RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN HELICOPTER PARENTING AND NON-SUICIDAL SELF-INJURY (NSSI) AMONG ADOLESCENTS IN KEDAH, MALAYSIA

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ABSTRACT

Background: Parents have a tremendous effect on adolescents’ emotional and behavioural well-being. The importance of effective parental involvement in adolescents’ health is evident in numerous literatures, however there are inadequate studies that focus on the relationship between helicopter parenting and non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI). Aim: The purpose of this study was to identify the prevalence of NSSI behaviour and to examine the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI among adolescents. Method: A cross-sectional study consisted of 242 secondary school students (70.2% female and 29.7% male), aged between 13 to 16 years old (Mage 14.42 SD=2.12) who completed the helicopter parenting and NSSI questionnaires. The respondents of this study were selected using a convenience sampling method from two secondary schools located in the Kulim district of Kedah, Malaysia. Findings: The results revealed that 81 (33.2%) out of 242 respondents reported having been involved in at least one incidence of NSSI in the previous 12 months, whereof banging the head is a frequent method of NSSI. Females reportedly engaged in a higher frequency of NSSI behaviour (M=13.42, SD=4.32) compared to males (M=12.68, SD=2.43). Besides this, the results also revealed significant relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour among adolescents. Conclusion: The findings highlight that parents’ behaviour continuously determined the emotional and behavioural well-being of adolescents and more research is warranted to establish a greater degree of accuracy on this matter.

Keywords: Helicopter parenting, Non-suicidal Self-Injury, NSSI, Adolescents, Malaysia

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Non-Suicidal Self Injury (NSSI) refers to deliberate non-fatal action of damaging one’s own body tissue without conscious suicidal ideation or reason that is not culturally permitted (Nock, 2009). NSSI has attracted attention in a considerable number of research in the past decades due to its severely destructive behaviour affecting vulnerable adolescents with or without any psychological disorders. Apart from a
higher prevalence among the clinical population (Lauw et al., 2018), NSSI behaviour is found to be common with the life time prevalence rate of 17% among the non-clinical adolescents population (Daukantaitė et al., 2021). A recent study that involved psychiatric outpatients in Singapore revealed that 23.1% of them had engaged in NSSI behaviour (Lauw et al., 2018).

Several studies proved the presence of NSSI in Malaysia among non-clinical samples (Tan et al., 2019; Yeong et al., 2017; Armitage et al., 2014). For instance, an empirical study revealed that 56.81% out of 602 adolescents from 12 secondary schools were reportedly engaged in NSSI behavior (Teik Ee & Aman, 2015). NSSI has a larger prevalence among Malaysian adolescents, however the scarcity of scientific evidence result in people being unaware of the seriousness of this behavior.

1.1 NSSI gateway to future suicide

In the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5), NSSI has been included as a new disorder and was proved to be a potential risk factor towards suicide (Chesin et al., 2017). Suicide has become a major concern in low and middle income countries and is the second leading cause of death among adolescents aged between 15 to 29 years old (Westers, 2019). The estimation rate of suicide in Malaysia is 13.1 deaths per 100,000, which was one of the highest in the South East Asian Region (Hendin et al., 2008). In fact, the precise number of suicide cases is underreported (Cheah et al., 2018) due to the great taboo and legal complications in Malaysia. Although Malaysia is among the countries with the lowest committed suicides compared to Sri Lanka, South Korea, and Japan (Cheah et al., 2018), but the prevalence of suicide among adolescents is growing rapidly and requires massive attention (Cheah et al., 2018).

NSSI is not only a momentous stressful trigger, but also considered a gateway to future suicide attempts among adolescents (Berger et al., 2017). Klonsky et al. (2013) described that frequent NSSI behaviour reduced the innate feeling of fear and pain to commit suicide in future and further added that NSSI is a uniquely important risk factor toward suicide which needs critical attention.

1.2 Helicopter Parenting and NSSI

Apart from the well-known classical parenting style proposed by Baumrind (1967), there is another type of emerging parenting practice such as helicopter parenting. Generally, the term ‘helicopter parenting’ is pointed towards overprotective parenting practice (Karunaharan et al., 2021), where they are overly involved and provide less opportunities for their child in the problem solving and decision making process. Parental practice is critical in constructing positive emotional and behavioural development. Parents’ earlier response towards NSSI behaviour has a significant impact on their child’s help-seeking behaviour in future (Fu et al., 2020).

