



## Bullying and delinquency. The mediating role of anger

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### ABSTRACT

The principal aim of the study was to examine the relationship between bullying, both studying those who bully and those who are victims of bullying, and non-violent delinquency (i.e., theft and burglary). We used structural equation modelling, while controlling for sex of participants, family structure and parental education, to examine the relationship between bullying and bully victimisation and delinquent behaviour, and whether this association is mediated through anger. The data for the analysis were drawn from a cross-sectional, population-based sample of 7149 15- and 16-year-old adolescents in Iceland. Results revealed that: (1) bullying behaviour and bully victimisation both increased the likelihood of delinquent behaviour, but the effects were significantly stronger for bullying behaviour than bully victimisation, explaining 40% and 30% of the variance in delinquency, respectively; and (2) the association between bullying behaviour and bully victimisation and delinquent behaviour was in both groups partly mediated through anger. The findings support Agnew's revised general strain theory that emotions such as anger are important in delinquency.

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### 1. Introduction

Research and understanding of bullying behaviour and bully victimisation has progressed greatly since Olweus (1978) produced his seminal work in Scandinavia in the 1970s into bullying in schools. The main focus of research continues to be in school settings (Farrington, 1993; Nitz, 2009; Olweus, 1994; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007), although in recent years bullying has also received attention in other settings, such as prisons (Ireland, 2002; Wood, Moir, & James, 2009). The fact that bullying typically occurs in peer group settings, makes it a group phenomenon (Espelage, 2003). Indeed, Ireland (2002) found that bullying often involves more than one perpetrator and points to the importance of peer influence in bullying incidents.

Farrington (1993) points to the frequency with which bullying occurs among children and adolescents and states that "Like offending, bullying arises from interactions between potential offenders and potential victims in environments that provide opportunities" (p. 383). Within a school setting, bullying is an aggressive act where children or a group of children use or abuse their position of power or circumstances to intimidate and harm other children (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Bullying is a destructive interpersonal behaviour, which adversely affects both the bullies

and their victims in terms of their development and mental health (Farrington, 1993; Juvonen, Graham, & Schuster, 2003). Victims of bullying are at heightened risk of making false confessions to police during questioning (Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, & Sigfusdottir, *in press*; Gudjonsson, Sigurdsson, Sigfusdottir, & Asgeirsdottir, 2008).

Bullying is not an isolated form of behaviour; it is one type of aggression, which is related to general antisocial behaviour (Farrington, 1993). Sourander et al. (2007) showed in a longitudinal study of 2551 boys from ages 8 to 16–20 years in Finland that being childhood bullies and victims of bullying are both significant predictors of later criminality. It significantly predicted the most common type of offences (property, violence, traffic violation). Bullies and bully-victims only comprised 8.8% of the total sample, but they were responsible for 33.0% of the total number of offences at follow-up. However, there were significant interactions with conduct disorder and hyperactivity. This means that risk of later offending was only predicted by bully and victim status if there was comorbid conduct disorder or hyperactivity. What has not been researched is the possible role of anger as a mediating factor between bullying and delinquency.

Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (2007) suggested on the basis of their research into motivation for offending that acting in the pursuit of self-interest and angry disposition are salient factors in offending among young people. Sigfusdottir, Asgeirsdottir, Gudjonsson, and Sigurdsson (2008) found, drawing on Agnew's (1992) general strain theory of offending, that anger was a more

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important mediating factor than depression between history of childhood sexual abuse and offending, whereas depression was a more important mediator than anger in relation to suicidal behaviour. The authors suggested that anger is a particularly important mediating variable in relation to outwardly-directed forms of delinquency, such as theft, burglary, vandalism and violence.

In the present study we investigate the relationship between group bullying among pupils in their final two years of compulsory education and delinquency. We draw on Agnew's (1992) general strain theory to examine the relationship between bullying and delinquency, and specifically test the possible mediating role of anger in accordance with Agnew's (2005) recently revised social-psychological general strain theory. The theory proposes that adolescents who experience adverse circumstances are pressed into delinquency by negative emotional reactions, such as anger. We hypothesised that there is a significant relationship between bullying (whether bullies, victims or both) and offending, because both form a part of a delinquent life style (Farrington, 1993; Sourander et al., 2007). We further hypothesise, in accordance with Agnew's (2005) theory, that the relationship between bullying and delinquency is partly mediated by anger.

