

Original Paper

Digital Stories of Youth Who Injure Their Own Bodies and Challenges in Today's Society

Carina Henriksen^{1*}

¹ Faculty of Social Sciences, Bodø, Norway

* Carina Henriksen, Faculty of Social Sciences, Bodø, Norway

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Abstract

The responsibility and solution for bodily self-harm has been tied to the individual, while society and the social context have remained exempt from accountability. This article portrays the challenges that youth who injure their own bodies experience in today's society. Society has changed, and along with such changes come certain implications for today's youth. Changes in the family situation for youth who harm their own bodies lead to loneliness and a reduction in social capital. Bodily self-harmers are influenced by societal discourses on what is expected of youth today, and such discourses are internalized. Injury of one's own body is considered a deviant act and, thus, self-harmers feel they do not fit in today's society. They experience increased pressure in relation to both education and physical appearance. This analysis is based on the digital stories of seven youths who injure or have injured their own bodies.

Keywords

self-injury, society, loneliness, deviation, social capital

1. Introduction

Growing up in today's society can be challenging in many ways. Today, young people experience pressure and expectations to a greater degree than was the case a few generations ago (Øverland, 2006; Hegna et al., 2014). Many who harm their own bodies perceive today's society as placing higher demands on them, and they experience difficulties meeting such demands (Fjelldal-Soelberg, 2013). Failure in today's society is attributed to the individual rather than to societal conditions (Hammer & Hyggen, 2013). Skårderud claims that individuals today want to "make it on their own" in every way; however, the risk is that one is left alone and feeling more lonesome (Aftenposten, 2014). Injuring one's own body must also be viewed in light of the time and society one grows up in and is a part of. In

this article, the challenges that young people who harm their own bodies face in today's society are addressed.

The number of youth who injure their own bodies today is extremely disturbing. The incidence of bodily self-injury in Norway shows that 16.2% of young people injure their own body (Tørrmoen et al., 2020). This is an increase from previous years, where epidemiological studies showed that 10.3% of girls and 3% of boys reported bodily self-injury (Ystgaard et al., 2003). This is in great contrast to today's research that offers optimistic portrayals of youth and their everyday life in many different arenas (Hegna et al., 2014). Today's youth are more reasonable, hard-working and conscientious than before. Both criminality and the use of illegal substances have been reduced, while youth also perform better at school. At the same time, youth experience more stress and are more discouraged than before, which begs the question of whether increased pressure can have its price (ibid.).

According to Ribe and Mehlum (2015), bodily self-injury is a considerable health problem in Norway. Nonetheless, knowledge on the topic is scarce at the societal level and within the health system as well. Research on bodily self-harm is traditionally connected to a psychological and/or medical perspective, whereby the issue is considered an individually pathological problem often tied to a mental condition (Adler & Adler, 2011). Such viewpoints are important; however, other perspectives should not be ruled out. The phenomenon is complex and is influenced by many factors. Sommerfeldt and Skårderud (2009) believe that the causes of bodily self-injury include mental, social and cultural factors. The social context has often been neglected in research on bodily self-harm (Adler & Adler, 2011). The responsibility and solutions have been tied to the individual, while society and the social context have remained exempt from accountability. People do not live independent of their social surroundings and are always being influenced by the societal context. It is, therefore, important to view bodily self-injury in light of current structures that exist in today's society.

The term "self-injury" is the most common label used nationally, having strong connections to the psychological perspective. Hetland et al. (2013) writes: "The problem with harming oneself is not that the body is harmed. It is not the blood, the bruises, the cut marks or the scars that are the worst part. The problem with self-injury is not that you injure the body, it is that YOU injure YOURSELF" (2013, p. 34). From a sociological perspective, it is the body that harms and is harmed. The body is the bearer of the self, and the self cannot be seen as independent of the body (Goffman, 1992). Therefore, in this article the term "bodily self-injury" is used to refer to the phenomenon rather than "self-injury". Crossley (2006) claims that the body is not only something we *are* but also something we have. It is inter subjective and available to others (ibid.).

Rubæk (2009) asserts that media often portray the phenomenon as something new in today's society. Harming one's own body is not something new from a historical perspective; furthermore, the act is often connected to a religious and ritualistic context that is culturally acceptable. Today one finds bodily self-injury as a form of expression through bodily modifications, where bodily self-harm has taken on a certain entertainment value (for example fakirs). This article does not focus on such forms of

bodily self-injury. The definitions of injuring one's own body are multiple and varied according to perspective and motive. In this article the phenomenon is defined as follows: "Bodily self-harm is an act that is not socially, culturally or ritually accepted, in which one inflicts a directly visible injury on one's own body without suicidal intent" (Fjellidal-Soelberg, 2013, p. 11).

