The Interplay between Bullying, Self - Esteem, and Empathy in a Sample of Albanian 12 - 16 Year Old Adolescents

Fatjona Haka[a]*, Arjet Pervizi[b]

[a]*University of Tirana, Bulevardi 'Gjergj Fishta', Tiranë, Albania +355*
[b]*Ardhmëria Association, Shkodër, Albania +355*
[a]*Email: fat.haka@gmail.com*
[b]*Email: arjet_pervizi@hotmail.com*

Abstract

The current research attempts to highlight the relationship between self - esteem, empathy dimensions, bullying and victimization. It is a quantitative, descriptive - correlative study that used self - report measures with a sample of 117 Albanian 12 to 16 year old youths. Respondents were randomly selected. The Adolescents Peer Relations Instrument of Parada presented in 2000, The Empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents developed by Rieffe known since 2010, and the Rosenberg Self - Esteem Inventory of Rosenberg that dates back in 1965 were applied to the sample of this study. Socio - demographic data like sex, age, and birth order were analyzed as well. A Spearman (rho) correlation was performed after checking for normal distribution. A set of hierarchical multiple regressions were also performed to assess if, empathy dimensions, and self - esteem could predict bullying, and victimization behaviors, after controlling for sex, and age effects. Findings showed that most of the variables have relatively strong to very strong positive and negative relationships among them. Self - esteem and empathy dimensions as measured by APRI can be used as predictors of bullying behaviors, but they are not good predictors of victimization subscales, since the amount of variance explained by them is inconsiderable.

----

* Corresponding author.

The authors believe the research is important for several parallel reasons: (1) in the authors' knowledge it was not performed earlier in the Albanian culture, thus offering an original approach regarding these variables, (2) it may be valuable to counselors and social workers who work with children and adolescents in schools and / or other settings, and (3) though it is not a specific aim of the study it also brings an additional contribution regarding the adaption of the measures used here as they were not previously used by the Albanian researchers.

Keywords: bullying; victimization; self - esteem; cognitive empathy; affective empathy; pro -social motivation.

1. Introduction

Psychological research on traditional bullying gives a detailed description on bullies and their victims characteristics [1]. Furthermore newer research emphasizes personality and behavior characteristics of another group identified as both bullies and victims [2]. According to these findings bullies, or perpetrators have at least an average level of self - esteem, and a lowered sense of empathy, and therefore tolerance as well, whilst victims tend to show a low level of self - esteem and empathy [1]. As Tamo puts it bullying is an *unprovoked violence* that can be shown in verbal, physical, and relational ways [3]. Social and verbal bullying are pretty much the same construct with someone's social status manipulation through the change of others' perception of him / her being the ultimate consequence [4]. Verbal bullying is the physical harm caused by the aggressive behavior of a stronger person. All types of bullying actually involve some degree of power imbalance, which becomes more or less obvious in different settings and social contexts [4]. Not all bullies behave the same way: some show a more insisting aggressive behavior toward their victims, while some others, known as lieutenants seek approval from the main bully, or act in his absence . On the other side, most victims' behavior is passive, lacking communication skills and assertiveness. Only a few of them practice teasing and engage in acts of fighting that they usually lose, since they lack effectiveness there too. An Australian research [5] explains that victims believe face to face bullying 'cuts deeper', otherwise hurts more their bodies, and souls because it is uncontrollable and can be testified by others. According to this research's findings other and self-helplessness affects children's perceptions on the worse form of bullying.   As for their traits, bullies display characteristics of antisocial personality disorder, and have dominant assertive personalities that are impulsive, and often aggressive [6]. It seems that this relationship is stable regardless of the type of bullying and perpetrators' gender [7] whereas victims gender seems to play a significant role regarding their severity of feelings, and internalizing behaviors with females experiencing them in a much higher degree [3]. Victims themselves tend to be anxious and insecure. As Duke University research shows such traits and behavior bridge the way toward future psychological disorders in both perpetrators' and victims' life as adults. Depression is common for all groups, whereas suicidal thinking seems to be related only to bully - victims groups [6]. An important problem is the criminal activity of both bullies and victims [7]. While the first group may engage in a criminal career, the second one may be subject to singular, yet dramatic criminal acts like school shooting [8]. Donegan [9] points out that *"the survival instinct when combined with a competitive atmosphere flows over into the educational, social, and economic realms.   Furthermore, cultural traditions, ethical standards, and control exerted by the government can strengthen the hierarchy competition."* Another key factor that reinforces bullying groups behavior is the lack of well being in their homes [10]. The above mentioned research of Duke University states that all types of bullies have more hardships in their families than non bullies and non bullied children. Lately,

