

## School Bullying Victimization and College Adjustment

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The present study investigated the hypothesized relation between retrospective bullying victimization during school-age and the adjustment during college-age. Data were collected from 95 college students male (N=62) and female (N=33). The self-report instruments Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire and the sub-scales of College Adjustment Scale were used. Results reveal that, victims of primary school had academic, interpersonal and self-esteem problems. Victims of secondary school had interpersonal, self-esteem and family problems. Victims of both primary and secondary school i.e. the stable victims had interpersonal, self-esteem and family problems. Hence, this study concluded that there was an obvious relationship between victimization in school-age and the adjustment during college-age.

Bullying is defined as repeated and targeted peer aggression, which can take many forms including physical, verbal, and indirect aggression (Olweus, 1994). Building on Olweus initial definition of bullying, many researchers examining bullying behaviors acknowledged the five features of bullying (Griffin & Gross, 2004; Roth, Coles, & Heimburg, 2002) as: (1) bullying consists of behavior that is directed towards a victim with the intention to harm or instill fear in the victim; (2) the behavior occurs without provocation from the victim; (3) the aggression occurs repeatedly over a period of time (4) the behavior occurs within the context of a social group; and (5) an imbalance of power exists between the aggressor and victim. Bullying can take the form of physical attacks (hitting, kicking, or shoving); direct verbal attacks (calling a student names, saying hurtful or unpleasant things); or relational aggression (purposely excluding a student, starting rumors). Although incidence rates vary, many studies indicate that as many as 35% of youth report some degree of involvement in bullying (WHO, 2004; Nansel, Overpeck, Pilla, Ruan,

Simons-Morton, & Scheidt, 2001; Olweus, 1994).

Researchers have begun to establish a literature base documenting the long-term effects of childhood/adolescent bullying among college students (Dempsey & Storch, 2008; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Jantzer et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2005; Olweus, 1993; Schafer et al., 2004; Tritt & Duncan, 1997). Adequate assessment of the nature of clients presenting problems, as well as factors contributing to these problems is critical to providing effective treatment (Hood & Johnson, 2002). Understanding the aspects associated with the long-term effects of bullying may strengthen the initial assessment phase of counseling by assisting college mental health professionals to identify former victims of bullying and determining if further assessment of associated consequences is needed. Retrospective studies of college students who experienced bullying during childhood and/or adolescence were more likely than non-bullied peers to experience depression (Roth et al. 2002; Storch et al., 2004), anxiety disorders (McCabe, et al.,

2003; Roth et al., 2004) and problems in interpersonal relationships (Ledley et al., 2006; Schafer et al., 2004). College students who recalled a history of bullying during school age years reported more symptoms of depression in comparison to adults who did not recall experiencing bullying during their primary and secondary school years (Hawker & Boulton; Jantzer et al. 2006; Olweus, 1993). Additionally, college students who reported being former victims of school-aged bullying were more likely to endorse feeling that they had little control over outcomes in their lives (Dempsey & Storch, 2008) and lower self-esteem (Olweus). These factors also have been found to be associated with a greater risk for depression (Orth, Robins, Trzesniewski, Maes, & Schmitt, 2009).

In addition to symptoms related to depression (Roth et al., 2002; Storch et al., 2004), college mental health clinicians should also be aware that college students who recalled a history of bullying reported more symptoms of anxiety in comparison to non-bullied peers (Dempsey & Storch, 2008; Gladstone, Parker, & Malhi, 2006; McCabe et al., 2003).

In addition, college students who recalled being the target of school aged bullying also were more likely than non-bullied students to endorse items regarding apprehension of others' evaluation of them; greater expectations that others would evaluate them negatively; more distress related to perceived negative evaluations; and avoidance of situations in which evaluation might occur (Dempsey & Storch, 2008). Schafer and colleagues also reported that college students who were bullied in elementary and high school identified more difficulty maintaining friendships.

