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RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN SCHOOL BULLYING VICTIMIZATION AND SOCIAL ATTACHMENT PATTERNS IN ADULTHOOD

Bullying has long-lasting consequences for mental and physical health as well as relationships, but little is known about how bullying experiences at school-age impact social behaviors–and particularly social attachment–in adulthood. This qualitative study investigates the relationship between experiencing school bullying and social attachment patterns in early adulthood. The analysis comprises a retrospective study of young adults in Poland (n = 20) who were interviewed to investigate possible connections between their peer bullying experiences and current social lives. The findings reveal three major social attachment patterns in adulthood: social cushioning, anxious withdrawal, and desperate friendship-seeking. In the first pattern, a person acquires emotional and social security through attachment to a small peer circle. In the second, a young adult prefers solitude or limited social contact to avoid further negative experiences. In the third, a person seeks to be socially recovered and approved despite multiple failures and rejections.

Key words: bullying; school violence; peer relation; attachment pattern; early adulthood

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Introduction

The ubiquity of bullying in contemporary schools has made it a significant research topic (Wójcik, Kozak 2015; Fox, Boulton 2005; Olweus 1997). Studies are moving beyond focusing on how children and adolescents are immediately affected by peer violence (Olweus 1993, 1997, Popyk 2024) and are paying increasing attention to the long-lasting implications of bullying in later life (deLara 2019; Jantzer et al. 2006; Lund et al. 2009; Schäfer et al. 2004; Ttofi et al. 2011).

The prevalence of bullying was underscored by Olweus (1993, 1997), who drew on 20 years of research in schools in Norway and reported that about 15% of children were involved in bullying. This percentage includes 9% of pupils aged 7 to 16 who were regularly bullied and 7% of those who bullied others. In Poland, the recent research on children's (aged 11–17) victimization (Popyk 2024) showcases, that peer bullying has been the most common victimization category[1] for the last fifteen years. The study indicates that more than half, 66%, of children and youth in Poland declared experiencing at least one form of peer and sibling violence (physical, psychological, group assault, violence at dating) in their lives. Besides, 46% experienced peer and sibling violence within 12 months before the study, which was held in 2023.

Though, due to the erratic nature of abuse and harassment, peer victimization–inclusive of bullying–may be construed in a variety of ways. Based on the work done by Dan Olweus (1997), this study conceptualizes bullying and victimization as 'exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students' (p. 496). Under this broad definition, specific forms of bullying span physical, psychological, relational, and cyber (Mondry et al. 2021). Rather than distinguishing between violent acts of different kinds, this study was more interested in taking a temporal view of bullying, focusing less on the particularities of bullying as such but rather on how it has shaped victims' social attachment patterns in the long term.

Bullying is closely connected to the state of peer relationships, so attachment patterns during life-course phases should be considered when evaluating its long-lasting effects. As such, bullying at school not only defines victims' social and psychological well-being but is also likely to have significant maladjustive effects on the development of the interpersonal skills needed throughout a person's life-course (Jantzer et al. 2006). Negative peer experiences are highly likely to reverberate at critical times (Pepler et al., 2006), such as during changes of school/college, place of residence, employment, friends, or intimate

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[1] The other researched categories were sexual violence, use by close adults, witnessing domestic violence, xperiencing physical and emotional neglect, parentification.

relationships, which can overlap with a transition to adulthood. Ronald R. Rindfuss (1991) aptly called young adulthood a "demographically dense" period during which a number of not only events but also personal networks critically shape a person's life (Billari et al. 2019, p. 599). Given that all transitions are interdependent and life-wide (Heinz 2009), peer victimization is likely to impact how young people fare when they become adults (Goodboy et al. 2016; Wolke et al. 2013).

