

# **BAR-ILAN UNIVERSITY**

## **Does Rejection Sensitivity Moderate the Relationship between School Belonging and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury?**

Noa Fellner

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## **Abstract**

Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) describes several behavior patterns when people deliberately and directly inflict self-injury to their body tissues, such as cutting or seriously scratching, burning or beating oneself (Nock & Favazza, 2009; Nock, 2009; Nock, Joiner, Gordon, Lloyd-Richardson, & Prinstein, 2006). Such behavior of non-suicidal self-injury is widespread among teenagers and young adults between the ages of 14-24 and mostly among women (Nixon, Cloutier, & Jansson, 2008). Self-injury frequency is assumed to be 17% among teenagers (Swannell, Martin, Page, Hasking, & St John, 2014). One of the main reasons of NSSI is the need to overcome and reduce the power of negative emotions (Chapman et al., 2006; Klonsky, 2009; Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2007, Klonsky, 2007).

Rejection sensitivity is defined as a cognitive emotional tendency of a person that influences his expectations, explanations, perception and behavior because of his fear of social rejection in different social situations (Feldman & Downey, 1994). In this study the variable Rejection Sensitivity is divided into three factors of sensitivity: (a) "sure" factor- how sure you feel? (b) "tense" factor- how tense you feel? (c) "angry" factor- how angry you feel? This research will focus on the "sure" and "tense" factors. School belonging is defined as a communicational, social and supporting connection (Nichols, 2008), and it was found that this feeling can be a protective factor against negative psychological aspects, such as depression and dangerous behavior (Nichols, 2008). In addition, it was found that a strong sense of belonging that the adolescent has towards his peer group and his school can protect him from NSSI (Muehlenkamp et al., 2013; You et al., 2013).

However, there is a lack of research studies dealing with the different aspects of NSSI concerning school and therefore the aim of this research is to examine rejection sensitivity, and school belonging and their influence on NSSI.

On the basis of the findings mentioned above, the hypotheses of this present study are: (1) a strong sense of school belonging would be for the student, a factor protecting him from NSSI. That means, a negative connection could be found between school

belonging and NSSI; (2) there could be found a positive connection between rejection sensitivity and NSSI; (3) rejection sensitivity would moderate the connection between school belonging and NSSI. Therefore, the more a student is sensitive to social rejection, the stronger is the connection between school belonging and NSSI.

In the present study, 594 students in the ages of 14-18, from various schools in Israel participated (54.4%- boys, average age- 14.96, standard deviation- 1.33). As part of the study, the students answered three questionnaires: the non-suicidal self-injury (Gratz, 2001), school belonging (Katz et al., 2009; Patrick, Kaplan, & Ryan, 2011) and the rejection sensitivity (Downey, Lebolt, Rincón, & Freitas, 1998).

By moderation model in binary logistic regression (BLR) some important findings were found: (1) according to the first hypothesis, a clear negative connection was found between school belonging and NSSI in three types: self-inflicted cutting, scratching and deliberately beating the head; (2) according to the second hypothesis, a clear negative connection was found between rejection sensitivity (sure type) and NSSI of two types: self-inflicted scratching and stabbing sharp objects into the skin. A clear connection was found, as well, between rejection sensitivity (tense type) and NSSI of the type of deliberately beating the head; (3) according to the interaction, it was found that as the rejection sensitivity was lower, so the connection between school belonging and NSSI (beating the head deliberately type) was stronger (in a negative way). Thus, when school belonging is stronger, NSSI (beating the head deliberately type) would decrease only for students who do not feel tension from rejection sensitivity.

According to these findings, some important conclusions can be deducted. First, we can deduct that if the student feels a strong sense of school belonging, it can provide a protective factor defending him from NSSI behavior, such as self-inflicted cutting, self-scratching and deliberately beating the head. Secondly, we can deduct that if we work with students on their sense of rejection sensitivity and the result is lower rejection sensitivity, they will feel reduced tension. We can decrease the NSSI of students in three types of self-injury (self-scratching, stabbing sharp objects into the skin and deliberately beating the head) out of five types of NSSI. In addition, sense of

school belonging can help the student in his struggle against NSSI behavior, when the student feels a low sense of stress concerning rejection sensitivity. Since educators testify about the lack of tools and knowledge to deal with the phenomenon of NSSI (Heath et al., 2011), there is an important need to guide educators, with the help of this study and others, on how to deal with those adolescents who suffer from NSSI. The findings of this study should strengthen the importance of lowering rejection sensitivity so that the sense of school belonging could help the students struggle against NSSI.

Still, there are some limitations in this present study. This study is a coordinators research aiming to describe the manifestation of NSSI, to define its frequency and also to test the connections between the variables of NSSI, school belonging and rejection sensitivity. The type of this study makes it impossible to draw conclusions from the findings on causation. Moreover, the sample of this study included students from state schools, and in order for the study to reflect the population, it should also include schools from different sectors (such as, religious education, Arab, private, boarding schools etc.).

In addition, it may be that the definitions of NSSI mentioned in the questionnaires were misunderstood by the students since they answered ready-made closed questionnaires. That's why continuing researches should include more serious interviews with the participants.

Therefore, my recommendations for future research include a longitudinal study which follows the subjects for an extended period of time, and in so doing, it may be able to identify processes in the teenagers' lives. Future research can also examine if indeed there are similar characteristics between the different types of NSSI that a clear connection was found between them and the variable school belonging and in the same way to examine whether there are similar characteristics to the different types of NSSI and whether a clear connection was found between them and the rejection sensitivity variable.