Prospectus

Perceptions of Coping Strategies of Young Adults Who Were Bullied as Youth

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Doctor of Philosophy – General Teaching Psychology
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Problem Statement

While there is some longitudinal research to examine sequelae of experiences of victimization by bullies during childhood and adolescence (Boulton, 2013; Hunter & Boyle, 2004; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007; Visconti, Sechler, & Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2013), less is known about the types of coping strategies individuals may develop in response to childhood bullying and use as young adults (Hemphill, Tollit, & Herrenkohl, 2014). Further, studies frequently use quantitative methods to investigate emotional and behavioral patterns of victims of childhood bullying (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014; Hunter et al., 2007; Tenenbaum, Varjas, Meyers, & Parris, 2011). Less attention has been given to the phenomenological experiences of these individuals. It is not uncommon for bullying to begin during one’s childhood (elementary, middle school, and high school) and continue to one’s adulthood years college and work environment (Hunter et al., 2007). The act of bullying is an aggressive form of behavior that is inflicted with the intent to harm, it is repetitive, and consists of an “imbalance of power” (Seltzer, 2013, p. 1). The outcome of bullying can be bad not only for the victim but the bully him or herself and other bully victims and witnesses/bystanders. Studies show that both the bully and the victim and witnesses/bystanders of bullying are at risk of developing symptoms of depression, in addition to suicidal ideation and suicide attempts (Seltzer, 2013).

Recent studies reveal that individuals who are victims of bullying apply coping strategies that are “passive, emotionally-oriented and avoidant” in nature (Garnefski & Kraaij, 2014, p. 1). However, it is unknown what coping strategies are in fact effective in addressing the subject of bullying. Some studies have shown that passive styles, which are identified as maladaptive, have resulted in the development of depression and negative mental health issues (Garnefski & Kraaij,
Other studies (Hunter et al., 2007; Tenenbaum et al., 2011) showed that victims of bullying typically use problem-focused strategies that often left them unsuccessful in finding a solution to their problems. One qualitative study by Garnefski and Kraaij (2014) explored coping strategies used by adolescents exposed to victimization by bullies; they found that the strategies the youths described were related to their psychological welfare. However, no similar qualitative study has examined possible relationships between coping strategies and psychological welfare among young adults who were victimized by bullies during childhood/adolescence.

**Purpose**

The primary research question that will be examined is, “What long-term coping strategies do young adults develop in adapting from being bullied as a teenager?” A qualitative design will be used to interview young adults who report being victims of bullying during adolescence. Structured interview questions will explore the participants’ individual recollections of such experiences, with particular interest in the stress they report experiencing in relation to the victimization and ways they attempted to cope with this stress as adolescents. Further, this study will explore their descriptions of coping strategies that they continue to use in response to life stressors, and their self-reported success with such coping strategies.

Smithyman, Fireman, and Asher (2014) have noted that recollections of incidents involving acts of bullying may affect one’s ability to conduct him or herself in such types of situations.

**Significance**

Researchers have yet to determine what factors help reduce the negative impact of bullying and victimization later on in one’s life; by identifying such factors, prevention and intervention programs may be developed which support resilience (Hemphill, Tollit, &
Herrenkohl, 2014). The proposed study will help to fill a gap in our understanding of coping strategies which may help to mitigate short- and long-term impacts of victimization during childhood and adolescence. Educators, parents, mental health counselors, and other stakeholders may then apply this information for support of children who are at risk, or already are victims, of bullying during childhood or adolescence. Further, those who work with young adults who were victims as children or adolescents can be sensitive to the needs of this group who may still be challenged by the effects of earlier and/or current victimization.

**Background**

The selected articles below address the subject of bullying from one’s childhood to adulthood concerning their ability to adapt:

1. Camodeca and Goossens (2005) conducted a study on a sample of 311 children and what useful interventions he or she used to stop bullying. The researchers administered a 36-item questionnaire to participants and asked each to imagine if they were the victim, bully, or a witness (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Peer reports were also used to determine participant's role in bullying (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005). Participants were placed into several groups as the (bully, follower, defender, outsider, victim, and those who were not involved). The results show that most of the participants coped with being a victim of bullying through assertiveness. Bullies responded by retaliating while defenders, outsiders, victims and those who were not involved tried to solve the conflict through assertiveness (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005).