Cutting is the most common form of bodily self-injury, though other forms of bodily self-harm also take place (Adler & Adler, 2011; Rubæk, 2009). Bodily self-injury occurs far more often among girls than among boys (Sund & Larsson, 2011), however, there are most likely hidden statistics when it comes to the boys (Møhl, 2006). According to Skårderud (2007), bodily self-harm is a shameful and lonely act that happens behind locked doors. Due to differing definitions, terminology and presumably hidden statistics, epidemiological studies present challenges. According to Sommerfeldt and Skårderud (2009) the behavior can result from a combination of mental, social, and cultural conditions. The perception of bodily self-injury must always be viewed in light of the culture and society of which the individuals are a part (Farber, 2000). As Søndergaard (1996) points out, people are existentially dependent on the integration of both culture and society.

2. Method and Analytical View

In this article a qualitative method is applied, where data that form the basis for analysis are collected through contact with youth who blog on the Internet about bodily self-harm. Selection of bloggers was based on whether they were active and registered with an email address through which they could be contacted. Requests were sent out to 12 bloggers, of which 7 young women between the age of 22-32 replied that they would like to be informants. All of the informants had harmed their own bodies for many years. Some of them were still bodily harming themselves while others had stopped. All of them shared the fact that they knew what it was like to be a bodily self-harmer in today's society. The informants were sent questions by email, which they answered and returned. This method of collecting data, rather than interviewing, was chosen based on prior research for my doctoral thesis (1). Previous experience showed that it could be challenging for many young bodily self-harmers to meet face-to-face with an unfamiliar researcher to talk about such a shameful topic. Boyd (2006) contends that, with the development of technology and web 2.0, researchers are presented with new ways of participating in social organization. Through various social arenas on the Internet, researchers are granted access to different social phenomena that were previously not available in the same way. Bodily self-injury, as a phenomenon, has moved from the private sphere to the virtual world (Fjellidal-Soelberg, 2012). With increased participation by people who injure their own bodies, and their public expression of the phenomenon through the Internet, a larger realm of research is created for the academic field.

Email responses from informants were sent as finished written documents. In contrast to interviews that need to be transcribed, for example, the documents constitute data material that is complete. Such a method of data collection involves indirect contact with the informants, as the researcher does not meet

with them face-to-face. Nonetheless, this does not mean that the document exists as «passive, dead material», to borrow an expression from Mik-Meyer (2005). She points to the fact that a document is nothing in and of itself, but that it gains meaning only when brought into synergy with the reader. Documents will continuously change in significance and content according to the social context they are brought into (ibid.). The digital stories of the bodily self-harmers are not without context either. The informants in this article are influenced by cultural discourses in society, which their narratives thus represent. The project has been approved by the Norwegian Social Science Data Service (NSD), and ethical research guidelines have been followed.

Data was coded and categorized for subsequent interpretation and analysis. The analysis is based on an interactionist-constructivist perspective (Järvinen, 2005). Additionally, central theoretical contributions from Bauman, Bourdieu and Becker, as well as Mead, have been used to shed light on the challenges young people who harm their own bodies face in today's society. Despite this broad foundation, it was nonetheless challenging not to be able to follow up on informant responses in the same way as an interview setting provides. Although some of the bloggers were contacted to elaborate on their answers, not everyone remembered what they had actually meant when they had responded to the questions. The advantage with this type of data collection can be that the informants likely answered more honestly to digital questions than they would have in an ordinary interview. Järvinen (2005) shows, among other things, how interviews with deviants can appear to be “purely defensive”, where informants present themselves in the best possible way for fear of “losing face”, to borrow an expression from Goffman (1967). With the use of digital stories, one cannot eliminate the possibility that legitimate explanations for bodily self-harm have been reduced.

