

Individual protective and risk factors for school bullying & victimization : Narcissism, Self-esteem and Empathy

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Abstract

The present study investigates the association, between self-esteem, empathy and narcissism with bullying and peer victimization. The sample included N=1,715 (52.16% girls) Greek-Cypriot early adolescents (M age = 9.38). For the purpose of this study participants completed self-reported questionnaires. Pearson's correlation results showed an association between self-esteem and peer victimization, empathy and bullying, and between narcissism and bullying/victimization. The results from the Multiple Linear Regression analyses suggested that bullying and peer victimization have a positive association, empathy and bullying have a negative association and self-esteem is associated with peer victimization in a positive way. Current findings can help contribute to the bibliography and provide useful information to develop new prevention and intervention programs for school bullying and victimization.

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Bullying is a very old phenomenon that unfortunately still exists in our days (Olweus & Limber, 2010). It can be described as an aggressive behavior that is persistent and happens in relationships that are characterized by an imbalance in strength and power. In other words, bullying is a negative, intentional, repeated behavior that is used by one person or a group of people against another person which has difficulty to defend himself (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Bullying is still prevalent in society since it is still happening in many settings, such as work, school and in sports (Ventura et al., 2019).

The aim of this research is to examine the phenomenon of bullying that takes place in the school environment. School especially is a place that nurtures the phenomenon of bullying. Every day a lot of students face school bullying and victimization. Some factors that contribute to that phenomenon are environmental, individual and can start at home in the family. There are four different forms of bullying including physical, verbal, social or relational and cyberbullying (Hornby, 2016). To begin with, physical bullying can cause physical harm to the person experiencing it. Secondly, verbal bullying is distinguished with verbal threats and taunts. Another form of this phenomenon is the social and relational bullying which includes rumor-spreading, exclusion and humiliation. The fourth form of bullying is cyberbullying which includes electronic harassment using emails, online mediums and texts (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). In this study we will examine some individual protective and risk factors and the association with school bullying and victimization.

It is very crucial to present a definition for school bullying because this term will occupy us enough in this research. School bullying is an intentional and systematic direct behavior against students that struggle to defend themselves (Olweus, 1993). Direct forms of bullying such as kicking or hitting are more easily detected in school by teachers rather than indirect forms (Asimopoulos et al., 2014). Moreover, several studies that took place in the school field suggest that it is more challenging for teachers to perceive bullying when they are not keeping an eye on students or when they are not present (Craig et al, 2000; Fekkes et al., 2005).

Despite the numerous studies that were done to examine the phenomenon of school bullying to help minimize it and understand the factors that contribute to this phenomenon, it still exists. In fact, the rates for victimization varying from 10% to 33% and the percentage of individuals who bully varies from 5% to 13% (Hymel & Swearer, 2015). Moreover, some studies identify that girls are less likely to participated in all forms of bullying rather than boys (Atik & Guneri, 2013; Chung et al., 2018; Glew et al., 2005; Nansel et al., 2001). According to Vaillancourt et al. (2010) there are a lot of areas that bullying occurs in school. To be more specific, secondary school children reported that bullying is more likely to take place in hallways, however elementary school pupils generally reported that bullying happened mainly in the schoolyard and on the playground. In addition, the research of Glew et al. (2005) showed that rates of victimization are higher on the playgrounds (71%). Moreover, school bullying is also a major problem in Cyprus (Ozada & Duyan, 2021). The results of another study with 1645 Cypriot participants showed that 5.4% of the students are participating in bullying cases only as bullies, 7.4% of the students only as victims, and 4.2% as victims/bully. In general, 17% of the Greek Cypriot students are involved somehow in bullying and victimization cases (Stavrinides et

al. 2010). The above data reveals that the research on that phenomenon is very necessary and important because it would help us understand it better and create more effective interventions.