Existing studies indicate that family experiences can influence the onset and maintenance of NSSI (Victor et al., 2019; Tatnell et al., 2014). Previous studies indicated that NSSI behaviour is the outcome of ineffective interpersonal interactions (Nock, 2009). Indeed, several studies revealed that adolescents engaged in NSSI often experienced difficulties in maintaining relationships with family and friends (Victor et al., 2019). They are also prone to be involved in high-risk activities such as alcohol and drug abuse compared to adolescents without NSSI behavior (Guvendeger Doksat et al., 2017). Empirical evidence indicated that some parenting styles are associated with NSSI behaviour. Adolescents from single families (Burešová et al., 2015), and invalidating family background (Du et al., 2017) have been proven to be linked
with NSSI behaviour. On the other side, several evidences revealed that negative parenting is a critical risk factor towards adolescents’ NSSI behavior (Van Lissa et al., 2019; Victor et al., 2019).

According to the attachment theory, Bowlby (1988) explained that parent-child relationship is the key factor that determines the child’s social and emotional development. Certainly, parents play an important role as a social agent (Baferani, 2015). Several empirical evidence in line with the assumption by Bowlby (1988) indicated that ineffective parent-child relationship increased the secretion of stress hormones in children (Nachmias et al., 1996) and resulted in negative consequences (Hibel at al., 2011). Apart from this, there are several empirically tested models that explained the phenomenon of NSSI among adolescents. The experiential avoidance model (Chapman et al., 2006) explained that NSSI behaviour resulted from an individual’s desire to avoid feeling difficult emotions. According to that model, there is individual focus on NSSI behaviour to avoid the unwanted emotion. In doing so, they experience the feeling of reassurance, thus consequently reinforcing the NSSI behaviour.

1.3 Gender difference on NSSI

There are inconsistent findings regarding the gender prevalence on NSSI. While several studies found that NSSI behaviour is more prevalent among women (Lauw et al., 2018; Bresin, Schoenleber, 2015), other studies did not find a single consistent gender prevalence (Xueyan and Moye Xin, 2018; Jacobson and Gould, 2007). According to Masiran et al. (2017), there were more female self-harmers than male in Malaysia.

Although studies related to parenting practice on NSSI have been on a rapid rise, extensive number of studies were conducted in developed countries. Very limited studies had been conducted among Malaysian adolescents concerning the phenomenon of NSSI. Since mental health issues such as suicidal ideation, attempted and committed suicide, and depression shows a growing trend among Malaysians (Wong et al., 2021), investigating the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour could eventually contribute towards the development of prevention and intervention strategies focused on parents’ role in alleviating NSSI behaviour among adolescents.

As NSSI is a growing public health issue and due to insufficient empirical data concerning the link between parenting domain, the current study was designed to identify the prevalence of NSSI behaviour and its relationship with helicopter parenting among adolescents in Kedah, Malaysia. Since the previous epidemiological studies on NSSI revealed an inconsistent finding on gender differences (Bresin & Schoenleber, 2015), the current study predicted that female respondents would report a higher frequency of NSSI behaviour than male. Moreover, considering the destructive nature of helicopter parenting, we expected the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour would be positive and significant.

2.0 METHODS

2.1 Respondents

The respondents of this study were drawn from convenience sampling method and they were from two secondary schools located in the Kulim district of Kedah. 242 respondents were recruited from a total
population of 638 secondary school students using the Krejcie and Morgan (1970) sample size determination technique. The study sample comprised of 73 (29.7%) males and 169 (70.2%) females between 13-16 years of age (mean=14.42, SD=2.12); 52.9% (n=128) were Malays, 27.7% (n=67) were Chinese, and 19.4% (n=47) were Indians.

2.2 Procedures

Our study was a joint effort with the school guidance and counselling teachers of the participating secondary schools. We provided a detailed research proposal to the particular school guidance and counselling teachers four weeks earlier in order for them to comprehend the novelty and significance of the present study. Data was collected during the school closure period due to the pandemic in November 2020. Data collection was conducted efficiently through social media platforms such as Telegram. Researchers joined the targeted class Telegram group through the assistance of the school guidance and counselling teachers and shared the link of the questionnaire to the respondents. Beforehand, parents of the respondents were informed through Telegram, consent was obtained, and all students were informed about the confidentiality of the collected data and the voluntary nature of participation.