Bullying and Peer Relations in Childhood and Adolescence

Children's social competencies are based primarily on various social interactions and play a significant role in peer contacts (Piaget 1970; Rubin et al. 1995, 2002; Wójcik, Kozak 2015). However, the peer relationship is itself complex and requires considerable time and effort for children (Corsaro, Eder 1990). Peer bonds not only shape communication and interpersonal skills but also contribute to children's emotional and psychological well-being and mental health (Oldfield et al. 2016).

While social competence starts developing in early childhood, it is exercised throughout the life-course (Corsaro, Eder 1990; Piaget 1932). Social skills are interlinked with the formation of a sense of social attachment (Marcus, Kramer 2001), which is viewed primarily in terms of child-to-parent (usually mother) attachment. The strongest family attachments (Bowlby 1982) wane over time when the child enters other social environments, such as kindergarten, school, and peer groups (Eisenstadt, 1956). People other than family members can shape children's social attachment behaviors during this stage. Hence social attachment patterns are considered here as relationships hinging on emotional bonds established with peers (in childhood/adolescence and adulthood) and based on needs and competencies.

As with competencies and skills, social attachment patterns have roots in childhood but are molded over time. John Bowlby (1982) highlighted the connection between early ties and further individual development resulting in secure or insecure attachment over an extended period. Ainsworth et al. (1978) specifically delineated three primary child attachment patterns that develop in early years (ages one to four), yet affect attachment behavior in adulthood. These comprise one secure attachment pattern and two insecure attachment patterns: pattern B (securely attached), pattern A (anxiously avoidant), and pattern C (anxiously resistant).

Secure attachment (pattern B) provides growing individuals with a basis for the successful management of crises and a secure exploration of the world. By contrast, insecurely attached children (patterns A and C) are likely

to feel unconfident and anxious in stressful situations (Freeman, Brown 2001; Thompson 2008). Between the two insecure patterns, anxiously avoidant persons (pattern A) are reluctant to engage in intimacy and relationships, often preferring to remain distant emotionally. An anxiously resistant pattern (C) features a concurrence of attention-seeking and ambivalence when contacts occur (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby 1982). In adulthood, pattern C translates to anxiety and fear of rejection in interpersonal relations.

The attachment theory (Ainsworth et al., 1978; Bowlby 1982) has been extensively applied in a general context to research on relationships developed from childhood (Nickerson, Nagle 2005; Rubin et al. 2004; Walden, Beran 2010) to adolescence (Burton et al. 2013; Murphy et al. 2017) and adulthood (Thompson 2008). The theory of attachment ties has also been used to study engagement in bullying behavior in childhood and adolescence under the role of both perpetrator and observer (Murphy et al. 2017; Walden, Beran 2010). However, few studies have investigated the role of peer attachment in the context of the life-course impacts of bullying.

Rubin et al. (2004) showed that good friendship ties in childhood lead to low peer rejection and victimization (though only for girls). Secure peer attachments were found to prevent children from experiencing the effects, such as involvement in bullying (Nickerson, Nagle 2005), of negative, insecure parental attachments. Furthermore, Burton et al. (2013) found that peer support could act as a "buffer" against bullying.

Children who are deprived of positive peer relationships develop weak or no peer attachment ties and report high levels of social anxiety, stress, and depression (Gazelle 2013; Östberg et al. 2018). This indicates that bullying victims are more insecure, cautious, withdrawn, sensitive, and quiet than non-victims (Olweus 1997). Hence insufficient peer relationships can result in children's rejection or neglect, which can be accompanied by a feeling of loneliness (Cassidy, Asher 1992) and solitude (Rubin et al. 1995). Besides, children's dissatisfaction with social relationships, caused by bullying experiences, can also lead to *social withdrawal* (Coplan, Rubin 2010; Gazelle 2013), defined as a "consistent (across the situation and overtime) display of all forms of solitary behavior when encountering familiar and/or unfamiliar peers" (Rubin et al. 2002, p. 330). Social withdrawal is directly connected to self-exclusion due to insufficient social skills or shyness rather than to being the isolated outcome of peer rejection (Rubin et al. 2002). Nevertheless, regular and lasting social withdrawal is likely to lead to increased mental and psychological problems, such as social phobias, *anxious solitude* (Gazelle 2008), and social anxiety disorder (Rubin et al. 2002).

