

Bullying and social and emotional loneliness in a sample of adult male prisoners

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Abstract

The present study explored social and emotional loneliness, and victimisation among a sample of adult male prisoners. 241 prisoners took part, completing a behavioural measure of behaviours indicative of bullying (DIPC-R: Direct and Indirect Prisoner behaviour Checklist, Ireland, J.L. 2003. The Direct and Indirect Prisoner behaviour Checklist — Revised. Psychology Department, University of Central Lancashire). and a measure of social and emotional loneliness (SELSA: Social and Emotional Loneliness Scale for Adults, DiTommaso, E. & Spinner, B. (1993). The development and initial validation of the social and emotional loneliness scale for adults (SELSA). *Personality and Individual Differences*, 14, 127–134.). Differences between the groups involved in bullying (i.e. pure bullies, pure victims, bully/victims and those not involved) were noted, with victim groups (pure victims and bully/victims) presenting with higher levels of social loneliness than those not-involved. Emotional loneliness was not a distinguishing characteristic for membership to the pure victim or bully/victim group, and instead was found to be associated with the type and amount of victimisation reported: victims who reported multiple types of victimisation presented with higher levels of emotional (family) loneliness than victims reporting just one type of victimisation. Increased victimisation was also associated with increased levels of social and emotional loneliness, most notably with regards to indirect victimisation. The results are discussed with reference to the environment in which the victimisation is taking place, and we outline a potential application of life events and added stress models in understanding social maladjustment (loneliness) among prisoners.

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1. Introduction

Bullying has proven a difficult concept to define in terms its exact characteristics (Smith & Brain, 2000). There is a developing consensus, however, that the term ‘bullying’ represents an all-encompassing term to describe a range of aggressive behaviours that can occur between individuals (Ireland, Archer & Power, 2007). Prison based researchers have opted for a broad definition of bullying:

An individual is being bullied when they are the victim of direct and/or indirect aggression happening on a weekly basis, by the same perpetrator or different perpetrators. Single incidences of aggression can be viewed as

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bullying, particularly where they are severe and when the individual either believes or fears that they are at risk of future victimization by the same perpetrator or others. An incident can be considered bullying if the victim believes that they have been aggressed towards, regardless of the actual intention of the bully. It can also be bullying when the imbalance of power between the bully and his/her victim is implied and not immediately evident (Ireland, 2002: p. 26).

Despite attempts at formulating a definition, however, there is a developing consensus among forensic researchers that the term “bullying” is simply one used to describe *intragroup* aggression, with the possibility of developing a fixed, measurable and prescriptive definition of ‘bullying’ unlikely to materialise (Ireland & Rowley, 2007).

Social relationships are a particularly important factor to consider in the perpetrator and victim relationship. Hodges and Perry (1996) suggest that, among children, there are three core social risk factors for victimisation: having few friends, having friends unable to protect you and, being rejected by peers. There has been support for these findings (e.g. Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999), with victims scoring higher on measures of loneliness (e.g. Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001). Research with children indicates that loneliness is not only related to overt [direct] victimization, but to relational [indirect] victimisation (Crick & Grotoper, 1996). Victims of multiple forms of aggression are also reported to be at increased risk of adjustment difficulties, including loneliness, than victims of one or no forms of aggression (Prinstein et al., 2001).

Social relationships are likely to play a particularly important role in prison settings where the risk of social retribution arguably increases for aggressors who choose to aggress towards a prisoner with a well developed social network. Indeed the presence of a social network arguably represents a protective factor against prison victimisation (Ireland, 2002; Ireland & Power, 2004).

Victims in prisons are also at risk of stigmatisation and rejection by the prisoner peer group unless able to respond effectively to the aggression. This has led to speculation that ‘pure victims’ (i.e. those who are victimised but do not perpetrate aggression themselves) are more likely to be stigmatised and rejected than bully/victims since pure victims acquire the reputation as a victim who does not fight back. To act in this way is a violation of the ‘inmate [social] code’ and a cause for continued peer rejection (Ireland, 2002). Thus victims in prison should be expected to be rejected, stigmatised and to present with a reduced social network. It is logical to assume, therefore, these victims may be characterised by loneliness. There has been a single paper to date focusing on the concept of loneliness and its relationship to prison bullying and social relationships. Ireland and Power (2004), in a study involving young and adult offenders, found psychosocial adjustment difficulties with regards to attachment and emotional loneliness to be characteristic of bully/victims but not pure victims, with the former characterised by increased loneliness and an avoidant attachment style.

Understanding the association between loneliness and victimisation within different social groups is important as it is possible that certain situations invoke additional stress for victims making it more likely that they will become lonely. For example, stress models may have value and application to prison settings because prisons are described as environments with numerous sources of stress, with the range of strategies available to prisoners to cope limited by the constraints of the physical environment (Zamble & Porporino, 1988; Ireland, Boustead, & Ireland, 2005).

Both the life events model and chronic stress models have certainly been applied to understand the association between victimisation (as a source of stress) and social maladjustment, including loneliness in non-detained individuals. The life events model argues that a single life stressor may provoke adjustment difficulties, whereas the chronic stress model suggests that maladjustment becomes more pronounced as the stressful events continue. In a longitudinal study of 388 kindergarten children (193 boys and 195 girls) followed up over a period of four years (with a 94% retention rate by the end of the study), Kochenderfer-Ladd and Wardrop (2001), found support for the life events model in relation to loneliness, with *initial* peer victimisation experiences sufficient to trigger signs of loneliness severe enough to be maintained over time. In relation to social satisfaction, however, they found more application for the chronic stress model, with signs of maladjustment with regards to social satisfaction not appearing until *after* the period of extended stress (victimisation). Thus it appears that loneliness precedes difficulties in social satisfaction.

The ‘Added Stress Hypothesis’ (e.g. Cacioppo, Hawkley, & Berntson, 2003), is a further stress model to account for, and it may apply in particular to victimisation and adjustment difficulties within prisons. Victimisation could arguably represent a form of stress that occurs in *addition* to the general stressors associated with detention (which would include the act of incarceration which in itself has been described as a ‘multifactorial source of stress’: Nieland, McCluskie, & Tait, 2001; see also Ireland et al., 2005). Victimisation in prison, as indicated earlier, carries with it an

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