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When the Future Self Feels Like a Stranger: Future-Self Continuity, Interpersonal Hopelessness, and Suicidal Ideation among Indian Adolescents

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Abstract

Adolescents who face similar interpersonal difficulties differ in whether those difficulties come to feel permanent. The interpersonal theory of suicide proposes that suicidal desire emerges when thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness are accompanied by hopelessness that these states will change, yet it says comparatively little about why one adolescent represents interpersonal pain as enduring while another can imagine it changing. This conceptual article proposes that future-self continuity, the perceived psychological connection between one's present and future selves, may help to explain this variation. Integrating the interpersonal theory of suicide, future-self continuity theory, and recent work on episodic future thinking among suicidal adolescents, I argue that continuity alone is unlikely to be protective: a connected and vivid future self may represent meaningful possibility or continued suffering. I therefore propose that future-self continuity moderates the pathway from thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness to interpersonal hopelessness, and that this moderation depends on the valence of the imagined future self and on whether interpersonal circumstances are perceived as changeable. I situate the model in Indian adolescence, where family obligation, educational expectations, negotiations of autonomy, and structural constraints may shape which futures appear credible. I derive four testable propositions, consider competing explanations including reverse causation, outline a research agenda for Indian populations, and treat clinical applications as hypotheses requiring evaluation. The central claim is that continuity of the person does not require continuity of their suffering.

Keywords: suicidal ideation, interpersonal theory of suicide, future-self continuity, hopelessness, adolescence, India

When the Future Self Feels Like a Stranger: Future-Self Continuity, Interpersonal Hopelessness, and Suicidal Ideation Among Indian Adolescents

Suicide is a leading cause of death among young people in India. Estimates from the Global Burden of Disease Study indicate that suicide was the leading cause of death among Indians aged 15 to 39 years in 2016, and that India's share of global suicide deaths among women rose from 25.3% in 1990 to 36.6% in 2016 (India State-Level Disease Burden Initiative Suicide Collaborators, 2018). Official records compiled by the National Crime Records Bureau (NCRB) point in the same direction for students specifically, with 14,488 student suicides recorded in 2024 and family problems and examination failure among the most

frequently recorded causes (NCRB, 2026). These figures describe deaths, however, and deaths are not the subject of this article. Suicidal ideation, suicide attempts, and suicide deaths are related but distinct outcomes, with different correlates and different measurement problems (Klonsky & May, 2015). NCRB figures rely on police-recorded causes and include students of all ages, so they cannot be read as estimates of adolescent ideation. Population survey data offer a closer view. In a representative survey of 20,594 adolescents in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, 4.4% of unmarried girls aged 15 to 19 and 8.2% of married girls in the same age group reported having seriously considered suicide in the previous year (Bhan et al., 2019). This article is concerned with an explanatory problem that such figures cannot resolve. Adolescents who experience similar interpersonal difficulties, such as conflict with parents, rejection by peers, or the sense of having disappointed their family, differ in whether they come to expect those difficulties to last. For some, a painful present is experienced as a phase. For others, it becomes a verdict about every future that seems possible. The interpersonal theory of suicide (Joiner, 2005; Van Orden et al., 2010) locates suicidal desire precisely at this junction: it proposes that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness give rise to active suicidal desire when they are accompanied by hopelessness that these states will change. The theory is less specific, however, about why interpersonal pain comes to feel permanent for some adolescents and not for others.

I propose that research on future-self continuity offers one candidate answer. Future-self continuity refers to the degree to which people feel psychologically connected to the person they will become (Hershfield, 2011). It has been studied mainly in relation to intertemporal choice, such as saving and health behaviour (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009; Rutchick et al., 2018), and more recently in relation to suicidal ideation in adults and young adults (Sokol & Serper, 2017; Webb et al., 2026). A parallel literature on episodic future thinking, the capacity to imagine specific personal events that might occur in the future, has begun to examine how suicidal adolescents mentally construct their futures (Cha et al., 2024; Goger et al., 2024; Nam et al., 2024; Nam & Cha, 2026). What remains undeveloped is an account of how the imagined future self might bear on the specific form of hopelessness that the interpersonal theory treats as decisive: hopelessness about belonging and burdensomeness.