Copeland [11] called for further attention to peers' influence signaling that their role and influence could be as important as family's role and influence in either aggravation, or diminishing of bullying behaviors. Hence, the role of self - esteem and empathy mentioned at the top of the article is crucial, since the experience of bullying varies widely according to context and individual factors [12]. Empathic individuals who can see somewhat from the other's perspective, and who have a healthy sense of self - esteem seem to be better protected. This view is further supported by the fact that in order to take place traditional bullying needs the availability of the victims. Thus, it leaves no room for anonymity of the bullies, and is characterized by time, and place restraining.

2. Method

2.1. Subjects & data collection

The current research is comprised of a relatively small sample, (N =117) preadolescent and adolescent subjects aged 12 to 16. The average age was 13.43, SD = 1.43. The sample included 68 females, and 48 males, while one of the respondents gave no gender information, SD = .51.

 They were randomly selected after school permission taking.   Clear instructions were given prior to application. The study uses three self - report measures.

2.2. Research questions

Is there a relationship between the below-mentioned variables: bullying perpetration subscales as measured by APRI, bullying victimization subscales as measured by APRI, self - esteem as measured by RSEI, and empathy subscales as measured by EmQue - CA? What is their strength and direction of relationship?

How well do the EmQue - CA, and RSEI subscales predict verbal bullying / social bullying / physical bullying / verbal victimization / social victimization, and physical victimization respectively, if we control for the possible effects of age, and sex? How much variance in the respective dependent variables can be explained by scores of our independent variables? Which of these variables is the best predictor?

2.3. Measures

A promising measure of bullying, <u>Adolescent Peer Relations Instrument</u>, developed by Parada composed of two subscales that deal with perpetrators' and victims' behaviors during the last academic year was applied to the sample of the study. The same items are firstly used to ask respondents how often they have initiated and directed those behaviors toward others, and then how often the same activities have happened to them. Considering the fact that data were collected during the month of May, it is obvious that subjects responded for a period of approximately 9 months (according to the Albanian academic year length). Each of the subscales has 18 items that score in a 6 point Likert scale from never (1) to everyday (6). Each of the subscales has three smaller ones: verbal, social and physical bullying and victimization. The total bullying and victimization subscales have shown an excellent reliability in Albanian, αs = .90 and .93 for total bullying and victimization

subscales respectively. Their respective subscales showed a very strong reliability too: verbal bullying = .77; social bullying = .76; physical bullying = .78; verbal victimization = .85; social victimization = .81, and physical victimization = .85.

The empathy Questionnaire for Children and Adolescents of Rieffe is relatively new, but it has known an extensive use in research. This measure too consists of 18 items and uses a Likert scale from never (0) to often (2). Its author claims it catches important notions of cognitive and affective empathy as well as pro social motivation, otherwise support [13]. The affective empathy and pro social motivation subscales have shown a very good and almost equal reliability, .73 and .74 respectively. The only subscale with a moderate reliability is cognitive empathy, $\alpha = .57$.

On the other hand, the Rosenberg self – esteem inventory of Rosenberg is a classical of clinical research. There are 10 items scoring from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (4) as a unique scale that has shown an acceptable yet moderate reliability, $\alpha = .64$.

