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RISK FACTORS FOR AND OUTCOMES OF BULLYING AND VICTIMIZATION

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No individual exists in isolation. We are all products of the interaction between our biology and our environment. The "father of social psychology," Kurt Lewin, wrote that behavior is a function of the interaction between the individual and his or her environment (Lewin, 1936). This prophetic formula holds true for our understanding of bullying behavior. Individuals exist within multiple environments: home, school, neighborhood, church, community, and society. Within the interaction between individuals and these environments are risk factors for bullying and victimization. In this paper research on risk factors for bullying and victimization across multiple contexts-- individual, peer, school, family, community, and society will be synthesized. It is important to keep in mind that these factors do not exist in isolation. There is no, one single causal factor for bullying. In fact, it is the interaction between these multiple contexts defined as the social-ecology in which bullying and victimization unfold (Espelage & Swearer, 2004, 2011; Swearer & Doll, 2001; Swearer et al., 2006; Swearer et al., in press). Outcomes of bullying will be reviewed, with the call to address bullying as a social-ecological problem that requires prevention and intervention efforts to target the interaction between individuals and their multiple environments in order to be effective.

Prevalence of bullying and victimization. Given the vast methodological variation in studying bullying and victimization and the fact that bullying is a phenomenon that is idiosyncratic to individual schools and communities, determining accurate prevalence rates is spurious at best. To date, there is no longitudinal, nationally representative assessment of bullying and victimization in the United States. However, one study analyzed prevalence rates for bullying and victimization across 22 countries and found that in the U.S. prevalence rates were 22.1% for male bully perpetrators; 15.1% for female bully perpetrators; 23.7% for male victims; 18.8% for female victims; 10.6% for male bully-victims; and 4.9% for female bully-victims (Cook, Williams, Guerra, & Kim, 2010). However, until a nationally representative, longitudinal study on bullying and victimization is conducted, prevalence rates will reflect differences in sample characteristics and methodology.

Individual Risk Factors

Gender. While both girls and boys are involved in bullying perpetration and victimization, research has found that boys are involved in bullying at greater rates than girls (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010).

Grade level. Bullying has generally been shown to be most prevalent in middle school (Nansel et al., 2001); however, research has suggested that bullying peaks during school transition (i.e., between elementary and middle school and between middle and high school) as youth are negotiating new peer groups and use bullying as a means to achieve social dominance (Pellegrini et al., 2011).

Ethnicity. Involvement in bullying is a cross-cultural phenomenon (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010) and transcends ethnicity. However, research has shown that

students who are in the ethnic minority in a school are more likely to be bullied than students who are in the ethnic majority (Graham, 2006).

Religious orientation. Surprisingly, while the media has reported on the connection between bullying and religious orientation (i.e., Muslims in the United States), a paucity of research on this risk factor for bullying has been conducted. In a study of 243 Hindu, Muslim, and Pakistani children in the U.K., 57% of boys and 43% of girls reported being bullied because of religious or cultural differences (Eslea & Mukhtar, 2000). Indeed, most students report being bullied because they are different from the normative group (Swearer & Cary, 2003).

Socioeconomic status. Greater disparities between socioeconomic status within a country were associated with higher levels of victimization (Due et al., 2009). Other research has found that low income status was a risk factor for aggression in male and female students (Harachi et al., 2005). However, it is likely that the relationship between socioeconomic status and being bullied is contextually-driven and varies across communities.

Poor social skills. Bullying has been called a "social relationship problem" (Pepler, Jiang, Craig, & Connolly, 2008). Indeed, victims, bully-victims, and some bullies display deficits in social skills (Cook et al., 2010).

Superior social skills. However, among a subset of bully perpetrators there are students who are perceived as popular and cool (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & VanAcker, 2006). For these youth, their popularity status affords them high social standing

which contributes to their ability to bully and manipulate others.

Low academic achievement. The relationship between bullying and academic achievement is complicated. Some research has demonstrated that victims and bully victims do poorly in school (Glew, Fan, Katon, Rivara, & Kernic, 2005), while other research has found that the connection between being bullied and low academic achievement is more robust when there is low parental support and school disengagement (Beran, 2008).

