

ADOLESCENTS' EXPERIENCES OF SELF-HARM: A CASE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

The phenomenon of adolescents committing self-harm is due to internal factors (including loneliness, negative self-concept, and high self-criticism) and external factors (including social pressure and family problems). These trigger negative emotions that are unable to be managed by an adolescent who is still vulnerable, so that self-harm becomes an unhealthy way of coping. Recent prevalence studies suggest that self-harm among adolescents in sub-urban Java is as prevalent as in urban areas. However, very little qualitative research has explored self-harm among adolescents in sub-urban areas. We sought to explore the experiences and perspectives of early adolescents who engage in self-harm. This study aims to describe the essence of the phenomenon of the lives of adolescents who commit self-harm, how it is viewed and what are the factors that cause it. Case study research design was conducted. Data were collected using semi-structured interviews with two early adolescent girls. The research was conducted from March to April at an elementary school in a sub-urban area. The results showed that problems in relationships were the biggest reasons for female students to commit self-harm. Social media and the friendship environment are the main media for early adolescent girls to know how to self-harm as a "solution" to the negative emotions experienced. Self-harm is considered an effective way for them to vent emotions. This research also reveals the factors, experiences, and reasons why people stop self-harming. This study describes the phenomenon of self-harm in adolescent girls, making an important contribution to understanding self-harm among early adolescents in sub-urban areas more comprehensively, so that it can help develop more effective approaches in dealing with and preventing self-harm in adolescents.

Keywords: self-harm, adolescence, qualitative research, case study, suburban

1. PREFACE

The phenomenon of self-harm, akin to a spreading disease in society, particularly among adolescents (Miller et al., 2021), has manifested in various instances. Several female students in an elementary school in the village of Ciherang, Cianjur, have been observed engaging in self-harm by cutting their wrists until they bleed. Subsequently, these acts and their aftermath are shared via WhatsApp statuses. Similarly, incidents of self-harm have been reported in other areas, such as 23 junior high school students in Saptosari, Gunungkidul, who have engaged in self-harm after emulating trends on the social media platform TikTok. These occurrences have been ongoing since November 2023 and typically take place at home. In response, schools and community health centers have intervened, providing peer counseling and preventive measures through health education sessions for students (Pandangan Jogja Com, 2024).

According to the World Health Organization (cited in Sarwono, 2011: 12), adolescence is divided into two stages: early adolescence, ranging from 10 to 14 years old, and late adolescence, spanning from 15 to 20 years old. Adjorlolo (cited in Aprilia et al., 2024) asserts that adolescence is a crucial transitional period, where hormonal and environmental factors significantly influence

psychological development. Between the ages of 6 and 11, individuals face the fourth stage of psychosocial development, namely industry versus inferiority (Mariam, 2023). During this stage, the primary crisis involves the conflict between feeling competent and experiencing inferiority. Individuals tend to be more physically active and competitive, and success in socializing and achieving goals fosters feelings of competence, while failure leads to feelings of inferiority (Santi, 2023). From ages 12 to 18, the subsequent stage of psychosocial development is identity versus role confusion (Mariam, 2023). At this stage, the primary crisis revolves around finding one's identity. Individuals experience unstable emotions while seeking their identity regarding beliefs, goals, and other life values from their social environment, including family, friends, and others. Successfully navigating this stage leads to strong self-confidence, while failure results in confusion about one's future (Santi, 2023).

Santrock (cited in Paramita et al., 2021) notes that adolescents experiencing turbulent emotions tend to exhibit signs such as self-injury, suicide attempts, and so forth. When negative emotions arise and cannot be managed effectively, adolescents engage in self-harm to release their emotions (Asyafina & Salam, 2022; Tarigan & Apsari, 2021). According to the World Health Organization (WHO), self-harm is defined as the act of deliberately injuring oneself without intending fatal consequences such as suicide. Examples of self-harm behaviors include cutting oneself with a knife or razor, biting, hitting, and so on. Additionally, the misuse of drugs, excessive or insufficient eating, also constitutes indirect self-harm (Yates, 2004). Among these, cutting is the most frequently reported self-harm behavior (Bailey et al., 2023).

A survey conducted by a research institution found that more than a third (36%) of Indonesians have self-injured, with nearly half (45%) of them being adolescents (Ho, 2019). A study conducted in 2022 on adolescents also found that approximately 20% of Indonesian adolescents have engaged in self-harm (Faradiba et al., 2022). The majority of self-harm behaviors are carried out by teenage girls, who engage in self-harm as a way to process their emotions, such as expressing sadness, distracting themselves from distressing events, and so forth (Hawton et al., 2012).

