BULLYING

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Abstract

Bullying is a pervasive problem affecting the mental health of children and youth. Approximately 20-25% are identified as repeated perpetrators, victims, or both. Bullying involves targeted intimidation or humiliation characterized by an imbalance of power. Bullies typically feel and appear powerful when they target those who are socially vulnerable (e.g., display internalizing symptoms, lack friends). Most victims, in turn, display a range of psychosocial vulnerabilities including distress, academic difficulties, and health problems. Those identified as both victims and bullies represent a particularly high-risk group. Self-reports are optimal to assess the prevalence of victimization and to identify the targets of bullying, whereas peer nominations and teacher-ratings are well suited to assess bullying perpetration. Typical interventions vary from targeted programs to universal school-wide anti-bullying prevention initiatives.

Keywords

Bullying, peer victimization, internalizing/externalizing symptoms, cyberbullying, developmental trajectories, social dominance

Glossary

Attributions: perceived causes of events that vary in locus (internal vs. external), stability (temporary vs. stable), and controllability (controllable vs. uncontrollable).

Cyberbullying: targeted humiliation and intimidation, such as insults or threats, sent and received through the use of the Internet or cell phone.

Relational Aggression: hostile actions intended to damage target's personal relationships and social reputation or status. Such tactics frequently involve use of indirect aggression (spreading of rumors) or covert forms of hostilities (e.g., exclusion from group).

School-wide Interventions: universal prevention approaches guided by the assumption that bullying is a systemic social problem requiring a collective response (e.g., involvement of all students, teachers, staff and parents).

Social Cognitive Biases: distorted ways to process social information (e.g., interpreting cues; making attributions) that include a *hostile attribution bias*, capturing a tendency to interpret ambiguous situations as reflecting hostile intent and *characterological self-blame*, describing a tendency to endorse explanations for events that are internal and uncontrollable.

Social Dominance: maintenance of a group-based social hierarchy that also captures an individual's motive to obtain and maintain a top social position.

Targeted Interventions: a set of programs designed for a specific group of individuals identified based on a particular pattern of behaviors and psychological characteristics deemed as at-risk (e.g., bullies or victims).

BULLYING is behavior aimed to intimidate or humiliate a peer. The imbalance of power that distinguishes bullying from conflict involves a physically stronger or socially more prominent child (ab)using her/his power to threaten, demean, or belittle another child (Olweus 1993). These threats and humiliation may involve direct verbal and physical aggression or indirect and less overt behaviors, such as spreading of rumors, backstabbing, and exclusion from the group. Bullying also takes place electronically via texting or various Internet applications, such as social networking sites. Although many youth engage in bullying across short periods of time, typically between 20 and 25% of youths are involved in bullying as persistent perpetrators, victims, or both (e.g., Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla et al. 2001). The bully-victim group that both targets and is targeted by others constitutes the smallest of the three groups (less than 5%). About 5-10% of youth are classified as persistent bullies and 5-15% as chronic victims. Each of these groups is characterized by unique psychosocial difficulties and is at risk for mental health problems even in adulthood (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello 2013).

In this chapter, we first review research findings on bullying behaviors and the motives underlying the perpetration of bullying. We then turn to examining the plight of the victim by reviewing risk factors, the effects of victimization, and the cyclical processes between some of the risk factors and consequences (e.g., internalizing problems). In the third section of the chapter we discuss assessment methods and then turn to some of the most typical intervention approaches in the fourth part of the chapter.

Bullying Behaviors and Motives

Young children may engage in aggressive behavior when they feel frustrated and lack skills to express their feelings and desires. This type of non-specific aggression differs from bullying

that is strategic and targeted, designed to humiliate, belittle or threaten someone. Rather than reflecting an inability to regulate emotions, bullies often lack empathy (Jolliffe & Farrington 2006). They resort to coercive strategies to dominate and control their peers (Pellegrini et al. 1999) and target peers who “enable” them to feel, and be perceived as, powerful.