2.4. Measures' translation and adaptation in Albanian

In the authors' knowledge neither the bullying measure nor the empathy one were previously used in the Albanian culture. As for Rosenberg's self esteem scale though it has been used by several researchers, as far as we know no validation process has been undertaken till now. The present study doesn't have this duty either. However a cautious process was pursued during translation. Since no standardized versions exist in the Albanian culture all three measures were translated from their original version by the first author of the article and then back translated by an independent professional translator, and another clinical psychologist. After final choice agreement they were firstly piloted with a small sample (N = 31). No changes in the statements' content, or number were made.   Therefore, we can state that *the final version is not only suitable for the new context, but also consistent with the original version* [15].

3. Results

A Spearman (rho) correlation was performed in order to assess the relationship among continuous variables: age, sex, self - esteem, empathy dimensions, victimization, and bullying dimensions. It was noted that bullying subscales had a very strong positive relationship among them ranging from .703 to .781 ($p < .01$). Victimization subscales, on the other side, showed a positive, but much weaker relationship among them. The only exception is the relationship among verbal, and physical victimization ($r = .757$, $p < .01$). The relationship between verbal, and social victimization ($r = .267$, $p < .05$) is almost the same with that of social, and physical victimization ($r = .259$, $p < .05$). As for the relationship between bullying, and victimization subscales several interesting results were observed. It should be emphasized that all three bullying subscales showed their strongest relationship with social victimization subscale with scores ranging from .702 to .908. Meanwhile, the relationship of social bullying with verbal, and physical victimization was not significant, though positive. Regarding sex, it must be stated that it showed a significant negative relationship with empathy dimensions' from -.202 ($p < .05$) to -.314 ($p < .01$), but no such significant relationships were observed with self - esteem,

and bullying, and victimization dimensions, except verbal bullying ($r = .202$, $p < .05$). Age was found to have a positive, significant relationship at $p < .05$ with self - esteem, verbal & physical bullying, and social victimization, whilst its relationship with pro social motivation was found to be even stronger ($r = -.261$, $p < .01$). Self - esteem itself showed a significant negative relationship only with social victimization ($r = -.207$, $p < .01$), however it is to be noted that the correlations of self - esteem with all variables had a negative direction. As expected empathy dimensions showed a strong positive relationship among them with scores ranging from .487 to .550 ($p < .01$). Affective empathy, one of empathy's dimensions, showed a significant relationship with other variables except of verbal victimization. Scores ranged from -.196 ($p < .01$) to -.329 ($p < .05$). Cognitive empathy is the only variable that didn't show any significant results with any of the variables. Though statistically insignificant, these correlations all had a negative direction, except that with social victimization which was almost inexistent: $r = .001$. Empathy's last dimension, pro social motivation, showed some negative relationships significant at $p < .05$ with all bullying dimensions; as well as with social victimization.   The remaining relationships were found to be insignificant. To further explore the relationship among variables, a series of hierarchical regressions were carried out. The researchers were interested in the way self - esteem, and empathy dimensions would predict verbal, social, and physical bullying as well as verbal, social, and physical victimization after controlling for sex, and age. Verbal bullying was firstly entered as a dependent variable, while sex, and age that were entered at step one, explained a total of 6.4% of the variance. After the entry of the rest of the variables namely self - esteem, affective empathy, cognitive empathy, and pro social motivation the model as a whole could explain a variance of 10.3%. The model as a whole is significant [F $(5.111) = 2.560$, $p < .05$]. In the next regression the model showed physical bullying can also be predicted by the above mentioned independent variables. Sex, and age explained 7.5% of the variance, while the whole model 10.6% of it [F $(5.111) = 2.619$, $p < 05$]. In the final choice, variables of the third regression were directly entered without controlling for the effects of gender, and age, because the variance explained by them was too insignificant. As shown, the model was significant [F $(4.112) = 2.671$, p $< .05$]. The model explained a total of 8.7% of the variance. Regressions where victimization dimensions were used as dependent variables are not reported here because their findings were insignificant. Otherwise, self - esteem, and empathy dimension as measured by APRI and RSEI are not good predictors of verbal, social, and physical victimization, when controlling for sex, and age effects, and when variables are entered directly as well.

