



Brief report

A preliminary examination of the specificity of the functions of nonsuicidal self-injury among a sample of university students

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ABSTRACT

To examine whether individuals who engage in NSSI report different coping behaviors and regulatory needs compared to a non-injuring comparison group, we surveyed 1107 undergraduates using a Functions Index. Individuals who engaged in NSSI indicated greater use of coping behaviors for anti-dissociation, interpersonal influence, and self-punishment than the non-NSSI group.

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1. Introduction

Nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI), which refers to the direct and deliberate destruction or alteration of bodily tissue without lethal intent (e.g., cutting, burning), is a serious health concern (Nock and Favazza, 2009). Among clinical inpatient samples, as many as 21% of adults (Briere and Gil, 1998) and 30–40% of adolescents engage in NSSI (Darche, 1990; Jacobson et al., 2008). NSSI is also prevalent among community-based samples, and recent estimates indicate that 13–38% of adolescents and young adults in the community report lifetime histories of NSSI (Gratz et al., 2002; Heath et al., 2008; Ross and Heath, 2002; Klonsky and Glenn, 2009). In addition to reporting higher levels of depression and anxiety (Gratz et al., 2002; Ross and Heath, 2002), individuals who engage in NSSI also report greater engagement in other health-risk behaviors (e.g., smoking, drinking alcohol) as compared to individuals who do not engage in NSSI (Hilt et al., 2008; Serras et al., 2010). In his integrated model of the development of self-injury, Nock suggests that NSSI may be associated with other problem behaviors, such as cigarette smoking, because these behaviors serve similar functions (Nock, 2009). More specifically, researchers have consistently found that individuals engage in NSSI to regulate intrapersonal (e.g., to reduce stress or anxiety) and interpersonal functions (i.e.,

to elicit help from others) (Nock and Prinstein, 2004; Klonsky and Glenn, 2009), but many other problem behaviors could similarly serve to regulate these needs (Nock, 2009). Researchers have yet to examine, however, whether individuals who engage in NSSI also engage in other coping behaviors to regulate similar affective and social experiences. Moreover, it is unclear whether individuals who engage in NSSI experience different regulatory needs and engage in different coping behaviors as compared to individuals who do not engage in NSSI. To address these gaps in the literature, we surveyed young adults about which coping behaviors they used when they wanted to regulate commonly endorsed NSSI functions (e.g., affect regulation, self-punishment) (Klonsky and Glenn, 2009).

2. Method

2.1. Participants

The current sample consisted of 1107 (70.3% female) first-year undergraduate students between the ages of 17 and 24 years (mean age = 19.11, S.D. = 1.05) from a mid-sized Canadian university who were part of a larger scale project on stress and coping in university. In total, 87.5% of the participants were born in Canada, and the most common ethnic backgrounds reported other than Canadian were British (19%), Italian (16.8%), French (9.5%) and German (9%), which is consistent with the broader demographics for the region.

2.2. Procedure

Students in first-year university were invited to complete a survey examining transitions to university by way of posters, classroom announcements, website postings, and residence visits. Students could participate regardless of academic

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major and were given monetary compensation (\$10) or course credit for their participation. The study was approved by the University Ethics board, and all participants provided active consent before participation. The survey was administered by trained personnel.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Demographics

Age, sex and parental education were assessed.

Table 1
Percentage of participants in each group who endorsed behaviors for each function.