Bullying takes many forms and most tactics can be classified as direct or indirect. In contrast to direct confrontation (e.g., name calling, physical aggression and threats), indirect forms frequently involve relational manipulation (e.g., spreading of rumors, backstabbing, and exclusion from the group). Name-calling is by far the most typical form of bullying among children and youth (Rigby, 1997). Physical bullying that includes hitting, kicking, shoving as well as threats, is more prevalent among boys than girls and decreases with age (Broidy et al. 2003). In contrast to popular beliefs about “female aggression,” girls are not necessarily more relationally aggressive than boys (Card, Stucky, Sawalani, & 2008). However, when girls resort to aggression, they rely mostly on verbal and relational tactics.

Bullying takes place in various contexts (e.g., in school, online). Cyberbullying refers to online or electronic bullying that includes both direct insults (posting nasty comments on the victim’s social networking sites, sending hurtful text messages or embarrassing pictures to the target) as well as indirect forms of humiliation (spreading rumors about someone on a website, sharing private text messages with others). One of the unique features of cyberbullying is its speed and spread: someone’s reputation can be damaged within seconds among all schoolmates. Depending on the electronic communication method used, the perpetrators may also be able to hide their identities.

Focusing mainly on physical aggression, early studies suggested that childhood bullying stems from a lack of social skills or that aggressive behaviors reflect a budding antisocial

personality related to inconsistent and harsh parenting (e.g., Olweus 1983). However, more recent evidence suggests that especially indirect forms of bullying are strategic and require a sophisticated understanding of how to manipulate relationships (Björkqvist et al. 2000). Also, bullying behaviors are frequently short-lived and most bullies do not turn into violent adults. Only about 5% of youth are identified as chronically aggressive across childhood and adolescence (Broidy et al. 2003). The question, then, is what motivates youth to intimidate or humiliate their peers, or what functions might such behaviors serve?

Consistent with ethological research demonstrating that aggression is a way to establish a dominant position within a group (e.g., Hinde 1974), youth identified as bullies report wanting to be visible, influential, and admired (Salmivalli et al. 2005). Starting in middle childhood (i.e., during elementary school), some aggressive children indeed become popular among their peers, and by early adolescence bullying is consistently associated with high social status (e.g., Parkhurst & Hopmeyer 1998). Perceived popularity of bullies and the rates of bullying behaviors appear to peak specifically during early adolescence when youth transition from elementary school to middle school (LaFontana & Cillessen 2010). Such transitions involve social reorganization as youth strive to determine where they “fit in” within the new and expanded social setting. In these circumstances characterized by some degree of uncertainty, bullying can be used to establish a social hierarchy; those who are in the position to subordinate others gain status and become popular (Pellegrini & Long, 2002). Such contextual and situational considerations underscore the social functions of bullying behaviors in establishing and maintaining status hierarchies and thus help us understand why many youth resort to bullying for only a short time.

In addition to understanding the social functions of bullying behaviors, it is critical to comprehend the psychological profiles of the perpetrators of bullying. In contrast to earlier assumptions about low self-esteem underlying bullying perpetration, youth identified as bullies typically have high, even inflated, perceptions of themselves (e.g., Cairns & Cairns 1994). Specifically, peer-identified bullies score lower on depression, social anxiety, and loneliness than do youths who are not involved in bullying (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster 2003). There are multiple explanations for why aggressive youths, and bullies in particular, display such positive self-views. One set of explanations pertains to their high social status and power. Peers rarely challenge bullies by intervening. Instead, bystanders frequently respond to bullying by smiling and laughing (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen 1998), thereby reinforcing the positive self-views of the bullies. Another reason that helps us understand the positive self-views of the perpetrators of bullying pertains to their information-processing biases. Aggressive youth tend to perceive ambiguous situations as reflecting hostile peer intent (Dodge 1993). For example, when tripping on someone's backpack, an aggressive child may assume that someone placed the bag on the floor on purpose. In the case of bullies, this hostile cognitive bias likely accounts for their lack of emotional distress, inasmuch as they are able to maintain positive self-views by blaming others.

