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Harm and Rejection in Peer Aggressive Relationships

Abstract: The novel approach to studying peer victimization is to focus on the harm resulting from aggression rather than a power imbalance between victim and bully, especially since various forms of aggression, which do not meet bullying criteria, can be equally harmful. The main aim of the study is to identify the most harmful act of aggression that is experienced by Polish adolescents. Secondary goals are to check how the various forms of victimization are connected and to verify whether experiencing harm is related to adolescents' well-being. The group of 551 Polish adolescents participated in the study which was conducted in four public schools. The study was designed as correlational research and the main variables – harmful aggressive behaviors and well-being – were measured using the Student Aggression and Victimization Questionnaire and Mental Health Continuum Scale – Short Form, respectively.

From 10 presented aggressive behaviors the most harmful is being left out. The harm resulting from rejection is negatively correlated with adolescents' well-being. Additionally, pupils who experience being left out are not only victims but also perpetrators of other acts of violence. The sociopolitical background and applications of our findings are discussed.

Keywords: *victimization, aggressive behavior, harm, adolescence, rejection, well-being*

INTRODUCTION

Peer relations are a crucial form of social contact in adolescence that function is to shape identity, to model behavior and to contribute to positive emotions. However, social interactions between peers may also be marred by various types (direct/indirect) and forms (physical/emotional) of peer aggression. Regardless of the categorization, the short-lasting effects (e.g. harm, sorrow, anxiety, isolation) and long-lasting consequences (e.g. depression, psychosomatic disorders, suicide thoughts) of this phenomenon were identified (Armitage et al., 2021; Cho et al., 2022; Erath et al., 2007; Wolke et al., 2000).

There are two research approaches in studies of children who experienced peer violence: the bully/victim and the general victimization tradition (Schäfer et al., 2002). The first approach, connected with Olweus' studies, defines bullying as a form of aggressive behavior with the intentional and repeated harm and power imbalance as the main criteria (Olweus, 1978). The classic measure is self-report Bully-Victim Questionnaire (BVQ, Olweus, 1996). The body of findings is connected with this methodological approach (e.g. Rivers & Smith, 1994; Salmivalli et al., 1996; Sutton & Smith, 1999). Our research belongs rather to the second tradition, namely the general victimization approach (Perry et al., 1988; Crick & Bigbee, 1998), which is focused on individual-level phenomena, and does not consider all classic bullying criteria as necessary in peers' aggressive behavior analysis. In this tradition peer-, teacher-, and self-reports are used for data gathering.

Peer victimization can take several forms; overt victimization is characterized by physical and verbal acts of aggression, while relational victimization is characterized by experiences of social exclusion (Wolke et al., 2000). Defined as unprovoked, intentionally harmful,

repeated violence where there is a power imbalance between victim and bully (Correia & Dalbert, 2008; Olweus, 1993), bullying remains the most harmful manifestation of peer aggression (Hunter et al., 2007). It can take the form of physical or psychological violence, and the perpetrator may be an individual or a group (Juvonen & Graham, 2014). Research exploring this area focuses on individual traits of bullying participants (within participant traits; Jenkins & Troop-Gordon, 2020; Salmivalli, 2010), features of their family background or correlation between parents' and children's psychological characteristics (external participant traits; Wasilewska et al., 2012; Piasecka et al., 2012) or on social network of bullying participants (the main assumption of this paradigm is the possibility of taking many positions in the bullying phenomenon by the same actor; Veenstra et al., 2007).

Although bullying may involve just a victim and a bully, other individuals often play specific roles in bullying scenarios. The Bullying Circle model (Olweus, 2001) includes eight such roles: bully (leads the aggression), victim (the target of aggression), active supporter (assists the bully), passive supporter (encourages the bully), possible defender (passively opposes the bully), real defender (actively assists the victim) and disengaged onlooker or neutral observer (does not side with the victim or bully). In the bullying literature there are many reports about ambiguity of the roles played by youths in aggressive peer relations. People involved in bullying may take different roles depending on the social network they are currently in and on their own emotional situation (Veenstra & Huitsing, 2021). An example can be a child with ADHD, who can be involved in bullying as either victim or aggressor, because of stronger impulsivity, limited self-control (Unnever & Cornell, 2003) or frustration intolerance (Liu et al., 2021). Their position can be either the cause or the effect of the social interactions and may vary depending on peer milieu.

While aggression that meets all of the definitional criteria of bullying seems to be the most harmful manifestation of peer aggression (Olweus, 2010a), other types may also cause harm and should not be overlooked or dismissed (Skrzypiec et al., 2019). For example, Green et al. (2013) have suggested that young people are more likely to associate experiences of bullying with repeated, persistent victimization "rather than the nuanced power differential element of the scientific bullying definition" (p. 657). The international study (Europe, Asia and Asia-Pacific) provides evidence of aggressive relations between peers that do not meet the bullying criteria but are perceived as harmful (Skrzypiec et al., 2018; 2019). However, bullying was found to be the most harmful peer aggression.

