

SCHOOL BULLYING: THE PROBLEMS OF INTERNALIZING CONSEQUENCES FOR PARTICIPANTS IN THE LITERATURE OF THE USA

© Attila KŐSZEGHY

(Kölcsey Ferenc Reformed Teacher Training College, Debrecen,
Hungary)

attilakoszeghy@gmail.com

School bullying has very likely been with us ever since there were schools. Research on school bullying started in the 1970s with that of Dan Olweus. Bullying is an intentional negative action - either physical or verbal - committed repeatedly by its perpetrator. Its victim - due to an unfavourable position in the power structure of the community - is unable to defend himself or herself against the bully, and is very unlikely to retaliate. Today research is adding newer and newer aspects, viewpoints, and statistical data to the phenomenon of school bullying. Among the research on the dire long term consequences one finds shocking statistics on how clinging the consequences could be. I am summarizing the results of literature in the USA dealing with the internalizing of the consequences of school bullying which affect the teenage years and young adulthood of not just the victim, but those of the bully, and the bully-victim.

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School bullying was first researched as a serious social issue by Dan Olweus (1993) in his native Sweden in the early 1970s. Later on he was commissioned to convey research by the Norwegian government in the early 1980s following the tragically suicide case of three teenage boys who had been victimized by their peers. Since then peer victimization and school bullying have become the object of serious scientific research throughout Western societies from Australia to Canada, from Denmark to the USA.

In the latter a real exuberance of research followed the findings of a Secret Service analysis of school shooters between 1974 and 2000 which concluded that 71% of all school shooters were reported chronically bullied (Vossekuil et al, 2002). Stassen Berger describes the process this way:

Within the past 15 years, scholars have shifted from indifference to fascination regarding bullies. PsycINFO includes only 27 citations of bully* or bulli* (peer-reviewed, not counting proper names) from 1900 to 1979 and only 35 in the next decade. In the 1990s, PsycINFO lists 289 cites, and the first listing of bull* appeared in the index of *Abstracts in Child Development*. Those 351 PsycINFO publications for the entire 20th century were surpassed in the first five years of the 21st. Between January 1st 2000 and December 31, 2004, 592 peer-reviewed articles, editorials, or book reviews were published, 158 of them in 2004. Other data bases (e.g., Academic Search Premier, ERIC) or related search terms (e.g., victim*, harass*) reveal a similar increase, although less explosive (Stassen Berger, 2007).

Although Stassen Berger, later on in her article, reports a kind of slowdown of the process, the upsurge of research in school bullying in the USA is more than obvious at the turn of this century (Stassen Berger, 2007).

The research in the field of bullying and peer harassment has progressed tremendously in the past three decades, and the subtleties of research focus have shifted considerably, too. One of the major shifts was the realization of the fact that bullies and victims are not static groups of roles of a dyadic pattern. Rather they represent a continuum of roles with bullies on one end and victims on the other one; however, in between these two a number of more complex types are imaginable. As, for example, the so called "aggressive bully" who reacts with aggression to an initiative act, or the "bully-victim" who in one situation acts as a bully while in another situation himself/herself is being bullied. Similarly "henchmen" or "followers" are participants who join a bully or an aggressive bully, they admire the aggression and assist the aggressor, but themselves do not initiate a bullying act when they are on their own.

Another decisive American research result is the realization of the social-ecological framework of the phenomenon of bullying, as its promoters (Swearer et al., 2004) like to say it "in a nutshell, bullying does not occur in isolation. This phenomenon is encouraged and/or inhibited as a result of the complex relationship between the individual, family, peer group, school, community, and culture" (Swearer et al., 2004:3). That is, bullying is not the deviant behaviour of the individual, it is a complex social phenomenon where we have to consider a great number of factors beyond the motivations of the individuals, from the climate of the family to that of the school, from the power structure of the community to the attitudes and preferences of the broader culture, etc.

Serious associations have been established among childhood victimization and some mental problems of early adulthood, too. How is childhood victimization related to depressive disorders? Susan Swearer and her colleagues (2004) use the poem of a ten-year-old depressed bully-victim as a motto to their article reviewing the literature on internalizing difficulties. The poem demonstrates the serious impact of getting involved in a situation of victimization for a child, and also indicates the vastness of helplessness and hopelessness of the speaker in it. But which are the symptoms that, very likely, both preceded and accompany bullying and victimization?

Hopelessness and *negative expectations* towards oneself and the future is a set of symptoms that might characterize victims of peer victimization. It is a well-known fact in bullying literature that victims most typically experience a feeling of helplessness, a kind of loss of faith in controlling and the changeability of their situation. This is partly due to the power structure of their community in which their position makes it impossible for them either to retaliate the aggression of the bully or to induce empathy among the

others in the community. This repeated experience of helplessness might lead to a kind of hopelessness in the future. The repeated negative events - that an individual perceives as uncontrollable environmental events - build up a system of negative expectations in the individual. The process proceeds parallel to an erosion of the self-esteem of the individual. When individuals experience name-calling, for example, that cannot be stopped, they "begin to believe in abusive name-calling, thinking perhaps that names such as 'baby', 'wimp' and 'idiot' must be true, for otherwise they would have been able to cope with the bullying. Their inability to cope proves that they are inferior. A gradual but pervasive erosion of self-esteem takes place" (Besag, 1989:53). This 'pervasive erosion of self-esteem' further fuels negative expectations, and internalizes the negative presupposition attributing the negative events to internal causes. Swearer and her colleagues (2004) find that "individuals who attribute the negative events to internal, global, and stable causes are more likely to become depressed", and they quote the research findings of Marciano and Kazdin, who examined 123 children between 6 and 13 years of age, and found that "suicidal children reported significantly higher levels of depression, hopelessness, and lower self-esteem than their non-suicidal peers" (Swearer et al., 2004:66). Children may develop *learned helplessness*, too, if they find themselves unable to get their peers to stop victimizing them (Besag, 1989). This experience could cause children to develop a more general belief that they have little control over outcomes in their lives, a thinking pattern related to depression.