How do bullies fare long-term? Long-term follow-up studies on physical forms of bullying suggest increased risk for violent behavior and criminality among males (Renda, Vassallo & Edwards 2011). However, little is known about indirect or relational forms of bullying, developmental trajectories of female bullies, or those who engage in bullying behaviors for a shorter period of time. It is therefore unclear at this point whether long-term risks dissipate when youth engage in bullying only temporarily.

Victimization Risks and Effects

Most youth report having been bullied during their school years (Romano, Bell, & Billette 2011), but the prevalence of the experience does not make it less hurtful. Peer victimization is concurrently associated with emotional distress (Hawker & Boulton 2000) and even single incidents of bullying are associated with increases in daily levels of anxiety (Nishina & Juvonen 2005). Not surprisingly, emotional and behavioral problems are most pronounced among those who continue to be bullied over one or more years.

There are several individual and social risk factors that increase the likelihood of being targeted by bullies. Youth who are physically weaker, quieter, or less socially connected (e.g., friendless) often become prime targets for bullying; those with no friends are particularly likely to be targeted (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski 1999), possibly because the bully knows they are unlikely to be defended. Youth who reach puberty early or late compared to their peers, obese individuals, those with disabilities, and adolescents who identify as lesbian, gay, bisexual, or transgender are also at elevated risk of being ridiculed and intimidated by peers (see Juvonen & Graham, *in press*). Thus, any potentially stigmatizing characteristic or condition that makes someone stand out within their group increases their chance of being bullied.

What then distinguishes the targets who experience bullying only for a short while from the chronic victims? Olweus (1993) identified two maladaptive responses to bullying that maintain vicious cycles of victimization. Both submissive responses—typical of youth who are insecure, anxious, and sensitive—and aggressively reactive responses—associated with emotion regulation difficulties—are known to reinforce bullying. Moreover, the insecure youth become increasingly withdrawn as a function of the bullying they endure (Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie,

1993), while the bully-victims or “ineffectual aggressors” (Perry, Williard, & Perry 1990) who respond to bullying with retaliation likely become increasingly dysregulated.

In general, victims of bullying exhibit a range of adjustment problems, both concurrently and longitudinally. In the short-term, bullied youth (particularly the submissive types) tend to be emotionally distressed, have school adjustment difficulties and report physical health problems, such as headaches and stomachaches (e.g., Gini & Pozzoli 2009; Nakamoto & Schwartz 2010). Emotional distress and physical health complaints, in turn, predict higher rates of absenteeism and lower grades (Nishina, Witkow, & Juvonen 2005). The comorbid bully-victim group, in turn, display overt behavior problems, have trouble engaging academically, and are rejected by their classmates (Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003).

Given the correlational nature of much victimization research, it is often difficult to determine if bullying experiences cause these negative outcomes or whether victims’ adjustment difficulties make them “safe” targets. As mentioned above, some of the same factors that put children at risk for peer victimization are also consequences of victimization, such as internalizing problems and social rejection. For example, socially anxious youth are more likely to experience victimization, and these victimization experiences reinforce and/or increase their social anxiety (Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch 2010). Such cycles of victimization can have lasting psychosocial consequences for victimized youth. Youth who are bullied during childhood or adolescence exhibit higher rates of psychiatric disorders during young adulthood, even after accounting for childhood psychiatric problems and family hardships (Copeland, Wolke, Angold, & Costello 2013). Whereas childhood victims display elevated risk for adulthood anxiety disorders, individuals identified as bully-victims show heightened risk for both adult affective disorders, such as depression, and anxiety, such as specific phobias and panic

disorders. Thus, victims who respond to bullying with retaliatory aggression appear to be an especially high risk group.

What mechanisms can account for the association between victimization and negative psychosocial outcomes over time? One way to understand reactions to distressing social experiences is to consider victims' causal perceptions, or attributions, about why they are victimized. Victims are likely to resign to their plight and endorse characterological self-blaming attributions (e.g., "If I were a cooler kid, I wouldn't get picked on;" "I know this will happen to me again."). If the victims believe the causes of their plight are their fault, but beyond their control (i.e., internal and uncontrollable attributions), they are especially likely to feel socially anxious and depressed (Graham & Juvonen 1998). If, on the other hand, victims blame others for their plight, they are likely to try to retaliate and the hostile attributions can explain their externalizing problems (Perren, Ettekal, & Ladd 2013). Hence, victims' social-cognitive biases and attributions help us understand when victimization is associated with internalizing vs. externalizing problems.