The argument of this article is that the effect of interpersonal distress on suicidal ideation may depend partly on whether an adolescent can represent a psychologically continuous future self for whom present circumstances are capable of changing. Two qualifications give the argument its shape. First, connection to a future self is not the same as expecting that self's life to be better. An adolescent may feel strongly connected to, and vividly imagine, a future in which they remain rejected or burdensome. Continuity is therefore unlikely to be protective on its own; its effect should depend on how the future self is evaluated and on whether interpersonal circumstances are seen as changeable. Second, the claim is not that future-self continuity has never been linked to suicidality. That link has been examined (Ball & Chandler, 1989; Sokol et al., 2022; Webb et al., 2026). The contribution proposed here is narrower: a specific integration of future-self continuity with the interpersonal hopelessness component of the interpersonal theory, developed for Indian adolescents, whose imagined futures are often negotiated within family, educational, and structural contexts that shape which alternatives appear credible.

The scope of the article is deliberately limited. It offers a conceptual account of suicidal ideation, not a comprehensive explanation of suicidal behaviour. The interpersonal theory itself separates the development of suicidal desire from the capability to act on it (Van Orden et al., 2010), and the model developed here addresses only the former. I focus on adolescents aged approximately 13 to 19 years, recognising that available Indian datasets use different age bands and that adolescence in India varies

considerably by region, gender, caste, class, schooling status, and marital status. The sections that follow describe the interpersonal theory and its unresolved temporal question, define future-self continuity and distinguish it from related constructs, connect it to research on episodic future thinking, consider Indian contexts, present an integrated model with testable propositions and competing explanations, and outline a research agenda and its clinical implications.

The Interpersonal Theory of Suicide and Its Unresolved Temporal Question

Core Constructs

The interpersonal theory of suicide was introduced by Joiner (2005) and elaborated by Van Orden et al. (2010). It proposes that the desire for suicide arises from two interpersonal states. *Thwarted belongingness* refers to an unmet need to belong: feeling disconnected from others and lacking reciprocally caring relationships. *Perceived burdensomeness* refers to the belief that one is a liability to others, often accompanied by self-hatred, such that others would be better off without one. In the formulation set out by Van Orden et al. (2010), the simultaneous presence of these two states is hypothesised to produce passive suicidal ideation, while the transition to active suicidal desire requires a third element: hopelessness about these interpersonal states, meaning the expectation that they will not change. The theory then distinguishes desire from capability. Serious suicidal behaviour is thought to require an acquired capability for suicide, including lowered fear of death and elevated pain tolerance, which develops through repeated exposure to painful and provocative experiences.

For the purposes of this article, the most important feature of the theory is that its hopelessness component is not general pessimism. It is domain-specific and temporal: it concerns the perceived permanence of disconnection and burdensomeness. I refer to this as *interpersonal hopelessness*. This distinguishes it from the broader hopelessness assessed by instruments such as the Beck Hopelessness Scale (Beck et al., 1974) and from the cognitive vulnerability described in hopelessness theory (Abramson et al., 1989), although these constructs are likely to be correlated.

Empirical Status

The theory has generated a large empirical literature, and its predictions should not be treated as settled. A meta-analysis of a decade of cross-national research found that thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness were each associated with suicidal ideation, with perceived burdensomeness showing the more consistent associations, while support for the predicted interaction between the two was more modest (Chu et al., 2017). A systematic review reached similar conclusions, finding that the individual constructs were generally supported but that evidence for the theory's interactive predictions was less consistent (Ma et al., 2016). In adolescent samples, the relevance of the theory has been examined directly, including among psychiatric inpatients (King et al., 2019). More broadly, a meta-analysis of five decades of research on risk factors for suicidal thoughts and behaviours concluded that individual risk factors predicted these outcomes only slightly better than chance (Franklin et al., 2017), a finding that cautions against any single-mechanism account, including the one proposed here.

Two further limitations matter here. First, the hopelessness component of the interpersonal theory has received less direct empirical attention than the two interpersonal constructs, in part because it is often proxied by general hopelessness measures rather than by measures of hopelessness about belonging and burdensomeness specifically. Second, the theory was developed largely in Western contexts, and the meaning of belonging and burdensomeness may differ where family interdependence is central to identity

(Markus & Kitayama, 1991). Neither limitation undermines the theory, but both define where extension is needed.