Peer relationships, though, are rarely univocally positive or negative as social competence is determined not only by bullies and victims but also by attachment to other peers who play various roles, such as bystanders or onlookers. In

addition, not all victims are deprived of positive peer contact, with some having a smaller than average circle of friends (Boulton, Underwood,, 1992). Carefully selected friends can become a "protective factor" (Smokowski, Evans 2019, p. 74) and safeguard the victim from attacks.

In summary, patterns of social attachment, social competence, and bullying experiences are interconnected and co-dependent. They work together to define social relationships over a life-course, regardless of age. Social competence affects both attachment patterns and possible bullying experiences, which, in turn, prevent the development of proper social skills and secure attachments.

Consequences of School Bullying in Early Adulthood

As argued above, the implications of peer violence can last for decades (Hawker, Boulton 2000; deLara 2019; Schäfer et al. 2004). The shape of peer relations in school tends to a projection of subpar social skills and negatively affects social attachment patterns in early adulthood (Lansford et al. 2014). Being a bullying victim increases the likelihood of experiencing negative social interactions in adulthood (Jantzer et al. 2006; Olweus 1997; Lund et al. 2009; Ttofi et al. 2011).

Negative experiences with peer attachment translate into negative health outcomes. They are likely to exacerbate depression (Brendgen, Poulin 2018; Östberg et al. 2018; Ttofi et al. 2011), social anxiety (Gazelle 2013), and social withdrawal (Coplan, Rubin 2010; Gazelle 2013). Mental health challenges in adulthood can be a result of persistent victimization, which leaves long-lasting scars (deLara 2022).

Illustrating this connectivity between adolescence and adulthood, Wolke et al. (2013) linked the lingering effects of peer violence to victims' worsened structural health and wealth outcomes in adulthood. Furthermore, low peer attachment and bullying are likely to cause social anxiety and withdrawal and increase subsequent victimization in adulthood, such as at the workplace (Brendgen, Poulin 2018).

Studying relational maladjustment among victims, Tritt and Duncan (1997) discovered that victims had an increased preponderance for loneliness while Jantzer et al. (2006) demonstrated that the poor quality of victims' college-age friendship was related to shyness and distrust. Jantzer et al., also reported that a high level of victimization in primary school resulted in diminished levels of trust in friendship 10 years later. Goodboy et al. (2016) found that a positive handling of relations during the first semester of college was negatively correlated with previous bullying victimization, while deLara (2019) found that childhood bullying hindered the formation of healthy young adult relationships–either

friendships or intimate bonds–due to the effect of social contact avoidance and/or staying in abusive relationships.

In their study of Danish men, Lund et al. (2009) concluded that their participants were diagnosed with post-bullying depression between the ages of 31 and 51, indicating that victimization effects can persist for 20 to 40 years after bullying experiences. Östberg et al. (2018) found that school bullying has a long-term negative effect on the self-image of young female adults even 10 years after bullying experiences.

Gender differences in school-age bullying affect the long-term consequences. For example, men who are socially marginalized at a school age feel lonelier than women (Rubin et al. 1993), which indicates that males seek friendship and group acceptance to a greater degree than females. In the absence of these factors, men feel more solitary and anxious than women. Furthermore, Rubin et al., found that adverse social interactions have more serious consequences for males than for females because girls are more likely to be rewarded, accepted, and understood by adults (e.g., parents and teachers) than boys.

To conclude, negative social interactions with peers during childhood and adolescence, particularly in the form of bullying, have significantly negative consequences on social attachment in victims' adulthood.

