



Peer group impulsivity moderated the individual-level relationship between depressive symptoms and adolescent nonsuicidal self-injury



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ABSTRACT

This study examined the influence of impulsive friendship group contexts on nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) and how peer group impulsivity (i.e. negative urgency and premeditation) moderated the individual level relationship between depression and NSSI among 1701 Chinese secondary school students (1147 females). Participants were assessed twice over a 6-month interval. After controlling for direct socialization effects for NSSI, multilevel analysis indicated that friendship group negative urgency exerted a significant influence on NSSI. Additionally, friendship group premeditation weakened the relation between individual depression and NSSI, while friendship group negative urgency strengthened the relation between depression and NSSI. The results suggest the contribution of indirect peer influence effects to NSSI.

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Introduction

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI), the direct and intentional destruction of one's own body tissue without suicidal intent, has become a significant public health concern among adolescents (Lewis & Heath, 2015; Nock, 2010; Nock & Favazza, 2009; Swannell, Martin, Page, Hasking, & St John, 2014). This behavior has affected 13%–23% of community adolescents all over the world (Jacobson & Gould, 2007; Nock, 2009). NSSI not only incurs physical harm to the body and brings about shame, regret, and other self-conscious negative emotions (Jacobson & Gould, 2007; Klonsky, 2007; Klonsky, Muehlenkamp, Lewis, & Walsh, 2011; Muehlenkamp, Peat, Claes, & Smits, 2012), but also increases the likelihood of future suicide attempts (Andover, Morris, Wren, & Bruzese, 2012; Klonsky, May, & Glenn, 2013; Muehlenkamp & Gutierrez, 2007; Nock, Joiner, Gordon, Lloyd-Richardson, & Prinstein, 2006; Whitlock et al., 2013). Given its prevalence and clinical significance, American Psychiatric Association (APA) has included NSSI as a diagnostic category in the “Conditions for Further Study” section of the latest version of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5; American Psychiatric Association, 2013), calling for more research on NSSI risk factors. The individual-level risk factors for NSSI have been extensively studied (Bresin, Carter, &

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Gordon, 2013; Guerry & Prinstein, 2010; Klonsky, 2007; Nock, 2009). Given that adolescents are vulnerable to the influence of their peers (Brown, 1990; Chen, Chang, He, & Liu, 2005), friendship group risk factors for NSSI may also be at play. The present study, based on the vulnerability- and social learning framework, aimed to examine the influence of friendship group risk factors and their interactions with individual risk factors on NSSI among community adolescents.

Previous studies have demonstrated the direct peer influence effects on adolescent NSSI, namely, friends' NSSI predicts adolescents' own NSSI (De Leo & Heller, 2004; Deliberto & Nock, 2008; Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008; Prinstein et al., 2010; You, Lin, Fu, & Leung, 2013). This is consistent with the “modeling” paradigm. In fact, Nock and Favazza (2009) has suggested that the direct peer influence effect to be one of the specific vulnerability factors that prompt the engagement in NSSI as an emotion regulation strategy. This direct modeling of NSSI may be positively reinforced by praise and encouragement during discussion of NSSI with peers who also engage in this behavior (Heilbron & Prinstein, 2008).

Apart from direct peer influence, adolescents may also develop NSSI through indirect peer influence. That is, adolescents' NSSI may not only be directly modeled from the same behaviors by their peers, but may also be shaped by relevant group norms (Chung-Hall & Chen, 2010; Harris, 1995). Adolescents often spend a large proportion of time with their peers and doing sharing activities (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 2007). These common activities and interpersonal affective communications within peer groups provide extensive opportunities for adolescents to learn from group norms (Hartup, 1989). Peer evaluations and reactions may also regulate and direct adolescents' value orientations and behaviors. Thus, in peer group interactions, adolescents develop specific belief and value systems and exhibit certain behaviors that are consistent with group norms (Chen et al., 2005; Hartup, 1989; Kandel, 1978; Prinstein & Dodge, 2008).