The Temporal Question

The interpersonal theory specifies that hopelessness about interpersonal states is critical, but it does not specify what makes such states seem permanent. This is the question the present article addresses: what makes current interpersonal pain seem permanent to some adolescents and not to others? Related theories point in a similar direction without resolving it. The three-step theory proposes that ideation arises from the combination of pain and hopelessness, and that connectedness protects against the escalation of ideation (Klonsky & May, 2015). The integrated motivational-volitional model identifies future thinking and goals among the factors that moderate the transition from entrapment to suicidal ideation (O'Connor & Kirtley, 2018). Each of these accounts gives the future a role. None, however, specifies how the self that is projected into the future contributes to the perceived permanence of interpersonal pain. I present the answer offered below as a proposed extension of the interpersonal theory, not as something the theory already implies.

Future-Self Continuity: Connection Is Not the Same as Improvement

Definition and Origins

Future-self continuity refers to the perceived psychological connection between the present self and the future self (Hershfield, 2011). The construct draws on philosophical work on personal identity over time and was developed in psychology primarily to explain intertemporal choice. People who feel more connected to their future selves tend to make choices that favour those future selves: individual differences in future-self continuity accounted for differences in saving (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009), and enhancing continuity with the distant future self increased subsequent exercise (Rutchick et al., 2018). Vividness of the future self has been linked to lower delinquency (Van Gelder et al., 2013), and a longitudinal intervention designed to increase vividness reduced delinquent behaviour among adolescents (Van Gelder et al., 2015). Hershfield (2011) described future-self continuity in terms of three facets: similarity to the future self, vividness of the future self, and positivity towards the future self. More recent work has argued that connectedness, the sense that the future self is still oneself however different, should be distinguished from similarity (Webb et al., 2026).

Hershfield's foundational work concerns temporal self-representation and choices across time. It was not developed as a theory of suicide, and applying it to adolescent suicidal ideation requires additional justification. The justification offered here is conceptual: if interpersonal hopelessness involves projecting present interpersonal states into the future, then the way in which the self is represented in that future should matter for whether those states are projected unchanged.

Future-Self Continuity and Suicidality

The idea that self-continuity bears on youth suicide has a longer history than the term future-self continuity. In a comparison of psychiatrically hospitalised adolescents with nonsuicidal peers, Ball and Chandler (1989) found that adolescents at high risk for suicide were distinguished by an inability to identify any grounds for their own continuity through time. Chandler and colleagues extended this work to Indigenous and non-Indigenous North American adolescents (Chandler et al., 2003) and to the community level, reporting lower youth suicide rates in First Nations communities with more markers of cultural continuity (Chandler & Lalonde, 1998). This tradition is important for the present argument

because it treats continuity as something that social and cultural contexts can support or disrupt, rather than as a purely individual trait.

More recent research has examined future-self continuity directly. Sokol and Serper (2017) reported associations between temporal self-appraisal, continuous identity, depression, and hopelessness, and later developed a questionnaire assessing similarity, vividness, and positivity (Sokol & Serper, 2020). Low future-self continuity has been associated with suicide risk among military veterans with traumatic brain injury (Sokol et al., 2022), and among transitioning veterans future-self continuity statistically mediated the association between job loss and negative mental health outcomes, including suicidality (Levin et al., 2024). The Levin et al. (2024) study is instructive for the present model because it concerns the loss of a valued social role, but it was conducted with adult veterans and its findings cannot be generalised to adolescents without direct testing.

The most informative study for the present argument is a two-wave analysis of a representative cohort of young people in Zurich (Webb et al., 2026). Future-self valence at approximately age 20 was uniquely and negatively associated with concurrent suicidal ideation and with ideation approximately four years later, whereas future-self connectedness was only inconsistently associated with ideation and its associations did not survive adjustment for negative affect. Suicidal ideation at the first wave did not predict later future-self perceptions. These findings concern young adults rather than adolescents and were obtained in an affluent European city, but they bear directly on the central distinction of this article: how one evaluates the future self may matter more for suicidal ideation than how connected one feels to it.

