Bully/Victim Problems and their Association with Coping Behaviour in Conflictual Peer Interactions Among School-age Children

ELENI ANDREOU, *University of Thessaly, Department of Primary Education, Greece*

ABSTRACT   *The main purpose of this study was to examine the relationship between bully/victim problems and the coping strategies used when confronted with a peer argument in Greek primary school children. Peer victimisation and bullying behaviour were assessed by the two six-item self-report scales developed by Austin & Joseph (1996), which could be immersed within the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC: Harter, 1985). Data are reported on the association between scores on both scales and scores on the SPPC and the Self-Report Coping Measure (SRCM: Causey & Dubow, 1992) with 408 children (211 girls and 197 boys), ranging from 9 to 12 years (mean = 10.7 years). The results suggest that both bullying and victimisation are associated with self-evaluations in diverse domains, and emotional coping strategies in conflictual peer interactions. Moreover, our data provide evidence that bully/victims are a distinct group in terms of their low levels of social acceptance and problem-solving ability. Future prospective studies are needed to provide a more definite account of social coping influences on bully/victim problems.*

Introduction

It is an undeniable fact, verified by many empirical studies, that there are children who are continuously harassed by their peers at school. When there is an imbalance of power and harassment (which can be direct or indirect, physical or verbal) happens repeatedly, it can be called bullying (Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996). Bullying not only causes considerable suffering to individual pupils but also has a damaging effect on school atmosphere (Olweus, 1993, 1994).

Recent research on school bullying (Stephenson & Smith, 1989; Slee & Rigby, 1993; Smith *et al.*, 1993; Boulton & Smith, 1994; Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996; Austin & Joseph, 1996) identified three groups of children involved in bullying situations: the bullies, the victims, and those who bully others and are bullied themselves (the bully/victims).

Accordingly, each group appears to have its own psychological characteristics. Highly aggressive bullies, for example, have been found to possess personality defects, having a positive attitude towards violence, while lacking a positive concept of themselves (Olweus, 1978), victims to experience rejection by their peers (Perry *et al.*, 1988; Salmivalli *et al.*, 1996; Hodges & Perry, 1999) and not to be particularly assertive (Schuster, 1996) and extroverted (Slee & Rigby, 1993), and bully/victims to have high neurotisism and high psychotism (Mynard & Joseph, 1997), and be distinguished by their low level of social acceptance and self-esteem, and their high degree of Machivellianism (Andreou, 2000).

Regarding coping behaviour in conflictual peer interactions, it has been found that victims are characterised by internalising coping, while both bullies and bully/victims show elevated levels of externalising coping and a lack of problem-solving (Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998). Taking into account, that bully/victim was assessed by direct questions in the above study and that many children are reluctant to admit to bullying others or being bullied when are directly asked (Tattum, 1988; Rigby & Slee, 1990; Smith, 1991), it is hypothesised that a different picture may emerge regarding the relationship between coping with peer argument and bully/victim problems in a study which will not draw attention to the issue of bullying and victimisation.

Austin & Joseph (1996) have recently developed two short individual difference scales with which to assess peer victimisation (the extent to which the child is bullied by other children) and bullying behaviour (the extent to which the child bullies other children). These scales were designed so they could be immersed within the Self-Perception Profile for Children (SPPC: Harter, 1985) thus reducing the saliency of the items. The main purpose of this study is to examine the relationship between bully/victim problems in Greek primary school children as assessed by these instruments and their coping strategies used when confronted with a peer argument.

The ability to cope effectively with interpersonal conflict situations has been recognised as an important component of social skills (Main & Roark, 1975; Nye, 1973; Rubin & Krasnor, 1986). Problem-solving (approach), distancing (avoidance) and social support seeking are generally considered as the three basic coping modes (Amirkhan, 1990), whereas internalising and extenalising represent two groups of emotional reactions to stress (Causey & Dubow, 1992). Our hypothesis is that children with bully/victim problems show different coping behaviour in peer conflicts than children without bully/victim problems. Moreover, it might be that the children who are both bullies and victims are distinguishable from either victims or bullies in how they cope when confronted with such conflicts. Since, it has been found that bully/victims are a distinct group from either bullies or victims in terms of social acceptance as measured by the SPPC (Mynard & Joseph 1999; Andreou, 2000) and that children's coping strategies are associated with social acceptance (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986; Bijttebier & Vertommen, 1998), our second hypothesis is that there is a link between bully/victim problems and the children's domain specific perceptions of self and that bully/victims are most readily distinguished not only in terms of emotional coping strategies, but also in terms of levels of social acceptance or other domain specific self-perceptions, as Austin & Joseph (1996) suggested.

