



A binary gender analysis to bullying, dating violence, and attempted suicide: The disproportionate effect of depression and psychological harm

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ABSTRACT

This study explored the link between four types of peer victimization (i.e., school bullying, cyber bullying, physical dating violence, and sexual dating violence) and suicide attempts using a nationally representative survey of high school students ($N = 11,341$). More specifically, this study examined gender differences in direct and indirect associations between different types of peer victimization, depression, and attempted suicide in a comprehensive path model. Results demonstrated that the effect size of “victim of school bullying” on suicide attempts among female students was greater than it was among male students, but the effect size of “victim of sexual dating violence” on suicide attempts among male students was greater than among female students. In addition, depression partially mediated the relationship between each type of peer victimization and suicide attempts for female students and male students. The indirect effects of “victim of school bullying” and “victim of sexual dating violence” on suicide attempts through the mediation of depression were greater among female students than they were among male students.

1. Introduction

Suicide is the second leading cause of death among 15–19 years old and has been increasing in recent years (VanOrman & Jarosz, 2016). While overall rates of suicide attempts have decreased, there was a 4% increase in adolescent suicide attempts between 2009 and 2015, hitting a 40 year high for female adolescents in particular (Centers for Disease Control; CDC, 2017). About 8% of high school students in the United States reported at least one suicide attempt in the past year (CDC, 2015). The increasing prevalence of adolescent suicide behaviors warrant further examination of the risk factors, their mechanisms, and prevention strategies.

A wealth of literature is devoted to identifying risk factors for suicide, which include depression, behavioral issues, and peer victimization (Bongar, 1991; Fremouw, Perczel, & Ellis, 1990; Geoffroy et al., 2016). School bullying is not only prevalent, with estimates around 20% of youth aged 12–18 experiencing it, but also occurs quite often, with surveys indicating at least 10% of students experience bullying on a regular basis (American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry; AACAP, 2011; CDC, 2015). Given the widespread access to cell phones and use of social media among adolescents, cyberbullying has recently

received more attention. Prevalence estimates place traditional bullying affecting around 36% of adolescents and cyberbullying affecting about 15% (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Moreover, adolescents are not only subject to traditional school and cyberbullying, but victimization within a romantic relationship. Vagi, Olsen, Basile, and Vivolo-Kantor (2015) estimate that about 21% of high school aged female respondents and 10% of high school aged male respondents who have dated experience physical and/or sexual dating abuse. Although adolescents experience these different types of victimization, previous studies have been focused on the effect of either bullying or dating violence alone on suicide behaviors. To our knowledge, no previous studies have explored the unique effect of these four different types of victimization (i.e., school bullying, cyber bullying, physical dating violence, and sexual dating violence) on suicide behavior. To fill the gap of knowledge, this study explores the link between these four types of victimization and suicide attempts using a nationally representative survey of high school students.

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2. Background

2.1. Peer victimization and suicide attempts

The correlation between peer victimization and suicide attempts is robust and a meta-analysis confirmed the strength of this relationship (Van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014). In addition, a considerable body of research has demonstrated the association between peer victimization and depression. For example, Klomek et al. (2013) reported that bullying victimization increases the risk for later depression in 13–18-year-old adolescents. In a longitudinal study, adolescents who were victims of school bullying were 15 times more likely to attempt suicide 2 years after than their counterparts who were not victimized (Geoffroy et al., 2016). Van Geel et al.' (2014) meta-analysis indicated that cyberbullying could potentially be worse than traditional bullying because it had an even stronger association with suicide ideation.

Romantic relationships in adolescence that are characterized by abuse can have a detrimental impact on physical and mental health and lead to experiencing more relationship abuse throughout their lifespan (Shorey, Cornelius, & Bell, 2008; Zimmer-Gembeck, 2002). Physical dating victimization in high school significantly predicts suicidal ideation (Nahapetyan, Orpinas, Song, & Holland, 2014). Olshen, McVeigh, Wunsch-Hitzig, and Rickert (2007) tease out part of this relationship and show that urban female teens had higher odds of a suicide attempt when they recently experienced dating violence, while urban male teens had higher odds of a suicide attempt when they reported a lifetime history of sexual assault. For both female and male respondents in late-adolescence, non-physical dating violence contributed to adverse health outcomes, but for females respondents physical or sexual dating violence contributed an even greater extent to unfavorable health outcomes including smoking, depressive symptoms, eating behaviors, and frequent sexual behavior (Bonomi, Anderson, Nemeth, Rivara, & Buettner, 2013).