	Non-NSSI		NSSI		<i>p</i>
Affect regulation	Alcohol	36.2 _a	Alcohol	47.8 _b	***
	Smoke	11.6 _a	Smoke	19.7 _b	***
	Bite nails	22.9 _a	Bite nails	30.7 _a	0.004
	Punch someone	02.7 _a	Punch someone	11.4 _b	***
	Marijuana	19.8 _a	Marijuana	33.0 _b	***
	Binge/under eat	13.1 _a	Binge/under eat	24.0 _b	***
	Exercise	37.8 _a	Exercise	41.2 _a	0.266
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	06.6 _b	***
	Shop	32.5 _a	Shop	27.7 _a	0.089
	None	17.5 _a	None	10.1 _a	0.001
Anti-dissociation	Alcohol	10.5 _a	Alcohol	27.9 _b	***
	Smoke	03.3 _a	Smoke	07.6 _a	0.002
	Bite nails	03.0 _a	Bite nails	09.4 _b	***
	Punch someone	01.0 _a	Punch someone	03.2 _a	0.006
	Marijuana	05.3 _a	Marijuana	17.2 _b	***
	Binge/under eat	04.9 _a	Binge/under eat	13.7 _b	***
	Exercise	12.5 _a	Exercise	22.2 _b	***
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	08.2 _b	***
	Shop	10.7 _a	Shop	11.0 _a	0.406
	None	73.9 _a	None	51.5 _b	***
Interpersonal boundaries	Alcohol	07.3 _a	Alcohol	12.0 _a	0.007
	Smoke	03.2 _a	Smoke	06.9 _a	0.004
	Bite nails	03.0 _a	Bite nails	05.3 _a	0.045
	Punch someone	01.5 _a	Punch someone	05.7 _b	***
	Marijuana	04.3 _a	Marijuana	10.3 _b	***
	Binge/under eat	03.2 _a	Binge/under eat	06.4 _a	0.011
	Exercise	24.5 _a	Exercise	20.7 _a	0.142
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	01.0 _a	0.178
	Shop	16.0 _a	Shop	12.6 _a	0.127
	None	56.4 _a	None	49.4 _a	0.027
Interpersonal influence	Alcohol	11.9 _a	Alcohol	18.9 _a	0.001
	Smoke	02.9 _a	Smoke	07.1 _a	0.001
	Bite nails	03.0 _a	Bite nails	04.4 _a	0.249
	Punch someone	01.1 _a	Punch someone	03.2 _a	0.011
	Marijuana	04.7 _a	Marijuana	10.3 _a	0.001
	Binge/under eat	03.2 _a	Binge/under eat	09.4 _b	***
	Exercise	11.4 _a	Exercise	14.5 _a	0.135
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	03.2 _b	***
	Shop	10.4 _a	Shop	08.7 _a	0.378
	None	65.3 _a	None	54.5 _b	***
Peer bonding	Alcohol	62.5 _a	Alcohol	68.6 _a	0.038
	Smoke	16.9 _a	Smoke	29.8 _b	***
	Bite nails	01.4 _a	Bite nails	05.5 _b	***
	Punch someone	02.0 _a	Punch someone	05.7 _a	0.001
	Marijuana	37.2 _a	Marijuana	53.0 _b	***
	Binge/under eat	06.4 _a	Binge/under eat	10.1 _a	0.026
	Exercise	32.5 _a	Exercise	35.8 _a	0.265
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	02.1 _a	0.004
	Shop	56.1 _a	Shop	56.0 _a	0.911
	None	10.6 _a	None	06.2 _a	0.011
Self-punishment	Alcohol	01.5 _a	Alcohol	06.0 _b	***
	Smoke	01.0 _a	Smoke	03.4 _a	0.001
	Bite nails	01.4 _a	Bite nails	04.6 _a	0.001
	Punch someone	00.2 _a	Punch someone	02.5 _b	***
	Marijuana	01.0 _a	Marijuana	03.4 _a	0.001
	Binge/under eat	07.0 _a	Binge/under eat	14.0 _b	***
	Exercise	12.8 _a	Exercise	14.9 _a	0.178
	Self-injure	00.0 _a	Self-injure	13.5 _b	***
	Shop	02.3 _a	Shop	01.4 _a	0.202
	None	79.3 _a	None	60.2 _b	***

Note: Different subscripts within a row denote significant group differences at $p < 0.001$.

*** Significant differences at $p < 0.001$.

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