Physiological mechanisms also contribute to emotional and health problems among bullied youth. One possible physiological pathway implicates the neuroendocrine system involved with stress regulation. Victims of bullying show abnormal cortisol levels (implicated in stress responses), compared with their nonvictimized peers. Thus, the association between victimization and physical health complaints may be explained by differences in stress reactivity (Knack, Ladd & Rudolph 2011). Additionally, recent neuroimaging research suggests that the brain region associated with emotional processing (i.e., the subgenual anterior cingulate cortex) shows differential activation in adolescents who have maladaptive responses to social exclusion (Eisenberger 2012). Hence, endocrine and neural assessments shed light on the complex ways in

which victimization experiences may “get under the skin” and alter concurrent and subsequent mental and physical health.

The severity of the emotional pain associated with peer victimization varies depending on the situation or broader social context. When victims reside in classrooms where there is relatively little bullying or when they belong to the numerical ethnic majority, they are particularly distressed (Bellmore, Witkow, Graham, & Juvonen 2004). To understand these findings, it is useful again to consider how victims construe their plight. Whereas victims who belong to the ethnic minority may perceive their maltreatment as an expression of prejudice toward their group, victims who belong to the majority ethnic group in their classrooms are more likely to conclude, “It must be *me*,” and hence feel more depressed (Graham, Bellmore, Nishina, & Juvonen 2009). Although research on cyberbullying has not yet examined the role of the electronic context, it is possible that similar processes are involved. When cyberbullying occurs on social networking sites in front of a large audience of Facebook friends, cyberbullying victims may feel especially alone and helpless when none of these friends show any concern.

Generally speaking, more is known about risk factors than protective factors related to peer victimization. The most robust protective factor is friends. Even just one friend can protect against the risk of becoming targeted and the degree to which victimized youth feel distressed (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski 1999). Yet the broader social context also matters. Recent research shows that African-American and Latino students attending ethnically diverse middle schools feel less bullied on average than those who attend ethnically less diverse schools (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham 2006). Increased diversity (i.e., multiple ethnic groups that share a balance of power) is likely to create enough attributional ambiguity to prevent victims from self-blaming and feeling distressed (Graham & Taylor 2013).

Assessment of Bullying

Various assessment methods can be used to assess the prevalence of bullying and to identify bullies and victims. The optimal assessment method depends on the age (or developmental level) of youth, whether the focus is on victimization and/or perpetration experiences, and the resources available. For example, observations are less common but have been used to examine the frequency and nature of bullying (e.g., bystander reactions) among school-age children in the classroom and on the playground (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas 2000). Interviews or focus groups, in turn, can be useful for better understanding the specific social dynamics and causes of bullying (e.g., friendship fallout).

The most commonly used assessment methods rely on self-reports. An important advantage of self-reports is that it is possible to gather lots of data in a cost-effective way within a relatively short amount of time. Several instruments have been developed and are used to assess self-reports of victimization and bullying experiences. A widely used measure is the Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire that can be used anonymously (Olweus 1993). This measure begins with a definition of bullying, and students then report on how frequently they have been victimized and engaged in different types of bullying. Because youths' definitions of bullying may not be consistent with the definition provided in such measures, it might be more informative to ask about concrete incidents (i.e., how frequently has someone hurt them physically, spread nasty rumors of them). When assessing victimization experiences of the most covert types of bullying (e.g., cyberbullying), self-reports are suitable because they assess subjective experiences that may not be readily observable by outside informants. In contrast, self-reports of bullying perpetration frequently underestimate actual behaviors (Pellegrini & Bartini 2000) because youth are reluctant to admit that they engage in rule-breaking behaviors. It

also appears that some of the psychosocial correlates of bullying perpetration vary depending on whether the assessment relies of self- vs. other-reports. For example, bullying is positively related to depression, only when relying on self-reports.

