



Romantic relationships and nonsuicidal self-injury among college students: The mediating role of emotion regulation



Eliana Silva^a, Bárbara C. Machado^b, Célia S. Moreira^a, Sofia Ramalho^a, Sónia Gonçalves^{a,*}

^a Department of Applied Psychology, School of Psychology, University of Minho, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal

^b Centre for Studies in Human Development, Faculty of Education and Psychology, Portuguese Catholic University, 4169-005 Porto, Portugal

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ABSTRACT

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) is an increasing health problem among college students. Research about risk factors behind the development of this behavior has been limited. This study aims to test whether emotion regulation mediates the connection between romantic relationships and NSSI. Participants were 566 college students (72.8% female) between 18 and 35 years old. Eighty participants (14.1%) reported having injured themselves. Emotion regulation fully mediated the associations between NSSI and four important subdomains of romantic relationships, namely, avoidance of intimacy, anxiety over abandonment, violence victimization, and violence perpetration. We specified a model that evidences the mediating role of the emotion regulation between romantic relationships (romantic attachment and intimate partner violence) and NSSI. This study makes a unique contribution by assessing the pathway through which romantic relationship functioning impact NSSI.

1. Introduction

Nonsuicidal self-injury behavior (NSSI) is a significant cause of harm and one of the most complex problems for clinicians (Levesque, Lafontain, Bureau, & Dandurand, 2010). It is defined as a deliberate, direct and self-inflicted destruction of body tissue in the absence of suicidal intent and for purposes not socially sanctioned (ISSS, 2007). The age of onset of NSSI is in the early teens to the mid-20s, corresponding to the college age (Wester & Trepal, 2010).

There is also evidence that NSSI is increasing among college-aged populations, with lifetime prevalence rates ranging from 12% to 38% (Gratz, Conrad, & Roemer, 2002; Heath, Toste, Nedecheva, & Charlebois, 2008; Swannell, Martin, Page, Hasking, & John, 2014). Similarly, in two Portuguese studies, between 16.2% and 28% of the college students reported having injured themselves at some point in their lives (Braga & Gonçalves, 2014; Gonçalves, Martins, Rosendo, Machado, & Silva, 2012).

There has been increased attention to understanding why individuals engage in NSSI. Nock (2009, 2010) proposed and integrated a theoretical model of the development and maintenance of NSSI. Distal risk factors (e.g., childhood abuse/maltreatment) lead to the development of intrapersonal vulnerability factors (e.g., high aversive emotions) and interpersonal vulnerability factors (e.g., poor social problem-solving). These vulnerability factors lead to ineffective responses to stressful situations. In fact, empirical research has provided evidence

that both kind of factors (i.e., interpersonal and intrapersonal) are associated with the initiation and the maintenance of NSSI (Tatnell, Kelada, Hasking, & Martin, 2014). Surprisingly, research about the relationships between interpersonal and intrapersonal factors, and NSSI is still scarce.

Current studies have revealed the role of romantic relationships as an interpersonal risk factor for NSSI development among young adults. Romantic relationships characterized by an insecure attachment and the presence of intimate partner violence are associated with an increased risk of NSSI (Levesque et al., 2010; Murray, Wester, & Paladino, 2008). However, an explanation of the pathways through which these interpersonal factors might lead to NSSI is needed. Emotion regulation, processes through which individuals modulate their emotions consciously and unconsciously (Aldao, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Schweizer, 2010), has been verified as a mediator of the relationship between insecure adult attachment and NSSI in college students (Kimball & Diddams, 2007). To the best of our knowledge, only one study has tested the mediating role of self-soothing, an emotion regulation strategy, in the relationship between romantic attachment and NSSI engagement in college students (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). Intimate partner violence (i.e., a pattern of multiple and varied behaviors, including psychological, physical, and sexual violence; Levesque et al., 2010; Straus, Hamby, Boney-McCoy, & Sugarman, 1996) is also an important interpersonal risk factor and it is related to difficulties in emotion regulation (Gratz & Roemer, 2004). Accord-

* Corresponding author at: Campus de Gualtar, 4710-057 Braga, Portugal.

E-mail addresses: sgoncalves@psi.uminho.pt, id4267@alunos.uminho.pt, bosorio@porto.ucp.pt (S. Gonçalves).

ingly, emotion regulation also seems to mediate the relationship between intimate violence and NSSI, although this has not yet been evaluated.

Therefore, this study contributes to the literature by deepening our understanding about the relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal factors of NSSI in college students. In this sense, we aimed to test a mediational model in which characteristics of romantic relationships such as romantic attachment and intimate partner violence (interpersonal factors) were related to NSSI via emotion regulation (an intrapersonal factor).

2. NSSI and romantic relationships

2.1. Romantic attachment

According to Erikson (1968) the focus in young adulthood is on developing intimate relationships. Love constitutes one important identity domain in this developmental period, with the establishment of a long-term romantic relationship an age-specific task (Luyckx, Seiffge-Krenke, Schwartz, Crocetti, & Klimstra, 2014).

