Relationships Between Bullying, Parental Support, and Social Anxiety

Jordan Wigfall

Mentor: Dr. Kenna Bolton Holz

University of Wisconsin Superior
Abstract

The present correlation study looked at bullying, social avoidance and anxiety, and parental support and how they interact. Participants completed questionnaires about the bullying they had experienced, their social anxiety/avoidance, and their experiences with parental support. Results indicated that greater levels of bullying predicted greater levels of social avoidance, and that parental support alone was not a significant predictor of social avoidance.
Relationships Between Bullying, Parental Support, and Social Avoidance

Bullying is a subset of aggression that is characterized by repetition, imbalance of power in favor of perpetrator(s), and intention to cause harm or distress. There are multiple manifestations of bullying including physical, verbal, social exclusion, and attempts to damage social relationships (Olweus, 1993; Smith & Brain, 2000). Bullying has become a serious problem in our school systems for the past few decades. There have been many studies on the effects bullying has on victims and on the bullies themselves. Bullying can cause social and physical problems throughout a person’s life (Espelage & Swearer, 2010; Hong & Espelage, 2012; Peguero, 2012).

Victims of bullying often have internalizing behavior (Kumpulainen et al., 1998), and are found to be immature, lonely, and have poor communication and problem solving skills (McClure & Shirataki, 1989), compared to those who have not been bullied. The poor communication and problem solving skills could stem from constantly being teased as a child and thinking that they will be teased again if they open up about things or try and solve problems. This is true for problem solving, because if someone could not solve the problem of being bullied as a child they might feel unable to solve problems as an adult. Olweus (1993) pointed out that involvement in bullying during childhood is related to future psychological distress. There has also been research that has determined that one-half of adults who were bullied as children have a long-term effect to their well-being, and this predominantly affected personal relationships (Hugh-Jones & Smith, 1999).

Being bullied during childhood may be related to future psychological distress. There are many forms of distress that one can encounter when it comes to bullying, but one form that shows significant issues is social anxiety among victims. Social anxiety is a form of anxiety,
which can be characterized by a discomfort or a fear when a person is in a social interaction with others that involves a concern of being judged or evaluated by others.

In the past there have been different ways of addressing bullying. Given a growing body of evidence on the concurrent and long-term consequences of bullying for both bullies (Rodkin et al., 2015) and victims (McDougal & Vaillancourt, 2015), considerable emphasis has been placed on finding the most effective ways to address bullying such as clinically, legally, and educationally (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Bradshaw (2015) provides a critical analysis of research on how schools can best address for the effectiveness of school wide, universal anti-bullying programs. The driving force is the underlying belief that peer victimization is an extremely difficult life experience with lasting and serious negative ramifications in the lives of young people and as such should be stopped (or at least reduced) through intervention and prevention efforts (McDougall & Vaillancourt).

Social anxiety can have devastating effects for children and adults. There have been some studies that have reviewed different forms of bullying and how they relate to anxiety in children and adults. One form that has been studied has been teasing; researchers have documented significant correlations of modest size between adults’ recollections of this form of childhood bullying and current levels of self-reported anxiety (McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson, 2003; McCabe, Miller, Laugesen, Antony, & Young, 2010; Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002; Storch et al., 2004; Strawser, Storch, & Roberti, 2005). Also, researchers have determined that bullying has a long-term effect on individuals because it can cause children to bring those concerns they had as children into their adulthood, and that can compromise their ability to function the same way as their peers. Strawser et al. (2005) presented a theory to account for this association, the theory looks at social anxiety and how it was particularly implicated as a long-
term correlate (perhaps outcome) of childhood teasing, and the importance of coping choices to emphasize a possible moderator of this association (Strawser et al., 2005). There is also a theory or hypothesis of “lack of belongingness” and how being bullied can violate a basic human need and can bring about serious physical and psychological distress (Baumeister & Leary, 1995, p.271). Baumeister and Leary (1995) explain that human beings have a pervasive drive to form and maintain at least a minimum quantity of lasting, positive, and significant interpersonal relationships with others (Baumeister & Leary, 1995).

