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Long-Term Consequences of Bullying in Adolescence

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ABSTRACT: Bullying behavior is a serious problem among school-age children and adolescents; it has short- and long-term effects on the individual who is bullied, the individual who bullies, the individual who is bullied and bullies others, and the bystander present during the bullying event. The physical health consequences of bullying can be immediate, such as physical injury, or they can involve long-term effects, such as headaches, sleep disturbances, or somatization. However, the long-term physical consequences of bullying can be difficult to identify and link with past bullying behavior versus being the result of other causes such as anxiety or other adverse childhood events that can also have physical effects into adulthood. Stress has ubiquitous effects on physiology and the brain, alters levels of many hormones and other biomarkers, and ultimately affects behavior. Therefore, both a general understanding of stress during early adolescence and, where known, specific links between stress and bullying can provide insight into the enduring effects of bullying.

KEYWORDS-bullying, adolescents, consequences, physiology, psychology, brain

I.INTRODUCTION

Bullying is a serious problem that affects the lives of countless adolescent, adolescents and adults. No one should have to feel unsafe or threatened by someone else, but it happens all too often in our society. While bullying can manifest itself in many different forms, the effects it has on an individual are always significant. From mental health issues to decreased self-esteem and even perpetuating cycles of further bullying behavior, the consequences of bullying can have long-lasting and damaging impacts. Is overthinking hindering your productivity and happiness? Take our overthinking quiz to gain insights and find strategies for managing it effectively.[1,2,3]

- Mental Health Issues: Bullying has been linked to a variety of mental health issues, including depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Victims of bullying often suffer from feelings of helplessness and hopelessness as they struggle to cope with the relentless verbal and physical abuse. As these negative feelings build up, they can manifest as more serious mental health issues that require professional help to overcome.
- Low Self-Esteem: Bullying can do a lot of damage to an individual's self esteem. When someone is constantly put down and belittled, it's hard for them to feel good about themselves. Victims of bullying may begin to believe the negative things they are told and feel like they're not good enough. This can lead to a cycle of low self-esteem that is difficult to break out of.
- Perpetuating Bullying Behavior: Unfortunately, bullying isn't just a one-way street. Victims of bullying may end up becoming bullies themselves as a result of the trauma and pain that they have experienced. This behavior can



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perpetuate the cycle of bullying, as those who have been victims may act out their aggression on others in the same manner that they have been treated.

The experience of being bullied can end up causing lasting damage to victims. This is both self-evident, and also supported by an increasing body of research. It is not necessary to be physically harmed in order to suffer lasting harm. Words and gestures are quite enough. In fact, the old saying, "Sticks and stones may break my bones but names will never harm me" is more or less exactly backwards. For the most part, physical damage sustained in a fist fight heals readily, especially damage that is sustained during the resilient childhood years. What is far more difficult to mend is the primary wound that bullying victims suffer which is damage to their self-concepts; to their identities. Bullying is an attempt to instill fear and self-loathing. Being the repetitive target of bullying damages your ability to view yourself as a desirable, capable and effective individual.

There are two ugly outcomes that stem from learning to view yourself as a less than desirable, incapable individual. The first ugly outcome is that it becomes more likely that you will become increasingly susceptible to becoming depressed and/or angry and/or bitter. Being bullied teaches you that you are undesirable, that you are not safe in the world, and (when it is dished out by forces that are physically superior to yourself) that you are relatively powerless to defend yourself. When you are forced, again and again, to contemplate your relative lack of control over the bullying process, you are being set up for Learned Helplessness (e.g., where you come to believe that you can't do anything to change your ugly situation even if that isn't true), which in turn sets you up for hopelessness and depression.

At the same time, you may be learning that you are helpless and hopeless, you are also learning how you are seen by bullies, which is to say, you are learning that you are seen by others as weak, pathetic, and a loser. And, by virtue of the way that identity tends to work, you are being set up to believe that these things the bullies are saying about you are true.

