Understanding Perceptions and Triggers of Self-Harm:
An Assessment of Behavior and Alternative Guilt Reduction Study

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**Project Description**

With the transition to college being a stressful and confusing time for students, some turn to self-harm in order to cope. Although not much research has been conducted on the topic, research suggests that approximately 38% of college students reported a history of deliberate self-harm (Gratz, Conrad, & Roemer, 2002). Although suicide is not the intention of self-harm, the relationship between self-harm and suicide is complex, as self-harming behavior may be potentially life-threatening. The purpose of this project is to address the growing concern of self-harm in the college setting. The project will consist of 3 different parts, including the training and assessment of Resident Advisors relating to the warning signs of self-harm, perceptions of self-harm among college students who have/have not engaged in self-harm, and alternative methods of reducing negative emotions that may induce self-harm (e.g. guilt).

In the initial stage of the project, we will be conducting interviews with Resident Advisors on campus in conjunction with Residence Life. Resident Advisors have been trained in the area of self-harm in regards to warning signs and how to address a case of self-harm if it arises. We will be assessing their awareness on discrete signs of self-harm, such as preference for wearing concealing clothing at all times, avoidance of situations where more revealing clothing might be expected, and frequent unexplained injury. We plan to provide them with helpful information and resources and suggest additional training techniques that can be incorporated into the Resident Advisor training provided by Residence Life.

We would also like to examine the perception of self-harm from those who have engaged in it and from those who have not. An online survey will be conducted including questions related to warning signs, possible triggers, and reasons why someone would engage in self-harm, how students perceive the mental stability of those who engage in it, potential consequences, and healthy alternatives.

The last part of the project will focus on alternative methods to reducing negative emotions that may induce self-harm (e.g. guilt). Previous literature has shown that pain reduces guilt (Bastian, Jetten, & Fasoli, 2011; Mosher, O’Grady, & Katz, 1980). Participants will be asked to complete a task that involves them writing about something they have done in the past that they feel guilty about and then given a scale to measure their level of guilt. Participants will then be asked to engage in a guilt reducing activity, either by placing their hand in ice water or warm water, writing an apology letter, or engaging in exercise, and then once again measure their level of guilt. The purpose is to see whether the positive alternatives (apology letter and exercise) are as effective in reducing guilt as the negative action (ice water). The warm water condition will be used as a control. This experiment is designed to ultimately suggest alternative methods to self-harm that don’t cause pain to the individual.

**Plans for faculty-student collaboration and mentorship**

I’m very excited because this project allows both Melissa and I the one-on-one time to explore statistical data analysis in both a quantitative (Survey research) and qualitative (interview transcription and use of NVIVO software) manner. I have a unique opportunity to work with an extremely talented and motivated student on an important project that addresses a crucial need of our students and RA’s.
SPRING 2012

During the Spring 2012 Semester Melissa will continue to gather relevant information from the self-harm literature database. We will meet on a bi-weekly basis during this semester. Bi-weekly meetings are designed to share theoretical insights in order to foster a more cohesive approach to answering the research questions and building of the online survey.

WEEKS 1-2

After May 20th, Melissa and I will move to a twice a week meeting schedule to facilitate analysis of collected survey data, transcribe interviews and begin planning the experimental study. During the first two weeks of the summer, Melissa and I will review training on in-depth interview techniques (e.g. reflection, building rapport), transcribing interview data into Nvivo (A qualitative software analysis package) and SPSS coding (A quantitative software analysis package).

During these meetings I will oversee her data analyses and guide to her conduct the appropriate analyses to answer our research questions and work with her on locating sources for our manuscripts and meeting with participants for the experimental guilt reduction portion of the project.

Our initial online surveys will be disseminated during the first week of the FUSE project to students on all four campuses through InstantSurvey. We plan to collect RA in-person interview data during the first two weeks of the summer session.

During these weeks we plan to collect survey data on the perceptions of why, how, and what triggers students to engage in self-harm behaviors, and how students perceive the mental stability, warning signs, coping mechanisms, and consequences of self-harm. It is important for us to meet twice a week so that we can better handle any unforeseen complications in scheduling with RA’s and campus students during the interview stage, to facilitate data analysis so we can submit to SEPA and APA in August and to keep Melissa motivated on the goals of the finished project.