Methods

Sample

The sample consisted of 408 children drawn from the fourth to sixth grade classrooms

of five primary schools in central Greece. It included 211 girls and 197 boys, ranging in age from 9 to 12 years (mean = 10.7, SD = 1.9).

Instruments

Children's coping strategies were assessed using the Self-Report Coping Measure (SRCM: Causey & Dubow, 1992). The SRCM consists of five subscales:

(1) social support seeking;
(2) problem solving;
(3) distancing;
(4) internalising;
(5) externalising.

Children are asked to imagine being confronted with a peer argument and then respond to each item on a 5-point Likert scale, ranging from 'never' to 'always'. The instrument was translated into Greek and retranslated into English by a native speaker of English. Differences between the original version and the retranslation were discussed in order to improve the quality of the Greek translation. Regarding the internal consistencies of the SRCM subscales, Cronbach's alphas ranged from 0.64 to 0.86.

In addition, all children completed the six-item 'Bullying Behaviour Scale' and the six-item 'Peer-Victimization Scale' (Austin & Joseph, 1996), which were immersed within the 'Self-Perception Profile for Children' (SPPC: Harter, 1985). The item pool of the Bullying Behaviour Scale was based on the Peer Victimisation Scale and involved changing the tense of the item from passive to active. As both the Bullying Behaviour Scale and the Peer Victimisation Scale employ the same forced choice format as the SPPC, both were scored according to the instructions provided by Harter (1985) for scoring the SPPC subscales (i.e. sum of six items). A full description of the Peer Victimization and Bullying Behaviour scales, and the procedure for their administration is available in Austin & Joseph (1996). The SPPC consists of five domain specific scales and one global self-worth scale. The domain specific scales assess scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance and behavioural conduct. As well as the data provided by Harter (1985), there is other evidence confirming the psychometric properties of the original SPPC (Granleese & Joseph, 1993, 1994). The results of factor analysis conducted in a previous study (Andreou, 2000) support the above conceptualisation in the Greek version of the SPPC.

Procedure

The Self-report Coping Measure and then the Self-perception Profile for Children were administered to each class separately during regular school days by a student in Education. Each child was given a copy of the questionnaires and the procedure for filling it in was explained. The items of the SRCM were read aloud to the children and any questions were answered as they arose. As the rationale for using the Peer Victimisation Scale and the Bullying Behaviour Scale is that they can be immersed within the SPPC so as to not draw attention to the issue of bullying and victimisation, the instructions provided by Harter (1985) were followed. This involved providing children with an explanation of how to complete the questionnaire and giving practice items to illustrate the forced choice format. No time limit was imposed. Once all the

TABLE I. Correlations between peer victimisation/bullying behaniour and scores on the SPPC and SRCM

	Peer victimisation		Bullying behaviour	
	Boys	Girls	Boys	Girls
SPPC				
Scholastic competence	− 0.268**	− 0.202**	− 0.152*	− 0.231**
Social acceptance	− 0.261**	− 0.365**	− 0.347**	− 0.141*
Athletic competence	− 0.155*	− 0.154*	− 0.031 (NS)	− 0.072 (NS)
Physical appearance	− 0.249**	− 0.582**	− 0.063 (NS)	− 0.012 (NS)
Behavioural conduct	− 0.381**	− 0.379**	− 0.529**	− 0.379**
Global self-worth	− 0.575**	− 0.425**	− 0.330**	− 0.162*
SRCM				
Social Support Seeking	− 0.232**	0.008 (NS)	0.031 (NS)	0.096 (NS)
Problem-Solving	− 0.021 (NS)	− 0.101 (NS)	− 0.158*	− 0.063 (NS)
Distancing	− 0.092 (NS)	0.014 (NS)	− 0.044 (NS)	0.009 (NS)
Internalising	0.397**	0.413**	0.069 (NS)	0.017 (NS)
Externalising	0.073 (NS)	0.005 (NS)	0.152*	0.042 (NS)

*$P < 0.01$; **$P < 0.001$.

questionnaires had been completed they were collected and placed in an envelope, which was immediately sealed in front of the children.