2.3 Instruments

The questionnaire utilized for this study has three conceptual sections. The first section in the questionnaire comprised of questions related to demographic details such as gender, age and ethnicity. The second section comprised of items on measuring NSSI behavior. Items on measuring NSSI behavior were selected from the Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (DSHI) originated by Gratz (2001). Existing literature demonstrated DSHI inventory has good psychometric values (You, Lin, Xu, & Hu, 2016). The Cronbach's alpha coefficient in the current study was 0.78. The participants reported the frequency with which they intentionally injured themselves without the intention to die during the past year, by each of the following nine methods such as self-cutting, carving, burning, severely scratching, inserting sharp objects to the nail or skin, biting to injury, erasing skin, banging the head or other parts of the body against the wall, and punching. Every nine NSSI behavior was rated on a 7-point scale from 1 = never to 7 = almost every day. The total scores of these items were used, with higher scores indicating higher NSSI frequencies.

The final section comprised of items with the linear scale format to measure the level of helicopter parenting developed by Lemoine et al. (2014). This section included ten items concerning the respondents’ experience with their parents. Every item of this questionnaire contained the 5-point Likert scaling: 1=strongly disagree, 2=disagree, 3=undecided, 4=agree, and 5=strongly agree. A higher score demonstrated a higher level of helicopter parenting experienced by the respondents. The researchers indicated Cronbach's reliability alpha of .74, which suggested that the scale used in this study has a good level of reliability.

2.4 Data analysis

In this study, we used descriptive statistics to explain the demographics and the prevalence of NSSI behaviour among the respondents. An independent t-test was used to analyze gender difference in regards
to NSSI behaviour, and Pearson correlation was performed to investigate the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour.

3.0 RESULTS

3.1 Prevalence of NSSI

From a total of 242 respondents, 81 (33.2%) reported having engaged in at least one incidence of NSSI in the previous 12 months.

Table 1 below shows the percentage of NSSI behaviour among adolescents in Kedah. “Banging the head or other parts of the body against the wall” is the highest form of NSSI behaviour at 33.3%. Next is the behaviour of “punching” which is 28.2% and followed by the “inserting sharp objects to the nail or skin” which is 20.3%. The lowest percentage of NSSI behaviour is “burning” which is 2.6%, “erasing skin” 7.8%, and self-cutting 8.4%. Furthermore, other NSSI behaviors such as “carving” shows 12.7%, “biting to injury” 15.4%, and “severely scratching” 18.9%.

Table 1: Percentage of NSSI behaviour among respondents.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>No</th>
<th>Type of NSSI Behaviour</th>
<th>Percentage</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Self-cutting</td>
<td>8.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Carving</td>
<td>12.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Burning</td>
<td>2.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Severely scratching</td>
<td>18.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Inserting sharp objects to the nail or skin</td>
<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Biting to injury</td>
<td>15.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Erasing skin</td>
<td>7.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Banging the head or other parts of the body against the wall</td>
<td>33.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Punching</td>
<td>28.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2 shows the differences of NSSI behaviour among male and female respondents. There was a significant difference between gender and NSSI behaviour, where females (M=13.42, SD=4.32) reported a higher range of NSSI behaviour compared to males (M=12.68, SD=2.43); t (213) =-2.050, p = 0.42.
Table 2: T-test for gender differences towards NSSI.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>N</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>SD</th>
<th>df</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>Sig.(2-tailed)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NSSI Behaviour</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>73</td>
<td>12.68</td>
<td>2.43</td>
<td>242</td>
<td>-2.050</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>169</td>
<td>13.42</td>
<td>4.32</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Significant value at .05 (p > .05)

Table 3 shows Pearson’s correlation analyses to examine the correlation between helicopter parenting and NSSI behavior. Findings showed that helicopter parenting significantly and positively correlated with NSSI behavior (r=0.47, p<0.000). This correlation explained that increasing helicopter parenting practices increases the frequency of NSSI behavior among adolescents. However, the correlation was weak although there is a positive linear relationship between these two variables (r=0.47, n=242, p < 0.000).