2.2. Depression and suicide

The connection between depression, suicide, and peer victimization is an area that is still being explored in the research. Depression is a key component when considering suicide, with estimates that 85% of clinically depressed adolescents present with suicidal thoughts (Cash & Bridge, 2009). Depression has been found to significantly predict suicide attempts in high school students (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013). In addition, studies found that traditional and cyber victimization have both been associated with depression as well as suicidal thinking and behaviors (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012). Current evidence indicates that depression at least partially mediates the relationship between cyberbullying/traditional bullying victimization and suicide attempt (Bauman et al., 2013; Sampasa-Kanyinga, Roumeliotis, & Xu, 2014). There is presently a lack of studies that explore the mediating effect of depression on the relationship between teen dating violence and suicide attempt(s), but preliminary evidence has established depression as a partial mediator of other negative outcomes of teen dating violence such as grades (Baynard & Cross, 2008).

2.3. Gender differences

It is clear from the literature that gender-based differences exist among bullying, teen dating violence, depression, suicidal ideation, and suicide attempts. For example, male and female individuals have differential associations between types of peer victimization (Kowalski & Limber, 2013). Female victims of cyberbullying report higher levels of depressive symptoms and suicidal ideation than male victims (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Reed, Nugent, & Cooper, 2015). In terms of depression as a mediator for peer victimization and suicide attempts, the relationship was mediated for traditional bullying and suicide attempts

across gender, however the relationship was mediated for cyberbullying and suicide attempts only in female adolescents (Bauman et al., 2013). Gender differences also exist among dating relationships and can be particularly complex. Female individuals are more likely to experience physical dating violence and suffer injuries as a result, which can lead to experiencing higher psychological distress and suicide attempts than male individuals (Arriaga & Foshee, 2004; Foshee, Bauman, Linder, Rice, & Wilcher, 2007; Molidor & Tolman, 1998; Olshen et al., 2007; White, 2009). Furthermore, among students who dated during last 12 months, the sexual dating violence victimization is more prevalent for female students (14.4%) than male students (6.2%) and attempted suicide rate for female sexual dating violence only victim (21.5%) is higher than for male victims (13.2%; Vagi et al., 2015).

A wealth of literature has been written on risk factors, specifically identifying school bullying, cyberbullying, physical dating violence, and sexual dating violence as risk factors for suicide among adolescents. However, a dearth of literature has examined the pathways of these different types of peer victimization on suicide attempts. Given the extent that empirical evidence has demonstrated the importance of considering gender differences and depression in adolescent peer victimization and in responses to the victimization, this study explores the pathways of different types of peer victimization, depression, and attempted suicide by gender.

2.4. Research questions

1. Does a specific type of peer victimization (victim of school bullying, victim of cyber bullying, victim of physical dating violence, and victim of sexual dating violence) have any significant direct effects on depression and attempted suicide?
2. Are there any significant indirect mediating effects of depression on the relationships between each type of peer victimization and attempted suicide?
3. Are there impact differences for each type of peer victimization on depression and attempted suicide?
4. Are there any significant gender differences in paths from each type of peer victimization to depression and attempted suicide?

3. Methods

3.1. Design and sample

Data were gathered from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC) national survey by the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) for the year 2015 (CDC, 2017). The YRBSS collected data using a cluster sample design in three stages, divided into strata based on racial/ethnic concentration and metropolitan statistical area (MSA) status. This was to ensure the sample was representative of all American students across private and public schools in 9th through 12th grade in 2015. Counties, groups of smaller adjacent counties, or sub-areas of very large counties served as the primary sampling unit; the secondary unit is the school the student is enrolled in. There was a total of 1259 primary sampling units and 16 strata. 15,713 questionnaires were completed by high school students in 125 public and private schools. The final sample size ($N = 11,341$) was obtained after excluding 89 incomplete questionnaires that failed quality control and cases with missing data from the analysis.

Data was collected on multiple demographic variables. To measure student's gender, we used the YRBSS question of "what is your sex?" which provides only two response categories: female or male. The female (50.9%) and male respondents (49.1%) were almost equally represented in the sample (see Table 1). Proportions of female and male students were similar across age and race. In terms of age, 25.9% of the respondents were 16 years old, 25.6% were 17 years old, 24.5% were 15 years old, 14.2% were 18 years old or older, and 9.8% were 14 years or younger. With regard to race, the majority of the sample was White

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