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Happy and unhappy adolescent bullies: Evidence for theoretically meaningful subgroups

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ABSTRACT

Are all bullies unhappy and socially disconnected? The majority of theorists argue that bullies are a homogeneous group, such that their aggression is linked to less happiness and a greater probability of social exclusion. Recent findings, however, indicate some bullies obtain social benefits from the act of bullying, increasing their happiness. We sought to identify whether subgroups of bullies exist among 481 Chinese adolescents (mean age = 16.9, *SD* = 1.5) using self-report data on bullying, victimization, and various psychological and behavioral variables. Cluster analytic results identified four subgroups differentiated primarily by level of bullying, happiness, and perceived social connectedness. Subgroups included (1) happy, socially connected non-bullies (33.4%), (2) unhappy, socially disconnected non-bullies (26.9%), (3) unhappy, socially disconnected bullies (17.3%) and (4) happy, socially connected bullies (22.4%). These results suggest that, not only are some bullies happy and socially connected, but only a minority of bullies are unhappy and socially disconnected. Our findings offer unique insights into potential positive consequences of bullying that may differentiate subgroups of bullies. Such insights might inform existing and future anti-bullying interventions.

1. Introduction

The majority of people, programs, and researchers view bullies as a homogenous group of unhappy people whose bullying behavior results in negative psychosocial consequences for all involved. A "bully" can be defined as someone who initiates repetitive aggression in an imbalanced power relationship with a victim (Nansel et al., 2001; Olweus, 1995). Bullying is neither a recent phenomena (e.g., Lowenstein, 1977 nor a trivial one (rates as high as 60% in some countries; Fleming & Jacobson, 2010). Recent findings, however, indicate some bullies cannot be described as unhappy, and in fact obtain positive psychosocial consequences. Understanding the nature of bullies may help us better intervene in or even prevent bullying.

Classifying types of bullies represents a relatively novel endeavor. Although most research to date focuses on the consequences of bullying for victims (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000, some studies examine consequences of bullying for bullies themselves. Research suggests bullies exhibit increased anger and substance use (Stein, Dukes, & Warren, 2007), interpersonal difficulties (Undheim & Sund, 2010), negative academic outcomes (Bosworth, Espelage, & Simon, 1999), and decreased happiness (Rigby & Slee, 1993). Thus, the negative consequences of perpetration and victimization form most of our current understanding of bullying.

Our understanding of bullies as a group, sub-group, or distinct set of groups remains somewhat impoverished. We assume bullies are unhappy and experience negative consequences of their behavior that mimic many of the negative consequences experienced by victims. Absent from the literature is the potential for intact health – particularly from the bully's perspective. Researchers, teachers, and parents rarely use the concept of "happiness" when conceptualizing the personality profile of a bully. After all, happy people are thought to be open-minded, generous, compassionate, and all-around better citizens (Lyubomirsky, King, & Diener, 2005). Thus, we may prematurely conclude that bullying is inversely related to happiness and related dimensions of well-being such as healthy social functioning. This assumption also suggests that all bullies are the same with regard to these dimensions.

As an alternative, we suggest that the notion of homogeneity be reconsidered by the use of research methodologies that go beyond "mean scores" to test for meaningful, heterogeneous subgroups

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(e.g., Kashdan & McKnight, 2011. For a subset of people, bullying coincides with positive intrapersonal outcomes such as increased self-esteem (Olweus, 1993) and popularity (Rodkin, Farmer, Pearl, & Acker, 2006). These results seem incompatible with research suggesting that bullying increases the probability of negative social outcomes, including peer rejection (Undheim & Sund, 2010) but point to the possibility of greater heterogeneity among bullies.

If we question the assumption of homogeneity, new insights about the nature of bullies and bullying behavior emerge. Bullies vary based on levels of social intelligence and popularity, with a sizeable minority of bullies (37.5%) being both socially intelligent and popular (Peeters, Cillessen, & Scholte, 2010). These beneficial social outcomes of intelligence and popularity are positively correlated with happiness (e.g., Myers & Diener, 1995). No research to date, however, explicitly examines the relationship between happiness and bullying. Understanding the prevalence and nature of bullies may illuminate key mechanisms to prevent and treat this problem.

