



# The promotive effects of peer support and active coping on the relationship between bullying victimization and depression among chinese boarding students



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## ABSTRACT

We examined the relationship between bully victimization experience and depression in rural adolescents and analyzed the moderating roles of peer support and active coping in male and female students. The sample comprised N=755 adolescents (376 females) with a mean age of 13.52 years. Through structural model and multi-group analysis, the results indicated: (1) a significant gender difference on the positive association between bullying victimization and depression; (2) peer support had a directly negative effect on depression among all boarding adolescents; and (3) significant moderating effect of active coping on the association between victimization and depression, without significant gender difference. We discuss enhancing active coping and peer support as a prevention strategy to reduce adverse mental health outcomes in adolescents due to bullying victimization.

## 1. Introduction

As the most common form of aggression and victimization in youth, bullying has aroused increasing attention by researchers and the public. Researchers have found that long-term experiences of being bullied likely causes deleterious effects on individuals' mental health, academic performance and social behavior (e.g., Fullchange and Furlong, 2016; Kaltiala-heino and Fröjd, 2011; Sweeting et al., 2006; Vassallo et al., 2014). Yet, despite coping with bullying in school, some youth develop with few internal or external problems (e.g., Averdijk et al., 2014; Sapouna and Wolke, 2013). Resilience theory provides an explanation for successful development despite adversity and suggests various promotive factors that help youth overcome risk exposure (Rutter, 1987; Zimmerman et al., 2013). According to resilience theory, both compensatory and protective factors are promotive factors that can help adolescents avoid the negative effects of risk exposure (Fergus and Zimmerman, 2005). Compensatory factors refer to variables that have an opposite, direct and independent effect on outcomes to counteract the exposure of risks, while protective factors moderate the negative effect of risks for predicting negative outcomes (Fergus and

Zimmerman, 2005; Zimmerman et al., 2013). Thus, protective factors change the effect of risks in an interactive way (Rutter, 1987). Researchers have identified social support as a vital protective factor against internal mental problems in bullied children (Wang et al., 2015; Wright, 2016). Active coping style has also been shown to protect adolescents from negative effectiveness of stressful experiences such as bullying victimization (Baldry and Farrington, 2005; Hemphill et al., 2014).

Since 2001, the number of primary and secondary students in rural areas in China has gradually decreased, prompting the government to merge these schools and establish boarding schools for students from rural areas. It is estimated that the boarding students in national compulsory education have reached 26.4million by the end of 2015, accounting for 27.8% of the total number of students in rural areas (Statistical Report, 2016). Generally, most Chinese boarding schools apply a closed (or semi-closed) management approach which requires students to live inside their school campus during the weekdays. Semi-closed management is less restrictive as students are allowed to leave their school campus after school, but they are required to return to sleep during the week. With the longer time spent with peers in a

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mostly closed context, boarding students experience a high rate of bullying events compared to their counterparts (Chui and Chan, 2015, 2013). Notably, boarding schools also have limited teacher resources so they cannot provide students with enough support and guidance to help both prevent bullying or help students cope with victimization effectively (Wang and Zhang, 2010; Wong et al., 2007). Consequently, these boarding adolescents without parents around face higher risk for undesirable mental health disorders resulting from bullying. We examine the role that peer support and active coping style may play to help moderate the effects of bully victimization on the mental health of Chinese boarding school adolescents.

### 1.1. Bullying victimization and depression

Bullying by peers, the most prevalent forms of bullying in schools, is a widespread problem transcending racial, cultural and geographic boundaries. Victimization among students is a common problem in both urban and rural schools in China (Gao and Chan, 2015; Pan and Spittal, 2013; Wang et al., 2012a, 2012b; Wong et al., 2007), however, the prevalence of bullying victimization varies. For instance, less bullying victimization is reported by students in Beijing than those in Hangzhou, Wuhan, and Urumqi (Chen et al., 2010; Pan and Spittal, 2013). Yet, research on school bullying victimization in China is in its infancy and requires considerably more research to better understand this issue.

Thus, considering the prevalence of school bullying, we focused on incidents involving both peer aggression and repeated aggression in a power imbalanced relationship between children (Olweus, 1993). Many researchers have examined the relationship between victimization and physical and mental health (e.g., Chen et al., 2010; Lee et al., 2016; van Geel et al., 2015). Researchers have suggested that—compared to externalizing problems—bullying victimization is more closely linked to internalizing outcomes (e.g., loneliness, anxiety, depression, suicide ideation; Boden et al., 2016; Bollmer et al., 2005; McVie, 2014). Even after controlling for confounding risk factors, researchers have consistently demonstrated victimization experience as a significant risk factor for an individual's mental health over time (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2010; Sansen et al., 2014; Ttofi et al., 2011; Zwierzyńska et al., 2013).

