Reviewer's report

Title: Why Alternative teenagers self-harm: Exploring the link between non-suicidal self-injury, attempted suicide and adolescent identity

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Reviewer: Judi Kidger

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This is an interesting paper, which addresses something that continues to be debated – how far ‘alternative teenagers’ are more likely to self-harm – and attempts to explore why that it is the case. The paper contains a useful overview of sociological theory and how it might explain the associations, and concludes with some interesting thoughts on implications for practice. However there are some weaknesses, particularly a lack of clarity in the aims and discussion regarding what type of SH is being examined, the analysis requiring more detail, and conclusions which are not strongly supported enough by the data.

Major Compulsory Revisions

Introduction

1. The prevalences reported in the literature vary a great deal. The ones cited here are definitely towards the high end – it would be helpful therefore for the authors to explain where they came from – are they international rates? And are they summary prevalences from a number of papers?

2. There is some slippage between self-harm and NSSI – the authors do separate the two in their cited prevalences, and in their actual measures and data analysis. But in the introduction the section on reasons for self-harm and how it links with alternative subcultures seems to only be about NSSI, then the aims for the paper just talk about self-harm, with no separation made. Given that NSSI and suicidal thoughts and attempts are separated in the regression models, the aims should really discuss the two separately. In particular the third aim asks about more severe forms of self-harm, but equates this to more frequent acts, whereas many would argue that the most severe form of self-harm is self-harm with suicidal intent. This lack of clarity regarding whether all self-harm or NSSI is being referred to occurs again in the examination of reasons – do the authors think these are reasons for any self-harm, or for NSSI in particular? The paragraph in the discussion that deals with this suddenly refers to the behaviour as self-injury rather than self-harm, suggesting they are considering NSSI here. But then there is no consideration of why alternative teenagers are also more likely to engage in suicidal thoughts and acts.

Statistical Analysis

3. The authors should list here which variables are included in the multivariate model, one presumes all the ones in table 1 but this is not clear. Also in the results section where the authors state that the covariates were significantly
associated as expected, we need some indication of what associations were expected and why.

4. The clustered nature of the data (individuals grouped into schools) should be taken into account in the models. The ICC is unlikely to be high – it rarely is in school-based studies – but it should still be examined, and robust SEs reported.

5. Authors should state that they run a separate model to look at the effect of victimisation, and why. Aim 4 mentions they will look at “risk factors such as victimisation” – presumably this is why they have run it as a separate model. However aim 4 should then just say they will look at whether this higher prevalence is accounted for “by victimisation” as this is the only risk factor examined separately in this way.

Results

6. There seems to be a really big difference in the SH rate between the two different measures – although this does not affect the associations being looked at, this is worthy of a mention in the discussion regarding the difficulties of measuring self-harm.

7. I am not completely sure why the authors looked at several different measures of alternative teenagers – a measure for emo, goth and punk, a generic measure, and one derived from factor analysis. I found this confusing, and in tables 7 to 9 it is not clear which measure is being used where. Could the reason for these different measures be given (it is not really picked up in the discussion), and the labelling of the tables be made clearer?

Discussion

8. The authors make much of the differences between alternative and non-alternative teenagers in terms of the reasons they endorse for SH. However, alternative teenagers just seem to endorse all the reasons more often, so I am not sure that this really does show how much the two groups differ in terms of their reasons, I certainly don’t feel the evidence for this is as strong as suggested by the discussion in the 5th and 6th paragraphs. I don’t agree that the evidence is there to suggest the alternative group have longstanding difficulty with emotional regulation compared to non alternative individuals who self-harm, as the authors suggest. I also feel that the small sample size (only 22 in the alternative self-harm group) compromises the strength of the evidence here, and makes firm conclusions difficult. There is a real lack of qualitative data exploring motivations for self-harm behaviour – such data would provide a much more in-depth analysis from the point of view of the individuals themselves as to what their motivations are, and therefore could aid with interpretation of these results.

9. I am not a statistician, but my understanding of the r values in the correlations are that none of them are particularly strong, although it is true that the r values are higher for the alternative group. But could the authors explain why they include these numbers, as well as performing a logistic regression?

Tables

10. Tables 7-10 should really indicate how many are in each group, some of the groups are very small.
11. Consistency is needed in the way the variables are regrouped – e.g. table 7 alternative is in 2 categories whereas Jock is in 3, and in table 10 alternative and any alternative have different cut offs for each level.

Minor Essential Revisions

Results

12. In the first paragraph, results from the chi-square tests should be given the same way round in each case – currently for the FASM the lower % (presumably for the non alternative teenagers) is given first, which isn’t consistent with how the results are presented for the other measures.

Discretionary Revisions

None.

**Level of interest:** An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests