



## The relation between bullying, victimization, and adolescents' level of hopelessness

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### A B S T R A C T

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In this study, 419 Turkish middle school students (203 girls, 216 boys) were surveyed on their exposure to and engagement in bullying, and their level of hopelessness. Our findings suggest that girls were victims of indirect (e.g. gossiping) bullying more than boys. Boys reported being victims of physical (e.g. damaging property) and verbal (e.g. teasing) bullying more than girls. While the level of hopelessness among victims of physical and verbal bullying was higher than non-victims, no difference was found between the victims of indirect bullying and non-victims. Students who never talked to their teachers and parents about bullying reported higher levels of hopelessness than others. The implications of the study for intervention and prevention programs are discussed.

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### Introduction

During the last twenty years, our understanding of the relation between bullying, victimization and children's psychological health has broadened significantly. It is now well documented that peer victimization and bullying has negative effects on adolescents' psychological health (Baldry, 2004; Roland, 2002) including increased anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and in some cases, suicide. Despite a large number of studies on the relation between bullying and depression, few were conducted on the relation between hopelessness and bullying when in fact hopelessness was found to be a key factor linking depression to suicidal behavior (Beck, Kovacs, & Weissman, 1975). The National Institute of Mental Health (2011) defines depression, the persistent feeling of sadness, as a "serious illness" that is manifested through various symptoms that interferes with daily functioning of the individual. These symptoms can be a combination of physical, emotional, and social symptoms such as anxiety, social withdrawal, and fatigue. Hopelessness, the cognitive dimension of depression, is associated with individuals' perceptions of lacking control over future event outcomes, and is found to play an important role in predicting depression (Marshall & Lang, 1990; McLaughlin, Miller, & Warwick, 1996). While previous studies suggest that depression and suicidal thoughts are high among both bullies and victims (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, & Rantanen, 1999; West & Salmon, 2000), it is unclear what aspect(s) of depression are more salient for bullying prevention and intervention programs. This paper examines the relation between bullying, victimization, and hopelessness among Turkish adolescents (ages 12–14) to understand the relation between depression and bullying, and how to improve prevention and intervention programs to address the issues of mental health surrounding bullying and victimization.

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### *Bullying, victimization, and depression*

Children engage in two types of bullying depending on the overt or covert ways of displaying an aggressive behavior. Direct bullying, the display of overt aggressive behavior(s), is defined as harassing others through either direct physical contact or verbal attack such as pushing, hitting, and teasing (Woods & Wolke, 2004). Indirect bullying, also called relational bullying, is defined as a person's covert aggressive behavior(s) that is intended to harass others by damaging the victim's social relations. It includes gossiping, rumor spreading, and excluding someone from the group (Coyne, Archer, & Eslea, 2006). Research suggests that boys are more likely to engage in and be exposed to direct bullying than girls, and girls are more likely to engage in indirect bullying than boys (Baldry & Farrington, 1999; Crick & Bigbee, 1998; Smith & Gross, 2006).

Both victimization and bullying is associated with depression, anxiety, and somatic complaints (Baldry, 2004; Craig, 1998). In their study, Marini, Dane, Bosacki, and YLC-CURA (2006) found that indirect bully-victims, those who bully others and are bullied by others, and victims, those who are bullied by others only, reported higher level of depression than bullies and uninvolved adolescents. While the level of depression of direct bullies and bully-victims were same, the victims reported lower levels of depression compared to the other two groups. In addition, previous studies suggest that bullies and victims display symptoms of depression and have suicidal thoughts more than those who are neither a bully nor a victim (Gini, 2008). Ivarsson, Broberg, Arvidsson, and Gillberg (2005) found that children who were victims or bully-victims have higher suicide attempts than bullies and those who were neither victims nor bully-victims.

Parents, peers and teachers, play an important role in children's ability to cope with bullying and mediate the development of depression. For instance, the positive relationship with peers, teachers, and parents play a buffering role between victimization and its negative psychological effects on the person who is been bullied (Davidson & Demaray, 2007; Idsoe, Solli, & Cosmovici, 2008). Studies found that teachers' beliefs about bullying determine whether they intervene in a bullying situation and how well the child copes with victimization (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). Interestingly, teachers and parents perceive physical bullying as being more serious and harmful than verbal and indirect (relational) bullying and are less likely to intervene when children experience indirect bullying (Bauman & Del Rio, 2006; Hazler, Miller, Carney, & Green, 2001).

### *Bullying, victimization and hopelessness*

Depression designates a complex pattern of deviation in feelings, cognitive processes, and behavior (Beck, 1969). While early studies conceptualized depression as a result of different pathologies caused by one factor, researchers developed multidimensional models that explained different characteristics of depression (Craighead, 1980). According to theory of hopelessness (Beck & Beamesderfer, 1974), the person's negative attributions to the event, the future and the self determine his level of hopelessness. People who are hopeless make three kinds of inferences in the face of a negative event: (a) they attribute the cause of a negative event to stable and global causes (b) they believe that the consequences are unchangeable and have big impacts, and (c) view themselves as worthless and inferior (Abramson, Metalsky, & Alloy, 1989). Thus, interpretation of the negative event, not the negative event itself, presumed to contribute to the development of hopelessness depression. While hopelessness depression is conceptualized having all three inferential styles, Abela and Sarin (2002) found that they are relatively independent for younger children but are interrelated in adolescence.

The theory of helplessness, a similar cognitive model of depression, also suggests that people's attribution to the causes of events to uncontrollable factors results in the development of chronic self-handicapping behaviors in the face of a new situation (e.g. learned helplessness). Furthermore, the expectation of failure results in adaptation of negative self-image. Thus, people who expect negative events are more likely to have low self-esteem and feel helpless, consequentially, more vulnerable to depression than those who do not have negative expectations (Abramson, Seligman, & Teasdale, 1978). Together, the theory of hopelessness and the theory of helplessness is the basis of *cognitive vulnerability-stress framework model* that focuses on the cognitive rather than emotional and behavioral characteristics of depression (e.g. negative attributional styles). According to this model, hopelessness and helplessness moderate the relationship between the negative life events and the development of depression (Hankin & Abramson, 2001); individuals with cognitive vulnerability are more likely to be depressed when faced with negative events than those who are not cognitively vulnerable. However, some studies suggest that hopelessness has a mediator effect (Cole & Turner, 1993). For instance, in their longitudinal study with 4th and 5th-grade children, Gibb and Alloy (2006) found that the level of children's hopelessness was a mediator between verbal victimization and the development of depression for both 4th and 5th-graders, while it was a moderator for only 5th-graders. Although the findings of this study are important in understanding hopelessness phenomenon, they do not address the relation between hopelessness and different kinds of victimization (e.g. physical) and bullying behaviors.

## **Methods**

### *Participants*

419 middle school students (203 girls, 216 boys), ages between 12 and 14, were surveyed on their exposure to and engagement in direct (physical and verbal) and indirect bullying and their level of hopelessness in their regular classrooms. Four middle schools in Istanbul, Turkey were randomly selected from two different school districts that vary according to

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