The harm as a phenomenon is not precisely defined, but can be described as emotional or physical discomfort with such possible symptoms as sleep and psychosomatic disorders or suicidal thoughts (Skrzypiec et al., 2018). It may be considered a subjective dimension of victimization (Przewłocka, 2015) and occurs independently from other components of bullying like its frequency or power

imbalance (Skrzypiec et al., 2019). The phenomenon similar to the harm could be psychological and emotional pain caused by social interactions. The definition of this kind of pain is not precise enough, but people who have experienced it report that it is a more severe experience than physical pain. Social psychologists mention psychological and emotional pain in research on immigrants and social minority groups (Wypych et al., 2020).

Although some acts of aggression might be reported as not harmful at all, especially when perceived as rough-and-tumble play (Forsberg, 2019; Pellegrini, 2002), research shows that considering the level of harm is crucial for reliable representation of reality. The participants of Gentry and Pickel's (2014) study were presented a story about a potential bullying incident and took it more seriously when the victim mentioned experiencing harm. In that condition the bully was more likely to be charged with responsibility for their actions and suggested punishments were more severe. Additionally, researchers observed that negative treatment by friends can be as traumatic for victims as negative treatment by non-friends. Therefore, restricting the study of victimization to questions connected only with 'bully/victim' problems may neglect some victimized children who are at risk of the "toxic" friendship (Schäfer et al., 2002).

When analyzing the emotional aspect of aggression in young people the question "Have you been harmed?" seems to be more adequate to the researched situation than "Have you been bullied?". According to Skrzypiec et al.'s (2019) conclusions, there is often a different understanding of the word "bullying" between youth and adults, which can lead to mistakes and not a clear picture of peer relations. Harm as an important aspect of adolescent aggression is tested in two international measures: Student Aggression and Victimization Questionnaire (SAVQ) by Skrzypiec (2015) and California Bullying Victimisation Scale (CBVS) by Felix et al. (2011). Aggressive behavior appearing in questions is connected to physical acts (hitting, kicking, pushing around), verbal acts (calling names, laughing at, sexual comments), specific approach (leaving out, threats, being mean) and damaging the reputation (spreading rumors).

It may be important to take into consideration different perspectives and to use measuring tools based on more than just one definition of bullying while studying the topic. In opposition to the classical Olweus model researchers suggest 5 levels of aggressive behavior in students' relationships: 1) not harmed aggression, 2) no intent but harmed, 3) intentional harm, no repetition, no power imbalance, 4) intentional harm, repetition, no power imbalance, 5) intentional harm, repetition, power imbalance (as in complete bullying definition; Skrzypiec et al., 2019).

Aggressive behavior in peer relations is a threat for students' well-being at school and at home (e.g. cyberbullying; Malinowska-Cieślik et al., 2022). Subjective well-being, defined in terms of psychological well-being (sense of autonomy, self-acceptance), emotional well-being (satisfaction with one's own life) and social well-

being (close relations with others, friendship; Keyes, 2002), is, in turn, condition sine qua non for mental health and successful young people's development. The body of findings confirms the strong positive correlation between peer victimization and mental health disorders. Relational victimization is more severe and adolescents are more affected than children (Armitage et al., 2021; Wolke et al., 2000). Loneliness, anxiety, and depression are generally considered the three indicators of emotional maladjustment in young victims (Cho et al., 2022; Erath et al., 2007).

The aim of our study was to identify the most harmful acts of peer victimization in Polish adolescents and to check the possible changes in their positions in aggressive relations.

Our assumptions were:

1. The most important consequence of aggressive behavior in young people is harm, experienced independently from power imbalance, repetition or intentionality of the act. Repetition of aggressive behavior is surely an important aspect in measuring peer aggression as a complex phenomenon, but in subjective perception could be connected with habituation. It means that victims could be "frozen" in their repetitive harmful experience and their estimation of harm degree might not be directly connected with the frequency of aggressive acts.

2. Harmful experiences that cannot be classified as bullying should not be dismissed as insignificant (Skrzypiec et al., 2019).

3. Identifying the most harmful act of aggressive behavior is important a) for enhancing students' well-being, b) for creating a safe school environment and promoting quiet, effective learning in students, c) for school mental health policy, especially for preventive and promotive programs.

The research questions we formulated were:

RQ1: What is the most harmful act of aggressive behavior in Polish students?

RQ2: Is the harm resulting from aggression related to well-being?