Various reasons compel individuals to engage in self-harm, including: (a) having mental illnesses (such as depression); (b) being unable to cope with serious life problems; (c) experiencing ongoing isolation or discrimination; (d) suffering from physical, emotional, or sexual distress; (e) genetic factors; (f) personality disorders; and (g) enduring chronic illnesses (WHO, 2022). Psychosocial factors such as family and peer relationships are crucial for adolescents who engage in self-harm (Webb, 2002). It has been found that adolescents who engage in self-harm often come from dysfunctional families, characterized by poor communication, the absence of important family members, and so forth. As Afrianti (2020) discovered, adolescents from broken homes tend to resort to self-harm as a means of expressing their impulsive emotions. Additionally, social pressures in the school environment, such as academic stress or bullying, play a role. Furthermore, several studies have identified internal factors driving self-harm behavior in adolescents. There is a positive relationship between loneliness and adolescents' desire to self-harm (Hidayati & Muthia, 2015). Negative self-concept also influences self-harm behavior, whereby adolescents with negative self-perceptions tend to criticize themselves when faced with adverse conditions, prompting them to harm themselves (Arifin et al., 2021).

The prevalence of self-harm among adolescents, particularly teenage girls, is on the rise. Emotionally unstable adolescents often resort to self-harm as a means to express or cope with negative emotions. To gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, a study was conducted to explore the experience of self-harm among early adolescent girls in elementary schools in the

village of Pacet, Cianjur. The aim of this research is to describe self-harm in the early adolescent stage, including factors and reasons related to self-harm using the Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis approach. The question of this research are: (a) how does an adolescent girl make sense of her experience of self-harm?; and (b) how does an adolescent girl make sense of her choice to self-harm some occasions.

2. RESEARCH METHOD

Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) is the approach employed in this case study, allowing for the exploration of specific experiences from the participant's perspective (Howitt, 2016). Through the IPA approach, researchers can comprehend a phenomenon in detail by examining an individual's personal experiences, in this case, the behavior of self-harm and how individuals interpret such behaviors. Therefore, with this approach, the researcher aims to gain insights into the depiction and reasons behind a young female student engaging in self-harm.

This study involves adolescents from Elementary School X who meet the following criteria: (a) have engaged in self-harm by cutting themselves with a razor blade; (b) aged between 10-12 years old; (c) attending school in the Pacet District, Cianjur; and (d) willing to participate in the research. Two participants aged between 10-12 years old and currently enrolled in school were included. Prior to commencing the interviews, each participant agreed to participate by signing an informed consent form.

Data collection was conducted through semi-structured interviews using an interview guide. Interviews with participants were conducted from March to April 2024. After obtaining informed consent, interviews were conducted for approximately 60 minutes at the school.

Data processing and analysis techniques began with the development of the interview guide, participants signing informed consent forms, and conducting in-depth interviews with the elementary school girls involved in self-harm behavior. After conducting interviews with participants, the initial stage of data analysis involved categorizing the data. Data categorization was done by extracting key points from the verbatim interview responses to be grouped into sub-themes and major themes. Subsequently, the next stage involved identifying the connections between theories or research findings and these themes. Finally, the last stage involved interpretation, drawing conclusions to address the research objectives and determine the alignment between the obtained data and the theories used.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Table 1

Participants Description

| | Participant 1 (N) | Participant 2 (S) |
|----------------------------|---|--|
| Age (years) | 11 | 12 |
| Current Education | 5 th grade elementary school | 6 th grade elementary school |
| Daily Activities | Playing with friend and mobile phone. | Playing with friend and mobile phone and also helping grandmother. |
| Families who Live Together | Grandmother and younger brother. | Grandparents and uncle |
| Social Media Usage | Tiktok | Tiktok & Instagram |
| Self-harm Behavior | Cutting | Cutting |
| Source of self-harm idea | Tiktok | Friend |

Factors related to self-harm

It has been found that there are two different sources that serve as sources of information for participants engaging in self-harm, namely social media and peers. Moreover, there exists a slang term among teenagers who refer to cutting as "Barcode" (Harahap et al., 2024). The influence of peers and social media portraying self-harm behavior as a way to cope with negative emotions encourages individuals to start experimenting with self-harm behavior (McAndrew & Warne, 2014; Stänicke et al., 2019).

Similar to previous research findings, participant S also revealed that they witnessed two of their friends engaging in self-harm and then followed suit.

" So, it's like seeing from friends ... They did it first. ... Their hands had marks and I asked, 'Why is that?' ... Then, I saw them cutting again." (*"Jadi ini lihat dari teman ... Mereka duluan melakukannya. ... Tangan dia ada bekas-bekas dan aku tanya, 'Itu kenapa?' ... Terus, aku lihat mereka lagi menyayat diri."*).

In the study by Bailey et al. (2023) and Syed et al. (2020), it was indeed found that there is an increased likelihood of a teenager engaging in self-harm after knowing that their friend is engaging in such behavior, whether it is by directly witnessing it or just knowing about it. This is due to social learning that makes self-harm behavior "contagious" among teenagers (Lloyd-Richardson et al., 2007), as observed among the peers of participant N. Although social media appears to have a significant influence, the research found that teenagers who access self-harm content are more likely to have engaged in self-harm before (Lavis & Winter, 2020), similar to participant S.