It is apparent that students who face systematic victimization suffer from adjustment problems (Salmivalli, 2004). Hawker & Boulton (2000) review revealed that victimization is strongly related with loneliness, depression, social self-worth, as well as social and generalized anxiety. Furthermore, a meta-analysis of Card (2003), showed that victimization is associated with low academic success, school avoidance, absence of school enjoyment and with externalizing or internalizing problems. Many studies detect a correlation between victimization and student's health (Forero et al., 1999). Some of these studies found that victims suffer from headaches, poor physical health, bedwetting, stomachaches, sleep disorders and feeling unhappy (Rigby, 1998; Rigby, 1999; Williams et al., 1996). In terms of sex there is some evidence that girls may experience a broader range and more negative consequences, such as serious health problem and negative psychological consequences compared to boys (Gruber & Fineran, 2008). The purpose of this study is to examine the individual protective and risk factors such as narcissism, self-esteem and empathy. Especially we will assess how these factors affect school bullying and victimization.

Self-esteem is the feeling that one is 'good enough' and includes feelings of self-respect and self-acceptance (Ackerman et al., 2011; Rosenberg, 1965). In other words, self-esteem is how the person perceives themselves and it can be either negatively or positively. It is an evaluation of one's value or worth (Tsaousis, 2016). High levels of self-esteem imply that the individual admires and considers himself or herself to be worthy. In contrast, low self-esteem indicates self-contempt, self-rejection, and self-dissatisfaction (Zhong t al., 2021). Self-esteem has a significant role in the development of a child as it is the base of self-attributions. Some

studies have shown that self-esteem has an impact in children's psychological and physical growth and adjustment (Tsaousis, 2016). Furthermore, according to Tambelli et al., 2012 self-esteem can be a protective factor for difficulties or emotional well-being of children and young adults.

In the literature there is a debate for self-esteem and how is associated with school bullying and victimization. There is a substantial body of research which recommends that self-esteem is strongly associated with bullying either in a negative or positive way (Tsaousis, 2016). Some studies noticed that self-esteem was connected to bullying-victimization in a negative way (Xu et al., 2020; Zhou et al., 2020). Furthermore, other studies have shown that low levels of self-esteem are related with higher levels of bullying behavior (Andreou, 2001; Jankauskiene, Kardelis, Sukys, & Kardeliene, 2008; O'Moore & Kirkham, 2001). In addition, lower levels of self-esteem have been considered as a main reason of bullying behavior. This is due to the fact that low self-esteem has been considered to be associated with so many antisocial and undesirable adjustments (Salmivalli 2001). The study of Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004 suggests that self-esteem predicts the involvement in both victimization and bullying, but low self-esteem is a characteristic of children who are victimized. In contrast, other studies claim that low levels of self-esteem are associated with less involvement in bullying (Gendron et al., 2011). Moreover, other studies found no relation between bullying and self-esteem (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999; Seals & Young, 2003; Tsaousis, 2016). On the other hand, some other studies and theories suggest that self-esteem is a moderator in the relationship of bullying perpetration and bullying victimization (Choi & Park, 2018). Gendron et al., 2011 show that a prognostic factor for bullying behavior later in life is how the individual perceives their self-esteem.

Another factor to take into consideration when talking about bullying is narcissism. The word "Narcissism" usually has a negative meaning. It refers to a person selfish, egocentric and arrogant that has vain characteristics (Perrotta, 2020). Narcissism is related to fragile self-view, self-enhancing tendencies, exploitation of others for personal gain, a grandiose, superiority beliefs and inflated self-appraisals. Moreover, narcissism has been associated to antisocial behaviors in young adults (Frick & Hare, 2001). A person who is a narcissist has unrealistic and high inflated positive views of themselves, which give them a feeling of entitlement. Furthermore, it seems that they have a diminished interest in affiliation, lack regard for other people, pro-social behavior and communal values (Campbell and Foster, 2007; Cisek et al., 2008). A child can be classified as narcissist according to two theories. Social learning theory supports that children who are overvalued by their parents are more likely to grow up as narcissists. Usually, their parents treat them as more entitled and special compared to other children. In contrast, the psychoanalytic theory believes that a child is more likely to become narcissistic when their parents are not as warmth towards them (Brummelman et al., 2015).