RQ3: In the case of the most harmful act of aggressive behavior, is the position of victim the only role the student fulfills?

RQ4: Is the most harmful act of aggressive behavior connected with another injured experience in the victim?

METHOD

Data analyzed in the present paper were obtained from an international project conducted parallelly in 10 countries in Europe, Asia and Asia-Pacific in 2017. The study was carried out in four typical public schools in Southern Poland: two primary schools (classes level 5 and 6) and two junior high schools (classes level 7, 8 and 9). *Participants*. The study sample included 551 Polish adolescents (47.5% female; 51.2% male; 0.9% no answer; 0.4% 'another') from primary (30.1%) and junior high schools (69.9%). The mean age was 13.51 years ($SD = 1.45$), ranging between 10 and 16 years old.

Students who have not experienced any type of peer aggression in the previous three months ($n = 84$) were excluded from further analyzes.

Measures. Questionnaires used in the study were meant to measure two main variables: aggression and victimization, and subjective well-being of participants.

Aggression and victimization. Involvement in peer aggression was assessed by the Student Aggression and Victimization Questionnaire (SAVQ; Skrzypiec, 2015), translated into Polish and adapted to the Polish school reality (Wyra et al., 2017). The novelty of this questionnaire refers to 1) identifying peer victimization beyond classical bullying criteria, 2) taking into consideration aggression in friendship. The tool is a self-report measure consisting of 20 items addressing different forms of violence, e.g. threats or rumors. Victims and aggressors can share their experience answering specific questions regarding such aspects of the situation as place, frequency, power imbalance, intentions and general relation between involved students. Participants also define how harmful the incident was to them, which is one of the main focuses of this research. No definition of bullying is presented to youth through the questionnaire.

As SAVQ consists of over 20 pages in total, it could be really difficult to fill in by younger children. Therefore, the authors designed it the way that firstly participants are asked whether they experienced particular act of violence. If they answer 'yes', they are asked to complete following questions about different aspects of the situation, and if they answer 'no', they can skip to the next act of violence. That way, completing the questionnaire is easy for children, and it results in gathering data in needed categories. SAVQ is a reliable measure. Each factor (harm, intent, frequency and power differential) fitted well with the data, and showed good reliability with a value of Coefficient H > 0.800 (Skrzypiec et. al, 2018).

Subjective well-being. Given the uniqueness of every act of aggression, well-being of the students was assessed through their subjective perspective. Therefore, Mental Health Continuum Scale – Short Form (MHC-SF; Keyes, 2009; see also Karaś et al., 2014) was used. The questionnaire consists of 14 items and measures three aspects of well-being: psychological, emotional and social. Participants are asked to rate how often in the past month they were feeling in a certain way, e.g. interested in life or socially accepted. They choose from 1 (never) to 6 (every day). High scores are related to good mental health (flourishing) and low scores may suggest a very poor mental state (languishing). The Cronbach's alpha coefficients can be considered satisfactory, for emotional well-being .85, for social well-being .82, for psychological well-being .87 and the total score of MHC-SF .91 (Karaś et al., 2014).

Procedure. The school headmasters and parents were informed and accepted students' participation in the project, and all invited adolescents freely agreed to participate. Students filled in questionnaires during their classes at the school. They were assured about the anonymity and confidentiality of their answers.

RESULTS

Identification of the most harmful experience. In order to identify the most harmful experience we explored descriptive statistics regarding aggressive behavior. We have considered only these results which came from pupils who answered 'yes' on the question whether they experienced a type of aggressive behavior. These results are presented in table 1.

As presented in table 1, the most harmful experience is being left out (M = 3.19, SD = 1.20). 140 participants answered 'yes' to a question whether they were left out during the past three months. Additionally, 20% of children who did experience being left out felt that it was an extremely harmful experience.

Harm and wellbeing. We examined whether the level of harm is related to subjective well-being. Correlation analysis revealed that harm caused by being left out is negatively connected with subjective well-being (r = -.29, Cohen's d = .61, p = .001). Other relationships were not statistically significant. Results are shown in table 2.

Being left out and perpetrating other acts of aggression. To examine the relationship between being left out and other acts of aggressive behavior, a series of chi-squared tests was performed. Its results are presented in table 3. Additionally, for each test, effect size (ϕ) was calculated, and its interpretations are as follows: small – .10, medium – .30, large – .50.