It would be great if the average person was possessed of unshakable self-confidence, but this just isn't how identity works. Identity is a social process. Other people contribute to it. Particularly when people are young and have not yet survived a few of life's trials, it is difficult for people to know who they are and what they are made of. Much of what passes for identity in the young (and in the older too) is actually a kind of other-confidence, which is to say that many people's self-confidence is continually shored up by those around them telling them in both overt and subtle ways that they are good, worthy people. This is one of the reasons people like to belong to groups – it helps them to feel good about themselves. Bullying teaches people that they are explicitly not part of groups; that they are outcasts and outsiders. It is hard to doubt the reality of being an outcast and an outsider when you have been beaten or otherwise publicly humiliated. It takes an exceptionally confident (or otherwise well-supported) person to not internalize bullies' negative messages and begin bullying yourself by holding yourself to the same standards that bullies are applying to you and finding yourself a failure. In other words, it is rather easy for bullying victims to note that they have been beaten up and then to start thinking of themselves as weak, no-good, worthless, pathetic, and incompetent. These are the sorts of thoughts that lead to depression, or, if they are combined with revenge fantasies, to anger and rage feelings.[4,5,6]



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Where the first ugly outcome of bullying unfolds rather immediately in the form of a wounded self-concept, the second ugly outcome unfolds more slowly over time. Having a wounded self-concept makes it harder for you to believe in yourself, and when you have difficulty believing in yourself, you will tend to have a harder time persevering through difficult situations and challenging circumstances. Deficits in academic performance can easily occur when bullying victims succumb to depression or otherwise become demoralized. They certainly also occur when victims ditch school to avoid bullies. The deficits themselves are not the real issue. The real issue is that if deficits occur for too long or become too pronounced, the affected adolescent can lose out on opportunities for advancement and further study, and ultimately, employment. I've read retrospective studies where people report having left school early so as to avoid continued bullying, and this of course will have altered and limited the job prospects they have available to them as adults. Leaving school may be a dramatic (if occasionally realistic) example of how early bullying can affect one's life, but there are surely other ways that anger or depression caused by bullying harms and developmentally delays people's progress.

Inevitably, it is the sensitive kids who get singled out for teasing; the kids who cry easily; the easy targets. Targeted as they are, many sensitive kids learn to think of their sensitivity as a bad thing and to avoid it, and/or channel it into revenge fantasy and anger. This doesn't much work when you are a kid (it is difficult to reinvent yourself without actually moving to a new place), and it can have negative consequences in adulthood when the same adolescent, now emotionally avoidant or angry or cynical adults, find themselves having difficulty entering into or maintaining loving and warm intimate relationships.

A similar form of damage comes when bullied kids internalize negative attitudes concerning aspects of themselves that set them apart from others, such as their sexual orientation, minority group membership, or religious affiliation. In such cases, bullying sets up a peer pressure to reject aspects of one's self which are fundamentally not rejectable, and thus a potentially lifelong tension gets set up inside that person. If anyone out there has a better idea for how someone can end up become a homosexual-hating homosexual, or a jew-hating jewish person or other seemingly self-contradictory person I'd like to know about it.[7,8,9]

The following list, culled from my reading on this subject, summarizes some of the effects bullying victims may experience:

In the short term:

- Anger
- Depression
- Anxious avoidance of settings in which bullying may occur.
- Greater incidence of illness
- Lower grades than non-bullied peers
- Suicidal thoughts and feelings (In one British retrospective bullying experiences survey I came across (of unknown scientific value), 20% of the sample attempted suicide secondary to having been bullied, whereas only 3% of participants who were not bullied attempted suicide). In the long term:



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- Reduced occupational opportunities
- Lingering feelings of anger and bitterness, desire for revenge.
- Difficulty trusting people
- Interpersonal difficulties, including fear and avoidance of new social situations
- Increased tendency to be a loner
- Perception of self as easy to victimize, overly sensitive, and thin-skinned
- Self-esteem problems (don't think well of self)
- Increased incidence of continued bullying and victimization

A few interesting observations of factors that seem to lessen the negative impact that bullying has on people have come to my attention during the process of cataloging the ways that bullying can mess you up. For instance:

Perception of Control

A 2004 Spanish college student sample study suggests that there is a direct relationship between victim's perception of control over their bullying experience and the extent of long term difficulties they experience as a result of bullying. This is to say, that bullied students who believed they were able to influence and/or escape their bullies reported fewer negative long term effects from having been bullied than did students who felt helpless to influence their situation while it was happening. Perception of control (and not reality of control) was key in this study, as no relationship was found between the various ways that students coped with being bullied and how they turned out. I can see the outline of a mechanism working here (where students who believed they still had control over their situations avoided developing learned helplessness and therefore had less of a chance of experiencing depression). However the study doesn't really help us to know what to recommend that people do to lessen their chances of long term problems. Remember, it didn't matter what the students actually did; it only mattered what they believed.

