

Exploring the constructs young people hold about non-suicidal self-injury: A pilot study

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Abstract

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is the act of purposely inflicting bodily harm on ones-self without the intent to commit suicide. The best currently available data suggests that this behaviour is most commonly an attempt to regulate and control emotions, with studies suggesting that reasons may differ depending on age, gender, and ethnicity. Considering the various motivating forces leading to NSSI is critical in understanding the behaviour and developing effective intervention techniques. This current research is a pilot study to explore the ideas held by young adults with no personal history of NSSI, about individuals who engage in NSSI. Mixed Repertory Grid Analysis was used to elicit and rate constructs from 10 participants, ranging in age from 18 to 34 years old ($M = 26.6$).

The purpose of this pilot study was three-fold. Firstly, to establish if young adults have generally positive or negative attitudes/ideas about NSSI. Secondly, to establish to what extent young adults associate NSSI with mental illness, emotional disturbances, manipulative behaviour, traumatic experiences, low self-esteem, and impulsivity. Finally, to establish if young adults are able to engage in a mixed format repertory grid interview focused on NSSI. Six constructs were supplied to participants, based on what previous research has suggested as risk and motivational factors for NSSI. Results found that participants generally associated negative constructs with NSSI, for example "insecure" or "hard to read, does not let people in." Each participant, strongly associated the individuals thought to have engaged in NSSI, with all of the (negatively oriented) supplied constructs. These include "highly mentally disturbed/distressed," "has lived through some bad experiences," and "is prone to behave in unexpected ways." Pervasive differences were also found in the way participants viewed people who had engaged in NSSI when compared with people had never engaged in the behaviour.

Participants were found to engage well with the Repertory Grid technique, however clarification was often required during the elicitation and rating process. The findings from this pilot study indicate that mixed Repertory Grid Analysis is a useful tool to explore personal constructs within the field of NSSI.

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