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Exploring Risk-Taking Behaviours as Potential Warning Signs for Suicide in Adults

Submitted as part of the Master of Clinical Psychology

School of Psychology

The University of Newcastle

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Statement of Originality

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. I give consent to this copy of my thesis, when deposited in the University Library, being made available for loan and photocopying subject to the provisions of the Copyright Act 1968.

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Ashleigh Pasculli

Acknowledgement of Authorship

I hereby certify that the work embodied in this thesis contains a published paper/scholarly work of which I am a joint author. I have included as part of the thesis a written statement, endorsed by my supervisor, attesting to my contribution to the joint publication/scholarly work.

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Ashleigh Pasculli
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Abstract

Scope: The present study investigated a broad range of risk-taking behaviours as risk factors and potential warning signs for suicidality in adult populations. Risky or reckless behaviours are warning signs for suicide in adolescents. However, risk-taking behaviours have not been well researched in adult populations to-date. In addition, investigating a broader scope of risk behaviours could reveal additional suicide risk factors and warning signs that are presently unknown.

Purpose: The purpose of the study was to contribute to early suicide intervention efforts by increasing knowledge of risk-taking behaviours as suicide risk factors and potential warning signs in adult populations. Gatekeepers, clinicians and the general public could be made aware of a new group of risk behaviours as warning signs for suicide. Valid warning signs should also be incorporated into clinical screening methods.

Methodology: Study participants were an anonymous sample of 713 internet users, predominantly female (77.1%), Caucasian (78.5%), and were aged 18 to 71. Using the Suicide Behaviors Questionnaire-Revised (SBQ-R), 401 were grouped as suicide-risk, and 312 as non-suicidal. Participants completed a 20-30 minute anonymous online survey, including items on five domains of risk behaviours and perceptions (i.e., Financial, Social, Ethical, Recreational, and Health/Safety), using the Domain-Specific Risk-Taking (Adult) Scale (DOSPERT). Demographic information included age, sex, education, and ethnicity. MANCOVA analyses were conducted to investigate group differences in risk perceptions and behaviours between suicide-risk and non-suicidal participants, controlling for age and education. A further MANCOVA assessed risk behaviour differences between participants who scored
high and those who scored low on an SBQ-R item relating to future suicidal intent, in order to better identify potential proximal behavioural warning signs.

**Results:** Several behavioural and perceptual differences were found between suicide-risk and non-suicidal participants. Suicidal participants reported greater likelihood to participate in the following behaviours: engaging in extra marital affairs, passing off someone else’s work as their own, keeping a wallet that they found containing $200, betting a day’s income at a high-stake poker game, riding in a car without a seatbelt or on a motorcycle without a helmet, walking home alone at night in an unsafe area and going bungee jumping. Analyses investigating more proximal warning signs found that participants with high suicidal intent were more likely to engage in extra-marital affairs, drive a car without a seatbelt, and walk home alone at night in an unsafe area, compared with participants with low suicidal intent.

**General conclusions and implications:** The implications of these findings are far-reaching in terms of their clinical utility; clinicians and gatekeepers can be alerted to a new range of risk factors and possible warning signs to indicate a distal or proximal suicide risk. Definite differences were found in risk behaviours between suicide-risk and non-suicidal adults, indicating that risk-taking is an important risk factor for suicide, beyond adolescence. These differences are broader and more complex than simply putting one’s life at risk. Further research in the area is needed to confirm the current findings, investigate a broader range of health risk behaviours, explore the meaning behind these findings and examine these behaviours as warning signs for people who have actually made a suicide attempt or completed suicide.