

Self-Injurious Behavior in College Students

In this paper I will examine self-injurious behavior (SIB) in college students. After meeting someone with this disorder, I reviewed some literature on this topic and then interviewed my acquaintance, whom I shall call Sharon. The result is an in-depth single case study, which is a form of qualitative research. Because my research was an interview, it did not involve any experimentation or manipulation of independent variables. There was only one participant, and her subjective experience was of interest rather than any external attributes. For this reason, no independent and dependent variables have been identified. However, in the summary below, dependent and independent variables regarding SIB in general are discussed.

Literature Review

The article "Self-injury is prevalent among college students, survey shows" (1) indicates that about 17% of college students suffer from SIB, with more women (20%) than men (14%) being affected. More than 3000 students were surveyed for this study, which was a quantitative research design using a single-shot survey method. This was descriptive rather than experimental research, and the sample was college students and there was no mention of randomization or the method of sample selection. There was a comparison group of non-self-injurers. To date, this has been the largest study on SIB in the U.S..

Most participants said they had first hurt themselves when they were 14 or 15 years old. However, more than 41% only started when they were 17 to 22 years old, when they were of college age. Various methods of self-harm are used, without apparent suicidal intent, such as biting, hitting or cutting oneself. Fewer than 7% of these individuals have sought medical treatment for their injuries, although a quarter of them felt that they should have done so, and a fifth of them had hurt themselves more severely than they had meant to. In terms of independent variables, it appears that stress and emotional problems are predisposing factors in SIB, and self-injurers are more likely to have thought of or attempted suicide; they are more likely to have come from abusive homes,

they are more likely to have an eating disorder, and they are more likely to be bisexual or to be confused about their sexual orientation. Fewer people of Asian descent suffer from SIB, whereas more sufferers are female than male. The dependent variable would be the nature and extent of the injuries, but this was not reported on in the article.

Case Study: Sharon

Prior to interviewing Sharon, I drew up a list of questions to ask her. These were open-ended questions, which meant that whatever Sharon mentioned could become the focus of the interview. This differs from a closed-ended survey or questionnaire approach, where the person is asked questions which have a limited scope for answers. I chose to do a descriptive case study because Sharon provided me with a convenience sample, in that I already knew her and knew of her SIB. I did not know any other such individuals and did not have the resources to identify them or engage them in research; also, given the sensitive nature of the topic there are ethical considerations in using a larger sample. I told Sharon that I would use a false name for her, and that I would change some of her biographical information so she could not be recognized. She was happy with this.

Sharon is a typical SIB sufferer, in that she first hurt herself when she was 15 after a boy she liked rejected her. She said that she could not turn to her parents for emotional support, because she has never been able to trust them with her feelings, and she was too “ashamed” to talk to her girlfriends. She is also typical in that around this time she was worried about the development of her body, and she started dieting; she said that she did not realize then that the changes were quite normal and her body was simply becoming adult. Sharon is now 20. Her usual method of self-injury was to cut herself on the forearms with a razor blade. She said that the feeling of pain gave her a sense of relief from the emotional numbness which she was experiencing, and she also felt that she deserved to suffer for being herself and for having certain feelings. Two years later she went into psychotherapy at a local counseling unit, but by then she had scarred her forearms badly enough that she always tends to wear long sleeves, even on hot days. She no longer self-injures, but she said that on very bad days, when things seem very bleak in her life, she does sometimes think about suicide, but she would never act on it.

References

1. "Self-injury is prevalent among college students, survey shows" (June 2006, Cornell University), *Science Daily* website, <http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2006/06/060605155351.htm> Accessed 6 May 2007
2. McCall, R. (1990). *Fundamental statistics for behavioral sciences* (5th ed). New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich
3. Rosenthal, R. & Rosnow, R.L. (1991). *Essentials of behavioral research* (2nd ed). New York: McGraw Hill