This Study

An overview of literature indicates a strong relationship between negative peer attachment and bullying victimization in childhood and adolescence. Previous studies have also demonstrated the negative long-term consequences of school-age bullying experiences in adulthood. This study explores young adults' perceptions of how bullying experiences in their childhood and adolescence impact their social attachment behavior patterns and friendship strategies in adulthood. To do so, we drew on the attachment theory developed by Bowlby (1969, 1982) and the three patterns of parental attachment proposed by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Our study sought to answer the following research questions: how does peer bullying victimization shape social skills and attachment patterns in young adulthood (RQ1)? How do peer relations in childhood and adolescence affect social attachment patterns in young adulthood (RQ2)?

We studied how the bully victim experience impacts friendship strategies operationalized as social attachment patterns in adulthood by analyzing the bullying experiences and peer attachments established in the childhood and adolescence periods of our respondents and examined how bullying victimization affected their social attachment patterns in adulthood.

Methods

This study draws on empirical material collected for the 'anonymized' project (see also Mondry et al. 2021), comprised of qualitative research based on in-depth interviews with young adults that examined the role of school-age bullying experiences in the transition to adulthood.

Project participants (n = 20) were recruited using an online form based on 2 main criteria: age and experience of long-term school-age bullying (more than 5 months). An online form was distributed by posting advertisements on social media and university pages. The form included demographic questions (education, gender, employment) and questions concerning bullying, such as, "Did you experience bullying at school (as a victim, witness, or aggressor)?" "Were you a victim, witness, or aggressor?", "When were you bullied (elementary, middle, or high school)?", "How long did it last (less or more than five months)?". Those who declared that they had been bullied (were victims) for more than five months were considered eligible for an interview. We did not take non-victims into the analysis. Though we believe that social attachment patterns tend to persist over time, experiencing peer victimization is likely to deteriorate social attachments in childhood and adolescence, which, as a consequence, prevents children from developing necessary social/interpersonal skills and increases uncertainty and negative self-image. As a result, in adulthood, individuals tend to reiterate the social attachment patterns from their childhood. Among the 20 interviewees, 14 were women, 5 were men, and 1 was a non-binary gender. The average age was 29 years, and the age range was 19 to 33. Almost all the participants had a university education, while two had secondary school qualifications.

All interviews were conducted online due to epidemiological restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020–2021. The researchers hold a PhD degree in psychology and sociology. The interview guide was divided into two parts. The first section was dedicated to retrospective perceptions of school-age bullying experiences as memories of adolescence. Participants were asked, for example, "What are your memories from elementary/secondary school? Tell me about your class/peer group/classmates? You mentioned being rejected; can you tell me what you mean? Which kind of peer interactions were the most problematic? What was the reason for bullying, in your opinion?" Retrospective accounts of peer violence were elicited under this component. The second section focused on the present (i.e., adulthood) and considered areas of interaction and social relations, such as education, the labor market, personal/family life, and general well-being. In this part, the researchers asked direct questions about the consequences of peer violence on the current lives of participants, for example, "Tell me about your social relationships. Tell me about your work experience. How do you see your future in terms of intimate relationships?"

The project adhered to all ethical best practices around data handling and confidentiality. Before data collection began, the project received ethical approval from the relevant committee at the institution. Informed consent was acquired from participants, and the researchers highlighted the participants' right to withdraw and maintain their anonymity as well as the availability of psychological support in case of discomfort due to the topics discussed during the interview. The quotations presented below have all had identifying details changed to preserve the anonymity of our interviewees.