WEEKS 3-5

During the 3rd, 4th and 5th week our time will be dedicated to transcribing the RA interview data into Nvivo. Melissa will further refine her qualitative and quantitative analysis skills by being mentored in entering and analyzing data in Nvivo and SPSS. During this time we will review our research questions, and Melissa will have the opportunity to use statistical methodologies to model the relationships within our Survey data and interview data.

Our experimental study will begin in the 4th week and continue through the rest of the summer session, since we plan to incorporate one or more of the coping mechanisms reported from the survey and RA interviews as a potential condition for reducing perceptions of guilt.

WEEKS 6-8

During this time, Melissa and I will begin writing up the results from the initial interview and online Survey. We will continue our twice a week meeting schedule to work together on manuscript writing, APA styling, and interpretation of data and statistical results. During this time, Melissa will be tasked with analyzing some of the research questions on her own and will present her findings at our meetings, so she may receive feedback to facilitate progress towards our research goal.
Goals and expected products

Since 2011, my lab has mentored 6 students, four of whom have presented their research at regional conferences, such as the Georgia Sociological Association Annual conference (GSA 2012), and the Southeastern Psychological Associations annual conference (SEPA). Through previous CURCA and LIL grants, I have had the opportunity to collaborate with these students, two of who are presenting their work at SEPA this year, and one who is currently writing up our study on Avatar Creation in Video games for publication. The student collaborator on this FUSE project, Melissa, has also submitted a manuscript to our undergraduate research journal Papers and Pubs for publication.

This project serves multiple purposes: (1) it attempts to identify gaps in the knowledge of college students and RA’s on the triggers, and warning signs of self-harm, (2) it provides Melissa with an applied setting in which they can use and develop their research skills, (3) it offers a change to integrate multiple techniques to examine and make meaningful contributions to the literature on self-harm in college age populations.

Through our assessment surveys, interviews, and empirical data we expect several short and long term goals. In the short term we will integrate other students in my lab into the project during the Fall 2013 semester to enable us to present at least three papers in at the Southeastern Psychological Associations (SEPA) 2014 annual conference and American Psychological Association’s annual conference on several topics including: (1) the perceptions of self-harm amongst college students who have/have not engaged in self-harm, (2) alternative methods of reducing guilt that don’t involve pain, and (3) training and assessment of Resident Advisors and the warning signs of self harm.

In the long term we plan to submit our entire assessment and results in a student co-authored peer-reviewed for publication in the (i.e. Journal of Applied Social Psychology) as our results will have implications for health, stress and coping behavior among college students. We have also met with Dr. Simon Cordery in the Office of Student Counseling, and developed a plan to use this study to create an evaluation of the assessment for the Resident Advisors and incorporate our findings into future training sessions for Residence Life across the consolidated campuses. Dr. Cordery was very enthusiastic about our approach, which has the potential become a critical element in the Residence Life training modules and an invaluable service-learning component for students in the future as we create follow-up studies to assess revisions in training.
## Budget

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## Timeline

- **February– May 2013** Literature Review and Research Design
- **May 20th – May 31st** Training in Advanced Research Methods and Nvivo/ Online Survey Data Collection
- **June 1st – June 21st** In person interviews and Experiment Data Collection (RA Interviews/ Pain and Guilt experiment study)
- **June 22nd – July 12th** Manuscript writing/ Analysis of data/Summarizing research findings
- **August 2013** Submission to SEPA and APA
- **October 2013** Manuscript submitted for Publication

**Faculty certification.** “I hereby certify that Bryan L. Dawson will teach no more than 8 course hours during each summer session spanned by the FUSE program. Bryan L. Dawson is committed to mentoring Melissa A. Deese on a continual basis during the period of the FUSE program.”

**Student certification.** “I hereby certify that I, Melissa A. Deese will commit at least 40 hours per week to the scholarly project described in this application. I also certify that I am not enrolled in more than 4 course hours during each summer session spanned by FUSE. I am aware that failure to comply with these two requirements may result in the forfeiture of my summer stipend.”
References