3. A society in Transition

Halvorsen (2002) feels that society has been characterized by a period of transition from being an industrial society to becoming a society at risk, whereby globalization and individualization lead to many individuals living in great uncertainty as a result of the transition. Society is not static and we see that social changes occur rapidly today and are more comprehensive than previously (ibid.). Beck (1997) shows how a society at risk, along with the structural changes that take place in a modernizing society, leads to extreme individualization. According to Krange and Øia (2005), individualization means that youth are left more to their own devices in handling critical life events. It is not only the individual who is individualized but also the family (Frønes & Brusdal, 2000). The family situation in Norway has undergone considerable changes, from having constituted a large family structure to embodying the more modern core family (Øia & Fauske, 2010). At the same time, we know that there has been an increase in the number of divorces, and that children often “commute” between two homes after the parents have split up (Ellingsæter & Widerberg, 2012).

Several of the informants pointed out that they felt changes in the family situation were challenging. One of the informant's digital stories described how her parents' divorce had affected and done

something with her life situation:

It was frustrating to be in the middle of Mom and Dad's arguments. I was kind of dragged into it all and (put) between them. Nobody asked what I actually thought, not afterwards either. Now it's ok, because they don't have hardly any contact. Mom works all the time and she has enough (to manage) with just herself. Dad and my stepmom have just gotten another child, (they) have two from before. They never have time. All the weekdays and weekends are filled up with everything possible, work, piano lessons, football matches and swim meets, and now a little baby. But I guess that's the way it is for all families, not just ours.

Among other things, Elligsæter and Widerberg (ibid.) point to an increase in the number of divorces, new family constitutions and the fact that children often live in two homes after their parents have divorced. Ellingsæter (2004) believes that modern family life is full of contradictions, and there are many needs to be met at any given moment. In her digital story, one of the other informants described her perception of various family constitutions:

I don't have any contact with my biological father. I've seen him twice in my life. I have a stepfather who I grew up with, but he and Mom split up when I was 7. So, actually, I don't have any good connection to a father figure. My relationship to Mom is very up and down. It can be warm but also cold between us.

Soest and Hyggen (2013) claim that the increase in the number of divorces, along with growing up with just one parent, can be an explanation for the rise in mental disorders among today's youth (particularly among girls). Bauman (2001) describes a flowing modernity that bears signs of uncertainty in many areas; with increased individualization, lack of predictability and a family home that is no longer safe and permanent. In a society characterized by individualization at all levels, it is important to be seen and acknowledged by one's closest friends and relations (ibid.). The family as an institution has undergone great changes. When combined with a lack of time spent with those one is closest to, these changes can lead to loneliness.

4. The Production of Loneliness

Halvorsen (2005) feels that today's society "produces" loneliness. There is considerable focus on individualization and material consumption along with a lack of social relations. If social distance to others increases, it can lead to an expansion of loneliness. According to Halvorsen, society makes demands on how the individual should live; and those who fall outside the norm can experience isolation and loneliness. Among other things, modernity has meant that the community of family and society, in general, has gotten lost (ibid.). As one of the girls described: "It's me against the world, or the opposite". All of the informants gave depictions of experiencing loneliness in everyday life, which is perceived as painful and challenging for many of them. One of the informants had this to say:

I think everybody feels loneliness today, it's hard to avoid it. Everyone is so focused on themselves that there isn't time to be with others. Even when you see that you have someone there, you don't have time.

I, myself, have been very lonely. I actually feel that I am lonely every day, it's, like, not something that just goes away.

This informant missed spending time with her family and expressed frustration over the fact that everyone was so busy with “their own stuff” in the daily routine. Parliament’s Report nr. 39 points out that today’s society is characterized by considerable changes and that today’s youth are growing up in a time that is very different from when their parents grew up. Much of society’s development is positive for today’s youth; but, at the same time, we also see a great deal of challenges. Youth today have a need for safety and stability. Very clear demands are made on parents, among others, to be safe and clear role models. One of the other informants wrote the following in his digital account:

Many times I see that I don't have anyone. I don't have anyone to talk with, who is interested in hearing what I have to say. It's generally hectic, and if I ever spent time talking about self-injury, nobody would ever talk to me again. So it ends up that I just keep thoughts and feelings about self-injury to myself.

Yip (2005) believes that family relations are of great significance and that good relations to one’s parents can be insulating such that bodily self-injury of youth is reduced. If we look at Durkheim’s (1993) studies of society, for example, suicide rates are highest when society demonstrates either a large degree of social control or a small degree of integration. A society characterized by a small degree of integration leads to loneliness and little contact with other people (ibid.). Hammerlin claims that, «Modern society’s efficiency and demands to be productive, along with structural changes and high rate of development, is characterized by social unrest (2010, p. 32); whereby social and geographical mobility and globalization can come at the cost of social networks (ibid.).