According to the literature, there are only a few recent studies that have examined the association between narcissistic features and bullying in young adults (Reijntjes et al., 2016). Some researchers support those individuals who score higher in narcissism may react aggressively if their goal attainment or ego is threatened by their peers (Farrell & Vaillancourt, 2019). Fanti & Kimonis, (2013), indicates that bully-victims and bullies tend to score higher on narcissism compared to noninvolved adolescence and victims. Furthermore, longitudinal research with Greek-Cypriot population aged 12-14 has shown that those who score higher on narcissism at baseline were more steadily and more likely to engage in bullying (Fanti and Kimonis, 2012). On the other hand, victims of bullying might score lower in narcissism (Farrell

& Vaillancourt, 2019). Narcissism has not been assessed directly with peer victimization, but there is simultaneous (e.g., Salmivalli et al., 1999) and longitudinal bi-directional evidence (e.g., van Geel et al., 2018) among peer victimization and negative self-perceptions that involve self-efficacy, lower self-esteem, social competence and self-worth (Arseneault, et al., 2010; McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015; Salmivalli et al., 1999; Wolke & Lereya, 2015).

The capability to understand the emotional state of others begins early in life (Dadds et al., 2008). It starts even before a child is able to report such abilities. Definitions of empathy differ in the reference. There are three different components: the sharing of other's emotional state as well as the ability of decoding other's emotional state, and the third component is the prosocial behavior that follows (Dadds et al., 2008). Empathy has two different components: the affective and the cognitive component. The ability to understand and identify with other individuals' point of view is defined as the cognitive component. On the other hand, the affective component is described as the tendency to experience emotions of sympathy or concern for others (Gini et al., 2007). Even if empathy is considered cognitive, affective, or both cognitive and affective, the suggested association with behavior is precisely the same, that's why the existence of empathy prevents antisocial behavior and facilitates prosocial behavior (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006).

The relationship between bullying and empathy is currently unclear (Noorden et al., 2015). Some studies support that bullies don't have the ability to appreciate the emotional effects of their behavior upon other individual's emotions. This is the reason that they are unable to understand the feelings of others (Arsenio and Lemerise, 2001; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998; Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Randall, 1997). The study of Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012 shows that low empathy is a predictor for bullying. According to Endresen and Olweus, 2001 bullies tend to

score low in empathy. Moreover, bullies are intended to have less empathy compared to non-bullies (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006). Some studies suggest that kids who bully have less empathy for their victims (Stavrinides et al., 2010). Gini et al., 2007 pointed out that low levels of empathic responsiveness are associated to bullying. Some other studies support that low levels of empathy show high levels of bullying (Zych et al., 2019). The research of Stavrinides et al., (2010), indicates that children who participated in bullying behaviors are less likely to develop empathy. Furthermore, the study of Georgiou & Stavrinides, (2012) shows that affective empathy has negative relationship to bullying.

Current Study

In this research we are going to examine self-esteem, narcissism and empathy in the context of bullying. In the bibliography there is some research that examines the above characteristics but individually. For example, according to Fanti and Henrich, 2015 children with narcissistic characteristics with a lower level of self-esteem are more possible to bully. Moreover, some other studies suggest that narcissism is negatively related with empathy (Sedikides et al., 2002; Morf et al., 2011; Hepper et al., in press). Although, there are some studies that examine the above variables it seems that they didn't examine all three of them as individual risk or protective factors compared to school bullying. Furthermore, there no clear evidence if the variables impact positively, negatively or if there is a correlation to the behavior.

In the bibliography there is limited evidence about self-esteem, narcissism and empathy and how all three play a role in bullying thus it is important to examine it. Therefore, in this study we will examine the interaction among self-esteem, narcissism and empathy with school bullying. More specifically, we will determine if self-esteem, narcissism and empathy will predict school bullying and victimization. We hypothesize that high levels of narcissism and self-

esteem and low levels of empathy will be risk factors for becoming a bully. On the other hand, we hypothesize that low levels of narcissism, self-esteem and high levels of empathy will be a risk factor to be bullied.