Sexual orientation. Recent media reports have drawn attention to youth who have been bullied due to their sexual orientation. Research conducted with 7,261 students (ages 13 to 21) in 2009 found that 84.6% of LGBT students reported being verbally harassed, 40.1% reported being physically harassed and 18.8% reported being physically assaulted at school in the past year because of their sexual orientation (GLSEN, 2009).

Disability status. The research on bullying toward and by students with disabilities has yielded mixed results. Some research has found that students on the autism spectrum are more likely to be victimized than their non-disabled peers (Little, 2002). Other research has found that students with behavior disorders are more likely to perpetrate bullying, but the bullying behavior may be retaliatory, in response to being bullied (Rose, 2011).

Externalizing behavior. One of the DSM-IV-TR criteria for conduct disorder is "often bullies, threatens, or intimidates others." Bullying is an aggressive behavior and studies have consistently found an association between conduct problems and

bullying (Cook et al., 2010). Youth who are bully-victims have reported the highest levels of conduct-disordered behavior (Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004).

Internalizing symptoms. Research has found that bully-victims, victims, and bullies all experience depressive disorders. In one study, 18% of bully-victims, 13% of bullies, and 10% of victims experienced depression (Kumpulainen, Rasanen, & Puura, 2001), which is higher than the estimated 8.3% of adolescents who are diagnosed with a depressive disorder (NIMH, 2011). Other research has supported the finding that bully-victims are at the greatest risk for experiencing comorbid internalizing and externalizing problems (Cook et al., 2010). In a recent study depression and suicidality were predictors of both bullying and victimization (Swearer et al., in press).

Peer Group Risk Factors

Homophily. This term is captured by the proverb, "birds of a feather flock together" and the homophily hypothesis has been shown to explain how bullying is a peer group phenomenon (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003).

Peer norms. When members in a peer group are involved in bullying, the other members tend to take part. Additionally, students who are involved in bully perpetration tended to come from larger peer groups (Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997).

Delinquency. Negative peer influence was found to predict involvement in bullying and victimization (Cook et al., 2010). In a recent study, the strongest predictor of both bullying and victimization was delinquency (measured as engaging in vandalism, being a member of a gang, and carrying a weapon

onto school property) (Swearer et al., in press).

Alcohol/Drug use. The relationship between alcohol/drug use and bullying is well-documented. In a study of middle through high school students, researchers found that aggressive victims and aggressive non-victims were more likely than their non-aggressive counterparts to use drugs and alcohol (Brockenbrough, Cornell, & Loper, 2002) and a study of 43, 093 U.S. adults found that bullying was significantly correlated with lifetime alcohol and drug use (Vaughn, Bender, DeLisi, Beaver, Perron, & Howard, 2010). Thus, involvement in bullying is related to concurrent alcohol/drug use as well as future alcohol/drug use.

School Risk Factors

School climate. The adults in our nation's schools play a major role in creating a positive or negative school climate. When the school climate is not supportive and unhealthy, then bullying and concomitant problems proliferate (Kasen, Johnson, Chen, Crawford, & Cohen, 2011). Schools where high levels of bullying exist are schools that have a negative and punitive school climate.

Teacher attitudes. When adults in the school system ignore bullying or feel that bullying is just "kids being kids," then higher levels of bullying will exist (Holt, Keyes, & Koenig, 2011).

Classroom characteristics. Schools are comprised of classrooms and it stands to reason that healthy classroom environments will have less bullying and victimization. There are four classroom characteristics that have been found to be associated with greater levels of bullying and victimization:

(1) negative peer friendships, (2) poor teacher-student relationships, (3) lack of self-control, and (4) poor problem-solving among students (Doll, Song, Champion, & Jones, 2011).

Academic engagement. When students are challenged and motivated to do well in school, engagement in bullying and victimization is lower. Students involved in bullying and victimization are less academically engaged (Nansel, Haynie, & Simons-Morton, 2003).