Results

No significant difference was found between boys and girls (means of 2.46 and 2.37 respectively, $t = 0.79$, NS) on the Peer Victimisation Scale, although boys scored higher than girls (means of 1.92 and 1.67, respectively, $t = 2.95$, $P < 0.01$) on the Bullying Behaviour Scale. For this reason, correlations between scores on these scales and the SPPC and SRCM subscales were conducted separately for boys and girls (see Table I).

For both boys and girls, higher scores on the Peer Victimisation Scale were associated with lower scores on all the SPPC subscales and higher scores on the Internalising Coping subscale on the SRCM. For both boys and girls, higher scores on the Bullying Behaviour Scale were associated with lower scores on all the SPPC subscales, except for athletic competence and physical appearance.

For boys, but not for girls, higher scores on the Bullying Behaviour Scale were associated with lower scores on the problem solving and higher scores on the extenalising coping subscales. A positive correlation was also observed between scores on the Peer Victimisation Scale and scores on the Social Support Seeking subscale of the SRCM, for boys but not for girls.

In order to investigate the self-perceptions and coping strategies of those grouped as both bullies and victims, children were classified, following the procedure used by Austin & Joseph (1996), into four groups:

(1) high bully and low victim—bully only group (71/408–17.4%);
(2) low bully and high victim—victim only group (76/408–18.6%);
(3) high bully and high victim—bully/victim group (42/408–10.3%);
(4) low bully and low victim—not involved group 219/408–53.7%).

This procedure chooses a cut-off score of 2.50 on both the Peer Victimisation Scale and

TABLE II. Mean scores on the SPPC and SRCM subscales for each of the four bully/victim groups

	Bully/victim ($n = 42$)	Bully only ($n = 71$)	Victim only ($n = 76$)	Not involved ($n = 219$)
SPPC				
Scholastic competence	2.29*bd*	2.45*a*	2.36*d*	2.64*ac*
Social acceptance	2.67*bcd*	2.97*ac*	2.75*abd*	3.00*ac*
Athletic competence	2.73	2.88*c*	2.34*bd*	2.87*c*
Physical appearance	2.51*cd*	2.74*d*	2.81*ad*	2.93*abc*
Behavioural conduct	2.37*cd*	2.41*cd*	3.11*abd*	3.21*abc*
Global self-worth	2.29*cd*	2.39*d*	2.82*ad*	3.27*abc*
SRCM				
Social Support Seeking	21.16	22.20*c*	20.00*bd*	21.58*c*
Problem-Solving	24.42*bcd*	26.13*ac*	27.34*abd*	27.92*ac*
Distancing	17.81	18.29*c*	18.74*bd*	17.83*c*
Internalising	17.81*bd*	16.30*a*	18.03*d*	16.98*ac*
Externalising	10.67*c*	11.02*c*	7.20*abd*	8.73*c*

a indicates a significant difference ($P < 0.05$) from bully/victim group; *b* indicates a significant difference ($P < 0.05$) from bully only group; *c* indicates a significant difference ($P < 0.05$) from victim only group; and *d* indicates a significant difference ($P < 0.05$) from the not involved group (two-tailed tests).

NB: classification using a cut-off point of 2.50 on the Peer Victimization and Bullying Behaviour Scales (see Austin & Joseph, 1996).

the Bullying Behaviour Scale to classify children into the above four groups. Mean scores on each of the SPPC and SRCM subscales are shown in Table II.

Although no difference was found between the bully/victim group and the remaining groups for athletic competence, the bully/victim group had the lowest score on social acceptance and were similar to victims only with respect to scholastic competence. For the other SPPC subscales, bully/victims scored significantly lower than victims, but not significantly lower than bullies.

Regarding SRCM subscales bully/victims scored midway between bullies and victims on Social Support Seeking and had the lowest score on problem-solving. Although no significant difference was found between the bully/victim group and the remaining groups for distancing, bully/victims were similar to victims only with respect to internalising coping, but similar to bullies only with respect to externalising coping.

Discussion

Based on previous work which examined the association between bully/victim problems and self-perceptions (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Andreou, 2000), and social coping strategies in relation to bullying and victimisation (Bijttebier & Vertomen, 1998), the results of our study indicate some interesting associations.