Table 3: Correlations between variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Helicopter parenting</th>
<th>NSSI behaviour</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Helicopter parenting</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>NSSI behaviour</td>
<td>0.47**</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: N = 242

**p < 0.000

4.0 Discussion

In the present study, we identified the prevalence of NSSI behaviour and investigated the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour among adolescents in Kedah, Malaysia. The results indicate from a total of 242 respondents, 81 (33.2%) reported having engaged in at least one incidence of NSSI in the previous 12 months with females reportedly engaged in a higher frequency of NSSI behaviour. Although the prevalence seems high, but it was found to be consistent with previous studies (Chen and Chun, 2019; Teik Ee and Aman, 2015). Since the data collection were conducted during the school closure amid the worsening of COVID-19 on November, 2020, a higher prevalence of NSSI might be due to the increasing symptoms of anxiety and depression due to the outbreak as revealed by Hafstad et al. (2021).

Additionally, we also discovered the gender difference related with NSSI behaviour which revealed that females reportedly engaged in a higher frequency of NSSI behaviour compared to males. Consistent with previous findings in Malaysia as reported by Masiran et al. (2017), females tend to engage more in NSSI. It seems possible that these results are due to the findings of a recent study which indicated that female adolescents experience severe mental health issues due to several reasons such as family income and urban lifestyle (Moeini et al., 2019). However, given that these findings were based on a substantially smaller sample of respondents, it would be inappropriate to assume we could draw firm conclusions from these
data. Thus, future research is warranted to examine the possibility of gender differences in the NSSI phenomenon.

In line with our expectation, the findings of this study indicated that helicopter parenting has a positive and significant relationship with NSSI behaviour among adolescents. The correlation between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour is worth mentioning because it yielded the significant role of parents in determining adolescent’s behavioural and psychological well-being. The findings of this study is consistent with previous studies (Victor et al., 2019; Tatnell et al., 2014) which emphasized the importance of parent-child relationship. However, correlation does not imply causality, it might be other factors that influence this relationship. In this study, helicopter parenting might be one of the factor towards NSSI behavior and conversely not an actual factor of NSSI behavior. NSSI behavior can triggered by other factors such as peer influence and social media (Brown and Witt, 2019). For that reason, it is worth a serious look at how helicopter parenting could be affecting adolescents’ NSSI behavior and our findings indicates that over-parenting is significantly associated with NSSI and vice versa.

Overall, as suggested in attachment theory (Bowlby, 1988), parents are an important psychological companion for their child and plays critical role in shaping socially functioning individual. The present study contributed towards the comprehension of NSSI behavior and also enhanced our understanding concerning the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI among adolescents.

Nevertheless, our study clearly has some limitations. Apart from the common limitation of self-report survey such as recall bias, and limited sample size, the data of this study might be subjected to social desirability, where the respondents might assume that information given in the questionnaire would be passed to the teachers. Future studies using the experience sampling method are warranted to minimize the recall bias which would occur since the respondents were required to recall the previous NSSI experience (if any) for the past 12 months of this study. It is also recommended to increase the sample size from a wider geographical area in order to comprehend more efficiently concerning the relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour among Malaysian adolescents. Finally, future studies also should be considered to investigate other NSSI behaviour related variables such as peer support, intrapersonal factors, and childhood abuse.

5.0 Conclusion

In summary, the current study identified the prevalence of NSSI behaviour among adolescents and deduced a significant relationship between helicopter parenting and NSSI behaviour. The findings of this study suggest that parents are one of the important factors that can influence adolescents’ emotional and behavioural well-being. Furthermore, overprotective parenting practice might elevate one’s negative feelings which can eventually lead to NSSI behaviour. The findings of this study have important implications for future practices including development of relevant educational and prevention programs for female adolescents as well as their parents.

Acknowledgement

www.turkjphysiotherrehabil.org
We are grateful to the researchers from the psychology research team based in Malaysia and the school administrators, guidance and counselling teachers, and respondents of this study.

**Consent for publication**

Not applicable.

**Competing interests**

There are no competing interests to declare.

References

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