Distinguishing Related Constructs

If continuity and positivity can come apart, the model requires a clear distinction between several constructs that are often measured together. Table 1 sets out five constructs and the question each addresses.

Table 1

Constructs Distinguished in the Proposed Model

Construct	Question it addresses
Future-self continuity (connectedness and similarity)	Does that future person feel like me?
Future-self vividness	Can I imagine that person clearly?
Future-self valence (positivity)	Do I evaluate that person positively?
Perceived changeability of interpersonal circumstances	Could my relationships or my place in them improve?
General hopelessness	Do I expect negative outcomes broadly?

Note. Continuity, vividness, and valence follow Hershfield (2011); the separation of connectedness from similarity follows Webb et al. (2026). Perceived changeability is proposed here as a domain-specific construct linked to the interpersonal hopelessness component of the interpersonal theory of suicide.

These distinctions matter because a connected future self could represent either meaningful possibility or continued suffering. An adolescent who feels intensely continuous with a future self who remains

excluded, or who continues to burden their family, may experience continuity as the problem rather than the solution. Conversely, an adolescent may feel that their future self will be quite different from who they are now, and therefore dissimilar, while still experiencing that future self as recognisably their own. This is the configuration that the model treats as most protective: a future self to whom one feels connected, whose life is evaluated positively, and whose relationships are imagined as capable of change. Perceived changeability is included separately because an adolescent could evaluate their future self positively in domains such as career while still expecting their family relationships to remain unchanged. General hopelessness is included so that the model can be tested against the simpler explanation that all of these constructs reflect a single pessimistic outlook.

From Imagined Events to Imagined Selves: Evidence From Episodic Future Thinking

Future-self continuity concerns how people relate to the person they will become. Episodic future thinking concerns the capacity to mentally simulate specific future events, a capacity that draws on the same constructive processes that support episodic memory (Schacter et al., 2007). The two constructs are distinct, but they are likely to be linked: one way an adolescent comes to feel connected to a future self is by being able to imagine specific scenes in that self's life. A review of this literature concluded that episodic future thinking is a cognitive process relevant to both depression and suicide risk, with its associations depending on emotional valence and on the specific features of imagined events (Nam et al., 2024).

Research with adolescents is particularly relevant to the present model. Cha et al. (2024) administered a performance-based measure of episodic future thinking to 176 community-based adolescents aged 15 to 19 years and examined how the details of imagined future events related to suicidal ideation. The authors noted how little is known about how suicidal youth mentally construct their future lives. Their results did not show a simple deficit. Positive future thinking was associated with more severe recent ideation at baseline only when the imagined events were highly novel, an association that held above and beyond depressive symptoms, and this pattern also predicted ideation severity at later assessments, although not after further covariates were controlled. A secondary analysis of the same study used a person-centred approach to identify latent classes of positive and negative future thinking (Nam & Cha, 2026). Imagining less vivid positive future events with emotional detachment was associated with higher hopelessness, whereas imagining negative future events with a perseverative quality predicted ideation severity at baseline and six months later. The authors concluded that positive and negative future thinking are not mirror images of each other.

These findings support two features of the model developed here. First, the association between imagining the future and suicidal ideation depends on what is imagined and how, not simply on whether a future can be imagined at all. A highly novel positive future, one that bears little resemblance to the adolescent's present life, may function less as a credible possibility than as an escape fantasy, which is consistent with the claim that continuity and positivity must be considered together. Second, the detachment and perseveration identified by Nam and Cha (2026) resemble, at the level of events, the low connectedness and negative valence that the present model proposes at the level of the self.

A further finding bears on intervention. Goger et al. (2024) tested whether episodic future thinking could be modified in the same sample of adolescents, 71% of whom reported a history of suicidal ideation, using a brief episodic specificity induction. Adolescents generated more episodic detail after the induction, providing the first evidence of the modifiability of this process in adolescents. More recent work has used experience sampling to examine future thinking and suicidal ideation in adolescents' daily lives (Cha et

al., 2026), which offers a methodological route for testing the short-term dynamics proposed below. Taken together, this research suggests that the future-oriented cognition of suicidal adolescents is structured, valence-dependent, and potentially modifiable. What it does not yet address is whether these processes bear specifically on hopelessness about belonging and burdensomeness, or how they operate in contexts outside the United States.