Social anxiety is only one of the problems that bullying can cause; however, there are many different ways to help someone who is being bullied. Parental or adult intervention is one of the helping mechanisms, which was examined in this study. Over the years there has been little research on this mechanism and some have seen effective results of this kind of intervention. Since bullying research is linked to rich and broader literatures on social aggression, direct and indirect aggression, school violence, and fears about school safety (Saylor & Leach, 2009) it is important to note that there is a great deal of focus on intervention and adult support. Saylor and Leach have also pointed out that social support can be defined as the perception one has of being cared for, valued, and included by others within a network of parents, teachers, peers, and community members. This showed that adult support for children can be very helpful according to these studies. Kilpatrick and Malecki (2003) studied perceived frequency and importance of social support. These researchers found that students who were victims of bullying perceived teacher, parent and classmate support as more important and viewed themselves as having less total social support then both controls and bullies (Kilpatrick & Malecki, 2003).
Research suggested that support from friends and family can serve a protective role (McDougal & Vaillancourt, 2015). For example, having a best friend in elementary, middle and high school helped individuals become less victimized and will gave them a more protective support system (McDougal & Vaillancourt, 2015.) The researchers also discussed how family and teacher support can help with victimization. The critical impact of not having family support emerged from the finding that links between peer victimization and suicidal ideation in adolescence were strongest when perceived family support was low (Bonanno & Hymel, 2010).

There have been some prevention programs put into place, but they are still being tested to see if they are effective. The Olweus Bullying Prevention Program (Olweus, 2005) was one of the more effective prevention programs set in place to help with bully victimization. It is also a multicomponent school wide prevention model developed by Olweus. The program addresses bullying by implementing components at multiple levels, including school wide components, classroom activities and meetings, targeted interventions for individuals identified as bullies or victims, and activities aimed to increase involvement by parents, mental health workers, and so forth (Bradshaw, 2015).

The purpose of this study was to examine social experiences of adults who were bullied as children. Olweus (1993) suggested that as adults, victims are reported more likely to be depressed and to have poor self-esteem (Olweus, 1993). The goal of this research question was to determine if childhood bullying experiences predicts higher levels of social avoidance for adults. An additional goal is to determine whether adult support moderates this relationship. Understanding the relationships between bullying, adult support, and social avoidance will help with prevention and even possibly support other programs that already exist to make them better. Knowing if adult support can help will hopefully benefit kids throughout their adult years.
Method

Participants

The participants (N = 86) were undergraduate students recruited from psychology courses at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Participants were between the ages of 18 and 59 (M = 24.22, SD = 8.60). Participant-identified genders were Female (n = 67), Male (n = 17), Cisgender Male (n = 1), and Gender Fluid (n = 1). Participant-identified race was Caucasian/white (n = 79), Native American (n = 3), Native American/White (n = 1), Asian (n = 2), and Other (n = 1).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from psychology courses at the University of Wisconsin-Superior. Some participants received extra-credit for participating. Participants completed the informed consent and all surveys online. After the survey was complete the participants were given a debriefing form so they could seek any help they needed and with all the contact information for centers that would help with social anxiety. After filling out the survey they were instructed to a final page where it had all the information they needed if they wanted to get in contact with the primary investigator for further questions having to do with the study.

Measures

Child and Adolescent Social Support.

The Child and Adolescent Social Support Scale – Adapted (CASS) consists of 18 items assessing social support. The six item subscale geared specifically towards social support for children and adolescents was used in this study (Wohn, D. Y., Ellison, N. B., Khan, M. L., Fewins-Bliss, R., & Gray, R., 2013). The participants responded on a 7-point scale with 1-never and 7-all of the time, the higher the score the more support the participant received. A sample
item was, “when I was a child/adolescent, an adult in my life made suggestions when I didn’t know what to do” (Wohn et al., 2013). The obtained alpha in the current sample was .89.