5. Social Capital

According to Bourdieu (1995), social capital is the access one has to social networks, whereby participation in such networks may be converted into a form of power. For Bourdieu (1996), power refers to symbolic power; i.e., a form of power that is concealed and difficult to discover and that only works when it is acknowledged. Bourdieu and Wacquant (1995) describe social capital as follows:

“Social capital is the sum of resources, whether they be actual or possible, that an individual or group administers based on the condition that the individual or group reigns over a lasting collection of relations, acquaintances and mutual recognitions that are more or less institutionalized; that is to say, the sum of capital and power that can be mobilized through one such collection.” (ibid, p. 104)

Moi (2002) asserts that social capital is one’s network of acquaintances, colleagues, close friends and/or family relations that are valuable and that offer benefits in many and varied arenas. Two of the informants, in particular, described that they had a small degree of social networks. One of the digital narratives went like this:

I feel that I stand alone, I don't have any particularly good friends. The friends I had have pulled away from me after they found out about the self-injury. My family almost never sees each other in the day-to-day routine, and it's a shame that it's like that. I wish we lived like they did in the past, when

everybody lived together on big farms and, of course, had a lot to do, but then you did it all together as a big family.

Colman (1988) points to the fact that changes in family structures are one of several reasons that social capital is reduced in society. Jensen and Ulleberg (2011) contend that culture in the western world is oriented toward the individual. People often put their own happiness and self-realization ahead of the community's interests when these come into conflict. It is the individual's rights that are predominant, and such values as self-realization, independence and freedom lie at the core.

All forms of capital (financial, cultural and/or social) function as symbolic capital, in both social and existential ways. Bourdieu (1999) feels, therefore, that it is better to talk about the symbolic effect of the capital. Symbolic capital is the feeling that one means something to others; i.e., that one receives continuous confirmation of one's significance to others and, in turn, receives confirmation of the importance of one's own existence. There is a great deal of agreement on the fact that social capital is a resource based on relations between people, and that most definitions focus on networks and the norms that guide interactions between network participants (Kilpatrick et al., 2003). The experience of loneliness, along with having a small network, can mean that one's social capital is converted into what Bourdieu (1999) calls negative symbolic capital. With limitations on the social network of bodily self-harmers, the possession of symbolic power is reduced. Hegna et al., believe that today's youth must "manage adolescence as valuable capital for the future" (2014, p. 376). If they are not able to do this, the question of blame is placed on the youth. In today's society, where individualization is so highly valued, structural problems are ascribed to the individuals themselves (ibid.).

6. Increased Pressure

Culture bears the mark of the hectic time in which we live. In today's society young people experience pressure and expectations to a greater degree than was the case just a few generations ago. The informants' narratives gave very clear indications that they perceived everyday life to be challenging. Several of the informants point to the demands society places on them and the difficulties they have in meeting those demands. They experience "great pressure" and the feeling that they "never manage". Society's expectations, versus what one is able to manage oneself, create a conflict that can be challenging. When asked who informants felt the pressure came from, one of the girls responded in the following way:

EVERYONE! But mostly from myself, I think, and that's because of society. We live in a society where we automatically start to push ourselves to be better in everything possible. Other people's facades and achievements are easily accessible, and then you want the same yourself. Nobody wants to be worse than others, I think.

In their digital stories, several of the informants depicted society's focus on the body as both harsh and frightening. In today's western society there is much focus on the body, and the ideal body is portrayed from a perfectionist's point of view (Shilling, 2005). This applies perhaps, in particular, to the female

body. One of the informants gave the following account:

If you don't succeed today, both in body and everything else, then you are not accepted by society. You are immediately viewed as different. The focus on the body has taken off completely, and everybody wants to have the perfect body of a model. If you have it, then you've kind of achieved something. It's not strange that people have started with self-injury the way things have gotten. It can be ok to shift focus onto something else, cause then you don't have to feel the pressure for a while. Sort of that you can think about something totally different than having to achieve all the time. I don't think self-injury even existed before, and now almost everybody does it. There sort of has to be a reason for it. Before, you didn't have the same pressure at school or work, you got a job no matter what. Today, you have to be able to succeed at everything, and preferably all at once. It's actually a bit frightening.