Methodology

Participants

The sample size of this study was N=1715 students aged 6-13 years old (M= 9.38, SD= 1.64) that reside in Cyprus. From the 1715 participants the 813 were male (47.4%) and 902 were female (52.6%). We collected our data from children that were students in public primary schools between the 1st and the 6th grade. The sample was selected from all the districts in Cyprus (Limassol, Larnaka, Nicosia etc.). The parental concern was the only criterion for children to participate in our research.

Measures

Self-esteem: Rosenberg Self-Esteem scale (RSES) has been used to measure the levels of self-esteem (Rosenberg, 1965). One of the most common used measures of global self-esteem (Byrne, 1996) in the social science research is the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (Rosenberg, 1965). RSES contains questions such as “I am able to do things as well as most other people” and “At times I think I am no good at all” (Rosenberg, 1965). It is a 10-item scale and includes 5 negative and 5 positive items that appear in alternately order (Tomas & Oliver, 1999; Rosenberg, 1965). This scale measures self-acceptance and self-respect and the items are placed on a 4-point scale, rated from 0 (“not at all true”) to 3 (“definitely true”) (Martín-Albo et al., 2007; Barry et al., 2009; Bushman & Baumeister, 1998).

Narcissism: Narcissism was measured by The Antisocial Process Screening Device–Youth report (APSD; Frick and Hare 2001). APSD was created to assess traits related with the construct of psychopathy. The APSD is a 20-item behavior rating scale (Kimonis et al., 2006). There are three factors index in APSD such as Narcissism, Callousness-Unemotionality, and Impulsivity. For the purpose of this research, only the Narcissism factor was used. (Frick and Hare 2001; Vitacco, Rogers, and Neumann 2003). The narcissism subscale contains questions such as “You think you are better or more important than other people”. The items that refer to narcissism was placed on a 4-point scale (ranging from 0 = “not at all true” to 3 = “definitely true”). APSD is a well validated tool and has been used in various studies to measure narcissism (Kimonis et al., 2006).

Empathy: We used the Social-Emotional Assets and Resilience Scales (SEARS; Merrell, 2011) to measure the levels of empathy. SEARS evaluates positive social-emotional attributes of adolescents and children. It is a strength-based, multi-informant, social-emotional assessment system. Moreover, this scale assesses problem-solving abilities, peer relationships, coping skills, empathy etc. This tool contains the SEARS-A (adolescent self-report), SEARS-C (child self-report), SEARS-T (teacher report), and SEARS-P (parent report). For the purpose of this research we will use the SEARS-P. Parents or caregivers can complete the questionnaire for their children aged between 5 and 18 years old. The subscales of SEARS-P are Self-Regulation/Responsibility, Social Competence and, Empathy (Nese et al., 2012). There are 22 items for self-regulation, 7 items for empathy and 10 items for social competence. Parents have to give their answers in a 4-point scale (“never” up to “always/almost always) on questions such as “Tries to help others when they need help” (Nese et al., 2012; Strømgren & Couto, 2022; Merrell, 2011).

Bullying/Victimization: The Student Survey of Bullying Behavior-Revised (SSBB-R; Varjas, Meyers, & Hunt, 2006) was used to measure bullying and victimization. This scale detects if participants experienced or are involved in different types of victimization or bullying. There are 12 items that evaluate school victimization, 12 items that evaluate school-bullying, 4 items that evaluate cyberbullying, and 4 items evaluating cyber-victimization. Moreover, in the SSBB-R there are questions such as “How often do you pick on younger, smaller, less powerful, or less popular kids by hitting or kicking them?” and the children have to give their answers on an ordinal scale (“never, once or twice a year, monthly, weekly, or daily”). Furthermore, SSBB-R assesses in a successful way school-victimization, school bullying, cyber-victimization, cyberbullying among adolescents. SSBB-R was used and verified in previous research in Cyprus and the US. (Fanti et al., 2009; Hunt, Meyers, Jarrett, & Neel, 2005; Varjas et al., 2006).