2. Carlisle and Rofes (2007) stated that because of the small number of research studies on long-term effects of bullying, the researchers were inspired to conduct a study on this
topic. The researchers in the study were psychotherapist and professors in education who worked with many individuals who survived school bullying. The researchers wanted to determine whether there was a relationship between long-term effects of school bullying and those who survived childhood abuse. Carlisle and Rofes’ (2007) study wanted to bring together the different perspectives of those who work in the psychology, sociology, and education field about this topic. The sample in the study was small and only 15 adult males attended school in the United States, United Kingdom, and Australia. Only six of the participants attended a boarding school (Carlisle & Rofes, 2007).

3. Hemphill et al. (2014) examined the externalizing and internalizing problems, and protective factors, of those who bully and are victims as young adults. The researchers hypothesized that bullying would predict externalizing problems in young adults and victimization predict internalizing problems, and protective factors would reduce negative outcomes for both the bully and victim (Hemphill et al., 2014). The Australian sample consisted of Victorian students from a longitudinal study on antisocial and prosocial behaviors in adolescents (Hemphill et al., 2014). The majority of the participants were surveyed by the researchers in the study at 10 and 11 years old. The results reveal that both bullying and victimization predict negative and harmful outcomes when children become adults (Hemphill et al., 2014). Those who bully later on in their adolescence were connected to adults who have a nonviolent antisocial behavior and those who have a violent antisocial behavior (Hemphill et al., 2014).
Depressive symptoms were found in those who were bullied in school as adults (Hemphill et al., 2014).

4. Homel (2013) conducted a study that provided in-depth data on a sample that consisted of young Australians that reside in Canberra around the ages 11, 14, and 20 years old. In this study, the researcher examined aggression found in young adults and its relationship to a long history of school bullying, with a specific focus on various experiences, such as drinking, receiving employment, and study, while approaching adulthood and the difference in aggression. The findings stated that certain contexts during the beginning stages of adulthood could be helpful to youth concerning aggressive trajectories to alter negative behavior. Aggression is related to antisocial behavior, which can transition into an individual’s adulthood. By learning about the cause and developing stages of certain behaviors they can be identified early on before bullying incidents begin or as a means to end bullying.

5. Hunter, Mora-Merchan, and Ortega (2004) examined the ways in which children assess and cope with school bullying and how it influences his or her long-term outcomes. The sample in the study consisted of 219 Spanish undergraduate students between the ages 18 and 40 (Hunter et al., 2004). Each participant completed the Retrospective Bullying Questionnaire and a distress scale. The results revealed that coping strategies reported by victims of bullying, control appraisal and coping strategy did not influence the levels of distress one experienced as adults (Hunter et al., 2004). Only control threat and challenge appraisals influenced one’s long-term distress (Hunter et al., 2004). The researchers focused on the effects and the possibility that appraisals might influence the
levels of distress and quality of emotions one experience in being a victim of bullying (Hunter et al., 2004). Active strategies were found effective in dealing with bullying and those who avoided conflict or involved in aggression were ineffective (Hunter et al., 2004).

6. Kim, Catalano, Haggerty, and Abbott (2011) examined the long-term consequences of those who have been bullied with those who have behavior problems in their adulthood. The sample was large and researchers analyzed middle school students who bullied their peers, to determine whether there was an increase in one committing violent acts, drinking and using drugs (Kim et al., 2011). The researchers wanted to determine if any of the behavioral problems would remain once measuring demographics, family, and peer risk factors. The data results showed that childhood bullying did predict one committing a violent act and using substance as an adult (Kim et al., 2011). The researchers believed that by creating an intervention for those who are involved with bullying early on children may not participate in violence and use substance as an adult.