"I rarely tell anyone, keep it to myself," "Lots of thinking... feeling dizzy," (*"Aku jarang cerita ke siapa-siapa, dipendam sendiri"*, *"Banyak mikir... Pusing"*,)

Expressed both participants during the interview. The researchers found that emotional problems such as disappointment and sadness experienced by both participants are often kept to themselves without proper outlet. The study conducted by Rusiana and Keliat (2021) supports that emotional issues are one of the factors influencing self-harm behavior in adolescents, due to emotional instability and lack of mature thinking before taking action.

Furthermore, it is known that both participants do not live with both of their parents, as participant N stated,

"Here. With my sibling and grandmother."

Thus, both participants receive less supervision from their parents due to not living together, which also becomes a risk factor for self-harm (Hankin & Abela, 2011).

Additionally, both participants admitted to using social media, such as TikTok and Instagram, for extended periods. This is also a risk factor because a study found a relationship between social media usage and self-harm behavior, where teenagers who use social media for more than 3 hours per day are more likely to engage in self-harm (Tørmoen et al., 2023).

The feeling of relief

"Just like that. The mind becomes calm. The mind becomes calm. Everything feels relieved," (*"Lega aja gitu. Pikiran jadi tenang. Pikiran jadi tenang. Lega lah semuanya."*)

Expressed participant S, reflecting an interpersonal way to express and communicate mental pressure, as stated by Miller et al. (2021), thus turning the behavior into a vicious cycle. "During fifth grade, it was frequent," participant S said.

When it was discovered that the participant engaged in self-harm, the participant's mother commented,

"Why did you do that, dear? It's not appropriate for you to do something like that." (*"Ya, kamu ngapain gitu, Kak. Nggak pantas buat kamu ngapain kayak gitu."*)

This reaction indicates that self-harm is something shameful and misunderstood, as stated by Bailey et al. (2023).

Reasons for engaging in and ceasing self-harm

"I've experienced it, being disappointed with someone, thought they were good, but turned out to be evil." (*"Pernah sih, kecewa sama seseorang, dikira baik, tapi di belakang jahat."*)

"Friends, when we have a problem, they're at fault but I'm the one who has to apologize." (*"Teman, Kalau kita ada masalah, dia yang salah tapi aku yang harus minta maaf."*)

From the participants' statements, it is found that friendship issues made the participants feel disappointed to the point of anger, leading to self-harm. Participant S also revealed that their friend engaged in self-harm due to relationship issues. As found in the study by Stănicke et al. (2019), relationship problems are one of the reasons why teenagers start engaging in self-harm to cope with negative emotions.

Participant S stopped engaging in self-harm when their behavior was discovered by their family. "Yes, Mom got angry... I was also scolded by my grandmother and grandfather." (*"Iya, mama marah... Aku pernah dimarahin juga oleh nenek dan kakek"*).

After that, they were scolded by their family and advised by a teacher, which made them reconsider their actions. It is found in the study by Stănicke et al. (2019) that seeking help or even ceasing self-harm is driven by external pressure or negative consequences felt. In the case of participant S, the pain and anger from their family are the negative consequences they experienced for engaging in self-harm.

Previously, participant S used self-harm behavior to cope with negative emotions, but now they have found a different way, as expressed.

"Sometimes talking to myself, sometimes crying." (*"Kadang ngomong sendiri kadang menangis"*).

In other words, participant S replaced self-harm behavior with other non-destructive behaviors, as revealed in the study by Brennan et al. (2022). Additionally, researchers also found a change in beliefs regarding self-harm behavior in participant S.

"Don't make barcodes anymore, because it's a sin to hurt yourself... So, it's harmful." (*"Jangan buat barcode lagi, Soalnya kan dosa menyakiti diri sendiri... Jadi merugikan gitu"*)

4. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Self-harm is an act of injuring one's own body without any suicidal intent. This phenomenon is often found among adolescents who are facing developmental tasks. In Indonesia, it is found that the majority of self-harm behaviors are carried out by females, influenced by various complex

internal and external factors. Similar cases have even been found in elementary schools in the village of Pacet, Cianjur.

This study explores self-harm behavior in elementary school students using a qualitative approach and Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) method to understand the origins, factors, triggers of self-harm behavior. Participants were elementary school girls aged 11-12 years. After analysis, the research team found factors, experiences, as well as reasons for engaging in and ceasing self-harm. It is known that participants became aware of self-harm behavior from social media or peers, also driven by various factors such as emotional issues, lack of parental supervision, and social media usage. However, the main issue leading to self-harm for participants is relationship problems, whether it's with friends, romantic partners, or others. Participants describe self-harm as a painful event yet bringing relief from negative emotions experienced. Additionally, changes in beliefs and negative consequences after engaging in self-harm become reasons for participants to stop.

Thus, this study provides an important contribution to understanding and addressing self-harm among elementary school students, highlighting the importance of a comprehensive approach in dealing with this phenomenon.

Suggestions for further research on self-harm include considering gender factors in participants, both male and female students, family, and school environment including bullying, as well as the role of social media used by participants related to self-harm content. In handling cases of self-harm in elementary school students, it is also important to consider these factors. Researchers can also establish a relationship first with participants, namely students, so that they feel more comfortable and open, and the information obtained from interviews can be deeper when discussing topics related to self-harm.

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