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The relationship between staff maltreatment of students and bully-victim group membership[☆]

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ABSTRACT

Objectives: The current study presents the prevalence of students' reports of physical and emotional maltreatment by school staff and examines the differences between these reports according to the students' category of involvement in school bullying (only bullies, only victims, bully-victims, and neither bullies nor victims).

Method: This study is based on a large, nationally representative sample of 16,604 students in grades 7–11 in 324 schools across Israel, who completed questionnaires during class. Using Multivariate Analyses of Variance (MANOVA), the study explores the differences between bully-victim group memberships on their reports of staff maltreatment. It also examines the interaction of students' gender, nation (Jewish vs. Arab students) and school level (junior high vs. high school student) with physical and emotional maltreatment.

Results: Significant MANOVA results were found for gender (boys more than girls), nation (Arabs more than Jews) and bully-victim group membership for both emotional and physical maltreatment. Post hoc follow-up analyses revealed that bully-victims reported significantly more staff maltreatment than other students, followed by bullies and victims. Students who were not involved in bullying reported the lowest levels of staff maltreatment. In addition, the interaction analysis revealed that differences in bully-victim subgroup membership vary by gender, nations and school level in both physical and emotional maltreatment.

Conclusion: The findings showed that levels of staff maltreatment toward students vary according to the category of students' involvement in bullying, with bully-victims boys being at the highest risk. These findings mirror past research suggesting that bully-victims present multiple challenges for school staff and they are in need for special attention.

Practice implication: The findings emphasize the need to invest more efforts in helping bully-victims that were found at highest risk for staff maltreatment in both Jewish and Arab schools. Furthermore, it is essential to support teachers to help them cope effectively with difficult situations without resorting to aggression. To achieve this goal, training opportunities for teachers in Israel and other countries need to be expanded. This intervention should be designed and implemented from a "whole school" approach that includes students, school staff, and parents.

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Introduction

While student aggression at school receives widespread attention, only limited notice has been taken of students' maltreatment by school staff (Hyman & Perone, 1998). In addition, many of previous studies that examined staff maltreatment have focused on reporting on the prevalence of the phenomenon or examined the student characteristics that are related to teachers' maltreatment, such as gender, age, and socioeconomic status (Chianu, 2000; Delfabbro et al., 2005; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Kim et al., 2000; Office of Civil Rights, 1998; Shumba, 2002; Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998; Zindi, 1995). These studies have reported high levels of staff maltreatment; for instance, in Israel, Khoury-Kassabri, Astor, and Benbenishty (2008) found that 28.3% of students reported emotional maltreatment and 14.9% reported physical maltreatment by school staff during the last month.

Previous studies that have attempted to identify the risk factors for staff maltreatment have found that these factors range from neighborhood and community factors to various features of the students' families. For instance, higher levels of emotional, physical, and sexual maltreatment were found in schools located in low socioeconomic status (SES) communities and that had a large proportion of students from low SES families. In addition, in Israel more maltreatment by school staff was found among Arab students compared to Jewish students (Khoury-Kassabri, 2006). Others focused on students' attributes, such as gender and age, and found that boys are more frequently maltreated by school staff than girls (Anderson & Payne, 1994; Gregory, 1995; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006). Students in primary and junior high school reported more physical maltreatment by school staff than students in high school (Khoury-Kassabri, 2006).

However, little is known about the behavioral characteristics of the maltreated students. In that respect, some researchers and school personnel indicated that many teachers use corporal punishment as a reaction to unaccepted or aggressive student behaviors, but this has not been empirically validated (Greydanus et al., 2003; Khoury-Kassabri, 2006; Zindi, 1995). The current study aims to expand the knowledge in the field by empirically examining whether school staff are more likely to maltreat students who are involved in bullying than those who are not involved in bullying. Furthermore, the study distinguishes between three categories of students' involvement in bullying: as victims, as bullies, and as students who are both bullies and victims (bully-victims). It also examines the interaction of students' gender, nation (Jewish vs. Arab students), and school level (junior high vs. high school student) with bully-victim status in predicting school staff physical and emotional maltreatment.

The effects of staff maltreatment

Student involvement in aggressive behaviors on school grounds disrupts the learning environment: students cannot learn and teachers' ability to teach is jeopardized (Kingery, Coggeshall, & Alford, 1998; Mercy & Rosenberg, 1998), and a substantial amount of teachers' attention is focused on achieving order and cooperation in class (Emmer & Hickman, 1991; Geving, 2007; Innes & Kitto, 1989). Consequently, many teachers feel overwhelmed by classroom behavioral problems and perceive aggression at school as a major problem facing them (Martin, Linfoot, & Stephenson, 1999).

This environment causes teachers to feel stressed at work. Geving (2007) found that students' hostility toward each other is one of the main factors affecting teachers' stress levels. According to Agnew's (2005) General Strain Theory, many aggressive acts are explained by stress or strain that leads to the use of aggressive behavior to reduce or escape from the strain. According to this theory, one can assume that teachers who perceive their school as under major strain and as lacking in resources and supports to help deal with this strain might be at higher risk to maltreat their students, to deal with their stress and handle behavioral problems at school. Thus, maltreatment by teachers might be a reflection of their stress (Rust & Kinnard, 1983), particularly when dealing with students who are difficult to discipline and may exhibit behavioral problems (Delfabbro et al., 2005). This relationship between staff stress and maltreatment of students needs further examination.

Unfortunately, school staff are exposed to many behavioral problems in their schools, especially aggressive behaviors between students. Previous studies have reported high levels of students' involvement in aggressive behaviors as victims and perpetrators (Delfabbro et al., 2005; Kennedy-Shriver, 2008). For example, in a study by Nansel, Haynie, and Simons-Morton (2007), 21.4% of students reported being victimized three or more times during sixth grade. Benbenishty, Khoury-Kassabri, and Astor (2006) found that almost 40% of Israeli secondary school students reported being bullied by other students at least once during the last year, and almost 33% of students reported bullying others during the last year.

Most research that examines school bullying has focused only on bullies and victims as separate categories. However, recent studies have focused on aggressive victims or bully-victims as a distinct group, where some victims of school bullying are involved also in aggressive behavior as bullies (Pellegrini, 1998; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001; Solberg, Olweus, & Endresen, 2007). Previous works found that these children are at a higher risk for peer rejection (Pellegrini, 1998; Schwartz, 2000) and disruptive behavioral problems than are aggressive children and victims (Kupersmidt, Patterson, & Eickholt, 1989). They have lower grade point averages than all other subgroups of children, and teachers describe them as irritable, restless, and hostile (Schwartz, 2000).

The current study is the first that seeks to determine whether staff maltreatment is directed differently toward students who are involved in aggressive behavior toward peers as bullies, as victims, and as bully-victims, and those who are neither bullies nor victims. In addition, the study examines whether the student's gender, nation and school level (interaction effects) play a role in the relationships between staff maltreatment and student's involvement in aggressive behavior. Separate examinations for reports of emotional and physical victimization were conducted.

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