7. Mahady Wilton, Craig, and Pepler (2000) investigated the emotional regulation and the patterns of victims of bullying in the classroom. The researchers observed each child participant who was in elementary and middle school over three years. The results indicate that those who have been bullied in school cope by using problem solving strategies that help decrease bullying situations (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000). Aggressive strategies are also used by victims of bullying that escalate the bullying incident (Mahady Wilton et al., 2000).
8. McDougall and Vaillancourt (2015) found that by studying peer victimization many people who are teachers, health professionals, researchers and parents seek to make a change. Research has focused on whether peer victimization in one’s childhood and adolescence can cause long-term outcomes later on in life. The researchers focused on the adjustment problems that follow after their peers victimize one during childhood and adolescence (McDougall & Vaillancourt, 2015).

9. Seiffge-Krenke and Beyers’ (2005) longitudinal study examined the relationship between 112 participants’ coping behavior and early attachment experiences. At age 14 the coping behavior of each participant was measured during their adolescence and early adulthood. An adult attachment interview was used to help assess those who were age 21 current and early attachment experiences. The results indicated that there were differences in how one copes and attach themselves in both adolescence and early adulthood. Those who were secure during their adolescence and early adulthood faced problems by using their social network (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005). More internal coping was used by those who were secure and dismissing than those who were preoccupied (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005). When measuring respect to withdrawal as a coping style there was minor differences found. In general, the researchers found that both adolescents and young adults coping trajectories are related to their attachment style of mind (Seiffge-Krenke & Beyers, 2005).

10. In Taylor, Doane, and Eisenberg (2014), a longitudinal study was conducted to measure the internalizing symptoms, perceived social support, and personality trait of ego-resiliency on a group of 82 participants who were in high school and college. As one
transitions from high school to college, he or she moves through adult roles, takes on new responsibilities, and builds social relationships. The data revealed that both the perceived social support from friends and family were negatively correlated with externalizing symptoms (Taylor et al., 2014). Ego-resiliency was positively correlated with perceived social support from friends (Taylor et al., 2014). Internalizing symptoms and perceived support was negatively associated when gathering information from friends as informants. Family ego-resiliency and perceived social support were positively associated. The researchers’ study suggests that coping resources are critical when it comes to an individual’s mental health (Taylor et al., 2014).

11. Tenenbaum et al. (2011) conducted a qualitative study on the coping strategies of 124 middle school students who were victims of bullying. The researchers used group interviews to discuss the topics of bullying and coping with each student. Results showed that problem focused coping was used most by victims of bullying (Tenebaum et al., 2011). Externalizing and social support were also employed by participants who have been victimized (Tenebaum et al., 2011). Boys frequently use externalizing strategies, whereas girls seek social support. (Tenebaum et al., 2011).

12. Wolke, Copeland, Angold, and Costello (2013) explored childhood bullying, and long-term bullying effects that it can have on an individual even when they reach adulthood. The effects of bullying depend on one’s health, negative behavior, wealth, and social relationships. The sample to this study was large with participants ranging from children who were adolescents to adults. The results showed that individuals that are chronic victims or victims of bullying would be at a high risk in adulthood concerning his or her
health, finances, and social relationships with others (Wolke et al., 2013). Those who were pure bullies were not at risk of negative outcomes in their adulthood when measuring family and childhood psychiatric disorders (Wolke et al., 2013). Being bullied at a young age can affect how one interacts in his or her adulthood. By creating interventions early in one’s childhood to prevent bullying, it will reduce long-term health and social problems.

**Framework**

The conceptual framework is Lazarus and Folkman’s Transactional theory. The model will be used to evaluate the processes of coping with stressful events (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). The theory holds that the stressful experiences of an individual are related to how one perceives possible stressors in the environment. When faced with a stressful situation one might evaluate whether the potential threat is positive, controllable, or challenging (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987). Based on the demands that an individual is faced with and the resources that he or she has to deal with the demands, stress may be increased or avoided (Lazarus & Folkman, 1987).

Current studies do not address effective coping strategies that were used by adults who were bullied during childhood. Research has focused primarily on adolescents and the outcome of bullying incidents; however, this theory is being applied to examine the adult point of view, in addition to strategies applied as a resolution. The employment of Lazarus and Folkman’s theory will help a researcher to identify the thoughts and behaviors an individual used to respond to a specific stressor. In obtaining this data, researchers will be able to provide a guide in how to
prevent, reduce, or resolve incidents of bullying and offer effective support and coping strategies to victims of bullying.