As it is presented in table 3, we found statistically significant relationships between being left out and follow-ing acts of aggressive behavior: spreading rumors, making

Table 1. The answers about experienced harm in the case of different forms of aggressive behavior

Being a victim of...	N	How harmful was this behavior?										M	SD
		Not harmful at all (1)		Not very harmful		Harmful		Very harm-ful		Extreme-ly harmful (5)			
		n	$\%$	n	$\%$	n	$\%$	n	$\%$	n	$\%$		
Teasing or laughing at	188	46	24.5	64	34.0	50	26.6	18	9.6	10	5.3	2.37	1.11
Picking on	168	72	42.9	61	36.3	19	11.3	11	6.5	5	3.0	1.90	1.03
Calling names	206	76	36.9	59	28.6	42	20.4	17	8.3	12	5.8	2.17	1.19
Being left out	140	11	7.9	28	20.0	52	37.1	21	15.0	28	20.0	3.19	1.20
Spreading rumors	242	78	32.2	76	31.4	49	20.2	22	9.1	17	7.0	2.27	1.21
Sexual comments	123	68	55.3	28	22.8	15	12.2	6	4.9	6	4.9	1.81	1.13
Taking things from me	134	51	38.1	40	29.9	21	15.7	7	5.2	15	11.2	2.22	1.31
Threatening	65	29	44.6	14	21.5	9	13.8	7	10.8	6	9.2	2.18	1.36
Hitting, kicking and pushing around	97	37	38.1	23	23.7	21	21.6	5	5.2	11	11.3	2.28	1.33
Mean comments	192	67	34.9	70	36.5	31	16.1	21	10.9	3	1.6	2.08	1.04

Table 2. Correlation between subjective well-being and harm resulting from aggressive behaviors

Harm caused by...	Subjective well-being			
	Pearson's r	*p*	*Cohen's d*	*N*
Teasing or laughing at	-.12	.133	.24	169
Picking on	-.11	.193	.22	146
Calling names	-.04	.567	.08	187
Being left out	-.29	.001	.61	124
Spreading rumors	-.11	.102	.22	221
Sexual comments	-.07	.459	.14	110
Taking things from me	.08	.405	.16	120
Threatening	.02	.897	.04	58
Hitting, kicking and pushing around	-.14	.176	.28	90
Mean comments	-.07	.372	.14	179

Table 3. Relationship between being left out (as a victim) and other forms of aggression as perpetrator

Being a perpetrator of…		I was left out by another person		X^2 statistics				
		Yes	**No**	X^2	*df*	*N*	*p*	ϕ
Spreading rumors	Yes	85	177	12.95	1	546	.001	.15
	No	54	230					
Scaring others	Yes	32	56	6.39	1	543	.011	.11
	No	107	348					
Fighting someone weaker	Yes	22	47	1.71	1	546	.190	.06
	No	117	360					
Hitting, kicking and pushing around	Yes	66	164	2.01	1	546	.157	.06
	No	74	243					
Leaving someone out	Yes	35	58	8.60	1	548	.003	.13
	No	105	350					
Directing sexual comments	Yes	29	45	8.37	1	548	.004	.12
	No	111	363					
Picking on someone	Yes	28	64	1.39	1	548	.239	.05
	No	112	344					
Mean comments	Yes	79	123	5.73	1	547	.0170	.10
	No	61	225					
Threatening someone	Yes	8	12	2.28	1	548	.131	.07
	No	12	396					

another person scared, leaving someone out, directing sexual comments at others, being mean to someone. It means that pupils who are left out are more likely (than pupils who are not left out) to be involved in these aggressive behaviors. All reported effects are small in size.

Being left out and being a victim of other acts of aggression. In the next step, we tested whether being a victim of rejection is connected to being a victim of other acts of aggression. A series of chi-squared tests was performed and its results are presented in table 4.

Table 4. Relationship between being left out and being a victim of other forms of aggressive behaviors

Being a victim of…		I was left out by another person		X^2 statistics				
		Yes	**No**	X^2	*df*	*N*	*p*	ϕ
Teasing or laughing at	Yes	69	119	19.83	1	546	.001	.19
	No	69	289					
Picking on	Yes	67	101	26.17	1	546	.001	.22
	No	73	307					
Calling names	Yes	73	136	15.63	1	548	.001	.17
	No	67	272					
Spreading rumors	Yes	81	159	14.77	1	546	.001	.16
	No	59	247					
Sexual comments	Yes	37	87	1.55	1	548	.213	.05
	No	103	321					
Taking things from me	Yes	45	90	5.79	1	546	.016	.10
	No	94	316					

Table 4 cont.

Being a victim of…		I was left out by another person		X^2 statistics				
		Yes	**No**	*X^2*	*df*	*N*	*p*	*ϕ*
Threatening	Yes	29	38	12.71	1	545	.001	.15
	No	110	368					
Hitting, kicking and pushing around	Yes	40	59	13.72	1	545	.001	.16
	No	100	346					
Mean comments	Yes	91	152	33.42	1	547	.001	.25
	No	48	256					

The analyses showed that pupils who are left out may experience all of the other acts of aggression excluding sexual comments directed at them. It means that victims of rejection are more likely (than students who are not left out) to be also a victim of following behaviors: teasing, picking on, calling names, spreading rumors, taking things from themselves, being threatened, hitting and mean comments directed at them. All effects are small in size.

