Project Title: Cyberbullying and self-harm in adolescence: an assessment of prevalence, associated predictors, and prevention interventions.

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Level: PhD

Background to the project:

Self-harm is widely recognised as a significant adolescent social problem, and recent research has begun to explore its aetiology, and its mediating factors.

The increasing popularity of social media and internet has grown rapidly in the last twenty years and is most popular among young people. Recent research conducted in the Republic of Ireland indicated that 40% of adolescents, aged 11 years to 12 years have a profile on a social media website (Livingstone, Haddon, Vincent, Mascheroni, and Ólafsson, 2014; O'Neill & Dinh, 2014). This growth of social media and internet use has reportedly created a new type of bullying and interaction between peers. O’Connor et al (2014) found that almost 20% of young people suggested that internet or social media use influenced them to engage in self-harm.

O’Connor et al. (2014) suggests that social media use (Twitter and Facebook) is growing at a rapid rate, and hence hypothesise that the influence of the internet and social media on self-harm specifically, is rising and will continue to grow in the years to come. The authors foresee challenges, specifically the need to understand the mechanisms by which these new technologies increase risk. They further suggest the need to develop new ways of working with young people which utilises/harnesses these technologies to help vulnerable young people. Consistent with other research on the idea of ‘self-harm contagion’ (Hawton et al., 2010), these findings also highlight the powerful influence of other people’s self-harm. O’Connor et al. (2014) argues that due to the strong evidence regarding the relationship between how social influences predict self-harm prospectively (O’Connor et al., 2009b), urgent work with schools and families may be needed to prevent and neutralise this risk.

In terms of correlates of adolescent self-harm, Hey and Meldrum (2010) concluded that bullying victimization was significantly and positively associated with adolescent self-harm and suicidal ideation. These relationships were reported to be strong, with standardized coefficients ranging from .32 to .39. The authors suggested that these results supported the General Strain Theory’s (GST) (Agnew 1992) prediction that abusive treatment from peers has an important relationship not just with externalising aggression, but also with aggression directed against the self, in the form of self-harm. The theory suggests that where strainful social relations are positively associated with negative emotions; it may be these emotions, in turn, which are positively
associated with deliberate self-harm; and the strength and potency of these relationships depends on other features of the adolescent’s social environment and self.

Similarly related, a study which looked at cyberbullying and depression found that helpless reactions were positively associated with depressive symptoms (Machmutow, Perren, Sticca & Alsaker, 2012), whereby certain coping strategies moderated the impact of cybervictimisation on depressive symptoms. In the same way, it is queried whether peer victimisation via social media networks can lead to depressive symptoms, thereby increasing the incidences of self-harm in adolescents, but also queries what other factors may affect positive and indeed negative coping strategies to mediate such experiences?

In terms of offering further explanation regarding mediating factors, Hey and Meldrum (2010), concluded that the relationship between bullying and self-harm was partially mediated by negative emotions. In their study, they noted that between 24 and 43% of the total effects of bullying were mediated by negative emotions, a finding supported by other studies (Kaufman 2009; Simons et al. 2003). Having said that, Hey and Meldrum (2010) still propose that additional theorising was warranted. The authors emphasise, however, that even after controlling for negative emotions, significant relationships between bullying and deliberate self-harm and suicidal ideation persisted. The authors further suggested that their measure of negative emotions was somewhat incomplete and that more elaborate measures of emotions were needed in future research. Also possible, however, is that additional mediating variables, including those not related to emotions, should be considered.

One such factor could be the ability to regulate emotions via emotional intelligence, and how this could assist in preventing self-harm behaviours in young people. Mikolajczak, Petrides and Hurry (2009) indicated that the relationship between trait emotional intelligence and self-harm were partly mediated by the choice of coping strategies. It seems that emotional coping was a notably powerful mediator, suggesting that self-harm could be a way to decrease the negative emotions that are heightened by maladaptive or dysfunctional emotional coping strategies, for example rumination, self-blame, and helplessness. The authors suggest that their findings regarding coping and self-harm may indicate the potential value of including ‘coping coaching programmes’, when intervening self-harm patients. Perhaps this could be extended to preventative interventions also.

Overall, evaluating Agnew's GST' basic theoretical framework for studying the causes of self-harm appears to be a promising perspective for considering this issue (Hey and Meldrum (2010). Nevertheless, the authors also recognise that theorising in this area is in its infancy, and the findings suggest that extended study is required on the issues.

**Objectives of the Research:**

The project aims to:
- **Conduct a literature review/systematic review of**
  - the prevalence of cyberbullying and self-harms in adolescents, comparing NI with other cultures,
as well as the various mediators/coping factors such as emotional resilience, emotional intelligence, emotional regulation, problem solving abilities, parental/peer support etc.

- Determine the prevalence of cyber bullying and relationship to adolescent self-harm for young people of varying age groups.
- Examine how the various coping related constructs mediate the impact of adolescent self-harm.
- Review a range of theoretical models which assist in explaining the links between adolescent coping factors/peer relationships/victimisation and distress such as self-harm.
- Based on the outcome of the survey, evaluate the most efficacious modes of preventing cyberbullying, and how to develop positive coping skills in young people.

**Methods to be used:**
- This study aims to recruit adolescents from a range of schools/and/or relevant organisations in Northern Ireland. The design is a cross sectional survey, utilising online survey methods.
- The study also aims to consider ways to seek the views of young people in how to consider/create ways to prevent cyberbullying, and assist in understanding what young people need to develop better coping mechanisms for various age groups. This may require the use of qualitative methods, and/or a pilot intervention.

**Potential Measures to be used.**
- Cyberbullying Questionnaire (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, and Tippett, 2006)
- Deliberate Self-Harm Inventory (Gratz, 2001)
- The Coping Styles Questionnaire (CSQ, Roger et al; 1993)
- Trait Emotional Intelligence Questionnaire – Adolescent Short form (TEIQue-ASF; Petrides et al, 2006)
- The Difficulties in Emotion Regulation Scale (DERS; Gratz& Roemer, 2004)

**Skills required of applicant**
- Have an understanding of adolescent mental health and impact of bullying/peer victimisation via social media.
- Be committed to undertaking this study to PhD level, requiring 3 years of study.
- Have good statistical analysis skills and be willing to be trained in more complex statistical designs.
- Be able to discuss the type of analysis required to meet the objectives above.
- Be able to work independently, having a good work ethic, and be able to meet deadlines.
- Have good academic writing skills.

**References:**

Assessment, 36, 41-54