Descriptions like this show that, no matter how hard the youth try to succeed in various arenas, it is easy for them to feel they are not good enough. Before, adolescents perhaps compared themselves to the girl next door or to a few of their idols. Today's youth have an entire world "within youth cyber space", via the Internet, as a basis for comparison. No matter how hard they try, someone will always appear to be better or will have done better than them. This can very obviously be frustrating.

Hegna et al. (2014) claim that academic pressure is considerable and that today's youth feel they are expected to do well at school. Hammer and Hyggen (2013) express concern about the constantly increasing educational level of the Norwegian population, along with evidence of an increase in the number of youth who do not complete their upper secondary education. Several of the informants expressed that they felt "stress" in relation to school and a future professional career:

What I feel most focus on today is that you have to do well at work, at school, and how you look. You have to do well at school, if not you end up as a «nothing». If you don't do well at school, then it's hard to find a job. It's, like, expected that everyone should do well, and the ones who don't manage, they suffer. Then society doesn't have any use for you.

One of the other informants explained that she feels different, as though she's on the outside; that she doesn't fit into today's society. She is also unsure of what is expected of her:

I feel completely useless and abnormal. While others my age are starting families and careers, I feel like I'm really on the outside and sick. I really want to live up to what others and society expect/want.

This girl, along with several of the other informants, felt that the pressure to do well at school came from her surroundings. One of the other informants, in contrast, perceived that she had placed the demands and expectations on herself. She explained:

I never feel "good enough", and things I do could always be better. I've always reached to be "best" in everything I do (very good at school, for example), and that has also show up in, for example, self-injury. Good, better, best—or bad, worse, worst. My fear is to be "mediocre", "average". The pressure, the demands and the expectations come very clearly from myself, cause I know that the world around me thinks I'm "good enough" or, actually, doesn't really care much about where I am on the scale. Most people today are most concerned with themselves.

The expectation that this girl describes is something that has been internalized through a lifetime of interacting with others. Mead (2005) believes that the individual is developed through interplay with social surroundings and that, through interaction with others, one better understands one's own behavior. One perceives oneself through the reactions of others. The individual is part of a society that, in turn, is part of the community (or "community of meaning", as Mead calls it). Mead called this community of meaning "the generalized other", and referred to attitudes, values and norms that the individual faces in society.

7. Society's Attitudes

Most bodily self-harmers hide wounds and scars from those around them and feel shame when interacting with others (Fjellidal-Soelberg, 2011). Shame, according to Scheff and Starrin (2002), is an emotion that influences social interaction more than other feelings. Shame occurs because one views oneself from others' perspective, which Cooley (1922) refers to as "the mirror self". According to Mead (1995) we humans are affected by the perceptions and evaluations that others have of us. With inspiration from Mead, Becker launched his theory on labeling in the middle of the 1960s (Meeuwisse & Swärd 2002). Becker (2005) contends that all social groups (society) have social rules that individuals try to follow. People who fall outside the category defined as «normal» are labeled as "outsiders" by the group (society). The informants described how they felt those around them perceived bodily self-injury. As one of the girls said: "It's me against the world, or the opposite". She went on to share the following:

I believe most people eventually are familiar with the term self-injury, but I definitely don't think that most have a good enough or correct understanding of what it is. I think there are lots of prejudices, misunderstandings and ignorance out there. It's probably not easy for everyone to understand why someone chooses to do something so extreme, sick and "meaningless" as cutting themselves up—while, for the one who's doing it, it seems absolutely necessary in order to survive.

One of the other informants described an everyday life that was challenging as a bodily self-harmer, where she felt she was judged by those around her:

It's not so easy to face the perceptions of others. It's a long time now since I injured myself like I used to, but it's still a part of me and I have scars a lot of places on my body that others notice, even though my friends say that they understand, I actually think they feel it was bizarre that I hurt myself. I just think they don't dare to tell me. Lots of people who harm themselves are seen as having some kind of attention-seeking illness, or that they're manipulative, and it's not easy to get that kind of label. Then people stop taking you seriously after a while and it's not right.

Even though this girl has stopped harming herself, her body still carries permanent traces of the past. She feels that she is labeled and put into a category of having an "attention-seeking illness" and being "manipulative". This is not uncommon. However, research shows that injuring one's own body is not about attention or manipulation (Adler & Adler, 2011; Fjellidal-Soelberg, 2013; Sutton, 2007).

