

## Consequences of school bullying and violence

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***Abstract.** Numerous studies conducted over several decades have shown that victimization is associated with adjustment problems such as depression, low self-esteem, anxiety, suicidal ideation and school avoidance. It has also interpersonal correlates such as rejection and lack of friends. The strongest effect sizes are usually obtained for depression and other internalising problems. Longitudinal studies indicate that many of the concurrent correlates of victimization are both antecedents and consequences of it, suggesting a vicious cycle by which children get trapped in a role of continued victimization. Some moderating factors that might protect victimized children against the negative consequences have been investigated, but more research in this area is needed. Not only individual, but also interpersonal and social contextual factors might moderate the relationship between victimization experiences and adjustment problems. The results from two Finnish follow-up studies are presented: they indicate that in the short term, victimization contributes to an increasingly negative generalized view of peers over time. In the long term, victimization in grade eight predicts depression and a negative view of other persons in young adulthood (controlling for children's overall happiness and satisfaction in grade eight). Unlike victimization, perceived popularity and perceived family support in grade eight were not predictive of the outcome measures. The consequences of school bullying for the whole group are briefly discussed, and initial evidence of the association between the degree of victimization and dissatisfaction with school life at the classroom level is presented. Some future challenges in the study of consequences of bullying and victimization are delineated.*

### Victimization and well-being: concurrent associations

It is evident that children exposed to systematic victimization by their peers suffer from adjustment problems. The review by Hawker & Boulton (2000), based on studies conducted during two decades, showed that victimization is concurrently associated with depression, loneliness, both generalized and social anxiety, and low

global as well as social self-worth. The strongest effect sizes were observed for depression. Also Card, in his meta-analysis (2003), found victimization to be related to internalizing (but also externalising) problems, school avoidance, low academic achievement, and lack of school enjoyment. Furthermore, victimization had several interpersonal correlates such as rejection, having few friends, and low friendship quality. Also suicidal ideation and suicidal behavior were associated with victimization in the peer group. Some studies have found elevated levels of psychosomatic symptoms among victimized children (e.g., Kumpulainen et al., 1998).

There are somewhat differing views about the adjustment of school bullies. Some studies seem to suggest that aggressive children and/or adolescents are neither insecure nor anxious under their “tough surface” (e.g., Olweus, 1994), and might actually have a relatively positive view of themselves (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi and Lagerspetz, 1999; Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpää and Peets, in press) whereas others indicate that anxiety and depression are equally common among bullies and victims (e.g., Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Rantanen, & Rimpelä, 2000). Future studies might lead to a more accurate distinction between different types of bullies, and thus enable to explain the current controversies. What seems to be widely agreed on, however, is that bully-victims, i.e. children who are both aggressive and targets of systematic harassment, are highly maladjusted - more so than children who are only victimized (e.g., Kaltiala-Heino et al., 2000; Kumpulainen, Räsänen, & Puura, 2001; O’Moore and Kirkham, 2001; Schwartz, 2001). So far, most studies looking at the consequences of victimization have overlooked the interaction effects of victimization and other child characteristics (such as aggression) in predicting outcome variables of interest. For aggressive children, the consequences of victimization may be different than for the passive, nonaggressive victims.

#### Longitudinal evidence of negative influences

Overall, studies investigating the consequences of victimization while controlling for initial levels in the variables of interest are still surprisingly rare. In the meta-analysis by Card (2003), concurrent correlates of victimization were separated from the antecedents and consequences found in longitudinal studies. Card showed that consistently across longitudinal studies, victimization has been found to lead to both

internalising and externalizing problems, decreases in prosocial behavior, and lowered social self-concept. For global self-esteem, the case is less clear: it seems that there is more evidence of a low global self-esteem being an antecedent of victimization, than its consequence.

Rigby (2001) reported, in an Australian sample of adolescents, that victimization was related to problems with physical health (such as headaches, stomachaches, cough, sore throats, etc.) three years later, controlling for initial health status. It has been suggested that elevated stress levels might mediate the association between victimization and health problems.