If we go with the idea that believing you have control over events is important then the thing to do if you are being bullied is to keep persevering in your efforts to stop the bullying as though those efforts will result in your being able to get the bullying to stop. No single thing you do may actually stop the bullying from happening, but the effect of continually working under the assumption that you haven't tried all options and may still get the bullying to stop may do the trick. And, of course, you might actually get the bullying to stop because of something you do or don't do.[10,11,12]

Rather than try to control the past (which is impossible), it might make more sense for hurting victims to get themselves to focus on what they can control in the present, for the benefit of their future happiness and fulfillment. As the poet George Herbert's classic phrase wisely advises us, "living well is the best revenge".

II.DISCUSSION

Effects on the bullied victim can include:

- Social isolation
- Feelings of shame
- Sleep disturbance
- Changes in eating habit



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- Low self-esteem
- School avoidance
- Symptoms of anxiety
- Bedwetting
- Higher risk of illness
- Psychosomatic symptoms (stomachaches, headaches, muscle aches, other physical complaints with no known medical cause)
- Poor school performance
- Symptoms of depression

Poor school performance (missed school due to suspensions increases this risk) • Increased truancy risk • Difficulty maintaining social relationships • Increased risk of substance abuse

One longitudinal study led by a group of scientists in Norway investigated the long-term psychological effects of adolescents. Results of the study indicated that all groups involved in bullying during adolescence, both bullies and victims, experienced adverse mental health outcomes in adulthood. While the victims showed a high level of depressive symptoms in adulthood, both groups experienced an increased risk of psychiatric hospitalization due to mental health disorders.

With immediate and proper mental health treatment and support systems in place, victims can stave off some of the potential long-term consequences of bullying. Without intervention, however, kids are at risk for the following:

- Chronic depression
- Increased risk of suicidal thoughts, suicide plans, and suicide attempts
- Anxiety disorders
- Post-traumatic stress disorder
- Poor general health Self-destructive behavior, including self-harm
- Substance abuse
- Difficulty establishing trusting, reciprocal friendships and relationships[13,14,15]

Without proper treatment, bullying behavior is likely to continue into adulthood.

- Risk of spousal or child abuse Risk of antisocial behavior Substance abuse
- Less likely to be educated or employed

Childhood bullying has serious effects on both short and long-term health of adolescent. Immediate intervention and long-term follow-up can help mediate some of these effects. It is imperative that schools, families, and communities work together to understand bullying and its consequences and find ways to decrease, and hopefully eradicate, bullying both in schools and communities.

III.RESULTS

Few prospective studies have examined how early bullying experiences impact long-term adjustment and the differential impact of adolescent's co-occurring bullying and peer victimization involvement on adjustment in adulthood. This study addressed these gaps by examining subgroups of first graders involved in bullying and associations with four outcomes in early adulthood, including (a) Major Depression diagnosis, (b) post-high school suicide attempt, (c) on-time high school graduation, and (d) criminal justice involvement. Additionally, middle school standardized reading test scores and suspensions were examined as potential mechanisms through which



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early bullying involvement is associated with adult outcomes. Participants were 594 adolescent from nine urban elementary schools in the United States who participated in a randomized controlled trial of two school-based universal prevention interventions. Latent profile analyses using peer nominations identified three subgroups: (a) High involvement bully-victims, (b) Moderate involvement bully-victims, and (c) Low/No involvement youth. Compared to the No/Low involvement class, High involvement bully-victims were less likely to graduate high school on time (OR = 0.48, p = .002) and Moderate involvement bully-victims were more likely to be involved in the criminal justice system (OR = 1.37, p = .02). High bully-victims were at greater risk for both not graduating high school on-time and criminal justice system involvement, which were partially explained by 6th grade standardized reading test scores and suspensions. Moderate bully-victims were less likely to graduate high school on time, which was partially explained by 6th grade suspensions. [16,17,18]

Bullying involvement in school settings – as an aggressor, victim, or both – can negatively impact concurrent and short-term adjustment for adolescent and adolescents. These negative outcomes have been widely documented in an array of youth adjustment domains including social, emotional, behavioral, physical, and academic realms (Ettekal et al., 2014; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine [NASEM], 2014). In addition to well-established short-term effects, bullying involvement may have long-term effects, even into adulthood. Increasingly, researchers are examining these possible long-term effects, with investigations finding impacts on more distal processes such as later physical and mental health, criminal justice system involvement, and even educational and economic success in adulthood (Ladd et al., 2013; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2014; Olweus, 2011; Wolke et al., 2013).