**Social Avoidance and Distress.**

The Social Avoidance and Distress Scale (SAD) consists of 28 true-false format items to measure social avoidance (Watson & Friend, 1969). A sample item was, ‘I feel relaxed even in unfamiliar social situations” (Watson & Friend, 1969). Validity was supported by the finding that SAD total score was negatively correlated with affiliation and desirability (Watson & Friend, 1969). The obtained alpha in the current sample was .94.

**Personal Experience.**

The Personal Experiences Checklist (PECK) consists of 32 items that were used to determine how often an individual experienced various forms of bullying (Hunt, Peters, & Rapee, 2012). Validity of the PECK is supported by the finding of positive correlations with anxiety and depression symptoms (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000), and a negative correlation with self-perceived social competence (e.g., Hodges & Perry, 1999). The obtained alpha in the current sample was .95.

**Results**

The regression analysis included parental support, bullying, and the interaction between parental support and bullying as independent variables predicting social avoidance as the dependent variable. This model was significant, $R^2 = .20$, $F(3, 82) = 6.75, p < .001$. Greater levels of bullying predicted greater levels of social avoidance $\beta = -.11, t(82) = 2.36, p = .02$. Parental support alone was not a significant predictor of $\beta = .23, t(82) = 1.64, p = .11$. However, the interaction of bullying with parental support, predicted social avoidance $\beta = 2.94, t(82) = 2.79, p < .01$. 
Discussion

There was a significant effect in the moderation between support and bullying in terms of social avoidance. Support alone however was not a significant predictor of anxiety, but the interaction of support with the amount of bullying was. Bullying was the strongest predictor of avoidance. The primary focus should be on bullying prevention because parental support does not negate the negative impact of bullying itself.

Other studies have shown that there is a link between parental/adult support and victimization (Boulton, 2013). There are also theories that support the proposal that victimization leads to social anxiety and that coping choices act as moderators (Strawser et al., 2005). Doing research like this will help develop and refine theories and inform intervention efforts to have better ways of addressing bullying and victimization (Boulton, 2013). The main point behind this research study was to be able to determine if parental and/or adult support is related to lower social avoidance among individuals who have experienced bullying. Results supported this finding, but also indicated that bullying remained the strongest predictor of social avoidance even in the presence of parental support. Future research should look into developing programs that will help with prevention so that bullying becomes a thing of the past and will not affect any more people.

Limitations

One limitation of the current study was that the majority of participants identified as White/Caucasian, and students of other backgrounds were underrepresented relative to the overall population. This limitation could be changed in future research by sampling from more diverse populations. Men were also underrepresented in this study. These limitations could be addressed by sampling from more diverse populations. The time limit was also a factor in the
limitation of this study, had the study been able to go for a whole school year there could have been more participants and more feedback. These are just some limitations that were examined during this study and can be looked at and changed for future research and made better. Another limitation is the fact that it is not possible to draw a causal conclusion from these results. Also all the data is self-report and additional sources of information such as observe report, behavioral observation, etc. would strengthen conclusions.

Future Research

The research study originally was meant to look at children’s experience and to interview children, but there was not enough time or resources to accomplish this task. This is why the study asked adults (college students) about their background in school and how bullying and social avoidance has impacted their lives. Future research would be useful to address how culture, gender, and race may shape individuals’ experiences with bullying. For example, girls have been said to bully or cause problems in school in a different way than boys. According to studies girls will bully via emotional attributes and boys will bully in a more physical manner. There is some research that suggested that girls are more likely to be victims of verbal aggression, insults, gossip, manipulation, and social isolation by their peers, whereas boys are more likely to be victims of physical aggression (Dukes, Stein, & Zane, 2010; Finkelhor, 2008; Popp & Peguero, 2011); however, there is also research suggesting that, for girls, there is an increasing trend of engaging in physical bullying (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Klein, 2012; Swearer, 2008). This would be a fascinating study to conduct and see how these different ways of bullying might have different outcomes in regard to social avoidance. Another area for future research would be to look at longitudinal designs that follow students bullied as children all the way into adulthood to see how they have developed.
References