A recent Finnish study (Salmivalli, 2004, unpublished data), investigated prospective links between three types of peer relationship problems: victimization, rejection, and friendlessness, and children's perception of themselves and of their age-mates (i.e., whether peers were viewed as hostile, untrustful, and unsupportive, vs. kind, trustful, and supportive). Data was collected at three time points, the second assessment taking place four months and the third assessment 12 months after the first one. At time of the first assessment, the participants were fifth- and sixth-graders, i.e. with 11-12 and 12-13 years of age. The results indicated that victimization was associated with an increasingly negative view of peers over time. The more a child was victimized, the more he/she started to perceive age-mates as hostile, untrustful, as having bad intentions, etc. Victimization had no influence on self-perception, however, but a negative self-perception was clearly an antecedent of victimization (as well as other peer problems such as rejection and lack of reciprocal friendships).

#### Long-term effects of victimization

Follow-up studies examining the long-term consequences of victimization are, to date, almost nonexistent. As an exception, Olweus (1994) followed up 87 men who had been assessed in grade 9 (and, most of them, also in grade 6) up to 23 years of age. The former victims were relatively well-adjusted in many respects. However, they had a lower self-esteem and they suffered from depression more often than their non-victimized age-mates.

In the University of Turku, Finland, a long-term follow-up of the consequences of victimization has just been conducted (Salmivalli, 2004, unpublished data). The sample consisted of 274 young adults (145 male and 129 female), who had been involved in a research on school bullying in grade 8 (1996), and were approached by mailed questionnaires eight years later, in 2004. The outcome measures included questionnaires regarding depression, self-perception, and generalized perception of other people. 52.4 % of men and 78.3 % of women who received the questionnaires responded: the overall response rate was thus 64.6 %.

The preliminary results have shown that victimization in adolescence, i.e. in grade eight (latent variable with self-reports, same-sex nominations and opposite-sex nominations as indicators of victimization) is associated with depression and a negative view of other people eight years later, even after controlling for “happiness and satisfaction” (Piers-Harris' self-concept measure, scale of emotional SC) in grade eight. Unlike victimization, neither perceived popularity among peers (e.g., I am not very popular; I have many friends) nor perceived family support (e.g., Nobody cares for me at home; My parents like me) in grade eight predicted any of the variance in the outcome variables. Estimating the model separately for men and women indicated a clear gender difference, however: the predictive paths from victimization to the negative outcomes were only significant among women.

Overall, many of the concurrent correlates of victimization seem to be both antecedents and consequences of it, suggesting a vicious cycle by which children get trapped in the role of continued victimization (Card, 2003). However, internalizing problems, such as depression, seem to increase as a function of victimization rather than precede it. Low global self-esteem, on the other hand, is clearly an antecedent of victimization, whereas evidence of longitudinal changes in self-esteem resulting from victimization is more mixed. Victimization clearly seems to influence children's view of other people, however, and there is evidence of a generalized negative peer-perception a risk for social maladjustment. A negative view of peers predicts lack of communal goals and consequently, shy/withdrawn behaviors (Salmivalli et al., in press). Negative peer-beliefs have also been found to be associated with feelings of loneliness (Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2003) and depression (Rudolph & Clark, 2001).

All children are not equally affected by victimization. More studies are needed about the mechanisms and possible moderators of influences - both in the short and in the long term.

#### Possible moderating factors

When victimized by peers, a child may attribute the cause of the maltreatment as being internal or external, stable or varying over time, controllable or outside his/her volitional influence. When it comes to psychosocial consequences of victimization, especially the internal/external dimension can be thought to be relevant. A child who tends to attribute the causes of negative social events to internal factors, blaming him- or herself for victimization (e.g., "I am harassed because *I am deviant*", or "I am harassed *because I can not behave as I should*"), may suffer from different -probably more severe - consequences than a child who makes external attributions in negative situations and, for instance, blames those who bully (e.g., "the other kids pick on me because *they are so mean*").

