EDITORIAL

Bullying victimization and perpetration: some answers and more questions☆

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Introduction

The U.S. government has defined bullying victimization as "any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated".[1] Conceptualizations of bullying and the use of the term vary by audience and context. For instance, for some, bullying behaviors might include acts of aggression or violence, whereas for others bullying might center on name-calling, exclusionary social practices or even spreading rumors and vicious lies.[2]

Notably, in addition to persons who are directly involved in bullying, there is also the emerging notion of "bystanders" who observe the bullying act and may exacerbate or mitigate bullying behaviors and dynamics.[3] The research on the effects of bystanders in bullying situations is scant. However, the few studies that do exist suggest that girls are more likely to be empathetic toward victims while males tend to believe that victims are deserving of the treatment being handed out to them.[4]

Worldwide, youth bullying victimization is escalating.[5] Among adolescents in the United States, 20−25% of youth in public schools nationwide report some type of bullying victimization or bystander observation.[3,6] Bullying victimization is commonly associated with several negative psychosocial sequelae including mental health distress,

negative health outcomes, low self-esteem, suicide, school absences, and bullying perpetration,[7] while bystander observation also has been shown to have negative effects such as substance use, mental health distress, and school absences.[8]

Given the rise of social media use among youth, with many of their social networks occurring in cyberspace, rates of cyberbullying have also risen. Cyberbullying is defined as using smartphones or the Internet to harass another person with text and pictures.[9] Such forms of bullying can be extremely cruel given that youth might be more inclined to be more vicious online given that they do not have to physically face the target of their bullying and may try to hide their identities. The sequelae from cyberbullying are often similar to the consequences of in-person bullying.[9]

Select correlates of bullying victimization

Although patterns may vary, exposures to physical bullying are generally more pronounced among males than females[10] with rates peaking among middle school-age youth.[8] Bullying tends to decline with age (e.g., high school) as youth "mature" whereas younger children (e.g., middle school) are seeking identity through friendships using exclusion and bullying of new and unfamiliar youth to solidify in-group belonging.[8]

There are some demographic (gender, race/ethnicity) and personal attribute characteristics (sexual identity, among others) associated with bullying perpetration and victimization. Some studies document that while males engage in more physical forms of bullying, females report more

psychological bullying (e.g., name-calling and malicious gossiping), particularly through social media.[11] In the United States, African American youth report higher rates of bullying victimization compared to other racial/ethnic counterparts.[12] Other personal attribute characteristics associated with higher rates of bullying victimization include being a member of a sexually minoritized group, being obese, having learning disabilities, reporting psychosocial issues such as depression and anxiety, being depressed, and having high intelligence.[8] In summary, characteristics that set youth apart as being different or othered are likely to put youth at risk for bullying victimization. Not surprisingly, minoritized youth, including racial/ethnic minorities and LGBTQ+ youth are at a heightened risk of experiencing "bias-based bullying", which is bullying that is based on one or more social identities.[8]

Select correlates of bullying perpetration

Bullying perpetration is defined as engaging in verbal (e.g., teasing or name-calling), social (e.g., excluding someone or spreading rumors), or physical (e.g., hitting) behaviors "to control or harm others".[1] While much of the research and policy attention tends to focus on bullying victimization, research has also shown negative effects or correlates of bullying on perpetrators, including alcohol and substance use, early sexual debut, and criminal behavior/experience with the justice system.[8]

Some studies have posited that youth who experience bullying victimizations are at greater odds of bullying perpetration. This phenomenon is referred to as "bully-victim overlap," where victims of bullying might engage in bullying victimization of others as a form of self-defense and develop aggressive tendencies when they are frequently victimized. Several studies have empirically explored this bullying victim-perpetration overlap and found evidence that bullyvictims are at a greater risk of negative outcomes, such as aggressive behaviors compared to youth identified as bullies-only and victims-only.[13] Youth growing up in high-crime, low-resourced neighborhoods who have been bullied may seek to protect themselves from further acts of bullying by becoming more aggressive and bullying peers as a form of proactive self-defense.[14] The "code of the streets" means that youth who have been victimized must assume a tough exterior and retaliate as a form of survival.[14,15]