Procedure

For the purpose of the present study an approval was obtained from the Cyprus National Bioethics Committee and the Cyprus Ministry of Education. The schools were randomly selected from the four districts in Cyprus in order to get a more representative sample. The school board approved our study and then information consent forms were given to the students to be signed by their parents to ensure participation in the study. After that the students and their families were informed about their rights as participants and then we provide them with general information for the present study. Well trained assistants administer and conduct the questionnaires. The questionnaires were completed by the children in a familiar school setting. Moreover, we give the questionnaires to the parents through the children in sealed envelopes. Both parents have to complete the questionnaires and we will give them back to the school in a

sealed envelope in 2 weeks' time. Parents and children didn't get any reward or any other motivation to participate in this study.

Results

For the statistical analysis of the data we used the statistical package of SPSS 24.0. To begin with, as reported in table 1 a Pearson's correlation between all scores was computed in order to identify associations existing between school bullying/victimization and individual characteristics. There was a negative correlation between bullying and empathy $r(921) = -.22$, $p < .001$ and a positive correlation between bullying and narcissism $r(921) = .43$, $p < .001$. No significant correlation was found between bullying and self-esteem. Moreover, it was found that victimization was positively correlated with narcissism $r(921) = .34$, $p < .001$ and with self-esteem $r(921) = .15$, $p < .001$ and there was no significant correlation between victimization and empathy.

Multiple linear regression analysis was carried out in order to examine if self-esteem, empathy and narcissism can predict school bullying and victimization. Two multiple linear regression analysis were performed using bullying and victimization as the dependent variables and empathy, self-esteem and narcissism as the independent variables. Table 2 shows the results of the first multiple regression analysis with bullying as the dependent variable. The overall regression was statistically significant, $F(3,695) = 58.27$, $p < .001$. The amount of variance explained by the model is 20% ($\Delta R^2 = .20$). The results showed that narcissism was significant positive predictor for school bullying ($\beta = .39$, $p < .001$) and empathy was significant negative predictor for school bullying ($\beta = -.18$, $p < .001$). Furthermore, the results showed that self-esteem was not a significant predictor for school bullying. Table 3 shows the result of the second multiple regression analysis with victimization as the dependent variable. The overall regression was statistically significant, $F(3,695) = 38.29$, $p < .001$. The amount of variance explained by the

model is 14% ($\Delta R^2=.14$). The results showed that narcissism and self-esteem was significant positive predictors for victimization ($\beta=.34, p<.001$ and $\beta=.12, p<.001$). The results showed that empathy was not a significant predictor for victimization.

Discussion

The present study enhances our knowledge on the development of peer victimization and bullying during early adolescence. Our results showed some evidence that narcissism is positively associated with peer victimization and bullying. The findings also suggest negative association between empathy and bullying. Furthermore, there is no association between empathy and peer victimization. Victimization and self-esteem have a positive association. Furthermore, there is no association between bullying and self-esteem. From our first hypothesis the above findings confirmed that high levels of narcissism and low levels of empathy are risk factors for becoming a bully. These results are discussed below in the perspective of the existing literature.

Our findings that there is no association between bullying and self-esteem agree with the research of Salmivalli et al.,1999; Seals & Young, 2003; Tsaousis, 2016. Moreover, our results are supported by the study of Kokkinos & Panayiotou, 2004 that self-esteem predicts the peer victimization but not with the fact that low self-esteem is a characteristic of children who are victimized. The fact that self-esteem is positively associated with victimization may be explained by a moderator. Maybe a third variable such as academic performance moderate the relationship between self-esteem and peer victimization. The moderator effect the relationship between self-esteem and victimization. For example students' with high academic performance will have higher levels of self-esteem but this may increase the risk for being victimized. More research is

needed to examine if there are other variables that affect the relationship between self-esteem and victimization.

Furthermore, our study shows that low empathy is a predictor for bullying and that is also supported by the study of Kokkinos & Kipritsi, 2012. The findings of Zych et al., 2019 that low levels of empathy show high levels of bullying is supported by the findings of our research. These results may be explained by the research of Arsenio and Lemerise, 2001; Eisenberg and Fabes, 1998; Bjorkqvist et al., 2000; Randall, 1997 that bullies don't have the ability to appreciate the emotional effects of their behavior upon other individual's emotions. This is the reasoning that they are unable to understand the feelings of others.

