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LGBTQIAP+ University Students and Likelihood of Self-Harm

Evan Smith

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

Self-harm is defined as the direct, deliberate destruction or alteration of body tissue (Bakken and Gunter 2012). This research is important because previous research has found that university students are likely to engage in self-harm and that it is an often-overlooked problem among both young people and university students (Gollust et al. 2008; Whitlock et al. 2011; Bakken and Gunter 2012). Additionally, the more we know about self-harm and self-harm trends the more we can do to reduce it in our communities.

In crafting my research question I examined previous research of self-harm on college campuses. One of the studies I examined focused on establishing an estimate of the amount of non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) among university students by using an internet-based survey to examine self-harm as well as risk factors such as depression, anxiety, and eating disorders (Gollust et al. 2008). The authors found that seven percent of survey respondents reported self-injury in the past four weeks (Gollust et al. 2008). Other research I looked at focused on NSSI characteristics and sex differences, similarly using a web-based survey of university students (Whitlock et al. 2011). The authors of this study found that females were more likely to self-injure than males and that individuals with a sexual orientation other than heterosexual were at a higher level of risk for NSSI (Whitlock et al. 2011). Another study I looked at focused on comparing mental health and self-harm between lesbian, bisexual, and heterosexual women on college campuses. This study found that both lesbian bisexual women were the more likely to self-harm than heterosexual women and that bisexual women were the most likely to self-harm (Kerr et al. 2013). The fourth study I looked at also examined risk factors for self-harm among

college students and likelihood of self-harm. The study found that seventeen percent of university students self-harmed, and of that seventeen percent, seventy-five percent did it more than once. The researchers also found that many of the self-harm behaviors occurred among individuals who had never been in therapy and rarely disclosed that they had self-harm tendencies. The researchers concluded that it is critical that medical and mental health providers find effective strategies for detecting and addressing self-harm behaviors among university students (Whitlock et al. 2006).

The previous research studies have multiple limitations that limit their generalizability. One limitation is the small sample sizes of the previous research, which limit the ability to generalize to a larger population. Another limitation is a focus on primarily LGBTQIAP+ women and men, which again leads to lack of generalizability as it can ignore the transgender and non-binary or nonconforming communities. Another limitation is that while much of the previous research explores which groups are more likely to self-harm than others and what variables increase or decrease the likelihood of self-harm, there is no discussion on the amount of self-harm between groups. While research has stated that LGBTQIAP+ people are generally more likely to self-harm than non-LGBTQIAP+ people, the research has not examined if they are likely to do so more frequently.

RESEARCH METHOD

Protocols

In April of 2017 we fielded an anonymous survey to the University of New Hampshire's (UNH) student population using Qualtrics, an online survey program. We used a convenience sample to collect our data by distributing the survey through email and various social media platforms such as Facebook to other UNH students through the researcher's social networks. The

respondents completed the survey anonymously for no compensation and were required to read and agree to an informed consent document at the start of the survey as well as be 18 or more years of age.

Measures

I had three variables that I tested in this survey. My independent variable was being part of the LGBTQIAP+ community and my dependent variables were if university students engaged in self-harm, and if so how often. The survey question that I used to assess my independent variable was “do you identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pansexual, polyamorous, plus (LGBTQIAP+) community?” The survey questions I used to assess my dependent variables were “since the start of the fall semester, have you done something to purposely hurt yourself without wanting to die, such as cutting, scraping, or burning yourself?” and “how often since the start of the school year have you self-harmed?”

My alternative hypothesis is that university students that identify as LGBTQIAP+ at UNH will have higher likelihood of engaging in self-harm than students that do not identify as LGBTQIAP+. My null hypothesis is that there is no correlation between being LGBTQIAP+ and the likelihood of engaging in self-harm.

RESULTS

The Qualtrics survey that we used to collect our data for analysis had 439 surveys started with closer to 373 answering all of the questions on our survey and 370 people answering all the questions for my research. I have provided two tables (*table 1 & 2*) to show the gender and class

standings of our respondents.

Gender		
#	Field	Choice Count
1	Woman	74.93% 278
2	Man	21.63% 81
3	Non-conforming/non-binary	3.23% 12
		371

(Table 1: Sample Characteristic “What is your gender?”)

By looking at the gender of our survey respondents we can see that there was a disproportionately large number of women that took our survey (*table 1*). Of the 371 respondents that answered the question on gender almost seventy-five percent of students that took our survey identified as women as opposed to almost twenty-two percent identified as men and around three percent as gender non-conforming or nonbinary.

