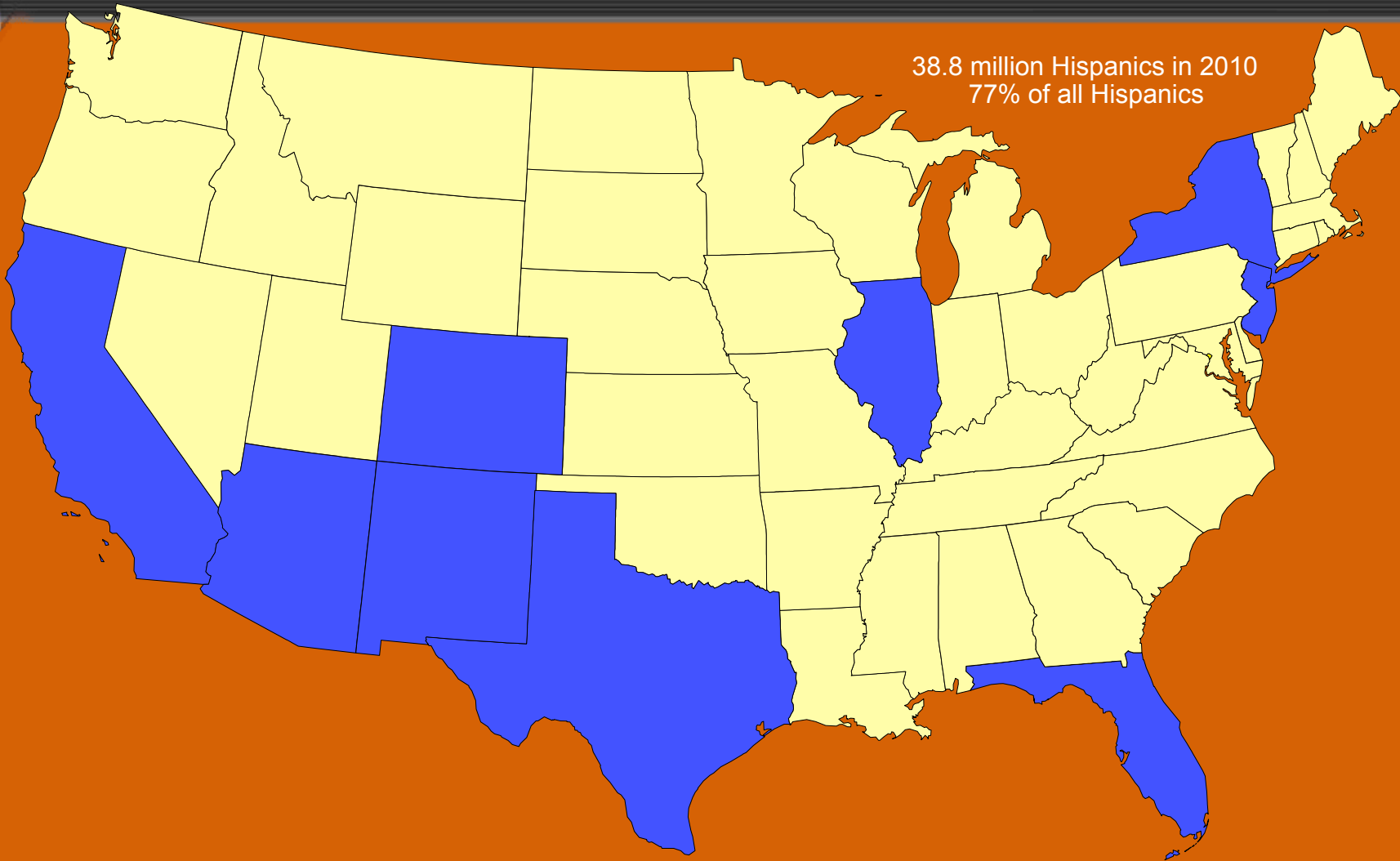


## Attempted Suicide, 2011



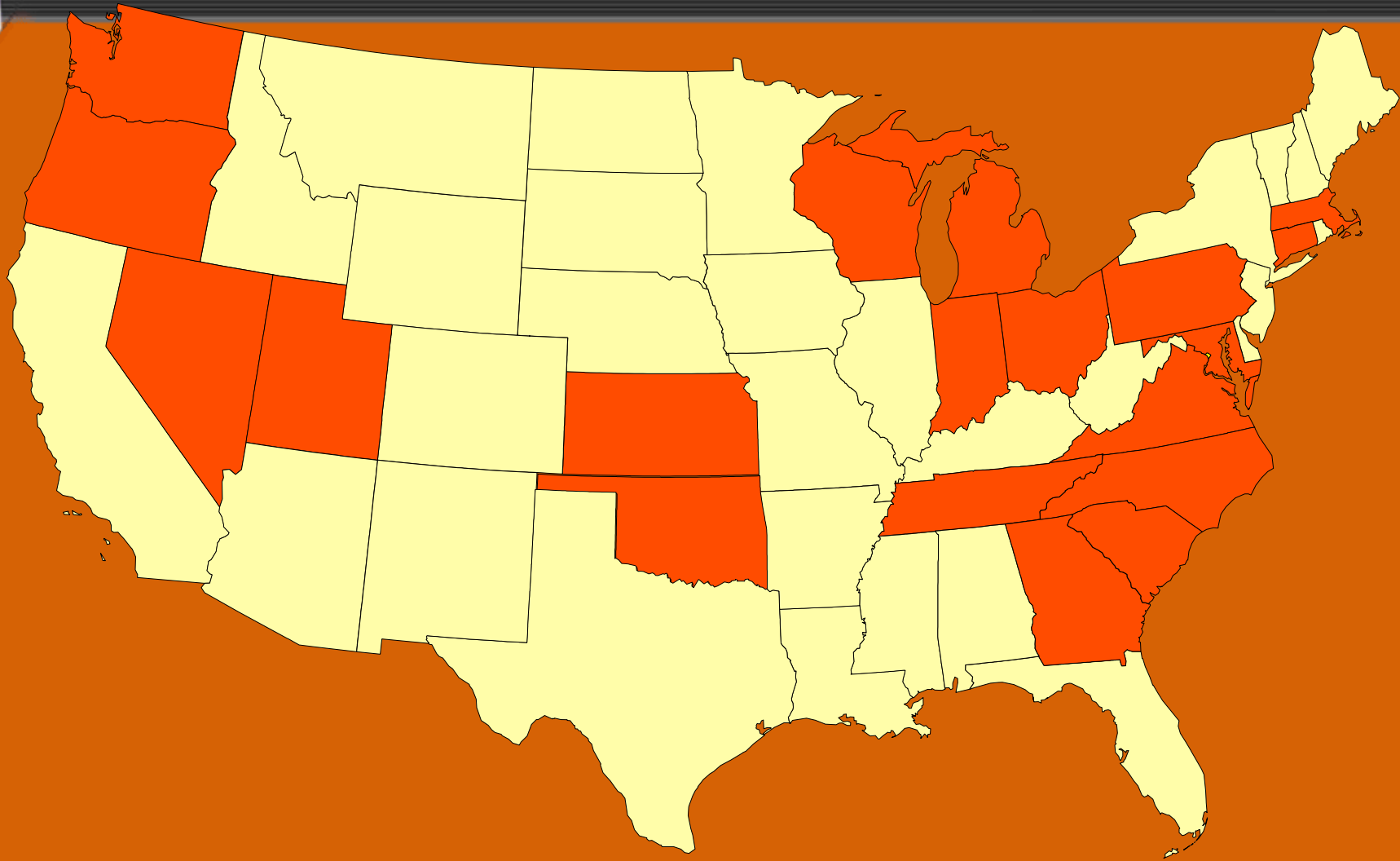


# THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT AUSTIN



Core Hispanic States (9)