All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and coded using MAXQDA software (version 20.1.1), based on a codebook created by the project team. The following code groups were analyzed: bullying experience and peer relations in school, bullying consequences in early adulthood, and social life and contacts. The typology of social attachment patterns was based on a thematic analysis (Wengraf 2001) and cross-case comparisons of the different attachment styles drawn from broad theorizing. The codes for attachment and social competence were then intersected with bullying experience and peer relationships during childhood and adolescence vis-à-vis those exhibited in early adulthood. An inductive approach was used, that is, the categories were derived from data and then three types of social attachment patterns were proposed. Under the premise of qualitative analysis, data saturation was obtained and the data was revalidated iteratively to confirm the sturdiness of the explanatory framework. The codes are not mutually exclusive but are likely to overlap or exchange along with the different life experiences of the respondents.

Results

The outcomes of this study are in line with those of previous research on the echoing effect of peer relationships at school, which shapes social attachment patterns in adulthood (Thompson, 2008), as well as the long-term consequences of school-age bullying victimization (Jantzer et al. 2006; Lund et al. 2009; Smokowski, Evans 2019; Ttofi et al. 2011). The results show that bullying experiences lead victims to engage in a recurring reconsideration, reevaluation, and renegotiation of friendships and other social ties throughout their early adulthood. The respondents in this study, who suffered from enduring (not occasional) bullying victimization in childhood and adolescence, reported predominantly insecure social attachment patterns in adulthood. After following the retrospective narratives on bullying experiences and their consequences on adult social lives, we delineated three major patterns of social attachment: social cushioning, anxious withdrawal/avoidant, and desperate friendship-seeking.

The social cushioning (*n* = 11) pattern of attachment is adopted by a person who seeks to bond with another person or group on the basis of familiarity and trust. Social cushioning is viewed as a "buffer" against the possibility of future victimization and can be perceived as a social protection "bubble." Moreover, it satisfies people's needs for emotional and social attachment via familiar contacts, which makes the bullying victim feel more secure.

The anxious withdrawal/avoidant (*n* = 6) pattern derives from the "social withdrawal" notion discussed by Rubin et al. (1995), as well as the anxiety–withdrawal behavior described by Brendgen and Poulin (2018) and Gazelle (2008). It is also based on the idea of the "anxiously avoidant" pattern elaborated by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Respondents who revealed an anxious withdrawal social attachment pattern reported low levels of self-esteem, which translates into a strategy of minimizing emotional expression and, ultimately, becoming emotionally distant. In adulthood, they are withdrawn and prefer solitude to avoid being victimized or judged.

The desperate friendship-seeking (*n* = 3) pattern is grounded in the "anxiously resistant" pattern discussed by Ainsworth et al. (1978). Desperate friendships were common among those respondents who struggled with a strong emotional need for attention and were preoccupied with/desperate to belong to a group. This manifested itself in the simultaneous display of clingy behavior and relational resistance. Friendship is perceived as an escape from isolation, but it does not bring emotional stability or satisfaction in this attachment pattern. The three patterns identified in the narratives are discussed in detail below.

Social Cushioning

Social cushioning was the most common social attachment pattern among the adult respondents in this study. Those who viewed friendship through the prism of social cushioning reported homogeneous social relationships. Being a bullying victim at school negatively affected how attachments were formed later in life. The young adults in this study had small circles of trusted friends to whom they felt attached. Staying in contact with the same person had a dual effect: on one hand, peers provided emotional and physical support during victimization; on the other, they offered a sense of familiarity and security, which also mitigated the negative experiences of teasing and mocking.

The case of Dorota illustrates the significance of peer attachment at school–particularly for those suffering from peer victimization. A lasting friendship helped Dorota persevere despite her negative experiences:

At that time [of bullying], it seemed to me that I had good relations especially with girls and with those boys who didn't bully me… I have always had good contact with girls. For a long time, the girls were on my side and even stood up for me, telling them [bullies]

to leave me alone. I have always felt that I can count on my friends ... If I did not have those friends, I think it would be more difficult for me to survive this elementary school. (Dorota, 30 years old)

Later, in high school, Dorota revealed the same pattern of social attachment by sticking to one good friend. In effect, bullying in primary and middle school taught her to be in contact with familiar people so as not to face more negative relationships:

I did not have a big group of friends, but I always had this one friend who was very good in elementary school. Therefore, I could talk to her. She was the one I could talk to. I also met another friend there [in high school]. She also lived not far from me ... So the three of us were hanging out together. From time to time, we talked to someone there, but, in general, the three of us were best friends because I did not want to just broaden my friend group anymore [so as] not to come across someone who would hurt me. I just preferred to stay aside, have a narrow circle of friends, whatever. It was enough for me. (Dorota, 30 years old)

This pattern of social attachment was maintained in university. Dorota was aware of her experiences and preferred having small and familiar groups of people around as she believed that was the "best way" for her for social interactions.

[At university] as I had those earlier experiences [of bullying], I did not want to shine or be the center of a group and be in contact with everyone because I did not care about that. I just wanted to have peace, study what I want, what I like, and maybe to have a small group of acquaintances. I did not have to be the center of attention. (Dorota, 30 years old)

Creating social bubbles was also present in the cases of Przemek and Pola, who were rather sensitive in making new social contacts. They preferred to interact with those who they knew and trusted:

It is always better to be a part of a group because it provides you with safety and a sense of community. If there is a kind of bullying within a group, it is not a type of harassment, but rather joking ... [My friendships are] based on long-lasting relationships with people whom I know and whom I can trust. Loyalty is a very important trait for me. (Przemek)

Anxiety occurred while meeting new people. But I had that safety cushion in the form of my friends whom I already knew, so I was not afraid of being left alone there because we were building this network of friends together. (Pola)

Consequently, familiarity provides a sense of security and helps prevent unexpected negative contact, which can lead to recurrent victimization experiences. Social cushioning patterns adopted in childhood and adolescence are often followed in adulthood as the main way to establish social life.

Anxious Withdrawal/Avoidant

The anxious withdrawal pattern was reported by the respondents who preferred solitude for various reasons, including negative experiences in establishing social contacts and psychological–emotional trauma caused by poor peer attachment in childhood and adolescence and its accompanying bullying experiences. It has been shown that anxious self-isolation is a continuous pattern and reflects how social life during the school-age translates to social attachment styles in adulthood. Respondents who fell into this category revealed a sense of loneliness and isolation from early childhood.

Anna, who is 33 years old, experienced a sense of solitariness throughout an extensive part of her life despite numerous attempts to make friends. Her self-perception of being "different" from early childhood led to low peer attachment and bullying victimization in primary and middle schools. She perceived isolation and social exclusion as the most significant factors which affected the growing feeling of loneliness and being a "black sheep" in class.

The worst experience was in school, [and it was] mostly psychological violence. The primitive things, which were not sophisticated at all, were the worst. Some nonsense incidents included putting stickers in my hair when I was not paying attention [and] cutting my hair when I was drawing and did not notice. I had long hair, so I could not see. My workbooks were thrown away for a long time. They [perpetrators] [had] fun with them. Once, a cleaner pulled [my workbook] out of the toilet. I did not even know it was there. […] I remember my childhood as [being] lonely. I was left alone frequently, and being ignored was the worst type of trauma. That was an awful trauma because it was not a single major case but days after days of goddamn emptiness. This drove me as crazy as Chinese water torture would. I greatly remember my solitude. (Anna, 33 years old)

Anna's social withdrawal during childhood was transferred to her adult life. Low social skills, bullying victimization, and a sense of solitude shaped her peer attachment pattern. While processing the negative experiences, Anna became aware of her difficulties in forming close relationships and, as a consequence, admitted loneliness:

In general, I have an extremely small number of friends. I mean, I have many colleagues, but zero close friends. I do not know if it is due to my home background, but I just do not have close friends to meet often… I do not know how much of this is connected to my experiences at school, but I just do not have close friends–someone to meet often or be in permanent contact with. I try sometimes. It is not that I am not trying but I am just unsuccessful. (Anna, 33 years old)

