

PATHWAYS FROM SCHOOL BULLYING TO ADULT
AGGRESSION: A LONGITUDINAL STUDY

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I declare that this thesis is my own original work

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Abstract

This study identifies developmental processes underlying the relationship between school bullying and physical aggression in emergent adulthood. The data are drawn from the ‘Life at School’ project, a longitudinal study of schooling, socio-emotional functioning, and bullying in a sample of young people living in the Australian Capital Territory. This study consists of three waves of self-report data collected from 88 females and 63 males (N=151) during primary school (Time 1), high school (Time 2) and emerging adulthood (Time 3). The study extends earlier analyses to consider the relative significance of distal functioning and the proximal effects of heavy drinking and work/study roles during the transition to emerging adulthood in shaping pathways from school bullying to adult aggression.

Results showed that bullying in either primary school or high school, and being male, increased the risk of adult aggression. Once bullying and sex were controlled, socio-emotional functioning (including emotion/behaviour regulation and school adjustment) did not make unique contributions to the prediction of adult aggression. To further investigate the effects of bullying, four bully trajectory groups were identified from children’s reports: a non-bully group, a child-limited group (bullying during primary school only), an adolescent-onset group (taking up bullying during high school), and a persistent group (bullying during both primary and high school). Moderated regression showed that a) frequent drinking at Time 3 significantly increased aggression only for the persistent bully group, and b) participation in university study, in comparison with being in the workforce, was significantly associated with lower levels of aggression only for persistent and adolescent-onset bullies. That is, both the past and present were important, but their effects only became apparent when considered in combination.

Given the pivotal significance of drinking and university participation for continuity of aggression, the second analysis stage used path analyses to explore the chains of events leading to these adult variables, and subsequent aggression. First, adaptive emotion regulation during high school directly predicted less frequent adult drinking, while continuity in such adaptive regulation between primary and high school was mediated by continuity in positive school connectedness. Second, greater parental education increased the likelihood that young people would attend university, both directly, and indirectly by increasing academic functioning during high school. In contrast, childhood impulsivity was directly related to a decreased likelihood of university participation and, in turn, to more frequent adult aggression. The final issue examined was the extent to which these mediated pathways from childhood were the same or different across the four bully trajectory groups. Descriptive comparisons indicated that pathways to drinking and work/study role were consistent across the four groups, with the partial exception of the adolescent-onset bullies.

The analyses show that the expression of bullying and adult physical aggression is flexible, open at each stage of development to influence from personal resources (e.g., capacity for adaptive shame management), social resources (e.g., parental education), and changing institutional settings, through for example the cultural and behavioural norms that characterise the university, workplace, and drinking environments and which constrain aggressive behaviour or promote a sense of future orientation. Patterns of adult aggressive behaviours are thus shaped not just by past bullying, but by the subtle interplay of emergent adult settings and experiences, socio-emotional functioning in school contexts, and family social capital.

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