According to Becker (2005) people are placed in various categories to which certain associations are then attached. In other words, people are placed in categories based on where others think they belong, and those around them automatically consign them characteristics that are associated with the group they have been tied to. Those around them emphasize their negative characteristics based on which group they belong to. This is well described by one of the informants, who says:

I always feel that others see me as something different from what I actually am. They look at the scars I have all over my body and surely think what they will. This is true for both those who know me and complete strangers. I feel judged no matter what. I feel like it's never worth explaining, there's no point in trying to get others to understand. They can't understand, or maybe it's that they don't want to understand. I'm never seen for who I am, but they judge me by how I look. But actually there isn't anything wrong with me.

Here, we clearly see that this girl feels she is being placed in a category and judged because of her injured body. Her body deviates from what is perceived as “the normal body” in today’s society. Becker points out that there is no universal consensus on norms for what is considered deviant. “On the contrary, they are open to conflict and disagreement, a part of society’s political process” (2005, p. 38). How others react to a deviant act is something that varies with time (ibid.). Part of the problem with categorizing is often that the cause of the problem is individualized and then tied to negative characteristics of the individual (Halvorsen, 2002). According to Becker, deviation is created by society. What he means is that deviation is not a characteristic of the act a person undertakes but rather a consequence of how others react to the act (ibid.).

Discourses in society help to form our attitudes to categories and terms and, as Foucault (1988) claims, there is power in the application of language. Youth who injure their own bodies exist in a culture and society where they are an integral part of established discourses. They are affected by society’s discourses and what is expected of youth today, and such discourses become internalized. Bodily self-harm leaves behind a body with permanent marks that is not in accordance with today’s focus on the ideal body. Societal discourses lay the groundwork for what is perceived as normative, and when self-harmers have a body that deviates from “the normal body”, this leads to social sanctions.

8. Conclusion

Bodily self-injury is a complex and challenging topic and is, therefore, important to address and interpret from various perspectives. Much of the social context has been missing from the research on bodily self-harm, which means that central components for understanding the issue are also missing. Bodily self-injury has taken place in and is a part of society. Therefore, as the illustration below demonstrates, the phenomenon is viewed with societal structures, in historical and cultural contexts, in societal discourses and from various perspectives.

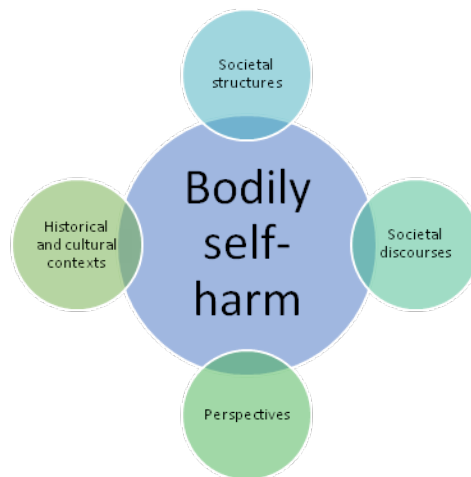


Figure 1. Bodily Self-Harm and Social Structures

Hammer and Hyggen point out that “we, in contrast to a society characterized by community and solidarity, are heading towards a polarized society where the gap between those who are on the outside and those who are on the inside is constantly getting larger (2013, p. 18). The focus of this article has been to demonstrate challenges that bodily self-harmers face in today’s society. In today’s society at risk, we can clearly see societal characteristics that may lead to vulnerability for youth who injure their own bodies. Changes in the family situation for youth who harm their own bodies can bring loneliness, leading to reduced social capital. If bodily self-harmers lose social arenas where they can find acknowledgement from others, there is the risk of being excluded from important social capital. Self-harmers are influenced by societal discourses on what is expected of youth today, and such discourses are internalized. Injuring one’s own body is considered a deviant act, such that self-harmers feel they do not fit in today’s society. However, it is not the bodily self-harmers themselves who create deviation. It is society that creates deviation. If one is to approach an understanding of self-injury, one must make room for the social context in which the phenomenon occurs and is a part of. The focus must shift from viewing bodily self-harm as internalized in the individual to looking towards the society and challenges connected to the phenomenon. As one of the informants pointed out, “I refuse to take all the blame for the scars I have, society also owns a part of the blame”. By including the social context in understanding bodily self-injury, it can help to provide a better understanding of this contemporary phenomenon.

Notes

- (1) Kroppsskadingens menings mang fold—En sosiologisk studie av personer som skader egen kropp (2013) (Bodily self-injury’s diversity of opinion—A sociological study of persons who injure their own bodies

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