"Historical Core" States  
(>400,000 in '90)

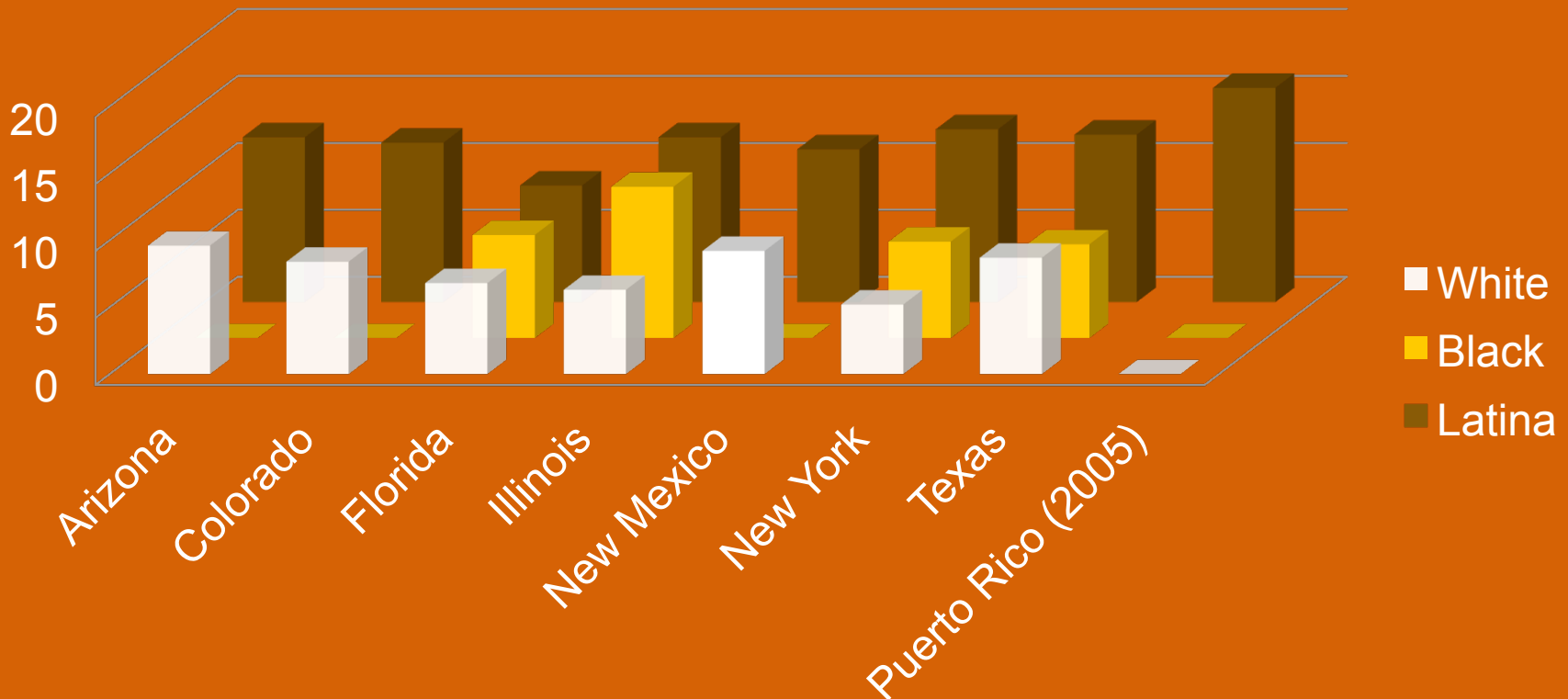


New Hispanic States (19)

“New Hispanic” States  
(’90-’10 Growth >100% & >200K)