4. Discussion

There are expected and in line with other sources of literature findings in the current study, while some others are clearly unexpected.

As stated above the relationship among some variables is much weaker than expected. The most obvious example is probably the one between bullying subscales and self esteem. The direction is negative as well as its strength is weak. Literature shows the opposite. Perpetrators have a strong self esteem. O'Moore & Kirkham [16] explain that students do not always have a pure bullying, or victimization behavior. A part of them, those who have the lowest self - esteem, are involved in bully - victim behaviors. In our view an important question would be: How does victimization behaviors, and/or bully - victim behaviors serve to someone's self - esteem when it is well known that they suffer some negative outcomes because of their behavior?

The researchers are also surprised with the very modest relationship between cognitive empathy with other variables. This result focused our attention to an empathy related disorder called Williams' syndrome. It explains that though someone may experience vivid feelings of empathy he / she is not able to process cognitively the situation. Further research can investigate on the issue [17].

Findings showed that age correlates positively with bullying and victimization subscales as well as with self - esteem. This highlights the negative potential of self - esteem in the case of bullies, but also emphasizes the fact that victimization behaviors increase with age. The negative direction of the relationship between self - esteem and victimization confirms literature findings about the consequences of a healthy self - esteem in victimization behaviors.

Sex didn't show any significant relationships with most of the variables, except verbal bullying, and empathy dimensions. The finding is in line with previous research that suggests a lack of empathy in those involved in bullying behaviors.

Considering our findings, and in line with previous research we suggest that self - esteem, and empathy proper education by caregivers, and schools are of primary importance. Interventions should be focused on them too. It is important to distinguish between the need for a high self - esteem in those who miss it, and the dysfunctional aspects of high self - esteem of those who have it. Regarding empathy we would emphasize two points: firstly, the need for a greater empathy, and secondly the need for a harmonious balance among affective, and cognitive empathy, since they would complement each other thus leading to a more responsible behavior.

Lastly, the research once more told us that bullying is an international phenomenon that knows no cultural boundaries, shows similar characteristics, and can be equally aggressive, risky, and damaging.

5. Limitations and future research

The study used self - report measures. Though they are mostly considered reliable, disadvantages exist as well. There are several risks that in the authors' opinion coexist. Firstly, there are cultural, individual and situational barriers that many inhibit victims to admit their situation. Secondly, even perpetrators may be biased toward hiding the truth, not to mention the fact that some of the respondents may belong to the bully - victims category, and consequently find it hard enough to give genuine answers. Brewer & Kerslake [13] state that the behaviors' intention may be more easily misunderstood when interacting online, thus leaving space for cyber bullying, but such a risk, though smaller due to the lack of anonymity may be present in face to face communication too fostering traditional bullying behaviors. A lot of subjectivity is involved.

The sample itself displays weaknesses. It is relatively small and involves students in an urbanized area in the northern part of the country. It might be interesting to study other children who live in rural and / or suburban areas, since there are some differences at least in the education system quality provided in those areas, and parental rearing practices, that may contribute to this phenomenon through intermediary devices like the level of self-esteem and empathy.

6. Conclusion

The present research offers some valuable conclusion regarding the relationship of self - esteem, empathy and bullying perpetration and victimization in a certain context and a specific age. Thus' these conclusions can be compared to similar studies and its findings can be replicated to further ensure their reliability.

On the other hand, these findings can be extended, but first of all a different design should be applied. We would suggest a longitudinal design that could lighten the interplay between age and bullying & victimization behaviors.

Authors believe that greater attention should be drawn to the empathy issue, partly due to different ways it has been used in psychology through years. Probably, other types of measures except the self - report ones need to be explored.

