Emotional and Behavioral Effects of Participating in an Online Study of Nonsuicidal Self-Injury: An Experimental Analysis

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Abstract
In this study, we experimentally assessed whether participating in online research about nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI) may produce harmful effects. A sample of 97 college students was randomly assigned to either an experimental condition (n = 48), in which they were exposed to questions assessing NSSI, or a control condition (n = 49) that did not include NSSI questions. Immediate effects were evaluated with pre- and postmeasures, and 3 weeks later. C72 participants (69%) participated in a follow-up assessment of reactions. NSSI behavior, and urge to self-injure. Overall, results indicated that responding to detailed questions about NSSI did not produce harmful effects immediately or over the follow-up period and may have contributed to positive outcomes. The positive findings largely held true for participants who reported engaging in different severities of NSSI behavior. These do not appear to be significant short-term adverse or intrusive effects of participating in detailed, online NSSI research. Implications for researchers and ethics review boards are discussed.

Keywords
ethics, nonsuicidal self-injury, harm, online research, experiment, negative effects of research participation

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There is a strong need for continued research on the topic of nonsuicidal self-injury (NSSI), the deliberate destruction of body tissue without suicidal intent for purposes not socially sanctioned. International society for the Study of Self-Injury (2007) and related risk behaviors. It is estimated that approximately 10% of community-based youth under the age engage in NSSI (Muehlenkamp, Gies, Stiver, & Persons, 2012; Whitlock et al., 2011), which is particularly concerning given the strong relationship between NSSI and risk for suicide (Goulden & Gibb, 2010; Guain, Fox, & Pirroux, 2012; Whitlock, Pirroux, & Purington, 2013) and other psychiatric and psychosomatic dysfunction (e.g., Barret, Gies, Muehlenkamp, Gies, & Onghena, 2012; Jacobson, Muehlenkamp, Miller, & Turner, 2009; Nock, Turner, Gordon, Lloyd-Buchanan, & Pirroux, 2006; Talabon, Muehlenkamp, Boscaw, McIvor, & King, 2012). Research on different facets of NSSI, although growing, has been hampered by the difficulties researchers face in securing ethics committees/institutional review board (IRB) approval because of fears of potential intrusions of effects (Lukeeman & FitzGerard, 2009; Pearson, Stanley, King, & Fisher, 2003). The findings of this research suggest that the use of questionnaires, and related sensitive topics, pose a significant threat to self and the advancement of science. The results obtained may have implications for understanding the scope and impact of NSSI (e.g., Beckers-Henze & Freyd, 2002).

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This study examined whether completing an online study assessing details about nonsuicidal self-injury resulted in any negative effects for participants. A total of 847 college student participants were randomly assigned to an experimental condition in which they were exposed to questions about self-injury or a control condition with no self-injury questions. Reactions to participating were assessed immediately and 3 weeks later. Results indicated that responding to questions about self-injury did not create negative emotional reactions nor increase a desire to engage in self-injury immediately or over the three week period. Positive reactions to participating in the study were also observed.