Indian Contexts: How Relationships May Shape the Imagined Future

This section is organised around candidate processes that the model predicts to be relevant, not around assumptions that all Indian adolescents share them. India's adolescent population is extremely heterogeneous, and generalisations about "Indian families" or "Indian culture" risk obscuring differences by gender, caste, class, religion, region, language, urbanicity, schooling status, and marital status. A review of a decade of Indian adolescent mental health research documented substantial variation in methods and findings and called attention to rapid socioeconomic change as a context for adolescent distress (Aggarwal & Berk, 2015). Indian evidence also gives reason to take interpersonal contexts seriously. In the UDAYA survey in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, child abuse was associated with suicidal ideation among unmarried adolescent girls, witnessing violence between parents was associated with ideation among adolescent boys, and experiencing marital violence was associated with ideation among married adolescent girls (Bhan et al., 2019). These findings support the contextual rationale for the model. They do not establish the future-self mechanism proposed here, which has not been tested in Indian samples.

Family Investment and Obligation

Many Indian adolescents grow up in families where considerable resources are invested in their education and where obligations to parents and wider kin are emphasised. Cross-cultural theory suggests that in such contexts the self is often construed in terms of relationships and roles rather than as independent of them (Markus & Kitayama, 1991), and that emotional interdependence can coexist with, rather than preclude, the development of autonomy (Kağıtçıbaşı, 2005). One question the model raises is whether perceived failure to meet family expectations can become a belief that one is a burden to the family. It is important to distinguish ordinary obligation, guilt, or a wish to repay one's parents from perceived burdensomeness in the sense intended by the interpersonal theory, which involves the belief that others would be better off without oneself. The former are widespread and may be protective; only the latter is hypothesised to contribute to suicidal desire. Measurement in Indian samples will need to separate them.

Educational Expectations

Where a successful future is narrowly defined, for example through admission to a particular stream, examination, or institution, an academic setback may be experienced not only as a disappointment but as the loss of the only future self that seemed acceptable to oneself and one's family. Possible-selves research suggests that the futures people imagine for themselves guide present behaviour and shape how setbacks are interpreted (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Oyserman et al., 2006). The model proposes that when the range of acceptable future selves is narrow, an examination result may simultaneously threaten identity, acceptance, and possibility, collapsing future-self valence and perceived changeability together. Examination failure appears among recorded causes of student suicide in NCRB data (NCRB, 2026), but police-recorded causes are an unreliable guide to psychological mechanisms, and this proposition requires direct study.

Autonomy and Relational Approval

A central developmental task of adolescence is to imagine a future self who is different from the present self. For adolescents whose sense of self is closely bound to family relationships, the relevant question

may not be whether they can imagine an independent future, but whether they can imagine a meaningful future that preserves valued relationships while allowing personal change. The model predicts that future-self continuity will be most protective when adolescents can envisage futures in which they change, for example by pursuing a different course of study, without losing the relationships that matter to them. Where change is expected to cost belonging, a vivid future self may intensify rather than relieve the conflict.

Structural Constraints

Imagination does not operate independently of opportunity. Poverty, caste discrimination, gender-based restrictions, early marriage, violence, and limited access to education may constrain which alternative futures are credible. In the UDAYA analysis, belonging to a Scheduled Caste or Scheduled Tribe was associated with higher odds of suicidal ideation among unmarried adolescent girls after adjustment for other factors (Bhan et al., 2019). For an adolescent whose realistic options are genuinely restricted, low perceived changeability may be an accurate reading of circumstances rather than a cognitive distortion. The model must therefore distinguish between an inability to imagine change and an accurate perception that change is unavailable, and it must avoid locating in individual cognition what is produced by social structure.

Supportive Relationships

Interdependence should be treated as potentially protective as well as stressful. Families, peers, teachers, and community members may help adolescents envisage belonging across time, for example by making it clear that their acceptance does not depend on a single outcome. The cultural continuity findings of Chandler and Lalonde (1998) suggest that continuity can be supported at the level of communities, not only individuals. A relational version of the present model would ask whether others in an adolescent's life actively hold open a future in which the adolescent belongs.