## Suicide Attempts of Adolescent Girls in Core Hispanic States, 2009

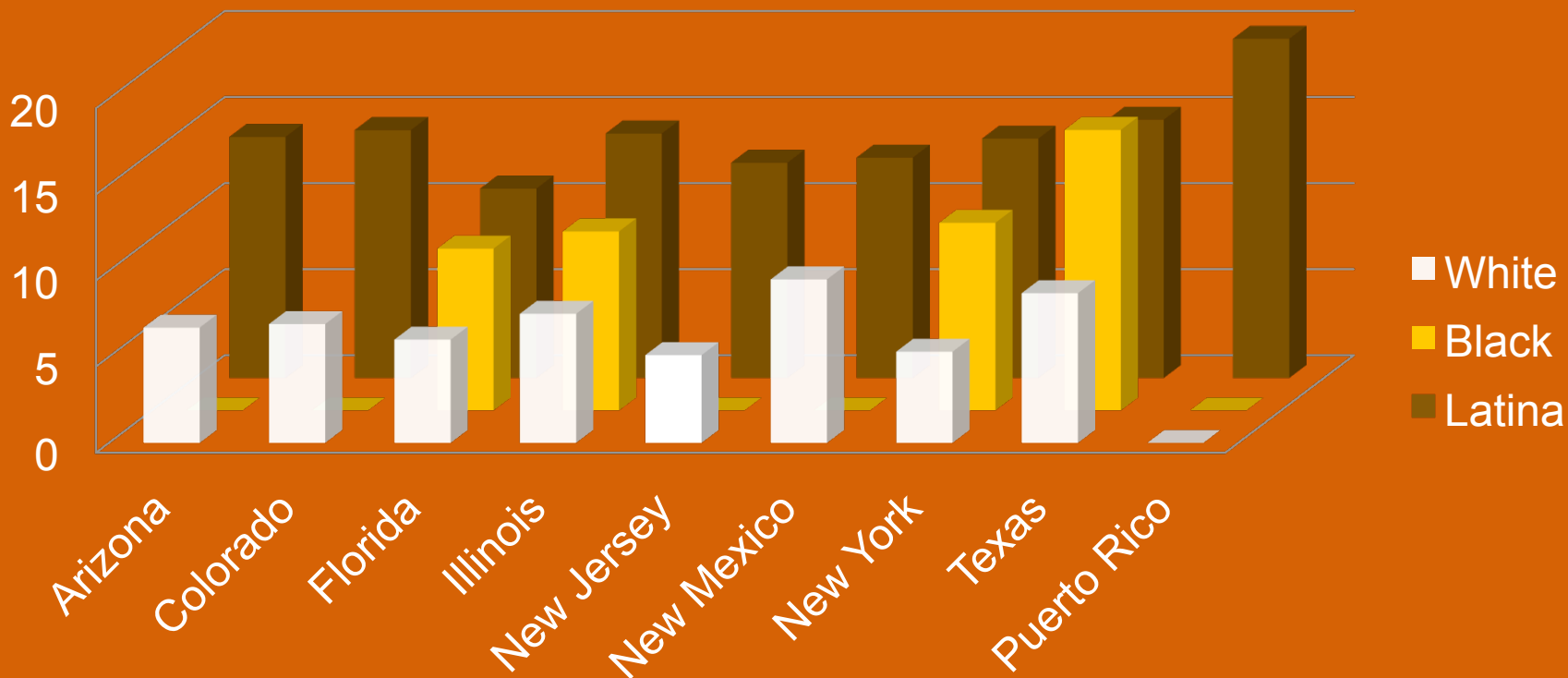


Data on California and New Jersey not available

Data on African Americans in Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)



## Suicide Attempts of Adolescent Girls in Core Hispanic States, 2011



Data on California and New Jersey not available

Data on African Americans in Arizona, Colorado, New Jersey, New Mexico not available (insufficient sample)



## Empirical Basis for Understanding Suicide Attempts

- Teen females more prone to depression than males
- Teen females more likely to attempt suicide than males
- Research primarily focused on
  - Non-Hispanic White adolescents
  - Suicide rather than suicide attempts ('psychological autopsies,' 'suicide contagion effects')
  - Focused on adolescents and peer group effects
  - Cultural, racial, or ethnic factors not examined