**Research Questions**

**RQ**: “What long-term coping strategies do young adults develop in adapting from being bullied as a teenager?”

**Nature of the Study**

The nature of this study is qualitative with a phenomenological study focus. Qualitative research is appropriate for this particular study because it seeks to explore, explain and understand the social and behavioral aspect of a phenomenon. This method is applied to describe and understand the lived experiences of an individual (Penner & McClement, 2008). In conducting a qualitative research, knowledge will be gained on the process that adults retrospectively describe as experiencing in applying effective coping strategies after a perceived experience of childhood bullying, and across time, into young adulthood.

Phenomenology is an approach that focuses on the lived experience of those who are within a particular group. According to Creswell (2013) the goal of the approach is to describe the nature of the phenomenon, not explain, an individual’s lived experiences. In other words, a researcher seeks to obtain the experiences and understanding of an individual based on his or her overall perspective. Within this approach researchers are able to gain a deep understanding of a phenomenon as experienced by a group of individuals. In order to analyze qualitative data in a research study using phenomenology one must look at four steps (Creswell, 2013). A researcher must learn to become familiar with data, set aside personal biases, use his or her own language, and incorporate and combine the meaning in their study (Creswell, 2013). In order to do this, one
must continue to examine and go over his or her data in the study. Researchers must also attempt to approach the phenomenon with an open mind (Creswell, 2013).

Typically, interviews are conducted in a phenomenological study on a group of individuals who have knowledge about an event, situation, or experience (Creswell, 2013). The interview attempts to expose an individual’s perceptions, recollections, and personal understandings of their experiences related to a particular phenomenon (Creswell, 2013). The researcher reads and rereads their data and looks for phrases and themes that are then grouped to form clusters of meaning (Creswell, 2013). Through this process the researcher constructs meaning of the event, situation or experience and gains a better understanding of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2013).

A researcher using phenomenology who is interested in the subject of bullying would first closely look at an individual’s experience of being bullied (Creswell, 2013). Thereafter, the researcher would concentrate on the basic characteristics of the individual’s experience itself. In conducting a phenomenological study, one should identify the basic components of the concept of bullying, by examining the experiences of those who are victims of bullying (Creswell, 2013). A phenomenological researcher does not concentrate on the amount of bullying that occurs in schools, or attempt to give reasons for the cause of the bullying situation. Instead, the researcher would concentrate on the experience of one being bullied (Creswell, 2013). For example, when conducting a phenomenological study, one can interview a student after he or she has participated in bullying their peers and study their responses (Creswell, 2013). By exploring what the victim of bullying shared verbally about their own experiences, phenomenology can help one to uncover the direct answers to the important questions about aggressive bullying.
Possible Types and Sources of Data

Sampling and Recruiting

- A list of organizations that promote anti-bullying in Atlanta, Georgia, will be created to sort through possible research sites that fit the criteria. One organization, “Don’t Be a Bully,” is a prime candidate at this time for recruitment.

- Possibly use Walden University’s participant pool to draw volunteers for my study that align with a set of criteria.

- Recruitment will be done through means approved by the community partner (e.g., posting flyers, announcements on web page, etc.).

- Sample: Purposeful sampling will be applied to help the researcher select participants and research sites. The sample will consist of a minimum of 12 (or more, as needed to reach saturation) 18-22 year old adults who have self-reported as being victims of bullying during childhood/adolescence. Other inclusion criteria include willingness and ability to share experiences regarding their experiences with bullying/incivility through age 17, and interpersonal experiences with bullying/incivility since 18.

Interview

- Individual, in-depth interviews will be conducted. The semi-structured interview will consist of open-ended questions addressing both the past and present status of the phenomenon being studied. Open-ended questions will allow participants to speak in an open and free manner on the topic being addressed. Follow-up questions will be used, as appropriate, for clarification of previous responses and to assure that sufficient
information is gathered so that each participant’s responses may be coded according to Lazarus and Folkman's coping category.
References