School belonging. Elementary students who bullied others reported lower rates of school belonging than students who were victimized or not involved in bullying (Ma et al., 2009). Data from 16,917 middle and high school students showed that feelings of school belonging were associated with less bullying and victimization (Swearer et al., in press).

Family Risk Factors

Parental characteristics. In a synthesis of research on family characteristics of bullies, bully-victims, and victims, psychologist Renae Duncan (2011) found that bullies typically come from families with low cohesion, little warmth, absent fathers, high power needs, permit aggressive behavior, physical abuse, poor family functioning, and authoritarian parenting. Bully-victims come from families with physical abuse, domestic violence, hostile mothers, powerless mothers, uninvolved parents, neglect, low warmth, inconsistent discipline, and negative environment. Male victims had mothers who were overprotective, controlling, restrictive, coddling, overinvolved, and warm while their fathers were distant, critical, absent, uncaring, neglectful, and controlling. Female victims

had mothers who were hostile, rejecting, withdrawing love, threatening, and controlling, while their fathers were uncaring and controlling.

Family discord. Being in a family where parents fight and use drugs and alcohol and who are physically or sexually abusive predicted both bully perpetration and victimization (Swearer et al., in press). Youth who bully others consistently report family conflict and poor parental monitoring (Cook et al., 2010).

Community Risk Factors

Neighborhoods. Characteristics of neighborhoods have a significant effect on bullying behavior (Cook et al., 2010). Neighborhoods that are unsafe, violent, and disorganized are breeding grounds for bullying. Living in a safe, connected neighborhood predicted less bullying and victimization (Swearer et al., in press).

Societal Risk Factors

Media. Decades of research have examined the question of whether or not exposure to violent video games, television, and film are associated with greater levels of aggression. In fact, meta-analyses of these studies clearly support the fact that media violence is correlated with aggressive and antisocial behavior (Gentile, 2003). A recent study examining the dosage effects of playing mature video games predicted greater risk for bully perpetration among middle school students (Olson, Kutner, Baer, Beresin, Warner, & Nicholi, 2009).

Intolerance. Discrimination and prejudice have been documented since Biblical times. Prejudices such as homophobia, sexism,

classism, racism, set fertile ground for bullying and victimization.

Outcomes of Bullying and Victimization

The aforementioned social-ecological risk factors for bullying and victimization clearly paint a bleak picture for the outcomes of bullying and victimization. The bottom line is that without effective intervention, the consequences of bullying and victimization are dire for individuals, peer groups, schools, families, communities, and society at large.

Biological. Studies of early social deprivation have demonstrated that the social environment alters brain functioning (Chugani et al., 2001). This and other research have been extended to our understanding of how bullying experiences can alter brain chemistry and functioning. The stress of being bullied has been hypothesized to depress immune functioning and research has found that cortisol moderated the link between being bullied and physical health (Vaillancourt et al., 2010). As neuroscientists have long argued, it is impossible to separate the brain from behavior.

Educational. According to the National Association of School Psychologists (http://www2.ed.gov/admins/lead/safety/trai ning/bullying/bullying_pg14.html), over 160,000 students miss school each day due to fears of being bullied. It stands to reason that bullying detracts from academic achievement and research supports this negative outcome (Glew et al., 2005).

Psychological. The psychological outcomes of bullying are well-established in the research literature. Individuals involved in bullying and victimization have higher

levels of depression, anxiety, and externalizing behavior (Cook et al., 2010; Menesini, Modena, & Tani, 2009; Espelage & Swearer, 2011).

Conclusion

Two decades of basic research have illuminated the risk factors and negative outcomes of bullying and victimization. The picture for our nation's youth is bleak. Researchers and educators have argued that research across the social ecology must inform bullying prevention and intervention practices if we ever hope to significantly reduce bullying in our nation's schools (Swearer, Espelage, Vaillancourt, & Hymel, 2010). Bullying and victimization are social-ecological phenomena that require comprehensive, data-based prevention and intervention efforts.

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