## Theoretical Basis to Explore Latinas

- Adolescent development:
  - Autonomy-connection/relatedness
- Development systems theory:
  - Reciprocal influence of person and environment
- Family systems theory:
  - Cohesion
  - Flexibility
  - Communication
- Familism
  - Obligation to family & individual identity
  - Enforces traditions, beliefs, family interactions



## Cultural Basis for Research & Practice with Latinas

- Influences psychological representations, affects
- Provides context & rules for interactions
- Sets limits of tolerance for emotions (salience)
- Provides categories & lexicons for emotional expressions (“idioms of distress”)
- Sets variations in family structure, interactions, & child-rearing, *family interactions prime and shape affects*





## Sociocultural Concepts

- Acculturation
- Immigration
- Socioeconomics
- Generation



## Emotional Vulnerability

- Low self-esteem
  - Hopelessness
  - Impulsivity
  - Emotional dysregulation/  
anger
  - Depression/anxiety
- Coping by
- social withdrawal
  - wishful thinking
  - blaming others
  - passive coping



## Adolescent Development

### Autonomy

- *Cognitive*: my own thinking and beliefs
- *Behavioral*: do what I want
- *Emotional*: have my own feelings

### Relatedness

- *Attachment*: need for closeness
- *Predictability/consistency*: source of organization



## Mentoring

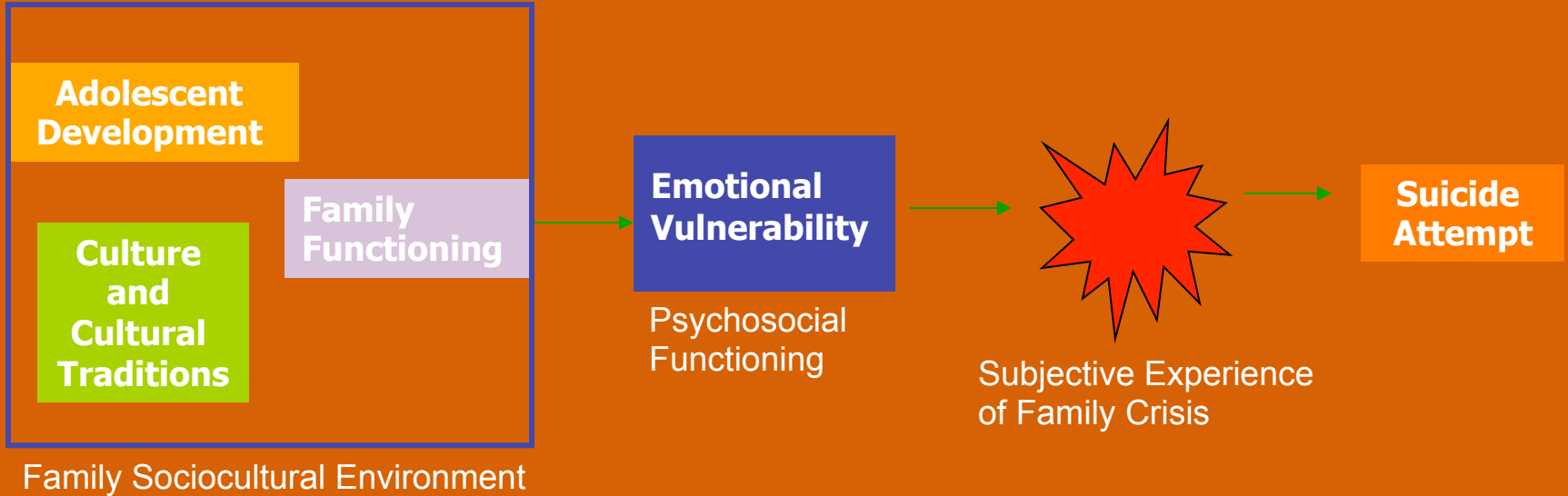
- Teaching, tutoring, guiding
- Knowing adolescent & cultural landscape
- Inspiring

## Mutuality

- Reciprocal exchange of affection, respect, admiration.
- Emotional attunement to other
- Perspective-taking



## Simple Conceptual Model for Project





# Latina Teen Suicide Attempts

NIMH (R01 MH070689)

## *Research Questions*

- *Why* do some Latinas attempt suicide and others don't despite similar characteristics?
- *What* are the elements in the suicide attempts of young Latinas?