DISCUSSION

As an answer to the first research question (RQ1) about **the most harmful aggressive behavior in adolescents to be left out was identified**. According to students' estimation they are the most emotionally disturbed when someone rejects them from the group as a community, excludes them from a common activity or ignores them during invitation (e.g. for birthday). The obtained outcomes are in line with other findings. The extensive report by Przewłocka (2015) reveals that the most harmful types of aggression among Polish students are the antagonization of one student by his classmates and social exclusion. Three of four victims feel some level of psychological pain due to peer rejection. Similar findings are presented by Zych et al. (2017). Their research shows exclusion as one of the most frequent and most harmful types of peer aggression in Polish upper secondary school students.

While rejection is a common experience, it is not a novel method of punishment. To maintain societal stability the Ancient Greeks employed ostracism, a practice that people today continue to use. Various languages have unique ways of describing this concept; for instance, Chinese characters can convey the idea of treating someone "as though they are transparent", while the German phrase *wie Luft behandeln* translates to "look at as through air" (see Ren et al., 2017). Interestingly, the Japanese word for bullying is *ijime*, which means "exclusion and relational aggression" (Skrzypiec & Wyra, 2019, p. 260). When it comes to our findings, this Japanese interpretation of what bullying is in its core helps to understand the destructive role of rejection in Polish adolescents. Ostracism occurs in diverse settings: at work (Liu & Xia, 2016), in schools (Zych et al., 2017), and even within families (Fitness, 2005). It is not only prevalent across many cultures (Gruter & Masters, 1986) but also among various species, including primates, lions, and bees (Lancaster, 1986; see Ren et al., 2017). However, its ubiquity does not make it any less threatening — a study by Steele et al. (2015) revealed that experiences of ostracism can increase the prevalence of death-related thoughts.

Psychological consequences of exclusion have such short-term effects as emotional decompensation, psychosomatic pains, decreasing in immunity, school anxiety and lack of vigor and happiness (Salmivalli, 2010). Adolescence is a very vulnerable period of development therefore every psychological injury may be important for shaping identity in terms of self-acceptance and self-esteem (Harter, 2012; Huang, 2010) which also means long-term consequences.

Other acts of aggressive behavior are perceived as not so harmful. To understand this connection young people's perspective ought to be taken into consideration. Incidents treated by adolescents as jokes or humor are perceived as aggressive by observers, despite the fact that for the participants they may be a typical, everyday form of interaction (Forsberg, 2019). If one hears the same vulgar terms from everywhere, it can be defensive not to attribute hostile intentions to them (Przewłocka, 2015). The victim perspective makes a big difference between researchers' and young people's victimization description.

While analyzing data connected with the RQ2 the low **correlation between harm as a reaction for being left out and well-being was found** (*r* = -.29; *p* = .001). Experience of being rejected, ignored was identified as danger for students' comfort and satisfaction. Many findings confirm that victimization is connected with decrease in well-being level in children and youth (Nazir & Nesheen, 2015; Olweus, 2010; Węgrzynowska, 2016). Social relations are crucial for well-being in general, but first of all for social well-being (Keyes, 2009), which pictures our satisfaction with being a part of a community or being in sympathetic, friendly relations with others. Furthermore, harm caused by classmates can not only significantly diminish emotional and social well-being (Rath et al., 2010; Rees et al., 2010) but also contribute to school phobia (Dambach, 2003).

The third interesting outcome in our study (RQ3) was statistically significant relationships between being left out (**passive position**) and undertaking many acts of aggressive