The focus in the present study is on group bullying rather than one individual bullying another. Both are important in bullying research (Roland, 1989). Roland defines bullying in the following terms: "Bullying is longstanding violence, physical or psychological, conducted by an individual or a group and directed against an individual who is not able to defend himself in the actual situation" (p. 21). We chose group bullying in the current study because it is very common in schools. For example, Gudjonsson et al. (in press) found that group bullying during the previous 12 months was reported by 22.9% and 42.7% of large Icelandic and European samples, respectively, suggesting that group bullying is a serious problem among many pupils in schools. We have separately studied individual bullying in this school leavers' age group, which typically occurred within a family setting and perpetrated by carers and siblings (Gudjonsson et al., 2008).

## 2. Methods

### 2.1. Participants

The data for this investigation came from the 2006 Icelandic study, *Youth in Iceland*. The participants were 7149 pupils enrolled in the 9th and 10th grades, or in the final two years of their compulsory education in Iceland. The mean age was 15.5 (SD = 0.50, range 15–16 years). There were 3507 (49.9%) boys and 3528 (50.1%) girls in the study (114 participants did not indicate their sex).

### 2.2. Instruments

The questionnaires used in the study are described in detail by Gudjonsson et al. (2008).

We tested two separate structural equation models: (1) where we examined the association between bullying behaviour and delinquency, similarly also looking at whether this link was mediated through anger; and (2) where we investigated the association between bully victimisation and delinquent behaviour and whether this relationship was mediated through anger.

Three latent variables and three observed variables were specified for each model and used in the analysis. All latent constructs were measured with multiple indicators. Three additional variables were used as control variables for each model in the study: sex of participants; parental education (a proxy measure of family

socioeconomic status); and family structure, i.e., whether adolescents lived with both biological parents or in other arrangements. About 94% of the estimated 320,000 inhabitants of Iceland are of Norse-Celtic decent and over 80% of the population belongs to the Lutheran State Church (Hagstofa Íslands, 2007). Because of this homogeneity, other exogenous variables, such as race, ethnicity and religion, which are often used in research in the US and other countries, were not included in this analysis.

The following measures related to bullying were constructed and developed by the Icelandic Institute for Educational Research and Icelandic Centre for Social Research and Analysis (Gudjonsson et al., in press).

*Victim of bullying.* Being a victim of bullying was measured by three items, which were preceded by the following question: 'During the last 12 months, how often have you...?':

- (a) Been individually teased by a whole group of people.
- (b) A group attacked you and hurt you when you were alone.
- (c) Been in a group that was attacked by another group.

Each item was rated on a five-point scale ('Never': 0, 'Once': 1, 'Twice': 2, '3–4 times': 3, '5 times or more': 4)

*Bullying.* Bullying behaviour was measured by three items, preceded by the following question: 'During the last 12 months, how often have you...?'

- (a) Participated in a group teasing an individual.
- (b) Participated in a group hurting an individual.
- (c) Participated in a group starting a fight with another group.

Each item was rated on a five-point scale ('Never': 0, 'Once': 1, 'Twice': 2, '3–4 times': 3, '5 times or more': 4)

*Anger.* Feelings of anger were measured by five items from a scale designed to assess the severity of anger problems (Sigfusdottir, Farkas, & Silver, 2004). Participants were asked how often during the previous week the following statements applied to them:

- (a) I was easily annoyed and irritated.
- (b) I experienced outbursts of anger that I could not control.
- (c) I wanted to break or damage things.
- (d) I had a row with someone.
- (e) I yelled at somebody or threw things.

Answers to each statement ranged from 0 = 'never', 1 = 'seldom', 2 = 'sometimes' to 3 = 'often'. The scale ranged from 0 to 15.

*Delinquency.* To assess respondents' delinquent behaviour, they were asked how often they had done something of the following in the past 12 months (Sigfusdottir et al., 2004):

- (a) Stolen something that was worth less than 5000 Icelandic kroners (approximately \$50).
- (b) Stolen something that was worth more than 5000 Icelandic kroners.
- (c) Committed a burglary to steal.

Answers ranged on a Likert scale from 1 = 'never', 2 = 'once', 3 = '2–5 times', 4 = '6–9 times', 5 = '10–13 times', 6 = '14–17 times', 7 = '18 times or more often'.

In this study, we focused only on theft and burglary offences. We did also have measures of vandalism and violence (Sigfusdottir et al., 2004; Sigfusdottir et al., 2008), but they overlapped with the measure of bullying and would have contaminated the results.

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