To measure bullying perpetration, peer reports offer an ideal assessment tool. In peer nomination methods, students are asked to write the names of the students who fit particular descriptions (e.g., who spreads rumors about others). An advantage of this method is that peers are most knowledgeable about relational forms of bullying that are not observed by adults. Moreover, peer reports rely on the consensus among peers and thus are very reliable. Although some ethical concerns have been raised with the procedures of students judging their peers and whether the procedure itself may create problems, research indicates that there are no negative consequences to utilizing this method (e.g., Mayeux, Underwood, & Risser 2007).

Another method used to identify victims and bullies involves teacher reports. Although teacher reports can provide valuable information, they are less likely to be valid when teachers do not know their students well or when assessing relational or cyberbullying outside the classroom. Teacher reports may be best suited for studies among elementary school students because classroom teachers spend several hours with their students and bullying behaviors are more visible (e.g., Ladd & Kochenderfer-Ladd 2002). Finally, parent-reports are used infrequently because parents are unlikely to be present in school and be aware or informed about such behaviors.

Overall, it is important to consider that each method and informant is likely to provide unique information about bullying. For example, self-reports and peer reports are complementary inasmuch as self-reports provide the best insights about subjective experiences of victimization, whereas peer reports provide reliable information on even the most discrete bullies. While

teachers may be somewhat objective in assessing bullying (particularly perpetration), the validity and reliability of their ratings varies depending how well they know their students, and on the types of bullying assessed. Finally, because research on cyberbullying is still in a nascent phase, the assessment tools for its perpetration are largely limited to self-reports that likely underestimate its prevalence.

Intervention Approaches

Different types of intervention approaches have been developed to address bullying in school settings. Some programs aim to get at the root of the problem by focusing the intervention on bullies, whereas school-wide approaches strive to empower the bystanders by involving the entire collective (all students, teachers, staff, and parents). By definition, the universal school-wide programs are more preventative than targeted interventions that rely on identification of persistent perpetrators of bullying. Fewer programs are available to address indirect forms of bullying or any type of cyberbullying at this time.

Although targeted interventions could focus on victims as much as bullies, most programs exclusively target perpetrators of aggression. Many of these programs were designed originally for physically aggressive males at risk for adult criminality. Therefore, relational forms of bullying and female bullies are often overlooked. Yet the basic premise of altering bullies' behaviors by changing their biased social cognitions (e.g., hostile attributions), which maintain the behavior, could apply to other forms of bullying as well as to female bullies. One model program with positive effects, *Fast Track*, offers a multi-component curriculum on social information processing, emotional understanding and self-control, in addition to individualized academic tutoring and parent training (Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2011). However, because *Fast Track* is an exceptionally multi-faceted program, it is not necessarily the

most typical targeted intervention. Other more short-term targeted interventions for aggressive boys have also shown improvements in social information processing and reductions in aggressive behaviors at least in the short run (e.g., *Brainpower* by Hudley & Graham, 1993 and the *Coping Power Program* by Lochman & Wells, 2004). Whether decreased aggression is maintained over time is unclear given the underlying motives and social dynamics (social dominance) involved in bullying. Thus, targeted interventions are limited in their scope because they do not take into account the larger social context in which bullying takes place, nor do they address the plight of the victims.

The assumption guiding universal school-wide programs is that bullying is a systemic social problem requiring collective efforts of everyone in the school to solve it. In other words, rather than targeting just those who engage in bullying, the school-wide programs educate all parties involved about the social dynamics and the effects of bullying. Multiple elements include raising awareness about the nature of the bullying problem, developing strategies for reporting incidents, integrating bullying topics into the curriculum, and increasing monitoring. School-wide programs have their roots in the *Olweus Bullying Prevention Program* (OBPP) developed in Norway. A more recent program with well-documented benefits developed in Finland, *KiVa* (Kärna et al., 2011), specifically focuses on bystanders or witnesses to bullying by fostering empathy for victims and teaching bystanders strategies to support victims. Other school-wide approaches that show promising results include *WITS* (Walk Away, Ignore, Talk it Out and Seek Help; Leadbeater & Sukhawathanakul 2011) which focuses on the early grades and teaches students social skills to resolve interpersonal conflicts and *Steps to Respect* (Frey, Hirschstein, Edstrom & Snell 2009) which also targets the early grades and has a unique focus on relational aggression.