Characterological self-blame (see Graham & Juvonen, 2001; Janoff-Bulman, 1979) refers to attributing the causes of victimization to stable, internal and uncontrollable factors. Graham and Juvonen (2001) argue that this is the kind of attributions for victimization are the most maladaptive ones. Even behavioral self-blame (attributing the causes to unstable and controllable, while also internal factors) is more adaptive: a child believes that he or she might be able to do something to change his/her situation.

Not only intraindividual factors (such as causal attributions), but also interpersonal and social contextual factors might moderate the relationship between victimization experiences and adjustment problems. According to Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, and Bukowski (1999), friendship can be a powerful buffer against the adjustment problems caused by victimization. Supportive relationships within the family may also protect against the negative influences of peer adversities. Gauze, Bukowski, Aquan-Assee, and Sippola (1996) found that changes in children's friendship status (such as losing or gaining a friend) were related to concomitant changes in adjustment

for children from low-adaptive families only. Certain family conditions may also attenuate the influences of victimization: this is something the researchers have not paid very much attention to.

When it comes to group-level moderators, there may be protective social contexts as well. For instance, in school classes where the victim gets support from other group members, or where the bullying is generally disapproved of, the negative influences might be minimized.

Influences of bully-victim problems on the group

*Bukowski and Sippola (2001): "Victimization not only damages the individual, but damages the group itself as well as the individuals who constitute the group"*

It has been suggested that bullying and victimization have negative influences not only on individual children, but also on the group (for instance, students in a classroom). It is known, that when bullying is going on, most students in a classroom are aware of it, and many are present in actual bullying situations. Despite their anti-bullying attitudes, many students take on roles which encourage rather than discourage the bully's behavior (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen 1996; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). So far, methodologically sound empirical investigations of the influences of bullying at the classroom level are rare, if not nonexistent.

The few studies that exist are either based on concurrent data, or they neglect the hierarchical nature of school data (students nested within classrooms, nested within schools). Our examination of observed and experienced victimization and school satisfaction (Salmivalli, 2004, unpublished data) has the former limitation, but avoids the latter by looking at the relations between variables both at the student and classroom level.

With multilevel modeling, it is possible to disentangle the variance in school satisfaction between individual students, from variance between different school classes. Our data with 1220 students from 48 school classes (grades 4, 5, and 6)

shows, that there are between-classroom differences in observed victimization: intraclass correlation of .12 indicates that 12 % of the total variance in observed victimization is between different classrooms. Experienced victimization, on the other hand, varies between individual children but not between classrooms (96% of the variance is between individual children, only 4% between classrooms). For school satisfaction, again, there is a significant classroom effect. Predicting variation in school satisfaction both at the individual and at the classroom level, it was found that at the individual level, experienced victimization was associated with lowered level of school satisfaction (standardized path=.14,  $t=3.07$ ). The more a student was victimized, the greater the dissatisfaction. At the individual level, also child gender was a significant predictor of dissatisfaction: girls tended to be more satisfied with school life than boys. At the classroom level, overall level of victimization (latent variable constituted of observed and experienced victimization at the classroom level) was related to lowered level of school satisfaction (standardized path=.31,  $t=1.85$ ). In other words, in school classes where a lot of victimization was taking place, school satisfaction was low.

#### Future challenges

It is quite clear that victimization has negative consequences for the individual children who are targets of it. Victimization seems to lead to internalising problems such as depression, but also to a negative view of other people. Victimization explains variance in these outcomes even many years after the schooldays, in young adulthood. In the short term, victimization is associated with increases in internalising and externalising problems, anxiety, school avoidance, and even problems with physical health. More longitudinal studies are needed, however, in order to more carefully disentangle the antecedents of victimization from its consequences. Also, not much is known about the consequences of victimization for the aggressive victims. The risk trajectories for different subtypes of victims need to be illuminated.

A big challenge for bullying research is the study of both antecedents and consequences of victimization at the level of classrooms. Also, interaction of individual and classroom level factors in causing bully-victim problems is a challenge for future research. For instance, does the relationship between risk factors

(i.e., low self-esteem, peer rejection) and victimization vary from one classroom to another? The same idea can be applied to studying the consequences of victimization: are they also dependent on group-level factors such as immediate social support received from peer bystanders?

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