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A meta-analysis of predictors of bullying and victimisation in adolescence

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Bullying is common and harms all involved, yet there is no clarity regarding factors that influence bullying and victimisation for adolescent samples. This meta-analysis aims to synthesise the literature and identify reliable risk and protective factors to adolescent bullying and victimisation. A systematic search of the literature using databases; PsycINFO and Scopus, was undertaken to identify relevant publications from 1985 until July 2014. Inclusion criteria included longitudinal data, an adolescent sample and a focus on predictive factors of bullying or victimisation. From 4698 articles identified, 18 were included. Four predictors of victimisation (prior victimisation, conduct problems, social problems and internalising problems) and four predictors of bullying (conduct problems, social problems, school problems and age) were identified. The literature provides little consistency in predictors assessed and replication is needed for clarification, however, social problems and conduct problems are consistent risk factors and a potential focus for future interventions.

Bullying has been defined as repeated exposure to negative actions by another or others over time (Olweus, 1993). As well as the action being repetitive and harmful, there must be a power imbalance between the bully and their victim (Griffin & Gross, 2004). This definition encompasses physical forms of bullying as well as relational bullying such as name-calling or social exclusion. For the purposes of this paper, "bullies" or "bullying" shall be used to refer to the perpetration of these negative acts, and "victims" or "victimisation" shall be used to refer to those who are the target of these acts.

There are a number of negative outcomes of being a victim of bullying as well as being a bully. Victimisation is associated with psychological maladjustment (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2000; Nansel et al., 2001) including the onset of anxiety and depression (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001), loneliness and decreasing levels of social satisfaction (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001), as well as increased behavioural, adjustment and emotional problems (Lopez & DuBois, 2005). Bullying is also associated with psychological problems (Nishina, Juvonen, & Witkow, 2005), such as a higher prevalence of suicidal ideation and depression (Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, & Rantanen, 1999), long-term social problems, as bullies can often lack the skills to effectively relate to other students (Laursen, Finkelstein, & Betts, 2001), and higher rates of violent offending and arrest/conviction for crimes in adulthood (Fergusson, Boden, & Horwood,

2014). Given the negative outcomes of both bullying and victimisation, it is important to determine the factors that lead to these phenomena, which could potentially be the focus of intervention.

Despite this need, and an abundance of research on the outcomes of bullying and victimisation, the body of literature that focuses on the predictors of these phenomena is not extensive. That which does exist tends to focus on risk, rather than protective factors. However, protective factors are arguably as important as risk factors as these can be targeted and amplified so that bullying and victimisation need not develop. Research also tends to focus on childhood predictors of bullying and victimisation, rather than those across different stages of development; this may be a problem as adolescent predictors of bullying and victimisation may differ from those in childhood. Numerous cross-sectional studies exist but less longitudinal research is available. Although cross-sectional studies may indicate that a relationship exists between two variables, they do not allow for the differentiation between cause and effect (Mann, 2003). However, risk and protective factors may be identified through longitudinal research (Mann, 2003).

The meta-analysis of Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, and Sadek (2010) focused on predictors of bullying and victimisation. However, most of the data included were cross sectional, and children and adolescents were considered as a collective group. Individual-level correlates of bullying were found to be externalising behaviour and other-related cognitions, whereas contextual correlates of bullying included peer influence and community factors (Cook et al., 2010). Factors related to victimisation included peer status and social competence (Cook et al., 2010). The findings of this study may not completely align with longitudinal research, as a small effect for the relationship between victimisation and internalising problems was found. In contrast, the meta-analysis of longitudinal studies concerning victimisation and internalising problems reported by Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, and Telch (2010) concluded that internalising problems were both a risk factor for, and an outcome of, victimisation.

The Cook et al. (2010) analysis found a small effect for the contribution of the home environment to both bullying and victimisation. However, other individual studies indicate a more robust relationship between parenting style, family environment and the onset of bullying and victimisation in children, with numerous studies showing that both bullies and victims are more likely to come from abusive, harsh or unsupportive home environments (Barker et al., 2008; Nation, Vieno, Perkins, & Santinello, 2008; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, Bates, & The Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2000).

Cook et al. (2010) did not focus on the predictive power of bullying and victimisation. Although they looked at externalising behaviour as a predictor of bullying and victimisation, it is not clear whether this measure included bullying. There is a growing body of literature that suggests that bullying is stable across time (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2001; Salmivalli, Lappalainen, & Lagerspetz, 1998; Strohmeier, Wagner, Spiel, & von Eye, 2010), meaning bullying at time one predicts bullying at a later time point. Research also tends to show that victimisation is stable across time (Juvonen et al., 2000; Salmivalli et al., 1998; Strohmeier et al., 2010). Although these findings require replication, they indicate that bullying and victimisation are important variables to consider as predictors of later bullying and victimisation.

As mentioned above, most research pertaining to predictors of bullying and victimisation focuses on childhood predictors. However, the outcomes of bullying and victimisation may be more harmful in adolescence than in childhood. For example, adolescent victims and perpetrators of bullying are at a greater risk of suicidal ideation, and adolescent victims of bullying also have increased odds of attempting suicide (Kim & Leventhal, 2008). Although this is a very real threat for adolescents, suicide in children is comparatively rare (Simon-Davies, 2011). Adolescent bullies and victims of bullying have received less attention in the research than their childhood counterparts, and for this reason, this review will focus on this developmental stage.

The main aims of this analysis are 1) to focus on longitudinal research; 2) to determine both risk and protective factors for bullying and victimisation; and 3) to focus on adolescence. All risk and protective factors identified through the search will be considered, and not limited to factors previously explored in other meta-analytic reviews.

Method

Data sources

The search strategy aimed to identify all research that focused on risk or protective factors for bullying or victimisation during adolescence. Studies were located using two databases: PsychINFO and Scopus. Articles were required to be peer reviewed, longitudinal, written in English and published since 1985. The search descriptors used were: included: *bully, victim, longitudinal, prospective* and *adolescent*. These search terms were combined using AND in 12 different ways, for example, 'bully AND victim AND longitudinal', or 'bully AND prospective', and all the results of these searches were included in articles to be reviewed for inclusion.

Selection criteria

Studies were selected on the following inclusion criteria: (a) participants had a mean age between 11 and 18 years during the study period; (b) the study had a longitudinal or prospective design; (c) the total study period spanned at least six months; and (d) the study included analysis of predictive factors for bullying or victimisation.