Long-term outcomes of bullying involvement are only beginning to be explored but are critical to our understanding of how early peer experiences may influence adolescent's pathways to adulthood (Ladd et al., 2013; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2014; Olweus, 2011). In particular, several experiences are linked with poor long-term health and well-being in adulthood, such as delaying or not graduating from high school, entry into the criminal justice system, and experiencing serious mental health problems such as major depression and suicide attempts (Bradshaw, Schaeffer, et al., 2010; Brière et al., 2014; Liem et al., 2010; Ramchand et al., 2009; Sweeten et al., 2009). There also is some evidence that these experiences are related to negative peer problems, including bullying involvement (e.g., Hong et al., 2014; Klomek et al., 2010; Olweus, 2011; Stapinski et al., 2014). Thus, it is important to explore the long-term effects of bullying involvement in early elementary school on these crucial educational, psychological, and behavioral indicators for young adults.

In addition to a lack of research on adult outcomes related to early bullying involvement, most studies classify adolescent as either bullies or victims, which does not account for adolescent who both perpetrate bullying and experience victimization. Examining this co-occurrence is crucial to the study of adult outcomes as adolescent who participate in both bullying roles often experience more dire outcomes than adolescent who just bully, or adolescent who are just victims (e.g., Copeland et al., 2013; Wolke et al., 2013). Thus, these different roles in bullying (i.e., bully, victim, and bully-victim) in early elementary school may predict separate pathways between early bullying involvement and negative outcomes in adulthood. In addition, it is unclear what mechanisms underlie these pathways from early bullying involvement to delaying or failing to graduate high school, criminal justice system involvement, and experiencing serious mental health problems in early adulthood. Therefore, it is essential to explore heterogeneity in adolescent's roles in bullying perpetration and victimization and how such heterogeneity in involvement may affect functioning in early adulthood, as well as mechanisms that help explain the pathways from early bullying involvement to these negative outcomes in adulthood. Finally, much of the current longitudinal



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research on bullying involvement has been conducted in predominantly white (e.g., Copeland et al., 2013; Kim et al., 2011; Ladd et al., 2013; Takizawa et al., 2014; Vaillancourt et al., 2013; Wolke et al., 2013) and predominantly middle to high income samples (e.g., Kim et al., 2011; Ladd et al., 2013; Vaillancourt et al., 2013). Although short-term longitudinal studies of bullying involvement are increasingly being conducted in more diverse samples (e.g., Bettencourt et al., 2013; Davis et al., 2013), there is a need for additional work exploring the long-term impacts of bullying involvement in racially/ethnically and socioeconomically marginalized populations.

The present study addressed these research gaps by examining associations between adolescent's involvement in both bullying perpetration and victimization in first grade and four key outcomes in early adulthood, including (a) being diagnosed with Major Depressive Disorder, (b) post-high school suicide attempt, (c) not graduating high school on time, and (d) involvement in the criminal justice system. In addition, using a multi-finality framework (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2014), we explored possible mediating mechanisms signaling educational difficulties, including low reading achievement and disciplinary problems in the first year of middle school, a key developmental switch point for adolescent (Dodge & Pettit, 2003). Finally, we explored these longitudinal relations in a largely understudied sample of predominantly Black and low-income youth drawn from an urban area with demonstrated structural racism and low resources. The following sections describe the importance of identifying bullying subgroups, how subgroup membership might be related to adult outcomes, and the possible mediating mechanisms that help explain relations between early bullying involvement and later problems in young adulthood.

Types of bullying subgroups

Studies vary in how bullying involvement is defined, although most consider bullying to include (a) aggressive behavior(s) towards a peer or peers, (b) an observed or perceived power imbalance between aggressor and recipient, and (c) aggressive behaviors that occur repeatedly over time (Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus, 1993). Most studies have largely focused on bullying involvement in late childhood and adolescent samples

Theoretical frameworks guiding this study

The present study views bullying through a multifinality framework, in which the long-term outcomes of young adolescent's role in bullying varies depending on possible intermediate mechanisms. In this model, adolescent who start on a trajectory of bullying perpetration and/or victimization in early elementary school may or may not experience negative outcomes (Cicchetti & Rogosch, 1996; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2014).[19]

IV.CONCLUSION

In sum, our conclusion suggest that involvement in bullying perpetration and victimization in early elementary school places adolescent on a negative trajectory that includes significant school difficulties in middle school, which in turn increases risk for failing to graduate high school on time and becoming involved with the criminal justice system in early adulthood.[20]

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