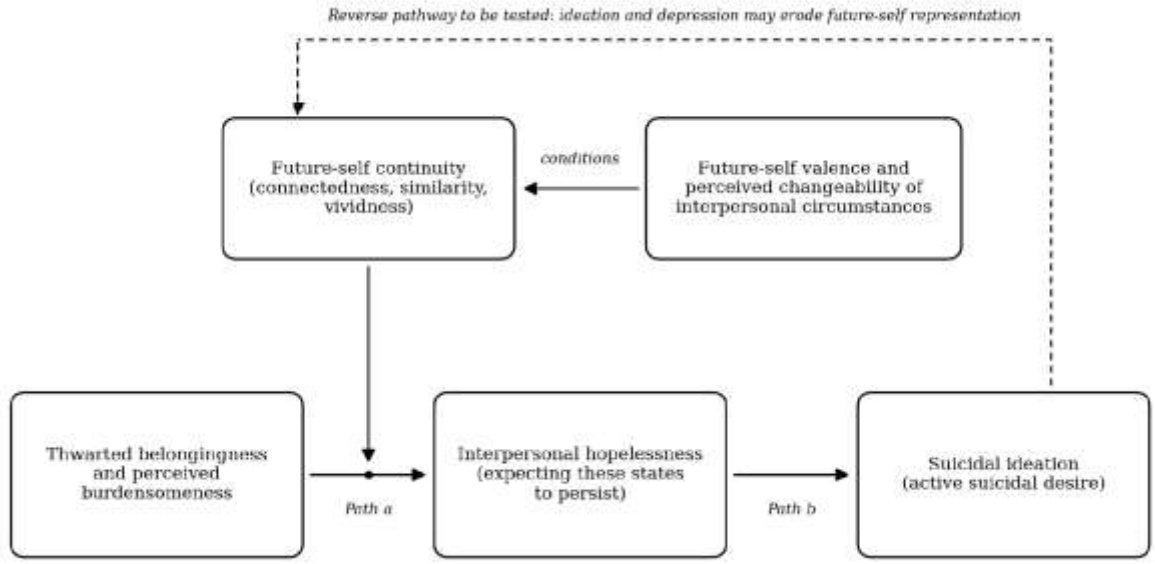
Each of these processes is expected to vary by gender, caste, socioeconomic position, region, schooling status, marital status, and other circumstances. The UDAYA findings illustrate why: the family violence exposures associated with ideation differed between unmarried girls, married girls, and boys (Bhan et al., 2019). Any test of the model should examine such differences rather than assume a single Indian pattern.

The Proposed Integrated Model

The model retains the sequence proposed by the interpersonal theory: thwarted belongingness and perceived burdensomeness lead to hopelessness about those states changing, which in turn leads to active suicidal ideation (Van Orden et al., 2010). It adds future-self continuity as a proposed moderator of the first pathway, from interpersonal distress to interpersonal hopelessness (Path *a* in Figure 1). Crucially, the moderating effect of continuity is itself conditional on the valence of the imagined future self and on the perceived changeability of interpersonal circumstances. Statistically, this is a conditional moderation hypothesis: a three-way interaction among interpersonal distress, future-self continuity, and future-self valence or perceived changeability in predicting interpersonal hopelessness. The model makes no claim that future-self continuity moderates the second pathway, from hopelessness to ideation, although this possibility can be examined.

Figure 1

Proposed Conditional Moderation Model



Note. Solid arrows show the pathways of the interpersonal theory of suicide (Van Orden et al., 2010). Future-self continuity is proposed to moderate Path a, and its moderating effect is proposed to depend on future-self valence and perceived changeability. The dashed arrow indicates a reverse pathway that competing models must test.

The key distinction in the model can be stated simply: continuity of the person does not require continuity of their suffering. Protection is predicted when an adolescent can imagine remaining recognisably themselves while entering different relationships, roles, or circumstances. Risk is predicted when the future self is connected but negatively evaluated, so that the adolescent projects both their identity and their present interpersonal pain unchanged into every imaginable future. When continuity is low, the model predicts that present distress is less likely to be buffered, because the future self is too distant or unreal to serve as a reference point for change.