Frequency, duration, and timing of bullying have been identified as potential contributing factors to the development of

long-term problems during the college years (Jantzer et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2005; Schafer et al., 2004; Tritt & Duncan, 1997). In a retrospective study of 853 college students, Newman and colleagues found that as the recalled frequency of bullying increased and the recalled duration of bullying during childhood/adolescence increased symptoms of distress during adulthood also increased. Greater frequency of bullying also has been found to be negatively correlated with trust in relationships and satisfaction with quality of friendships among college students (Jantzer et al. 2006).

Duration of bullying is another factor that appears influential in the development of long-term effects (Schafer et al., 2004). College students who recalled being the subject of bullying throughout their primary and secondary school years were more likely to report problems with psychological distress than those who were only bullied only during one of these periods of time (i.e., either primary or secondary school) (Schafer et al., 2004). Perceived isolation during bullying events also has been found to be significantly associated with higher reported levels of distress. More specifically, those who were bullied and perceived themselves as isolated, were more likely to report elevated symptoms of distress than those who were bullied, but did not recall feeling isolated at the time of bullying (Newman et al., 2005). Age at the time of bullying also may be an important factor associated with longterm effects of bullying (Schafer et al., 2004). There is some evidence that bullying during secondary school may be more influential than bullying during the primary school years. Schafer and colleagues found that young adults who recalled only being bullied during secondary school were more likely to have a fearful attachment style and reported lower self-esteem in relationships than individuals who recalled only being bullied during primary

school years. However, duration appeared to be a stronger predictor of these problems than age at the time of bullying.

As indicated above, most literature has examined the long-term effects of victimization and its links to adulthood adjustment. Victimization of school-aged has been found to be associated with a number of adjustment problems during college-age. Based on this premise one could conclude that college students experience big difficulties. Furthermore, these difficulties may influence a student's social or personal-emotional adjustment to college. Finally, due to the lack of research in this area it is worthwhile to examine victimization by school bullying on a college level.

### Method

#### Sample:

95 participants (Male-62 and Female-33) were undergraduate students' from a private college at Puducherry.

#### Tools:

Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire (RBQ, Schafer et al., 2004). It covers 6 types of victimization: 2 physical, 2 verbal, 2 relational, and the frequency, perceived seriousness, and duration (all 5-point scales) of bullying, the gender of bullies, and the number of bullies encountered. The RBQ has been found to have good test-retest reliability with  $r = .88$  for elementary school victimization and  $r = .87$  for middle/high victimization (Schafer et al., 2004), for the current study the trauma sub-scale, questions on suicidal ideation and the final section was not used.

College Adjustment Scale (CAS, Anton & Reed, 1991). It assesses nine domains of developmental and psychological problems encountered by college students, however only five subscales were used in the current study: anxiety, self-esteem, interpersonal relationships, family problems, and academic concerns. The CAS has good convergent and discriminant validity, and internal

consistency reliability coefficients for the sub-scales range from .80-.92 with a mean of .86.

### Results and Discussion

**Table 1. Study variables with reference to gender**

Variables	Gender	N	Mean	SD	t' value
Academic Problems					
	male	62	20.06	4.05	3.91*
	female	33	16.90	3.05	
Anxiety					
	male	62	22.35	5.15	4.08*
	female	33	18.03	4.41	
Interpersonal Problems					
	male	62	21.11	4.80	3.98*
	female	33	17.15	4.22	
Self-esteem Problems					
	male	62	20.48	4.21	3.87*
	female	33	17.18	3.42	
Family Problems					
	male	62	19.14	4.44	3.58*
	female	33	15.93	3.51	
Elementary School					
	male	62	15.50	2.81	1.74
	female	33	14.54	1.92	
High School					
	male	62	22.19	3.43	1.74
	female	33	21.06	1.95	

\*  $p < 0.05$

Table-1 shows that gender significantly predicted the college adjustment, which is female students were reported less when compared to male students on academic problems, anxiety, interpersonal problems, self-esteem problems and family problems. According to a study conducted by Kenny and Rice (1995), Women tend to use relationships and socialization experiences in college to adjust more than their male counterparts. Females have traditionally been thought of as being more social and having a more difficult time adjusting to the college environment and making social connections than their male counterparts and numerous studies have found high levels of differences in the social adjustment of males and females (Cook, 1995). However, the difference in the adjustment levels for the groups in this study is more favor towards females. This may be

due to several factors such as the changing roles of women in society, as well as the fact that more opportunities for leadership are now available for women than ever before. With regard to the retrospective bullying, there were no significant differences between males and females in perceived seriousness of physical bullying during elementary or middle/high school, verbal bullying during 9.028 (94) =  $p < .05$ ).