Lastly, although the bully - victim group is not the focus of the current study the researchers are aware of the

fact they are the most problematic group whose behaviors needs be further studied.

References

[1] Adem Tamo , "Nga kriza shkollore te trauma psikologjike," albPAPER, 2012.

[2] Vijai P. Sharma, "Psychological Profiles of Bullies and Victims," Mind Publications. Retrieved from http://www.mindpub.com/art192.htm

[3] Maggi Price, Meghan A. Chin, Charmaine K. Higa - McMillan, B. Christopher Fruer, "Prevalence and internalizing problems of ethnoracially diverse victims of traditional and cyberbullying," School Mental Health.

[4] Heather Nicole Hines, "Traditional Bullying and Cyber - Bullying: Are the Impacts on Self - Concept the Same," Thesis submitted at the Faculty of Graduate School of Western Carolina University, 2011.

[5] Emma - Kate Corby, Marilyn Campbell, Barbara Spears, Philip Slee, Des Butler, Sally Kift, "Students' Perceptions of Their Own Victimization: A Youth Voice Perspective," Journal of School Violence, Vol.15, Iss.3, pp. 322 - 342, 2015.

[6] M. Fekkes, M.L. Pijpers, S.P Verloove - Van - Horick, "Bullying behavior and associations with psychosomatic complaints and depression in victims," JPediatr. Vol. 14, No. 1, pp.17 - 22, 2004.

[7] Dieter Wolke, William E Copeland, Adrian Angold, E Jane Costello, "Impact of bullying in childhood on adult health, wealth, and crime and social outcomes," Psychol. Sci. 24, Vol. 10, pp. 1958 - 1970, 2013.

[8]   Susan M Swearer, Sally Hymel, "School bullying and victimization," American Psychologist, 2015.

[9]   Richard Donegan, "Bullying and Cyberbullying: History, Statistics, Law, Prevention and Analysis", The Elon Journal of Undergraduate Research in Communications, Vol. 3, No.1, pp. 33 - 42, 2012.

[10] Eric F Dubow, Paul Boxer, L Rowell Huesmann, "Long-term Effects of Parents' Education on Children's Educational and Occupational Success: Mediation by Family Interactions, Child Aggression, and Teenage Aspirations," Wayne State Univ Press, Vol. 55,No. 3, pp. 224–249, 2009.

[11] William E Copeland, Dieter Wolke, Adrian Angold, E Jane Costello,"Adult Psychiatric and Suicide Outcomes of Bullying and Being Bullied by Peers in Childhood and Adolescence," JAMA Psychiatry, Vol. 70, No. 4, pp. 419 - 426, 2013.

[12] Gayle Brewer, Jade Kerslake, "Cyberbullying, self-esteem, empathy and loneliness," Computers in Human Behavior, Vol. 48, pp. 255–260, 2015.

[13] Anouk P Netten, Carolien Rieffe, Stephanie C P M Theunissen, Wim Suede, Evelien Dirks, Jeroen J Briaire, Johan J M Frijns, "Low Empathy in Deaf and Hard in Hearing (Pre)Adolescents Compared to Normal Hearing Controls," PLOs ONE, Vol. 10, No. 4, 2015.

[14] Dan Olweus, "Bullying at school: What we know and what we can do," Wiley-Blackwell, 1993.

[15] Juliane Callegaro Borsa, Bruno Figueiredo Damasio, Denise Ruschel Bandeira, "Cross - Cultural Adaptation and Validation of Psychological Instruments : Some Considerations," Paidéia (Ribeirão Preto). Vol. 22, No. 53, 2012.

[16] M. O'Moore, C. Kirkham, "Self-esteem and its relationship to bullying behaviour," Aggressive Behaviour, Vol. 27, pp. 283-296, 2001.

[17] C.B Mervis, B.P Klein - Tasman, "Williams Syndrome: Cognition, Personality and Adaptive Behaviour," Ment Retard Dev Disabil Res Rev. Vol. 6, No. 2, pp. 148-58, 2000.