Sex difference should be considered when researchers investigate the association between bullying experiences and its outcomes. Researchers have reported that the relationship between bullying experience and internalizing or externalizing problems differs for males and females (Bond et al., 2001; Peskin et al., 2007; Reed et al., 2015; Turner et al., 2013). For example, bullied females report more severe depression symptoms and show more internalizing conflicts than males, who are more likely to exhibit externalizing problems (Herge et al., 2016; Peskin et al., 2007; Turner et al., 2013). Nevertheless, researchers have also reported no significant sex difference (e.g., Fekkes et al., 2006; Sweeting et al., 2006). Therefore, we hypothesize that the experience of bullying victimization among Chinese boarding adolescents in rural areas will be associated with more depression, and that the relationship will be stronger for females than males.

### 1.2. Peer support

Atri and Sharma (2006) indicated that social support provided both emotional and material resources that help youth cope with stress. The buffering model of social support proposes that social support from different sources (including family and peers) can reduce the negative effects of stressors on psychological and physical outcomes in vulnerable adolescents (Aneshensel and Stone, 1982). Numerous researchers across different populations and stressors have found support for this buffering hypothesis (e.g., Galand and Hospel, 2013; Ant3nio and Moleiro, 2015). Averdijk et al. (2014), for example, demonstrated that social support can protect against the deleterious effects of bullying victimization. In school settings, peer support is more accessible and effective for the bullied adolescents than family support (Natvig et al.,

2001). Additionally, it is hard for teachers to keep an eye on each student, especially in boarding schools, so peer support may be especially important in this context.

Brunstein Klomek et al. (2016) illustrated that students with more parental and peer support were less likely to engage in direct-self-injurious behavior after being bullied than students with less support. It is possible that supportive friends function as defenders against bullying to provide emotional and practical support, which makes the victimized children believe that they belong to a social group and they are not alone (Baumeister and Leary, 1995). Some researchers have not found sex difference in the moderating role of peer support between victimization and depressive symptoms (e.g., Cooley et al., 2015), but others have found that peer support for males was stronger than females (Cheng et al., 2008; Davidson and Demaray, 2007). We hypothesize that peer support will have a moderating effect on the influence of bullying experiences and depression, and that this effect will be stronger for males than females.

### 1.3. Active coping

Coping is a process of dealing with stressful situations through the changing of behavior, emotion, cognition or physiology. According to resilience theory, active coping is regarded as a constructive strategy and therefore a protective factor that reduces the negative effects of bullying victimization on the development of mental distress (Baldry and Farrington, 2005; Hemphill et al., 2014). Garnefski and Kraaij (2014) have suggested that students who choose active coping including positive refocusing or positive reappraisal might be more resilient than those using such styles as self-blame or rumination. Active coping represents an effort to exert some control and take action to overcome stress. Thus youth who are bullied, but take action to cope with being victimized (e.g., reporting to adults, avoiding interactions with the bully) instead of internalizing all the negative feelings may be less likely to suffer mental distress (Garnefski and Kraaij, 2014; Newman et al., 2011).

Moreover, due to different social expectations of traditional gender roles, in general males students are expected to be more likely to engage in active coping strategies than their female counterparts (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Skinner, 2002). Consequently, we hypothesize that active coping will have a moderating effect on the influence of bullying experience and depression, and that this effect will be stronger for females than males.

### 1.4. Control variable: stressful events

Ttofi et al. (2014) have suggested that it is crucial to control confounding factors when we investigate the association between bullying victimization and its consequences. Generally, stressful life events refer to a range of stressors, such as health-related problems, interpersonal stressors, and financial difficulties. Stressful life events require individuals to make considerable behavioral or ideological adjustment that may lead to a consequence of negative outcomes if they require too much adaptation (Marum et al., 2014). Researchers have found that adolescents in boarding schools experience stressful life events such as the absence from parent or guardian support and confinement of their school life (Huang et al., 2009; Manson et al., 1989). Researchers have also reported that the boarding school experience increases the probability of depression and psychological distress for some youth (e.g., Midgley et al., 2017; Risch et al., 2009; Sanchez et al., 2012). Therefore, we controlled for stressful life events that are particularly relevant for boarding school youth such as poor academic performance and leaving home (i.e., family) for a long time. In summary, the following three hypotheses were examined in the present study:

**Hypothesis 1.** The experience of bullying victimization among boarding adolescents in rural areas will be associated with depression.

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