## Research Method

- Sample: Latinas 12-19 years of age in NYC
- Clinical group: 1 or more SA in past 6 mos
- Comparison group: no SA lifetime
- One-time in-depth interviews and objective measures: girls, mothers, and fathers
- Qualitative and quantitative analyses



## Measures

- Demographics
- Self-esteem
- Internalizing & externalizing behavior
- Familism
- Acculturation
- Parent-adolescent Conflict
- Mutuality
- Parental affection, communication, & Support
- Family environment (conflict, cohesion, control)





## Sample

	Quantitative	Qualitative
<b>Attempters</b>		
Teens	122	73
Mothers + Grandmothers	(86 +2) 88	46
Fathers	19	16
<b>Non-Attempters</b>		
Teens	110	68
Mothers	83	48
Fathers	17	14



## Demographics

	Total (N=226)		Attempters (n=121)				Non-attempters (n=105)			
	SD/		n	%	M	SD	n	%	M	SD
	M/n	%								
Age	15.47	2.01			15.33	1.80			15.64	2.23
Parent Educ.	10.57	3.66			10.17	3.81			11.01	3.46
Pto Rican	79	35	43	36			36	34		
Dominican	64	28	38	31			26	25		
Mexican	27	12	17	14			10	10		
Colombian*	23	10	5	04			18	17		
Other Hisp.	33	15	18	15			15	14		



## Familism, Parent-Adolescent Conflict, & Self-Esteem

	Total Sample (N=226)		Attempters (n=121)		Non-Attempt (n=105)		
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>t/χ</i> <sup>2</sup> Values
<b>Parent-Adol. Conflict</b>	5.20	4.61	6.59	4.84	3.72	3.85	t(206)=-4.70***
<b>Internalizing</b>	20.67	11.13	25.98	10.70	14.95	8.47	t(212)=-8.31***
<b>Self-Esteem</b>	29.28	5.72	26.85	5.29	31.94	4.95	t(209)=7.20***

\*p<.05   \*\*p<.01   \*\*\*p<.001



## Results

- *Acculturation*
  - Attempters = Non-Attempters
  - Teens > Parents
- *Familism*
  - Attempters = Non-Attempters
  - Teens < Parents
- *Affection, Communication, & Support*
  - Attempters < Non-Attempters
  - *Attempters rate mothers significantly lower than non-attempters rate their mothers*



## Mother-Daughter Mutuality/Reciprocity

- Mutuality with mothers
  - Attempters < Non-Attempters
  - Girls generally rated mothers lower in mutuality
  - But: Disparity greater between attempters/mothers than between non-attempters/mothers
- Attempters' moms perceive selves to be attuned to daughters
  - Daughters disagree: mothers not attuned
- Non-attempters moms perceive selves to be attuned to daughters
  - Daughters agree: mothers pretty much attuned



## Why Mother-Daughter Mutuality Matters

- A one-point increase in measure (MPDQ) of mutuality is associated with a 57% decrease in the probability of being an attempter



## Mutuality with Fathers

- Insufficient data from fathers
- Attempters expressed greater mutuality with fathers than with mothers
- Attempters expressed more communication, affection, and support from fathers
- BUT, many fathers were absent in attempters' lives (e.g., divorce; imprisoned; living in other state or country, sometimes w/ new family)



## Themes of Crisis

- **Family/Household**
  - Relations with divorced parents
  - Breaking house rules
  - Household chores
  - Perceived favoritism for sibling
- **Autonomy**
  - Privacy and boundaries
  - Romantic relations
  - Personal attire