People who believe they control the events of their lives "possess an internal locus of control orientation; whereas, individuals who believe their environment is under the control of forces external to themselves possess an *external locus of control*" (Swearer et al., 2004:67). From the previously stated it clearly follows that the locus of control might have a decisive role in the development of depressive disorders. Interestingly enough researchers have suggested that the locus of control might play a part in understanding aggressive behaviour as well. Research findings support that there is a relationship between aggression and external locus of control orientation, too. A study which surveyed 76 Australian school children examined the relationship between children's locus of control orientation and their bully-victim status. The results showed that bullies tended to refer to the external locus of orientation pattern, while no status children tended to refer to internal locus of orientation one, whereas victims' responses showed no marked differences between external and internal locus of orientation (Slee, 1993).

Anxiety disorders are most typically related to bully-victim situations. An anxious person is reported to display cognitive, emotional and behavioural symptoms. These symptoms range from physiological (e.g. a faster heart beat) ones to subjective (e.g. frightening thoughts) ones. Anxious children are typically shy and withdrawn; two characteristics that might precede as well as follow experiences of victimization. Research in this field has proved to be inconsistent, inasmuch as the symptoms of anxiety are reported both as provoking bullying, and as following it. Furthermore, anxiety is reported to be a symptom on the part of the bully, too. According to one view, comorbid anxiety may produce a higher level of aggression. Anxious children are on alert constantly for threatening events, on the one hand. They tend to interpret ambiguous situations and events as provoking, and they respond to them with aggression, on the other hand. According to another view, children with symptoms of comorbid anxiety prove to show less aggression for a presence of inhibition and higher level of caution. In that sense anxiety

works as a mitigating factor in the behaviour of the individual, rather than an aggravating one.

Depression is also a common phenomenon among participants of bully-victim situations. The degree of depression varies greatly with age, sex, and status in the bully-victim situation. The prevalence rate of depressive disorders among school-aged youth vary from 2% to 8% in the literature of the field, while that of dysthymic disorders range from 1% to 9%. However, depression has always been associated with participation in peer victimization, and a marked difference has been reported in prevalence rates. All status participants of the bully-victim continuum have a likelihood of displaying a markedly higher level of the symptoms of depressive disorders. It has been found that the highest level symptoms (18%) lies with bully-victims, followed by bullies (13%), and then victims (10%) (Kumpulainen et al., 2001). Bully-victims are also at the highest risk to suffer from *suicidal ideation*, their group is followed by victims and then by bullies (Kaltiala-Heino et al., 1999).

In 2002 D. A. Roth and her colleagues surveyed a large sample of college students (514 undergraduates) in order to examine the relationship between childhood victimization and adult level of trait anxiety, social anxiety, worry and anxiety sensitivity. For the purposes of the study they devised a questionnaire of twenty items enquiring about the modes of teasing. The twenty items of the Teasing Questionnaire (TQ) refer to appearance, intelligence, behaviour and clothing, that teasing is usually about among school children and adolescents.

In their introduction the authors comment on the relative scarcity of studies on the long term effects of bullying as the vast majority of literature tend to focus on short term effects of bullying in childhood. They also ponder whether or not the characteristic features of a typical victim (anxious, insecure, cautious, sensitive and quiet) lead to their selection to become victims or vice versa, their victimization results in developing the same characteristics. Their conclusion in the introductory notes reveals the complex nature of this issue:

”It is difficult to answer these questions with confidence based on available data, but it seems that both questions may be answered affirmatively-children with certain temperaments may be at increased risk for being bullied by their peers and the experience of being bullied may lead to difficulties with anxiety and depression while the victimization is actually going on and perhaps into the future as well.” (Roth et al., 2002:150)

The study reveals a strong association for victimization with social anxiety, trait anxiety, and anxiety sensitivity. Social anxiety is defined as a kind of fear of interaction with strangers, a symptom which goes back to early childhood. By trait anxiety the authors mean a tendency of the individual to react with anxiety to every unpleasant stimulus; while anxiety sensitivity means a defence against anxiety symptoms. The effects of childhood victimization have been found to persist in adolescence and early adulthood.

Roth and her colleagues (2002) quote the findings of a research in which they surveyed the clients of an anxiety disorders clinic, and found that 85% of clients with social anxiety reported that they had been victimized earlier on by peers. They also found that being teased in childhood is related to both body dissatisfaction and eating disturbance in adulthood. They added that clients with panic disorders, for example at the same clinic scored significantly lower and claimed to have been involved in peer victimization on a much smaller scale (25%) (in Roth et al., 2002:151).

In the present study I have been trying to collect the most relevant problems of internalizing the consequences of participating in peer victimization among school-aged youth from the literature of the United States. *Hopelessness* and *negative expectations* towards oneself and the future, the feeling of an *external locus of control* in one's life, *anxiety*, and *depression*, all represent symptoms that indicate the possibility of long-term effects. As it is often commented upon in the literature of the US (see e.g. Storch et al., 2004) researchers tend to focus on short term effects when examining the consequences of bullying. Each and every finding of research quoted here clearly demonstrates an imperative conclusion. School bullying and peer victimization represent a set of conditions in the life of those involved which have dire short *and* long term consequences. Not only the childhood and the school career of the individual are affected negatively by the consequences, but the entire process of socializing and the healthy development of the personality are at risk here. Researchers in the future are going to face the task of finding out ways of how to cope with the dire long term consequences of early involvement in bullying situations.

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