Bullying victimization and weapon carrying

The article "Association between adolescents who are victims of bullying and weapon possession"[16] published in this volume addresses a novel research question, tied to the "code of the streets" hypothesis, about whether youth who have been victims of violence are more likely to carry weapons, especially in urban environments. This study documented that among 2296 high school students, among victims of bullying, 37.6% reported having already carried some type of weapon (knife, revolver, or truncheon) in the last 30 days, while 47.5% of these adolescents carried some type of weapon (knife, revolver or truncheon) in the school environment. The researchers concluded that adolescents who are victims of bullying are twice as likely to carry some

type of weapon (knife, revolver, or truncheon) to the school environment, and are also more likely to carry a firearm.[16] These are important and alarming findings and lead us to recommend that more research be conducted. While novel and important, the findings are based on cross-sectional findings, and therefore temporal or causal inferences cannot be made. Although temporal stems were used to assess the major study variables, bullying victimization may lead to weapon carrying, an alternative explanation is that youth who carry weapons might belong to social networks that endorse violence and therefore might be more prone to report being bullied. In addition, the association with youth who reported bullying in the past 12 months and weapon carrying in the past 30 months may be a measurement artifact, such that youth may have already been carrying weapons prior to 12 months and the motivation for weapon carrying may be related to something other than bullying.

New areas for research on bullying

This important paper is part of a larger body of research on bullying that has emerged within the past several decades. Despite the increase in empirical findings on bullying, there are several inquiries worthy of investigation that build on the article the authors just discussed and on the remaining important conceptual and policy questions, including causal and moderating/mediating factors, intervention design, and intervention effects.

The causal and moderating/mediating factors motivate more research on the mechanisms linking bullying perpetration and negative psychosocial outcomes and the mechanisms linking bullying victimization and negative psychosocial outcomes, and especially whether they share overlapping mechanisms. An emerging body of research for example is exploring the mechanisms mediating bullying victimization and bullying perpetration of negative psychosocial sequelae, and more research, particularly with diverse samples, is warranted in these fields. Mediating and moderating factors associated with bullying perpetration are parental anger, poverty, poor relationships with parents, lack of school engagement, and peer conflicts.[8,17] More research is also needed about the effects of bullying victimization and perpetration such as (1) whether there are more severe outcomes for youth who are bullied by the opposite versus same sex, (2) whether mental distress is more severe among youth who experience intra-racial/ethnic bullying based on racial identity (e.g., contested racial authenticity) as opposed to inter-racial/ethnic bullying, and (3) in terms of bullying based on race/ethnicity and other identities, the experience of same-group bullying or "othering."

Protective factors need more research to provide guidance on intervention design. For example, what are some protective factors beyond family, peer, and school contexts that moderate the relationship between bullying and negative outcomes? Female bystanders tend to show more empathy than male bystanders for victims of bullying. What are the cultural and gender norms that account for these differences? If identified, can these empathic tendencies more associated with girls also be effectively taught to boys? Studies have explored the protective role of social supports within the family and peers in the association between

bullying victimization and mental health problems,[18] academic achievement,[19] stress.[20] However, studies rarely examined the protective effects of the neighborhood, such as neighborhood cohesion in the relationship between bullying victimization and adverse outcomes. A recent study found that neighborhood conditions are important factors in the association between bullying victimization and suicidality among urban African American youth.[21]

A final important line of inquiry concerns intervention effects such as whether existing anti-bullying programs that have demonstrated efficacy in suburban schools are as efficacious in schools located in urban neighborhoods. Given that youth in urban low-resourced areas are consistently exposed to crime and violence in the neighborhood, many of these youth are highly likely to fall victim to bullying while not likely to receive intervention due to cost. Consequently, these youth may seek other ways to protect themselves from harm, such as acting tough or displaying false bravado. Would programs, such as Second Steps, which have been found to reduce bullying in suburban school districts be effective in urban school districts? Increased attention to intervention effects especially as they relate to high violence, low-resourced populations, and contexts would provide important evidence for new interventions to reduce bullying and violence.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

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