A hypothetical illustration may clarify the distinction. Consider two adolescents who each perceive their parents' disappointment after an examination setback. The first can imagine remaining recognisably herself while taking a different educational path, and can imagine a future in which her parents come to accept that path. The second feels just as connected to her future self, but in every future she can imagine, her parents' disappointment persists and her sense of having failed them deepens. The model predicts that the first adolescent's distress is less likely to become interpersonal hopelessness than the second's. These are hypothetical examples introduced to clarify the model; they are not evidence that the mechanism operates.

Testable Propositions and Competing Explanations

Propositions

The model generates four propositions, each of which could be falsified.

Proposition 1. Future-self continuity will be associated with lower interpersonal hopelessness among adolescents experiencing thwarted belongingness or perceived burdensomeness, but only when the

imagined future includes credible relational improvement, that is, when future-self valence and perceived changeability are high.

Proposition 2. Continuity with a negatively evaluated future self will offer little protection and may strengthen the association between interpersonal distress and interpersonal hopelessness. This proposition is consistent with the finding that negatively valenced future-self perceptions, rather than connectedness, predicted later ideation in young adults (Webb et al., 2026), and with the finding that perseverative negative future thinking predicted later ideation in adolescents (Nam & Cha, 2026).

Proposition 3. Perceived family acceptance and access to alternative educational or relational pathways will influence whether future-self continuity is beneficial. Where these are available, continuity is expected to be protective; where they are absent, continuity is expected to be less protective regardless of an adolescent's cognitive capacity to imagine the future.

Proposition 4. The proposed interaction will predict interpersonal hopelessness and suicidal ideation over and above depression, general hopelessness, and generally positive expectations about the future. If the effect disappears once these variables are controlled, the model adds little to existing accounts.

Competing Explanations

Several alternative explanations must be ruled out before the model can be considered supported. The first is *reverse causation*. Suicidal ideation and depression may themselves disrupt future-self representation, so that low continuity or negative valence is a consequence of distress rather than a moderator of its effects. Evidence on this question is limited and mixed: in the Zurich cohort, ideation at the first wave did not predict later future-self perceptions (Webb et al., 2026), but this finding comes from young adults in one setting and does not settle the question for adolescents. The model therefore requires longitudinal designs capable of testing both directions.

The second alternative is that future-self continuity is simply a marker of *depression or general hopelessness*. Connectedness to the future self in the Zurich cohort was attenuated once negative affect was controlled (Webb et al., 2026), which suggests that some future-self constructs may substantially overlap with current mood. Proposition 4 addresses this directly. The third alternative is that the relevant variable is the *severity of actual adversity* rather than its representation: adolescents facing more severe and persistent family violence, discrimination, or deprivation may report both lower perceived changeability and more ideation because their circumstances are in fact less changeable. Tests of the model should therefore include measures of objective adversity. The fourth concern is *measurement overlap*. Items assessing future-self valence, perceived changeability, and interpersonal hopelessness may share content, producing inflated associations. Establishing that these constructs are empirically distinguishable is a precondition for testing the model, not an afterthought.

A Research Agenda for Indian Populations

Testing the model in India would require a sequence of studies rather than a single project. The following agenda is ordered by logical priority.

Qualitative groundwork. Research should begin with qualitative interviews exploring how Indian adolescents describe their future identities, family obligations, belonging, and the possibility of change. Such work would establish whether the constructs in Table 1 correspond to distinctions adolescents themselves make, and whether additional constructs, such as the anticipated approval of specific family members, need to be incorporated.

Measure adaptation. Existing measures of future-self continuity, including the overlapping-circles measure of connectedness (Ersner-Hershfield et al., 2009) and the Future Self-Continuity Questionnaire

(Sokol & Serper, 2020), have been validated mainly outside India; psychometric evaluation of the questionnaire outside the United States has only recently begun (Han et al., 2025). Adaptation will require translation into relevant languages, cognitive interviewing to establish that items are understood as intended, and tests showing that continuity, valence, perceived changeability, and hopelessness remain distinguishable. Performance-based measures of episodic future thinking of the kind used by Cha et al. (2024) could complement self-report and would reduce reliance on items that may overlap with hopelessness.