In our correlational approach we found both bullying and victimisation to be associated with self-evaluations in diverse domains and emotional coping strategies in conflictual interactions. Higher scores on the Peer-Victimisation Scale were associated with lower scores on all the SPPC subscales and higher scores on internalising coping subscale of the SRCM for both boys and girls, and social support for boys, but not for girls. This means that, despite their social problems, victimised boys do not resign from seeking support in the peer group. If we take into account that the forms bullying takes

differ between boys and girls (Hoover *et al.*, 1992; Whitney & Smith, 1993; Schuster, 1996), it seems more reasonable for the boys who predominately experience physical attack or threats to seek for support than the girls who are confronted mainly with verbal and indirect attacks. They seem to believe that their peers will feel more sympathetic to them because they are in obvious physical danger.

Moreover, higher scores on the Bullying Behaviour Scale were associated with lower scores on scholastic competence, social acceptance, behavioural conduct and global self-worth for both boys and girls, and with a lack of problem-solving and increased levels of externalising coping strategies for boys, but not for girls. Girls' coping strategies are not related to bullying at all. These results are similar to Bijttebier & Vertomen's (1998) findings which suggest a link between victimisation and internalising coping for both boys and girls, and a link between bullying and externalising coping for boys, but not for girls and provide support for the idea that the different forms that bullying takes for boys and girls depend on their different social skills. Research on sex-related strategies for coping with interpersonal conflict show that boys are more concerned with, and more forceful in pursuing their own agenda and girls are more concerned with maintaining interpersonal harmony (Miller *et al.*, 1986). The increased levels of externalising coping of male bullies fits that description well, whereas the increased levels of internalising coping in victims of both sexes is consonant with the descriptions of victimised children in the bully/victim literature, which suggest that victims cry easily, are manifestly anxious, and tend to reward attackers by submitting and relinquing resources (Olweus, 1978; Perry *et al.*, 1990; Pierce, 1990; Schwartz *et al.*, 1993; Hodges *et al.*, 1997). Moreover, the lack of problem-solving coping strategies in male bullies supports the idea that boys produce less variety of problem-solving alternatives than their female peers (Rubin, 1982; Musson-Miller, 1993).

Our results, regarding the association between both Bullying Behaviour and Victimisation Scales, and scores on the SPPC subscales are consistent with prior research on that association (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Mynard & Joseph, 1997; Andreou, 2000). Given that people tend to stabilise their self-perceptions by creating around themselves social environments that offer support for those perceptions and the stability inherent in these environments, in turn, stabilises their behaviour and their self-views (De La Ronde & Swann, 1993), it seems improbable that the cycle of peer bullying will stop without intervention.

The results of the categorical approach regarding differences in the SPPC and SRCM subscales between bullies, victims and bully/victims, suggest that bully/victims is a distinct group in terms of social acceptance and social coping strategies. What seems to set bully/victim apart most of all is their low levels of social acceptance and problem-solving ability.

Regarding the social acceptance, our data is interesting because it is known that children may behave aggressively after having seen a model act aggressively (Bandura, 1977) and Olweus (1993) suggests that those who are most strongly influenced by model effects are those who do not have a natural status among their peers and who would like to assert themselves. Therefore, this mechanism may be particularly appropriate to understanding the behaviour of the bully/victim group who are characterised by low social acceptance. Moreover, since low social acceptance leads to reduced availability of friends (Dishion *et al.*, 1995), the friends that are available may form a powerful network which, as recent work by Salmivalli *et al.* (1997) highlighted, may reinforce the already existing predisposition. Thus, prevention, as well as intervention

strategies against bullying, should focus not only on individual children (bullies, victims or/and bully/victims), but also the wider context of the class.

Bully/victims are similar to victims with respect to internalising coping, but similar to bullies with respect to externalising coping. Thus, our data contradicts Bijttebier & Vertomen's (1998) hypothesis that bully/victims have more in common with bullies than with victims. It also condradicts Dodge's (1983) findings, which suggest a link between peer rejection and externalising. It seems that bully/victims have their own coping responses with peer arguments, which are linked with their low social acceptance. Although this link was reported in prior research (Rubin & Krasnor, 1986) cannot explain satisfactory the behaviour patterns of bully/victims. Due to the cross-sectional and correlational nature of this study, which was based solely on self-reports, it cannot be assumed that getting involved in bullying situations either as a bully, victim or bully/victim depends on coping orientations. Being the victim of school bullying, for example, may influence subsequent coping. Future research could strive to examine causal relationships in this direction and account other possible variables, which may relate to the personality of groups involved into school bullying.

Correspondence: Dr E. Andreou, 255 Gazi Str., Volos, 38222, Greece. E-mail: elandr@uth.gr

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