#	Field	Choice Count
1	First-year	19.25% 72
2	Sophomore	28.61% 107
3	Junior	28.61% 107
4	Senior	23.53% 88
		374

(Table 2: Sample Characteristic “What is your classification in college?”)

While the gender of our respondents was heavily skewed toward women, the classification or class-year of our respondents was very evenly distributed (*table 2*). Of the 374 respondents that answered the question on class year almost twenty percent were first-year students, almost twenty-eight percent answered sophomore, another twenty-eight percent answered junior, and twenty-three percent answered senior.

My independent variable was if survey respondents identified as being LGBTQIAP+ (*table 3*). The majority of respondents did not identify as being

LGBTQIAP+ as almost seventy-five percent of respondents did not identify as being LGBTQIAP+. However, twenty-five percent of respondents did identify as being LGBTQIAP+. Given our previous results on the gender of respondents we can guess that this is not a representative proportion of the LGBTQIAP+ student population at UNH. However, since we have 25% LGBTQIAP+ respondents (almost 100 respondents) we still have a good chance of being able to make determinations about if the self-harm differential between LGBTQIAP+ and non-LGBTQIAP+ students is statistically significant.

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	25.07% 93
2	No	74.93% 278
		371

(Table 3: Sample Characteristic “Do you identify as part of the LGBTQIAP+ community?”)

My dependent variable was if the survey respondents had self-harmed themselves since the start of the school year, September 2016 (table 4). Additionally, I have a variable looking to measure how often people who say yes they self-harm do so (table 5).

#	Field	Choice Count
1	Yes	13.92% 54
2	No	86.08% 334
		388

(Table 4: Sample Characteristic “Have you self-harmed?”)

#	Field	Choice Count
4	Only once	51.85% 28
5	Once a month	16.67% 9
6	Two or more times a month	12.96% 7
7	Once a week	9.26% 5
8	Several times a week	7.41% 4
9	Once a day	0.00% 0
10	More than once a day	1.85% 1
		54

(Table 5: Sample Characteristic “How often have you self-harmed?”)

Looking at my dependent variable (table 4), almost fourteen-percent of respondents have self-harmed since the start of the academic year. Eighty-six percent of respondents said they have not self-harmed since the start of the school year. While the vast majority of respondents said they have not self-harmed, over fifty people of the three hundred and eighty-eight that answered the question have self-harmed. Looking at how often people that have self-harmed have done so (table 5), we see that all fifty-four people that said they have self-harmed answered the question on how often they did so. A slight majority, fifty-one percent of respondents, said they have only self-harmed once since the start of the semester. The second largest group is respondents that said they do so about once a month with almost seventeen percent, followed by the third largest group with almost thirteen percent of respondents saying they do so two or more times a month. Nine percent of respondents said they self-harm once a week, seven percent of respondents said they do so several times a week. No respondents said they self-harm once a day. However, one respondent said they self-harm more than once a day.

As stated earlier, my research question was, do LGBTQIAP+ university students have a higher likelihood to self-harm than non-LGBTQIAP+ university students? My hypothesis is that yes, LGBTQIAP+ university students have a higher likelihood of self-harm than non-

LGBTQIAP+ university students. To examine the data collected and make a determination about my hypothesis I created a cross-tabulation of my results (*table 6*).

		Do you identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pan...		Total
		Yes	No	
Since the start of the fall semester, have you done something to purposely hurt yourself without...	Yes	27 29.35%	25 8.99%	52 14.05%
	No	65 70.65%	253 91.01%	318 85.95%
	Total	92 100.00%	278 100.00%	370 100.00%

 Add Stub

		Do you identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pan...
Since the start of the fall semester, have you done something to purposely hurt yourself without...	Chi Square	23.71
	Degrees of Freedom	1
	p-value	0.00

(Table 6: Cross-Tabulation – Being LGBTQIAP+ and Self-Harm)

Out of the fifty-two respondents that said yes they self-harmed, twenty-seven identified as LGBTQIAP+ and twenty-five as non-LGBTQIAP+. While these two numbers are incredibly close to each other, it is still statistically significant as my p-value is 0.00 meaning this is statistically significant on the .01 alpha level and the chi-square test is 23.71. Additionally, while the actual numbers of respondents that self-harm are close they likely represent massively different proportions of their respective respondent groups. The twenty-seven LGBTQIAP+ respondents that self-harm represent almost thirty percent of the LGBTQIAP+ respondents, whereas the twenty-five non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents that self-harmed represent only nine percent of the non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents. Looking at this I can comfortably reject my null hypothesis. This leads me to conclude that LGBTQIAP+ students have statistically significant higher likelihood of self-harming themselves compared to non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents.