1.1. The Present Study

The goals of this study were to (1) determine the prevalence of bullying and victimization in a sample of Chinese secondary school students, (2) identify the relevance of happiness and social connectedness to bullying and victimization, and (3) identify potentially meaningful subgroups within bullies. Similar to prior research (e.g., Stein et al., 2007), we examined prevalence of bullying and victimization by creating variables to reflect four distinct groups of adolescents: neither a bully nor a victim (Neither), those who only bully others (Just Bully), those who are only victimized by others (Just Victim), and those who engage in bullying and are victimized by others (Bully-Victims). We expected both bullying and victimization to be related to less happiness and decreased social connectedness. In addition, we used cluster analytic strategies to explore meaningful subgroups within bullies based on these variables of happiness and social connectedness. We hypothesized two clusters of bullies: a happy, socially connected subgroup and an unhappy, socially disconnected subgroup.

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants included 484 high school students in Hong Kong (273 female). The students came from 10th (29%), 11th (31%) grade, 12th (18%), and 13th (22%) grades with an average age of 16.9 (SD = 1.46). All students were Chinese, with about 88% from schools taught in Chinese and 12% from schools taught in English.

2.2. Procedure

Prior to data collection, school principals provided their approval and school staff members sent letters of consent to parents. Researchers randomly selected classes in each of the four participating secondary schools. Classroom teachers distributed survey questionnaires during regular class periods, and students completed them independently without compensation or extra credit.

2.3. Measures

2.3.1. Bullying and victimization

To measure the occurrence of bullying and victimization, the authors developed a face valid two-item measure; "How often have you been bullied in school?" and "How often have you taken part in bullying other students in school?" Participants responded using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (it has not happened) to 5 (several times a week). We defined bullies and victims as any individual who responded with a 2 or higher on these two respective items. We found a moderate positive relationship between bullying and victimization (r = .35, p < .01).

2.3.2. Happiness

Researchers administered a Chinese translation of the Subjective Happiness Scale (SHS; Lyubomirsky & Lepper, 1999) to assess participants' subjective ratings of happiness. To complete the 4-item measure, participants used a 7-point likert scale to indicate which option they believed best completed each item. Two items prompted respondents to describe themselves using both absolute ratings and ratings relative to their peers. The response options for these items ranged from 1 (not a very happy person) to 7 (a very happy person). The other two items provided a brief description of happy and unhappy people, and asked respondents to rate the degree these descriptions matched their own perceptions of themselves. The response options for these items ranged from 1 (not at all) to 7 (a great deal). The measure was internally consistent (α = .80).

2.3.3. Social connectedness

To assess social connectedness, the authors used a face valid, single-item measure. Participants completed this measure by selecting from six available response options, ranging from 1 (Very bad) to 6 (Very good). Researchers used these response options to identify the perceived social connectedness with their peers.

2.3.4. Risk-taking behavior

Researchers measured risk-taking behavior using a face valid, 10-item, self-report measure. Researchers used this measure to collect data regarding the engagement in various risky behaviors, such as substance use, cheating, and truancy. Students indicated their frequency of engagement in each behavior using a 5-point scale, ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (often). The measure was internally consistent (α = .76).

2.3.5. Hopelessness

Respondents completed the Chinese Hopelessness Scale (C-HOPE; Shek, 1993) – a Chinese translation of a 20-item, internally consistent (α = .88) self-report measure designed to assess negative cognitive expectancies of oneself and one's future life (Beck, Weissman, Lester, & Trexler, 1974). Prior research using the original measure included adolescent samples (e.g., Kashani, Strober, Rosenberg, & Reid, 1988).

2.4. Data analysis

First, we calculated prevalence rates of bullying and victimization using standard procedures. We then conducted a series of bivariate correlations to determine the magnitude of associations between our variables and both bullying and victimization. Next, we completed a cluster analysis to identify potential bully subgroups. Cluster analysis is an effective way to identify subgroups by maximizing both within-group homogeneity and between-group heterogeneity (Aldenderfer & Blashfield, 1984). Additionally, previous researchers successfully used cluster analysis to identify meaningful subgroups of bullies in different samples (e.g., Estell, Farmer, Pearl, Van Acker, & Rodkin, 2003). We used a two-step, cluster analysis for its ability to handle large datasets, to indicate each variable's importance when identifying and differentiating clusters, and to provide estimates without *a priori* data assumptions (Chiu, Fang, Chen, Wang, & Jeris, 2001). In the first step, the