

# Perceived Sense of Loss, Psychache, and Suicide Behavior in Latino/a College Students

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## BACKGROUND

- Edwin S. Shneidman is widely regarded as a pioneer of suicidology, and his empirical and theoretical contributions have been recognized as foundational to the field (e.g., Leenaars, 2010). His concept of psychache—defined as unbearable psychological pain that is a central precondition for suicide—has been identified as a strong proximal predictor of suicidal behavior (e.g., Boye et al., 2024; Holden et al., 2001).
- Other elements of Shneidman's work have received little attention. Based on his examination of suicide notes and psychological autopsy findings, Shneidman believed that psychache was caused and sustained by frustrated psychological needs, including a perceived “sense of loss” for who and what are not in one’s life (Shneidman, 1998).
- Research has shown that suicidal behavior is linked to specific experiences of loss, such as job loss, loss of self-esteem, and loss of social support. However, to our knowledge, research has yet to examine individuals’ perceptions of loss and their relationship to psychological pain and suicide behavior.
- Accordingly, the present study will use a mixed-methods approach to investigate the relationship between suicidal behavior, individuals’ perceptions of loss, and the psychological pain associated with those perceptions.

## PURPOSE AND HYPOTHESES

The purpose of this study is to explore the relationship between suicide behavior and individuals’ perceptions of loss and the psychological pain associated with their perceptions. To the best of our knowledge, research has not yet investigated individuals’ perceptions of loss and their relationship to psychological pain and suicide behavior.

Specifically, we expected that:

- Individuals with higher levels of emotional pain from their loss will have a higher likelihood of suicidal behavior.
- Individuals with higher levels of emotional pain from their loss will experience higher levels of psychache.
- Individuals with higher levels of psychache will have a higher likelihood of suicidal behavior.
- The relationship between emotional pain from loss and suicide behaviors will be mediated by psychache.

### Death of a Loved One

“Where I felt my deepest sense of loss was two years ago, it was the day when my grandma passed away. She was my person, my favorite person in this world.”

### Heartbreak

“When I experienced my deepest sense of loss was when I was going through some problems in my relationship and we broke up but my heart was so hurt that I could feel it hurting and like almost like a knot in my heart I felt like it was going to stop for a second.”

### Loss of Social Network

“Graduating high school and realizing that nobody stuck with me after graduation.”

### Loss of What to Expect in Life

“...me just not really knowing what I am doing with my life and what my future holds affects me greatly. It all leaves me feeling worthless and extremely anxious for the future...”

### Loss of Self

“There was a point when I thought I wouldn’t get better. I was in a deep depression, feeling as if I had lost myself.”

### Loss of Emotional Security

“Moving out of my parents’ house was one of the deepest losses I’ve experienced, because it meant leaving behind the sense of security and familiarity I had grown up with.”