Furthermore, the findings of our research show that narcissistic characteristics are higher in bullies and that is also supported by the research of Fanti & Kimonis, 2013. Although the fact that our research shows that narcissistic characteristics are also high in victims may be explained by the psychoanalytic theory. This theory supports that a child is more likely to become narcissistic when their parents are not as warmth towards them (Brummelman et al., 2015). More research is needed to also examine if the lack of parental warmth is a risk factor for becoming a victim.

Our findings give us important information and evidence to develop interventions to minimize school bullying. Based on the above findings we know that bullies score higher in narcissism and lower in empathy thus, in the field of school psychologist we can develop interventions to increase empathy and decrease narcissism for school bullies. Moreover, we can educate teachers so they can identify which students have a higher risk to develop narcissistic behaviors and low empathy. By doing so we could develop prevention programs for that specific target group.

Strengths, Limitations, and Future Directions

The main strength of this study was the large sample of early adolescents and with that we had the opportunity to detect the direct associations among the variables. Furthermore, our sample contains participants from all the districts of Cyprus and is equally divided in terms of gender so it's more representative and our results can easily be generalized. On the other hand, self-report and parental-report data instead of behavioral data of self-esteem, narcissism and empathy was the main limitation of this research. The use of self or paternal report questionnaires increase the risk to derive more socially desirable, subjective and hasty answers. Moreover, we collected our sample from school communities which does not include clinical cases. The relationship and the association between self-esteem, narcissism, empathy and school bullying should be limited to bullying tendency and in mild forms of bullying. There is a possibility that the relationship may be different between the above variable and school bullying in a more serious form of this phenomenon. Another limitation of this research is the fact that it did not examine other variables that may affect the relationship of self-esteem and victimization and narcissism and victimization.

For future research behavioral measurements could be included to eliminate the effects of a self/parental opinionated data gathering. Also, we can include in our sample more clinical cases to see if the association among the variables may be different from the findings of our research. Moreover, based on the psychoanalytic theory we can measure the parental characteristics to see if some parental styles (lack of parental warmth) increases the possibility for a child to develop narcissistic characteristics and then become a victim. Also, we must examine if some other variables such as academic performance may affect the relationship between self-esteem and victimization. Furthermore, we could take this research a step further and we can use the results

of this research as a pre-test. A prevention program can be applied to students that score higher in narcissism and have a post-test to examine if the cases of bullying were decreased at school. School psychologist can apply this prevention program to the students with the above characteristics.

Conclusion

To conclude with, our results point to the potential importance of studying the association between empathy, narcissism and self-esteem to understand better the role of personality factors in the development of school victimization and bullying in Cyprus. The present study expanded the current bibliography. Every research for school bullying is important because it can provide new evidence for this phenomenon. Finding risk and protective factors linked to both school bullying and victimization is significant for the design of new preventions and interventions in the school field. A very useful prevention program that is already been used at schools in Cyprus is Daphne III. In this program there is a manual titled “teaching trough a variety of stories” that are associated with school bullying. Our data can be used to add additional stories which will target individuals with low empathy and individuals with narcissistic characteristics.

Table 1. Correlations Between the Variables Under Investigation (n = 1715)

	Bullying	Victimization
Self-Esteem	.05	.34*
Narcissism	.43*	.15*
Empathy	-.22*	-.04

*p<.001

Table 2. Regression Analyses with Bullying as the dependent variable (n = 1715)

Variable	<u>Bullying</u>				
	Beta	SE	t	β	p
Constant	4.98	1,91	2.61		.009
Self-Esteem	.06	.08	11.25	.03	.35
Narcissism	.94	.06	.94	.39	.000
Empathy	-.45	.09	-5.16	-.18	.000

Table 3. Regression Analysis with Victimization as the dependent variable

<u>Victimization</u>	
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Variable	Beta	SE	t	β	p
Constant	-.49	2.70	-.18		.86
Self-Esteem	.29	.09	3.25	.12	.001
Narcissism	1.14	.12	9.65	.34	.000
Empathy	-.09	.12	-.03	-.03	.45

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