At this point, few programs specifically address cyberbullying. Given the overlap between school bullying and cyberbullying in regards to the types of behaviors and the group of students who are involved (Juvonen & Gross 2008), approaches that address school bullying may also help reduce cyberbullying. For example, an evaluation of the school-based *KiVa* program revealed that it reduced cybervictimization (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta 2011). An additional avenue for cyberbullying interventions is via the use of technology itself. For example, interventions that incorporate digital tools for reporting cyberbullying and coaching students on how to deal with such experiences via sites such as Facebook where cyberbullying is likely to take place may show promising results (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Also, programs specifically aimed at addressing cyberbullying (e.g., Cyber Friendly Schools in Australia) are currently being implemented but have yet to be evaluated.

One notable limitation of bullying interventions is that many are reactive rather than preventative. Thus, considering the timing of when interventions are implemented in schools is essential. For example, a critical time for interventions may be during transition periods such as the transition to middle school when bullying behaviors tend to peak (e.g., Pellegrini & Long 2002). Finally, across school bullying and cyberbullying interventions, a main concern is developing programs that demonstrate effectiveness in maintaining long-term behavior change.

Conclusions

Perpetration of bullying and its consequent victimization predict negative developmental outcomes, especially when these behaviors and/or social experiences are prolonged. The roles of “bully” and “victim” are likely to be maintained over time due to complementary or mutually interlocking interactions characterized by an imbalance of power. For example, when the social

dominance needs of bullies are rewarded by submissive responses, the perpetrator and victim roles are likely to be sustained.

Bullying appears to increase during transitions to new school settings. Such peaks likely reflect the social uncertainty in a new setting or situation wherein bullying is one way to establish social status. To feel and be perceived as powerful, bullies typically target “safe” victims: those who are some how different from their broader group, especially when they lack friends. Victims—even those who serve as only temporary targets—experience a range of psychosocial problems. Repeatedly targeted youth are often not only rejected or friendless, but also emotionally distressed, and in poor physical health. Due to these problems, they may also appear academically disengaged in school. Many of these symptoms may go undetected or misattributed by parents and teachers because adults are unaware of bullying.

To understand the scope of bullying, it is necessary to assess the prevalence and the nature of the problem. Whereas self-report measures provide invaluable information about the subjective experiences of victimization, bullying perpetration is better assessed by relying on peer or teacher reports. Peers are particularly useful informants because they are privy to covert forms of bullying, such as rumors and cyberbullying. The possible overlap between the bully and victim roles needs to be taken into account in such assessments given that the comorbid bully-victim group may be a particularly high risk group.

Different intervention strategies are available for schools to combat bullying. Targeted interventions developed for physically aggressive youth provide one model to deal with the social-cognitive biases of bullies, although they do not address the social rewards that bullies receive when exerting their power over others. Although universal school-wide programs are challenging to implement inasmuch as they are delivered by teachers who need training and

support, these comprehensive programs highlight the critical role of bystanders as having the ultimate power to object to the maltreatment by bullies. Given the link between school-based bullying and cyberbullying, preliminary evidence suggests that such programs could also address bullying that takes place via electronic communication.

Finally, clinicians need to keep in mind that relatively little is known about situational factors, other than school transitions, that increase bullying. It is possible that also other changes (e.g., within the family composition) may increase the need to have control over one's environment and may therefore result in hostile and abusive behaviors among some children and adolescents. Hence, when dealing with the perpetrators of bullying, it is vital to understand situational antecedents as well as any possible internal characteristics (e.g., hostile attributions). The victim's plight in turn is highly problematic because youth are reluctant to report on bullying incidents, and victimization often goes undetected for long periods of time. Therefore, additional attention needs to be paid to early detection. Warning signs of victimization include a wide-range of symptoms (from somatic problems to refusal to go to school) that clinicians need to be aware of when dealing with school-age youth.

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