behavior (**active position**). Students who have experienced harmful rejection are more likely to spread rumors, make another person scared, leave someone out, direct sexual comments and to be mean to someone. It means that pupils who are left out, more often (than pupils who are not left out) are involved in these aggressive behaviors. This result could be explained firstly via the frustration-aggression hypothesis (Miller et al., 1958), in which case the harm connected with rejection causes **the need for revenge**. This scenario would indicate the beginning of a vicious circle of violence, as every victim would be a potential perpetrator. The second possible explanation is seeing **aggressive behavior as a cause** of being excluded by peers. Mulvey et al. (2017) describe two kinds of exclusion. Intergroup exclusion refers to prejudices and concerns minority students, e.g. those with different beliefs or nationality (Killen & Rutland, 2011). Interpersonal exclusion, on the other hand, focuses on individual differences or social deficits. Thus, rejection may affect children who are withdrawn and quiet, but also hyperactive, aggressive or having conduct problems (Killen et al., 2013; Kljakovic & Hunt, 2016; Liu, 2004). In the latter case, there is a higher probability of a negative feedback loop, because adolescents left out due to their externalizing behaviors tend to display it even more often (Broidy et al., 2003; Laird et al., 2001). In this instance the circle of violence could be broken by appropriate social skills trainings. The third explanation is based on the social network paradigm, which enables us to understand various roles undertaken by teenagers in various social milieu (Veenstra et al., 2007; Veenstra & Huitsing, 2021). In research on friendship selection and influence were identified as crucial factors. Children present **similar behavior** because peers who were already similar make friendships (selection), or friends become more similar in their behavior or attitudes over time (influence). To be as my aggressive classmates could mean to belong to them and not be alone anymore. When participating in various social networks (peer groups in the neighborhood, school colleagues, sports team, etc.) many different friendships could be formed. Behavior patterns of bullies can influence their friends and defenders of victims are more prone to victimization (Veenstra & Huitsing, 2021). This explanation suggests that the shifts of roles derive mainly from the environment in which the students rotate. The positive aspect of this framing is that by creating a more supportive school community, we can realistically reduce the number of bullies. Another aspect is that school changes alone are not enough.

The lessons from the social network research on bullying teach us that the roles in aggressive relations are not permanent. It is a commonly known pattern, when the same person is a victim in one social context and a bully in another (Sung et al., 2018). Bully-victims, also called provocative victims, are prone to negative consequences of acting as both bully and a victim (Mark et al., 2019). They are often perceived as problematic and thus disliked at school (Olweus, 2010). They also tend to have low self-esteem and be generally unhappy. Polish reports addressing the bullying issue suggest that at biggest risk are those students who do not have many friends, cannot count on others and feel lonely in general (Giza-Poleszczuk et al., 2011). Węgrzynowska (2016), however, debates whether the listed factors are indeed the cause, or an effect of victimization.

The next finding, connected with the research question RQ4 – whether being a victim of rejection is connected to being a victim of other acts of aggression – shows that **excluded students are also receivers of other aggressive behaviors.** This result could prove our above-mentioned explanation about the victim-bully onerousness. Students who are hyperactive, immature, with social deficits are frequently perceived as inadequate and strange (Olweus, 2010; Salmivalli, 2010). Because their behavior is often difficult to anticipate, their classmates could be unpleasantly surprised or disoriented by them. Aggressive behavior towards "difficult classmates" could mean defense before attack, revenge after attack or learned interaction form (Mark et al., 2019; Sung et al., 2018).

The obtained results are in line with many international findings about harm connected with rejection and nullification as forms of peer aggression. Co-occurrence of aggressive behavior such as calling names, kicking or ignoring somebody are reported in research as well (Zych et al., 2017).

CONCLUSIONS

To draw some conclusions, a short summary of our findings will be useful. The most harmful act of aggressive behavior in Polish students seems to be rejection (being left out). The harm which results from rejection is negatively, but weakly connected with victims' well-being. This outcome may be influenced by the fact that victims in many cases fulfill more than just one role in the bullying situation. They can be victims in one circumstance and bullies in another. Our study showed that victimized students are more likely to spread rumors, make others scared, leave them out, direct sexual comments at them and be mean. We discuss potential explanations of this relation above. Being left out occurred to be the most harmful, but not isolated form of violence. Those who suffer from it, often are also victims of a wide variety of other aggressive behaviors.

The occurrence of unfriendly relations in adolescence could be influenced not only by the social context but by puberty processes and technological progress in the society as well. Biological changes in young minds and bodies stimulate such mechanisms as social comparison, popularity need or rivalry. The self-esteem of adolescents involves scholastic competence, social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, behavioral conduct, romantic appeal, job competence and close friendship (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2019; Harter, 2012). In all these specific domains social contact with others is very important for creation of self-concept.

Apart from the general developmental issues also mass media influence in terms of cancel culture and low level of social trust in Polish society should be taken into

consideration. Social media have been used in cyberbully-ing for a while but now they are also a resource of new bullying forms (e.g. hate speech in cancel culture).