While LGBTQIAP+ respondents were more likely to self-harm than non-LGBTQIAP+ students, I wanted to look at if there was a difference in how often respondents who self-harmed did so, and if that varied by being LGBTQIAP+. To look at this relationship I created a second cross-tabulation (*table 7*).

		Do you identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pan...		Total
		Yes	No	
How often since the start of the school year have you self-harmed?	Only once	13 48.15%	14 56.00%	27 51.92%
	Once a month	4 14.81%	4 16.00%	8 15.38%
	Two or more times a month	4 14.81%	3 12.00%	7 13.46%
	Once a week	4 14.81%	1 4.00%	5 9.62%
	Several times a week	2 7.41%	2 8.00%	4 7.69%
	Once a day	0 0.00%	0 0.00%	0 0.00%
	More than once a day	0 0.00%	1 4.00%	1 1.92%
	Total	27 100.00%	25 100.00%	52 100.00%

Add Stub

		Do you identify as part of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex, asexual, pan...
How often since the start of the school year have you self-harmed?	Chi Square	2.91*
	Degrees of Freedom	6
	p-value	0.82

Table 7: Frequency of Self-Harm by LGBTQIAP+ and Non-LGBTQIAP+

Looking at this cross-tabulation we can see that it is not statistically significant, the p-value is 0.82 and the chi-square is 2.91. This lack of significance is also visible in the column percentages. Of the respondents that said they had self-harmed, forty-eight percent of LGBTQIAP+ respondents said they had self-harmed only once as opposed to fifty-six percent of non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents. Almost fifteen percent of LGBTQIAP+ and sixteen percent of non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents said once a month, and almost fifteen percent and twelve percent said two or more times a month. The biggest difference was in respondents that said they self-

harm once a week with almost fourteen percent of the LGBTQIAP+ respondents and only four percent of the non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents saying they self-harmed once a week. Seven percent of LGBTQIAP+ respondents said they self-harmed several times a week and eight percent of non-LGBTQIAP+ respondents said they did. No respondents from either group said they self-harmed once a day, and only one respondent said they self-harm more than once a day and said they do not identify as LGBTQIAP+.

CONCLUSION

The study found that at UNH LGBTQIAP+ students have a significantly higher likelihood of self-harming than non-LGBTQIAP+ students at UNH. The study also found that while LGBTQIAP+ students are more likely to self-harm than non-LGBTQIAP+ students, there is no significant difference in how often they self-harm when compared to non-LGBTQIAP+ students that also self-harm. This highlights that self-harm is a serious problem among the LGBTQIAP+ survey respondents at UNH and that self-harm in general is a problem among the respondents. If this sample were to be representative then self-harm would be a significant issue at UNH, however due to the lack of a representative sample more research is needed to determine that.

My research had multiple limitations including the lack of gender diversity, the use of a convenience sample, and the subject matter of my research. The lack of gender diversity can hurt the significance of the results because the student population at UNH is not seventy-five percent female and therefore this sample is not representative in gender diversity. Additionally the convenience sample can hurt the external validity of the study because the majority of the respondents are likely friends of people in the class and thus are not representative of the student population either. Finally, many people may have chosen not to complete the survey because

they did not feel comfortable answering questions on self-harm. This could have been a factor that resulted in the 439 started surveys but only 373 completed.

Clearly self-harm is a large issue among LGBTQIAP+ students at UNH and, if this sample were representative, a problem among the student body at large. I hope to use this research to present my findings of self-harm on campus to the university administration to help address this troubling issue. Future research should be done to try and get a more representative sample regarding gender as well as a larger sample to help determine if these findings can be generalized to the larger student body and not just the sample. Future research would also benefit from examining specific LGBTQIAP+ identities and seeing if specific identities have a higher likelihood of self-harm than other identities. Ultimately, it is my hope to use this research to influence campus culture and reduce the rate of self-harm among both LGBTQIAP+ and non-LGBTQIAP+ students at UNH.

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