



UMEÅ UNIVERSITET

Självskadande handlingar

Ungdomars berättelser

Kontextualisering av ett medikaliserat socialt fenomen

Inger Ekman

Akademisk avhandling

som med vederbörligt tillstånd av Rektor vid Umeå universitet för
avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen framläggs till offentligt
försvar i Hörsal C, Samhällsvetarhuset,
fredagen den 20 april, kl. 10:00.
Avhandlingen kommer att försvaras på svenska.

Fakultetsopponent: Professor Emma Sorbring ,
Avdelningen för psykologi, pedagogik och sociologi, Högskolan Väst,
Sverige.

Institutionen för socialt arbete
Umeå centrum för genusstudier

Organization

Umeå University
Department of social work
Umeå center for gender studies

Document type

Doctoral thesis

Date of publication

27 March 2018

Author

Inger Ekman

Title

Self-injuring acts. Narratives of adolescents. Contextualizing a medicalized social phenomenon.

Abstract

The aim of this thesis is twofold; to explore adolescents' own views on self-injuring acts and to analyse the field of research on self-injuring acts. Together, these two aims comprise the overall aim of the thesis; to increase knowledge on self-injuring acts among adolescents.

The material for the first study consists of scientific publications from 1913 to 2018. The material for the three following studies consists of adolescents' Internet published unsolicited first-person narratives on their experience of self-injuring acts.

Based on an examination of the research literature over a hundred year period, it was found that self-injuring acts have been medicalized since the beginning of research. Studies in the 1960's and 1970's were mainly conducted through observations of female psychiatric inpatients, establishing a picture of the typical cutter as a young, attractive, emotionally unstable woman. Although later research has found self-injuring acts to be common among community adolescents, the dominance of medical and psychological studies has continued to reinforce the view on self-injuring acts as related to intrapersonal difficulties.

In the narratives studied, the adolescents described their self-injuring acts as closely related to an unstable social context, consisting of problems within the family, problems at school and the loss of dear ones. The recurrently described lack of access to an arena of comfort, a place or a relation providing trust and security, was found to be significant with respect to the initiation of self-injuring acts among these adolescents.

In contrast to the common view on self-injuring acts as an outcome of individual characteristics, the findings point to adolescents' self-injuring acts as a cognitively motivated and planned strategy to endure otherwise unbearable situations. Due to their adolescent position, their options to act, to take control or make changes are severely restricted.

Disclosure of self-injuring acts within the social network was described as met with demands to seek professional mental help. Thoughts on seeking professional help were accompanied by fear of being perceived as crazy or diagnosed as mentally ill, thus causing social stigma. Thus, the medicalization of self-injuring acts was found to have negative consequences for disclosure and help-seeking, thereby limiting the adolescents' options for finding adequate support. Internet websites were described as value-free and safe arenas, providing an opportunity to disclose self-injuring acts without fear of being stigmatized.

The main conclusion is that adolescents' self-injuring acts are closely related to problems in the social context, and need to be understood and related to the restrictions inherent in an adolescent position. From this perspective, it is the social context, not the self-injuring acts that should be in focus in research and practice. Social work research, focusing on social context and interaction, could develop the research field, broaden perspectives on these acts, and develop knowledge and understanding that goes beyond the established medicalized view of self-injuring acts.

Keywords

Self-injuring acts, adolescents, narratives, Internet, interaction, social context, arenas of comfort, social work, medicalization, demedicalization

Language

Swedish and English

ISBN

978-91-7601-856-9

ISSN

0283-300X

Number of pages

94 + 4 papers