elementary or middle/high school or relational bullying during elementary school. Hence, it was understood that the present sample had the exposure to bullying without any gender differences. Regarding birth order, there was a significant difference in perceived victimization was found among college students. The both elementary and high school experience of victimization shows significant F values (7.323 (94) =  $p < .05$  and

**Table 2. Correlation coefficients between the study variables**

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1 Gender	-									
2 Birth order	-.599**	-								
3 Academic Problems	-.376**	.198	-							
4 Anxiety	-.390**	.202*	.934**	-						
5 Interpersonal Problems	-.382**	.201	.939**	.981**	-					
6 Self-esteem	-.373**	.188	.915**	.946**	.934**	-				
7 Family Problems	-.348**	.178	.926*	.928**	.908**	.974**	-			
8 Elementary School	-.178	.147	.277**	.192	.270**	.277**	.200	-		
9 High School	-.178	.151	.185	.197	.268**	.287**	.270**	.753**	-	
10 Both School	-.190	.159	.203	.212	.260*	.302**	.294**	.925**	.947**	-

\*\*  $p < 0.01$  \*  $p < 0.05$

Table-2 shows Pearson correlation coefficients of the study variables. It reveals that, victims of elementary school had significantly and positively correlated with academic, interpersonal and self-esteem problems. Victims of secondary school had significantly and positively correlated with interpersonal, self-esteem and family problems. Victims of both primary and secondary school i.e. the stable victims also significantly and positively correlated with interpersonal, self-esteem and family problems. Hence, it is understood that interpersonal and self-esteem problems had highly correlated with the exposure to bullying at school-age. As expected results obtained in this study indicated a significant relationship between retrospective bullying histories as assessed by the retrospective bullying questionnaire and college adjustment assessed using the college adjustment scale. In other words higher levels of retrospective reports of bullying victimization from

elementary school through college appear to be related to less successful adjustment to college. This result is consistent with several research studies which have found that school-aged bullying victimization was related to adverse social and relational variables in young adulthood (Gilmartin, 1987; Hugh-Jones & Smith 1999; Jantzer et al., 2006; Schafer et al., 2004; Rivers, 2001). Results of current research support the notion that bullying during childhood and adolescence may have long-term consequences with interpersonal functioning and self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Jantzer et al., 2006; Newman et al., 2005; Rivers, 2004; Schafer et al., 2004; Tritt & Duncan, 1997). These patterns of symptoms were similar to symptoms displayed in children who are currently being bullied (e.g., Andreou, 2000; Craig, 1998; Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Slee 1995; Smokwoski & Holland, 2005), suggesting that the effects of bullying may persist into young adulthood. Further no significant relationships were found between

the stable victims and academic problems and this results suggest that higher reports of bullying victimization history is not related to adjustment to the academic or educational demands of college. There is lack of pre-existing research data explaining the relations among these variables. However one possible explanation is that, bullying is a social and interpersonal act, it may be distinct from academic functioning and feeling towards individual goals which is not as highly interpersonal in nature.

### Implications and Recommendations

Adjustment to college life is most important for students' population, since poor adjustment may produce negative outcomes. This study investigated the effect of exposure to bullying at school-age on college adjustment in a sample of college students. This study provided additional support for those college students who were bullied as children and/or adolescents may be at greater risk for developing interpersonal and self-esteem problems. Therefore, it is likely that college counsellors will encounter clients with a history of bullying. During the initial assessment process, it may be helpful for college mental health professionals to inquire about experiences with peers during adolescence/childhood. Many victims of bullying may not receive interventions at the time of bullying; research is also needed to determine how colleges and universities can promote psychological well-being among students who were victims of bullying. Therefore, it is recommended that outreach programming by college counselors in the form of psycho-educational interventions and support groups for school-aged victims of bullying for better adjustment during college-age.

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