With regard to NSSI, the impulsive group norm may be of particular relevance. This is because NSSI is often performed on the spur of the moment (Favazza, 1998; Nock, Prinstein, & Sterba, 2009). Previous research has found mounting evidence that individuals high in impulsivity are more likely to engage in NSSI than those low in impulsivity (Bresin et al., 2013; Glenn & Klonsky, 2010; Hamza, Willoughby, & Heifer, 2015; Janis & Nock, 2009; Klonsky, 2007). Thus, in groups holding positive attitudes toward impulsive behaviors, adolescents may engage in NSSI, because NSSI is a behavior conforming to the group norm. A previous study has demonstrated this indirect peer influence effect from friends' impulsivity to male adolescents' NSSI (Giletta, Burk, Scholte, Engels, & Prinstein, 2013).

The construct of impulsivity has several conceptualizations. One of the major conceptualizations of impulsivity considered it to include five dimensions: negative urgency, (lack of) premeditation, (lack of) perseverance, sensation seeking, and positive urgency (Cyders & Smith, 2007; Whiteside & Lynam, 2001). In the present study, we focused especially on the dimensions of negative urgency and (lack of) premeditation. This is because negative urgency, the tendency to act rashly in response to extreme negative emotions, best distinguished self-injurers from non-injurers (Bresin et al., 2013; Dir, Karyadi, & Cyders, 2013; Glenn & Klonsky, 2010; Taylor, Peterson, & Fischer, 2012), and lack of premeditation, the inability to delay action in order to plan, was also found to be associated with NSSI (Glenn & Klonsky, 2010; Lynam, Miller, Miller, Bornovalova, & Lejuez, 2011). Other dimensions of impulsivity, however, were not significantly related to NSSI.

In addition to its direct contributions to adolescent NSSI, peer group impulsivity may also moderate the relationship between individual-level risk factors and NSSI. Take the individual-level risk factor of depression as an example. Depression is found to be one of the strong and robust risk factors for NSSI (Guerry & Prinstein, 2010; Hankin & Abela, 2011; Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Stattin, 2013; Muehlenkamp & Gutierrez, 2007; You & Leung, 2012). Adolescents who engage in NSSI often report that NSSI serves the function of relieving negative emotions, including depression (Klonsky, 2007). But not all depressed adolescents use NSSI as an emotion regulation strategy. So among those depressed adolescents, who are more vulnerable to NSSI? We suggest that adolescents in impulsive groups are more likely to engage in NSSI. The impulsive group norm may facilitate adolescents' expression or regulation of depression in an impulsive manner. In these groups, adolescents who display impulsive behaviors, e.g., NSSI, are likely to gain acceptance and social status (Adler & Adler, 1998; Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Van Acker, 2000), which may also help to alleviate adolescents' depression.

The present study

Although individual-level risk factors and direct peer influence effects for NSSI have been relatively well studied, little research has examined the indirect peer influence effects for NSSI. To partly fill in this knowledge gap, the present study aimed to examine the influence of impulsive friendship group contexts on adolescents' NSSI and how peer group impulsivity moderated the individual level relationship between depression and NSSI. Based on past research (Dir et al., 2013; Glenn & Klonsky, 2010; Lynam et al., 2011; Taylor et al., 2012), impulsivity was measured by negative urgency and (lack of) premeditation in this study.

To answer our research questions, we used hierarchical linear modeling with a two-time-point design over a 6-month interval among a large sample of Chinese community adolescents. We hypothesized that after controlling for Time 1 (T1) individual and friendship group's NSSI, T1 friendship group impulsivity (i.e. negative urgency and lack of premeditation) would still be predictive of Time 2 (T2) individual NSSI. Additionally, we hypothesized that adolescents with depressive symptoms would be more susceptible to the engagement in NSSI if they were members of friendship groups characterized by high levels of negative urgency, and less likely to engage in NSSI if they were members of friendship groups that were high in premeditation.

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