Schmitt et al. (2003) argue that over the mid-1980s, researchers began to investigate how attachment styles and orientations might apply to people's cognitive-emotional attitudes toward romantic love and sexual relationships (e.g., Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Shaver and Hazan (1988, p. 475) conceptualized romantic love as an attachment process: "(...) all important love relationships - especially the first ones with parents and later ones with lovers and spouses - are attachments in Bowlby's sense." Romantic attachment has been conceptualized as the most important attachment model in young adulthood (Hazan & Shaver, 1987). Individuals' romantic partners constitute each other's primary attachment figure (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). People with secure attachment styles tend to experience less conflict, more satisfaction, greater stability, and longer duration in their romantic relationships and people with insecure attachment styles tend to experience more conflict, less satisfaction, lower stability, and shorter durations in their romantic relationships (Schmitt et al., 2003).

Two dimensions characterize individual differences in romantic attachment (Brennan, Clark, & Shaver, 1998). The first dimension, avoidance of intimacy, is characterized by reluctance for intimacy or discomfort with the dependence of the partner. The second dimension, anxiety over abandonment, is defined as the anxiety an individual feels that a partner will not be available in moments of need. Individuals with a secure attachment reveal both low anxiety and low avoidance attachment.

Given that NSSI is conceptualized as an affect regulation strategy (Klonsky, 2007; Linehan, 1993), theoretical and empirical works on attachment theory provide some explanations for the occurrence of NSSI in the context of a romantic relationship. Until now, three studies have explored the empirical link between romantic attachment and NSSI. In all studies, the authors conclude that insecure attachment was related to NSSI (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013; Fung, 2008; Levesque et al., 2010). Fung (2008) realized the first study to evaluate the relationship between NSSI and adult romantic attachment in a sample of 40 adult NSSI patients and 52 matched non-NSSI control subjects. Results demonstrated that the majority of self-injurers had higher levels of romantic attachment anxiety. Similar results were obtained in a second study with a non-clinical sample of 537 college students currently involved in a romantic relationship (Levesque et al., 2010). Romantic attachment anxiety was a significant predictor of NSSI thoughts in men and women, and NSSI behaviors in women. Fitzpatrick et al. (2013) extended prior research evaluating possible mediators of this relationship in a sample of 1055 college students. Results revealed that insecure romantic attachment was linked to fewer behavioral self-soothing skills, which in turn resulted in more NSSI engagement. This study is also the first to demonstrate that not only romantic attachment anxiety but also avoidant style does predict NSSI behavior in college students.

Individuals with secure attachment are more likely to use adaptive emotion regulation strategies (e.g., constructive problem-solving strategies) to properly manage their negative affective states (Fitzpatrick et al., 2013). In contrast, individuals who reveal romantic attachment insecurity (attachment anxiety and attachment avoidance) seem to use affective regulation strategies that are maladaptive, such as NSSI, to regulate their distress. According to Messer and Fremouw (2008), the inability to regulate and cope with negative emotions (e.g., sadness, anxiety, hostility or loneliness) may result in a stage of heightened physiological and emotional arousal that seems to lead to an unhealthy short-term emotion regulation method, NSSI as coping strategy.

2.2. Intimate partner violence

Another important concern about romantic relationships is the presence of intimate partner violence, which is probably the most common form of violence currently. The rate of violence in intimate relationships is reported to peak during young adulthood and then decline (Levesque et al., 2010). A study with 16,000 college students from 21 countries found that 14% to 39% of the individuals reported having been victims of physical assault by the partner and 17% to 44% reported having been the perpetrator. Students reported rates of perpetrating sexual coercion that ranged from 8% to 34%, and the rate of students who were victims was calculated to be between 9% and 46% (Chan, Straus, Brownridge, Tiwari, & Leung, 2008). Psychological abuse seems to be the most common form of college students' violence, with prevalence rates ranging from 13% to 65% (Murray et al., 2008). Portuguese studies have revealed similar rates of college students who adopted these behaviors in the context of their relationships (Machado, Caridade, & Martins, 2010). NSSI is another prevalent problem among college students, and both can have a significant impact on this population's lives (Murray et al., 2008).

Some studies with young adults and adults have found associations between NSSI and violence perpetration (i.e., violence perpetrated by the individual to his/her partner) (Murray et al., 2008) and, more commonly, victimization (i.e., experienced violence from his/her partner) (Levesque et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2008; Sansone, Chu, & Wiederman, 2007). The experience of violence by a romantic partner has been identified as a significant predictor of NSSI (Levesque et al., 2010; Murray et al., 2008; Sansone et al., 2007). According to Murray et al. (2008), although the direct relationship between romantic violence and NSSI does exist, it is weak, which indicates the possibility that other factors are associated with these two behaviors. In specific, researchers have suggested emotion regulation difficulties and maladaptive coping strategies as reasons why victims of romantic partner violence might engage in NSSI. In addition, victims who have difficulties regulating their emotions in an effective way may use this kind of violence toward themselves (Levesque et al., 2010). As verified with violence victimization, difficulties in emotion regulation may be the mechanism underlying both NSSI and violence perpetration (Gratz & Roemer, 2004).

The nature of these relationships is still not completely understood due to the scarcity of research and the nature of the previous studies that assessed victimization or perpetration independently and different kinds of violence are also not evaluated (e.g., physical, psychological and sexual).

3. Objectives

The literature reviewed suggests that romantic relationships may represent an attachment process to young adults and that individuals with a secure attachment reveal both low avoidance of intimacy and low anxiety over abandonment. NSSI tends to be consistently conceptualized as a maladaptive emotion regulation strategy that can emerge within a romantic relationship. In turn, intimate partner violence in romantic relationships can be related to the presence of NSSI. These two

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