## MATERIALS AND METHODS

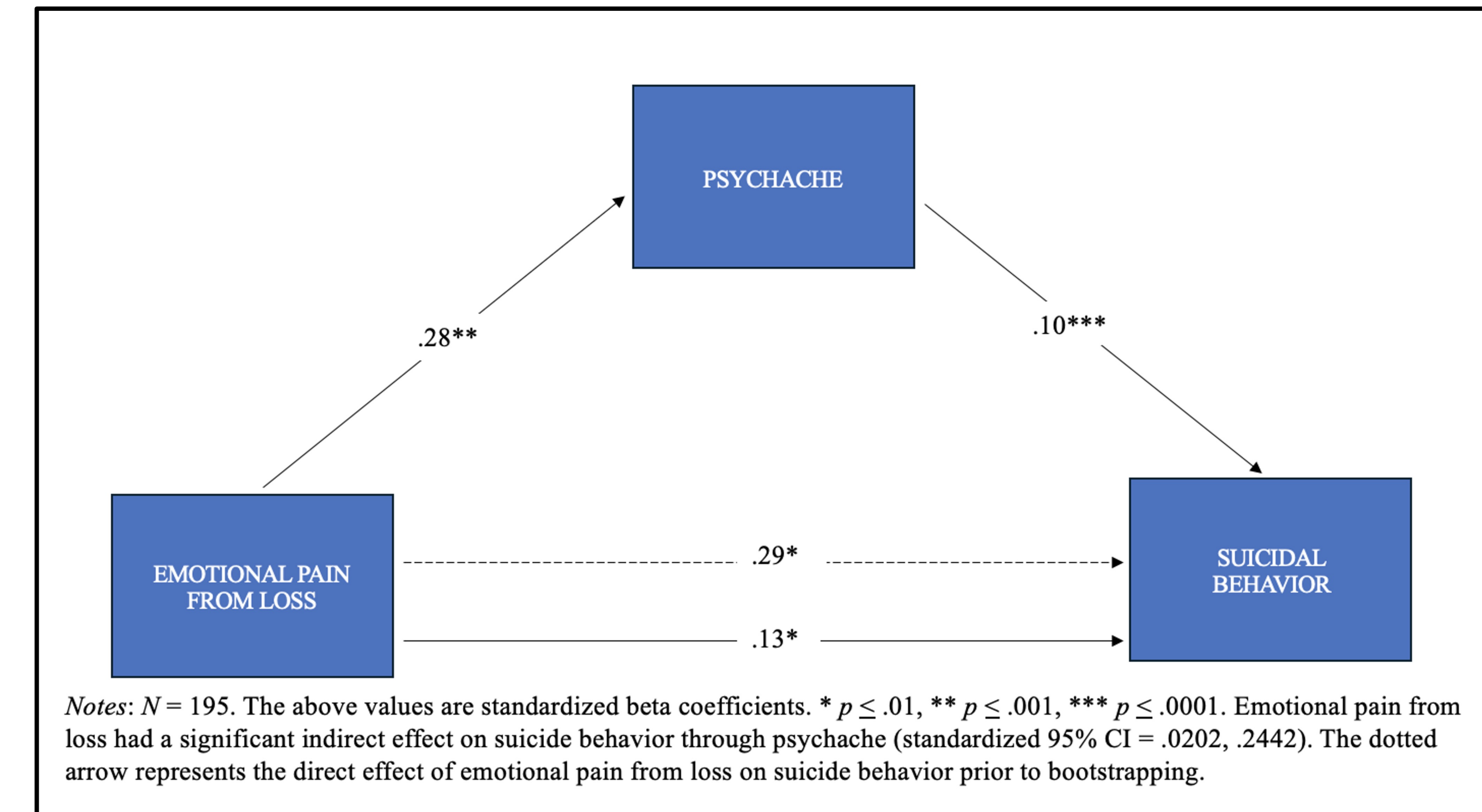
### Participants and Procedure

- 195 undergraduate UTRGV students of Mexican heritage.
  - $M = 19.6, SD = 1.71$ .
  - 62.6% females.
- The data was collected through Qualtrics online survey software. The survey included a free response question asking participants to describe experiences where they felt their deepest sense of loss, followed by a quantitative assessment of the level of psychological pain associated with these experiences. The survey also included standardized measures.

### Measures

- Patient Health Questionnaire-9* (Kroenke, 2001).
- Social Support Scale, Emotional Support Item* (Santiago et al., 2022).
- UCLA-3 Item Loneliness Scale* (Hughes, 2014).
- Coping Competence Questionnaire* (Shroder, 2013).
- Ruminative Response Scale Short Version* (Treyner, 2003).
- Psychache Scale* (Holden, 2001).
- Brief Agitation Measure* (Ribeiro, 2011).
- Beck Hopelessness Scale* (Beck, 1988).
- Suicide Behavior Questionnaire* (Osman, 2001).

## RESULTS CONTINUED



## RESULTS

### Correlations Between Variables

	Suicide Behavior	Coping Competence	Social Support	Depression	Emotional Pain	Agitation	Loneliness	Rumination	Hopelessness
Psychache	.611**	-.465**	-.275**	.782**	.224**	.718**	.575**	.610**	.514**
Suicide Behavior	--	-.357**	-.201**	.586**	.196**	.471**	.492**	.451**	.398**
Coping Competence	-.357**	--	.113	-.529**	-.152*	-.595**	-.396**	-.469**	-.323**
Social Support	-.201**	.113	--	-.273**	.078	-.211**	.406**	.158*	-.272
Depression	.586**	-.529**	-.273**	--	.267**	.659**	.624**	.672**	.427**
Emotional Pain	.196**	-.152*	.078	.276**	--	.272**	.214**	.384**	-.067
Agitation	.471**	-.595**	-.211**	.659**	.272**	--	.498**	.559**	.437**
Loneliness	.492**	-.396**	-.406**	.624**	.214**	.498**	--	.491**	.382**
Rumination	.451**	-.469**	-.158*	.672**	.384**	.559**	.491**	--	.373**
Hopelessness	.398**	-.323**	-.272**	.427**	-.067	.437**	.382**	.373**	--

Note: \*  $p < .05$ ; \*\*  $p < .01$ .

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

- Emotional pain from loss significantly predicts psychache.
- Psychache strongly predicts suicidal behavior, even when controlled for emotional pain from loss.
- The total effect of emotional pain from loss alone significantly predicts suicidal behavior.
- The emotional pain from loss and its relationship with suicidal behavior can be explained through an individual experiencing psychache.
- Because Shneidman’s theoretical ideas focused on perceptions of loss rather than type of loss, per se, our findings empirically enhance our understanding of how perceptions of loss increase the risk for suicide, thus helping to validate his theory.
- Given that perceptions of loss may be shaped by ethnic, cultural, and economic factors, our study helps provide a rich understanding of how loss is experienced and perceived within a low-income, Mexican heritage community in South Texas.
- Finally, our findings can help inform prevention and interventions efforts to help reduce suicide behavior in young Latino/a individuals, a group at elevated risk for suicide behavior (CDC, 2023).

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