Applications of our findings can be connected with dissemination of knowledge about the peer interpersonal violence among teachers and parents. Firstly, the consciousness that rejection is the most harmful act of aggressive behavior in Polish youth ought to alarm parents and educators to pay closer attention to this phenomenon. Secondly, adults should strongly promote tolerance and friendly conflict solving both at home and at school. Especially in the post pandemic time teenagers' well-being needs to be supported and taken care of. Of course, other aggressive behaviors (calling names, etc.) also impact young people's mental health and should be eliminated from the peers' relations using anti-bullying programs, and resilience promoting programs. However, the belief that only physical aggression may cause harm should be dropped. Increased knowledge on dynamics in aggressive relationships can provide insights for direct interventions. There are international famous anti-bullying programs, e.g., FAGT – Freiburger Anti-Gewalt Training (Fröhlich-Gildhoff, 2006) or KiVa – Kiusaamista Vastaan, "against bullying" (Salmivalli et al., 2012; Yang & Salmivalli, 2015), but the local interventions should be created and applied as well.

Given the distinction between the two types of peer rejection – intergroup and interpersonal – different preventive strategies can be implemented (Mulvey et al., 2017). Focusing on students excluded due to their social deficits, the social skills training may be the solution. Workshops focused on taking another person's perspective, allusion understanding, self-reflection and complex emotion understanding could help in conflicts and buffer aggressive behaviors (Białecka-Pikul et al., 2016; Bosacki, 2008). As an enhancement of social understanding, empathy and tolerance mentalization training would be applied. More complex operations would target the school climate replacing prejudices and hostility with tolerance and acceptance. Research shows that there is a much lower probability of bullying in harmonious classes (Pyżalski & Roland, 2010). Such inclusive space could be created for example with improving school or even governmental regulations, so that principals were obligated to take care of classes' integration. They might provide several opportunities for trips or prepare some outdoor games for adolescents to work as a team. A great option for schools with the problem of aggression is adventure education and adventure therapy in such forms as forest camps, tramping or climbing. Many reports from adventure pedagogy interventions showed the enhanced level of resilience and well-being in participating children and adolescents (Beightol et al., 2012; Sikorska, 2016).

Moreover, conscious Internet consumption should be discussed in family and school. Social media are powerful tools not only for social integration but for social exclusion as well. Advice for adults – teenagers learn not only during lectures at school but first and foremost through the screen.

THE LIMITATIONS OF OUR STUDY:

1. In examining relations between the perceived harmfulness of the different forms of victimization and subjective well-being, the effects for indirect/relational forms of aggression may be stronger than those for physical forms partly because the subjective well-being measure does not take physical well-being into consideration.

2. Our results rely on a specific sample, that is schools participating in the study are typical, public schools, but only from one city and the findings may not apply to other populations or contexts, for example, children from rural neighborhoods. In the literature (e.g., Eriksson et al., 2010; Newland et al., 2014), we can find reports of differences in mental health between urban and rural children. In rural communities, children seem to have strong connections to their families and communities. Both parents and children indicate that rural children experience a greater sense of trust and safety compared to their urban counterparts, as well as a heightened sense of support from their families and communities (Newland et al., 2014). Therefore, we can expect that social exclusion has a magnifying effect on rural children's well-being, however, due to the nature of our sample we cannot generalize our results.

3. The study setting limits the reach of conclusion. First of all, analyzed categories were created based on children's self-reports without including parents' and teachers' observations, which is suggested in the general victimization research tradition (Schäfer et al., 2002). Additionally, in some cases, we observed and analyzed unevenly balanced groups. Although the chosen analysis (chi-square) allows for such irregularity as it calculates proportions, the reach of the conclusion would be greater, if experimental or semi-experimental settings were used. Moreover, while correlational research offers significant insights into the relationships between variables, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations, including the absence of cause-and-effect conclusions, issues with directionality, potential influence from third variables, and the inability to predict individual behavior. In our study, we observed that students who experience exclusion may be both victims and perpetrators of violence. However, due to the nature of our research design, we cannot definitively conclude that being a victim of exclusion causes students to become perpetrators. To address this limitation, we recommend conducting a longitudinal study, incorporating the perspectives of parents and teachers. The different angles here would show the differences in the child's functioning in various social networks.

Future directions for studying harm in peer interpersonal violence could be focused on two paths. The first one would be connected with aggression in students after the difficult experience of COVID-19 pandemic lockdown. The interesting question is whether this experience of mandatory isolation influenced the strength and changed

the forms of interpersonal aggression in children and youth. The second direction could be linked to cyberbullying as a new technological possibility to exclude classmates from closed class groups or to block their entry to some online group events. This path is particularly important, because cyberbullying will continue to be a valid problem for adolescents' well-being (Malinowska-Cieślik et al., 2022). A very promising direction would also be an evaluation of the effectiveness of anti-bullying interventions in students, for example comparison between local and national programs, or psychoeducation and adventure education workshops.

As future research directions we propose deeper exploration based on the findings about rejection in Polish adolescents in following aspects:

1. Mass media influence in terms of **cancel culture** – on the approach towards others, tendency to use rejection as a punishment.
2. Connection between rejection as a form of social contact regulation and the **low level of social trust** in Polish society (sociological and psychological data).

