Co-Occurrence of Self-Damaging Behaviours in University Students Over 8 Months: Are Sexual Minority Students More at Risk?

Julie Prud’homme, M.Sc., Holly Pellatt, B.Sc., and Brianna Turner, Ph.D., University of Victoria

Introduction

• Sexual minority (SM) undergraduates experience higher rates of self-damaging behaviours (i.e., self-injurious thoughts and behaviours [SITB], disordered eating [DE], and substance use [SU]) than non-SM students (e.g., McCabe et al., 2003; Schlicht et al., 2018).
• These three classes of self-damaging behaviours carry a high potential for physical harm and frequently co-occur, often resulting in complex clinical management, worse prognosis, and heightened health care costs (see Lalonde, 2016; see Turner et al., 2013).
• Yet, no studies have looked at whether SM undergraduates are more vulnerable to multiple self-damaging behaviours than non-SM students.

Research Questions

1) Do SM students engage in more SITB, DE, and SU in their first year of university than non-SM students?
2) Does SM status predict the co-occurrence of self-damaging behaviours over time in first-year university students?
3) Do SM students engage in greater numbers of self-damaging behaviours than non-SM students?
4) Are SM students more at risk for cross-class co-occurring self-damaging behaviours than non-SM students?

Methods

Sample: 307 non-SM and 49 SM first-year undergraduates at UVic

Measures: Self-reports, 7 time points (October – April 2018)

Class 1: SITB (Little, Nock, Homberg, Photos, & Michelot, 2007)
• Non-suicidal self-injury, suicidal ideation

Class 2: DE (Deo, Stice, Telch, & Reiss, 2000)
• Purging, fasting, binge eating

Class 3: SU (Hsu, Oliver, Huesman, & Labouvie-Vief, 2004; Hsu, Berlier et al., 2008)
• Binge drinking, drug use (marijuana, illicit, prescription)

Analyses: SPSS 23
1) Crosstabs and Chi-Square Tests of Independence
2) Linear Multilevel Modeling
3) Independent T-Tests
4) Crosstabs and Chi-Square Tests of Independence

Results

30-Day Prevalence of Self-Injurious Thoughts and Behaviours According to SM Status

30-Day Prevalence of Disordered Eating According to SM Status

30-Day Prevalence of Substance Use According to SM Status

A Linear Multilevel Analysis revealed:
• A fixed effect of SM status, where SM students reported significantly more co-occurring self-damaging behaviours (M=1.44, SD=1.48) in their first year than their heterosexual counterparts (M=9.6, SD=1.08, p = .073, (873) = -3.651, p < .001)
• A fixed effect of time, indicating that rates of co-occurring behaviors declined over the course of the year (p = .170, (1244) = -4.145, p < .001).
• No interaction effect between SM status and time (p = .058, (1245) = 1.304, p = .192).

Results 2 & 3

SM students reported more:
• SITBs in their first year ($\chi^2 = 6.45$ to 18.38, $p < .05$), except in January and March ($\chi^2 = .25$ to .96, $p > .05$).
• DE in their first semester of study and in January ($\chi^2 = 6.81$ to 8.64, $p < .05$).

There were no significant differences between SM students and non-SM students’ self-reports in their first year of study ($\chi^2 = .001$ to 3.78, $p > .05$).

Conclusions

• SM students engage in significantly more self-damaging behaviours in first year than non-SM students.
• While SM and non-SM students report similar rates of SU, SM students have higher rates of co-occurrences that cross over classes of self-damaging behaviours.
• However, for both SM and non-SM students, rates of co-occurring behaviours seem to decline over the course of their first year of university, suggesting no difference in trajectory.
• The first term of study, known as a particularly stressful time for students, may be exacerbating SM students’ risk for co-occurring self-damaging behaviours.

References


For further information, please contact the first author at julieprudhomme@uvic.ca