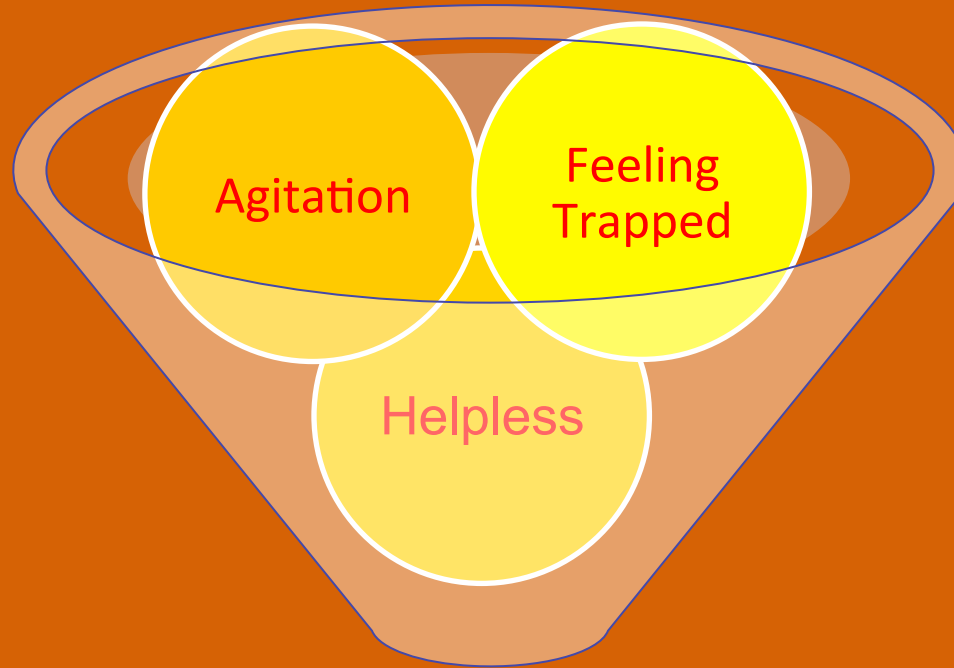


## The Crisis Event or Trigger

- Prolonged tension between girl and parents
- Often about a boyfriend, dating, sexuality
- Boyfriend/dating represent autonomy-relatedness struggle
- Intense argument with parents just prior
- Felt guilt at threat to family integrity



## Trigger and intense emotional experience



Overwhelming, contradictory, emotions



## Meaning of the Suicide Act

### Self-Punishment Self-Blame

"I was thinking, 'Oh, I should just kill myself. I'm not worth it anymore.'" [16 year-old; blade from a pencil sharpener]

"I wanted to kill myself. I didn't want to cause any more problems for my father. I felt so bad for everything." [14 year-old; pills]

### Emotional Release

"I have so much pain inside, it's kind of like I cry inside...I guess when I cut myself, I feel like I'm letting endless words or anything through the blade. I'm taking out my pain." [16 year-old; razor blade]

### Revenge

"I went to rub it in my mom's face. I was like, 'that's why I went in to the bathroom and swallowed the bottle of pills.'" [13 year-old; 11 Tylenol with Codeine]

### Control

It was like a breath of fresh air for me, cause it's like my mom wasn't the one who was hurting me, like she didn't have control over the hurt I felt." [15 year-old; razor blade]



## Implications for Interventions

- Prevention starts in middle-school
  - Youth groups, girls and boys
- Parent groups in school
- What to look for in assessments
- Utility and limitations of individual therapy
- Family-oriented prevention programs and treatments
- Family therapy including
  - Perspective-taking
  - Narratives & story-telling
  - Family rituals



## Lingering Questions

- A cultural idiom of distress?
- A dissociative-like experience?
- Why do Latinas attempt more often than other girls?
- How distinct are Latinas' attempts from other girls' attempts?
- What is the danger for Latino males?