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Isolation and the stress of being bullied

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Abstract

Approximately one-third of children report being victims of bullying, and this victimization has been linked to a number of negative psychological outcomes. In the present study, we examined the effects of perceived isolation on the link between victimization before and during high school and stress symptoms during college. Consistent with our predictions, victimization appears to do the most damage to those who felt isolated during high school. These results suggest that schools should reframe their approach to the bullying problem, and devote more resources to helping students feel less isolated.

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Introduction

Being bullied by peers in childhood is a stressful experience. A growing body of research has identified several risk factors and consequences of being bullied, including psychological maladjustment (for a review, see Hawker & Boulton, 2000). However, research has yet to examine moderators of the consequences of being bullied. In the present article, we argue that bullying is best understood as a chronic stressor, and examine individual differences in social support as a moderator of reactions to bullying.

According to most estimates, roughly 30% of children report being victims of bullying at some point, and between 5% and 10% are victims on a regular basis (e.g. Perry, Kusel, & Perry, 1988; Rigby & Slee, 1991; Olweus, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001). Boys are more likely than girls to bully and

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to be bullied (e.g. Arora & Thomson, 1987; Slee & Rigby, 1993; Siann, Callaghan, Glissov, Lockhart, & Rawson, 1994; Nansel et al., 2001), although changing definitions of “bullying” to include more indirect aggression (e.g. teasing, ostracism) can reduce the gender difference (e.g. Crick, 1995). In a study of middle schools in Italy, girls’ experiences with bullying included name-calling, rumours, rejection, and teasing, whereas boys’ experiences included more physical harm, threats, and rejection (Baldry, 1998).

Being a victim of bullying has been associated with a number of negative psychological outcomes, including anxiety (e.g. Perry et al., 1988; Craig, 1998; Bond et al., 2001), depression (e.g. Neary & Joseph, 1994; Craig, 1998), and poorer perceptions of self-worth and competence (e.g. Roland, 1989; Slee & Rigby, 1993; Neary & Joseph, 1994). A recent meta-analysis found that victimization was related most strongly to depression and least strongly to anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000). Although females tend to report more of these symptoms than males, and although males and females are subjected to different types of bullying, there is typically not a sex difference in the consequences of bullying (i.e. no interaction; Perry et al., 1988; Roland, 1989; Slee & Rigby, 1993; Craig, 1998; for an exception, see Rigby & Bagshaw, 2001).

Reports of victimization by bullies appear to decrease with age (e.g. Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Perhaps not coincidentally, the majority of bullying research has been done with younger children. One goal of the present study was to examine the psychological consequences of being bullied later in adolescence. However, research also reveals there is a subset of bullying victims who are chronically victimized throughout school, and many of these are also bullied as adults (Smith, Singer, & Hoel, 2003). In a study of Swedish students, Olweus (1978) referred to these frequent targets as “whipping boys”, and found that they make up between 4% and 7% of boys in each grade level (girls were not studied). A second goal of the present study was to contrast these “chronic” victims with those bullied only before high school, and examine the consequences of differing durations of bullying.

The “whipping boys” studied by Olweus (1978) were rated as less popular, more passive, and scored higher on several anxiety scales than either bullies or control children. But does bullying cause these problems, or are bullies drawn to anxious loners? To investigate the causal pathway, Kochenderfer and Ladd (1996) followed a group of American boys and girls as they started school for the first time. Their results suggest that bullies initially target all children, leading to loneliness and anxiety symptoms. Certain children seem to react worse to being bullied, and these appear to become the chronic victims. The critical question, therefore, is the basis of these different reactions to similar bullying.

One way to understand these negative outcomes is to view victimization as a chronic stressor, and the outcomes as responses to a traumatic experience. Research reveals that responding to a stressor is a two-stage process (for a review, see Lazarus & Folkman, 1984). First, individuals *appraise* the potential stressor, to determine the demands of the situation and their ability to meet those demands. Individuals typically perceive that they can meet demands if they perceive having control over the stressor (e.g. Langer & Rodin, 1976; Florian, Mikulincer, & Taubman, 1995), or if they view an uncontrollable stressor as due to temporary, external factors (e.g. Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978).

Second, if they perceive difficulty in meeting demands, then individuals make use of a variety of *coping* strategies for dealing with the stressor (for a review, see Carver, Scheier, & Weintraub,

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