Longitudinal and intensive designs. Cross-sectional data cannot test the temporal ordering the model assumes. Panel designs with at least three waves would allow competing models, including the reverse pathway in Figure 1, to be compared. Experience sampling methods, now being applied to future thinking and ideation in adolescents (Cha et al., 2026), could test whether daily fluctuations in interpersonal distress are more strongly followed by hopelessness when future-self valence is low.

Sampling and measurement invariance. Samples should extend beyond urban, English-medium schools to include rural adolescents, adolescents outside school, married adolescents, and adolescents from marginalised caste and religious communities. Measurement invariance should be tested across gender, language, caste, and socioeconomic groups before comparisons are made between them.

Ethics. Research on suicidal ideation with adolescents requires careful attention to parental consent and adolescent assent, confidentiality and its limits, and a clear protocol for responding to disclosed suicide risk, including referral pathways that are actually available in the study setting. Where family conflict or violence is part of what is being studied, procedures should consider whether routine parental involvement could place an adolescent at risk.

Clinical Implications

If supported, the model would suggest that interventions targeting the future self should aim not merely to increase connection to the future but to help adolescents construct future selves that are both recognisably their own and capable of different relationships. Several approaches could be evaluated as hypotheses. Narrative work could connect valued aspects of the present self, such as a skill, a commitment, or a relationship, to realistic future possibilities. Brief exercises have been shown to modify future-oriented cognition in other contexts: writing a letter to a distant future self increased subsequent exercise (Rutchick et al., 2018), a letter-exchange exercise with a future self enhanced self-continuity among students (Chishima & Wilson, 2021), and an episodic specificity induction increased the detail of adolescents' imagined future events (Goger et al., 2024). None of these has been shown to reduce interpersonal hopelessness or suicidal ideation in adolescents, and the model predicts that increasing vividness or connection without attention to valence could be unhelpful or even harmful for an adolescent whose imagined future is dominated by rejection.

The model also implies that individual cognitive work should be combined with relational and practical support. If perceived changeability depends partly on whether families signal that acceptance does not rest on a single outcome, family-level interventions may be as important as individual ones. Future-self work would, in any case, supplement rather than replace established components of care for suicidal adolescents, such as risk assessment and safety planning.

Limitations

The model has several limitations. It is a conceptual proposal, and the evidence on which it draws comes largely from adult, young adult, or United States samples. The central interaction it proposes has not been tested in any population, Indian or otherwise. The construct of future-self continuity was developed in

cultural contexts that may conceptualise the self and its future differently from many Indian adolescents, and it is possible that relational constructs, such as the anticipated continuity of family acceptance, will prove more important than self-continuity itself. The model addresses suicidal ideation, not suicidal behaviour, and says nothing about the capability for suicide. Finally, imagination cannot remove violence, exclusion, or material constraints. An account that located the problem solely in how adolescents imagine their futures would risk implying that adolescents facing real and unchangeable adversity are simply thinking about it wrongly. The model is intended to identify when imagined futures may matter, not to suggest that they matter more than the circumstances adolescents actually face.

Conclusion

The interpersonal theory of suicide identifies hopelessness about belonging and burdensomeness as the point at which interpersonal pain becomes suicidal desire, but it leaves open why that pain comes to seem permanent. This article has proposed that the way adolescents represent their future selves may help answer that question, with an important qualification: connection to the future self is likely to be protective only when that self is positively evaluated and its relationships are imagined as capable of change. Situated in Indian adolescence, the model directs attention to how family obligation, educational expectations, autonomy, and structural constraints shape which futures appear credible.

The model would be supported if longitudinal studies in Indian samples found that the association between interpersonal distress and later interpersonal hopelessness is weaker among adolescents with connected and positively evaluated future selves, and that this conditional effect predicts ideation beyond depression and general hopelessness. It would be challenged if future-self constructs proved indistinguishable from general hopelessness or mood, if the reverse pathway from ideation to future-self representation accounted for the observed associations, or if objective adversity explained the effects attributed to imagined futures. Either outcome would clarify how adolescents come to believe that their present will be their future, and what might help them imagine that it need not be.

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