As mentioned above, using rejection as a punishment is not an extraordinary behavior. There is a well-known pattern, based on the tendency to prefer those who are similar and avoid those who are different (McPherson et al., 2001), which can be observed in young people – children create groups based on resemblance and exclude those who do not meet their criteria. Nowadays, this tendency is strengthened by global postmodern cancel culture phenomenon. Cancel culture seems to be an example of culture wars (Jay, 1997), originally connected with social justice and human rights movements (Álvarez Trigo, 2020; Ng, 2020). Sociologists notice the links between the culture of nullification and universal processes of grassroots, extra-legal punishment. It can be recognized as an attempt to maintain control over the processes of attracting attention and building a reputation by those who dominate. It leads to the dissemination of network annulment, weakens trust in constitutive actions for affective capitalism, and strengthens the processual nature of culture (Krajewski, 2022). Many researchers point out that justice warriors sometimes become hater activists (Krajewski, 2022; Ng, 2020). Being in frequent contact with many examples of internationally known persons cancelling others (via mass media) young people are encouraged to do similarly in their environment. This situation is an international danger and seems to be especially threatening to the Polish youth.

Adolescents from Poland are – apart from culturally universal factors – burdened with another possible risk factor: low level of social trust. The capital of social trust placed on the low level in Polish society is mentioned in many psychological and sociological studies (Wypych & Bilewicz, 2022). Invariably for the 20 years, respondents who believe that most people can be trusted have been in the minority (19%), and the vast majority believe that one should be very careful when dealing with others (77%). When asked about their attitude towards strangers they encounter in various situations, respondents are more likely to talk about a lack of trust than trust (58% vs. 30%; CBOS, 2022). The average value of the trust index is -0.83. A negative value means that in Polish society distrust is more strongly articulated than attitudes based on openness and trust. Polish young people are often influenced by negative intergenerational messages about others and foreigners. When taking low original social trust into consideration the cancel culture examples can be treated as a potentially serious enhancement for marginalization and rejection tendencies. The situation should change with open possibility to travel, to make international friends and with education focused on tolerance and respect towards others.

PRACTITIONER POINTS

1. Teachers should pay closer attention and react to all forms of peer aggression, not only physical one, as rejection occurred to be the most harmful for adolescents. The bullying prevention based on similar ideas as international programs (aforementioned FAGT and KiVa trainings) is present in Poland in the form of pedagogical initiatives promoting peaceful coexistence at school. For example, between 2006 and 2013, Polish schools were able to join the 'School without Violence' program, carried out by the Orange Foundation and two publishing groups, Polskapresse (now Polska Press) and Regional Media. The project aimed to support school communities in countering aggression and building pro-social attitudes among young people (see Nowakowski, 2014). Currently, the prevention program 'Minesweeper or how to de-mine aggression' for primary schools, widely supplied as a 19-hour cyclical school workshop, is worth recommending (Knez & Słonina, 2009).
2. Considering that pupils often change their roles in the cycle of bullying, it is important to refrain from giving labels of good (victims) and bad (bullies). Instead, it is worthwhile to undertake as many group integration activities as possible (Moyano et al., 2019). Principals ought to provide children with many integration opportunities throughout their entire educational journey, not only the one school trip at the beginning of the first year.
3. Schools should implement some social skills trainings and draw methods from adventure education to enhance children's resilience and buffer aggressive behaviors. Many Teacher's Centers (Ośrodki Doskonalenia Nauczycieli) and Psychological-Pedagogical Counseling Centers (Poradnie Psychologiczno-Pedagogiczne) offer courses on internationally known Nonviolent Communication (Rosenberg, 2017) for educators, who transmit communication rules to students. Workshops developing social understanding are the internationally known practice, appearing in multiple forms, e.g., narratives, conversations, discussions, videos, role-playing, corrective feedback, and sociodramatic play (Bosacki, 2008; Carpendale & Lewis, 2015; Sikorska et al., 2024). Attractive training forms would be important for catching attention and engagement of adolescents.

Our findings have already been implemented in the everyday practice of school psychologists, at primary school where PW worked, especially following the 2022 influx of refugees from Ukraine. Insights into the harmfulness of rejection were crucial, prompting us to surround the new Ukrainian students with heightened care and support. Before their integration into standard classes, measures were carefully employed to prevent them from feeling left out. Namely, Polish students were familiarized with the concepts of inclusion and the overall situation of the incoming refugees. After the newcomers' initial integration into classes, our approach expanded to include focus group discussions and subsequent integrative workshops, all aimed at enhancing these students' well-being and ensuring they felt welcomed and supported in their new academic milieu.

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