This was also the case for Zoya, whose bullying experiences forced her to learn to be "invisible" and to never solicit social contact. Low self-esteem and a fear of being singled out made Zoya withdraw from social interactions at school, college, and in her adult life:

First of all, I tried to escape all contact and not draw attention to myself. I think, at some point, I learned to be invisible. I neither dressed in a way to attract attention nor spoke during lessons and breaks. I did not interact, tried to avoid eye contact, was not active at any point either in school or afterschool or during sports activities. I was just trying to be invisible. […] I did not have much peer contact. Most of the time I spent at home listening to music or drawing. I rarely met someone outside school.

[At college] I did not interact with people. I managed to be invisible all the time. I was feeling okay with that. I could keep silent for the whole day. I was not worried about that. I just went to the lectures and stayed alone during the breaks. In the beginning, it was difficult. I sometimes cried while going back home after college. Later, I learned that I don't have to talk at all. (Zoya, 31 years old)

Zoya mentioned that she no longer had significant difficulties in interacting with people after undergoing treatment and practicing her social skills. Nevertheless, she maintained narrow and tight relationships with a small and familiar group of friends as she preferred to avoid shallow contacts with a large group. In that sense, with substantial assistance from mental health treatment, she progressed from a fully insecure withdrawal/avoidant pattern toward social cushioning.

I still prefer a narrow group of trusted people [than] to have shallow relationships with many people. I no longer have problems with communication or making conversations. I put a lot of effort into learning this. There is definitely a side-effect to [bullying], but these are things that I have dealt with to some extent. (Zoya, 31 years old)

We thus find that those who faced peer victimization, which led to peer rejection, at school age tend to prefer solitude or small group contacts in order to "stay in the shadows" and avoid negative experiences.

Desperate Friendship-seeking

Desperate friendship-seeking is the frantic desire to have friends, to be noticed, and to be approved by others. The respondents who revealed this type of attachment pattern reported various ways of obtaining peer recognition, including being pushy and clingy, or even becoming perpetrators of peer violence. They often engaged in delinquent or unhealthy behaviors to impress their peers. In adulthood, this pattern is manifested in a constant need for approval and an eagerness for social reassurance, acceptance, and visibility. In this pattern, these behaviors are responses to the pronounced fear of being evaluated/assessed and rejected.

Maja, who is 28 years old, experienced bullying victimization in her childhood and adolescence, which was accompanied by strong peer exclusion. Her inability to cope with emotions and her inner desire to self-protect often resulted in emotional outbursts and aggressive behavior.

If I had better, more neutral contact with peers, it was mostly outside the school during afterschool activities. But in class, I was quite nervous, and children took advantage of it, and then there was some mockery from them [...] I was trying to cope with it [bullying]... somehow to defend myself against it. I just did not know how to do it, so it turned out that I was defending myself with verbal aggression. The teachers at school advised me not to react to it at all–not [to be] provoked. But how? I did not react once, twice, or thrice. Eventually, a person explodes. (Maja)

These negative peer relationships later resulted in an anxious desire to establish friendships. For Maja, friendship relationships allowed her to escape solitude and be perceived as someone else–someone who had no interpersonal problems and was surrounded by friends. This led to clingy behavior and a desperate need to be noticed by others.

In college, I was trying very hard to show myself as a nice person to be more accepted by peers, and, sometimes, I was too clingy, I guess. Sometimes, I was forcing too much. I was also striving to be involved in a group, where I did not see or pretended not to see that I was mocked, which was rather veiled, [and] not as direct as it was before. It was hard to remain [sic] a victim, which was [happening] in my head. I was trying too much to show myself as a cool person. It often changed into imitation [sic], which could be viewed as pretending to be someone whom I wasn't really. I was desperately trying to present myself as being someone other than the real me. My behavior might be perceived as just getting attention. (Maja)

The anxious desire and desperate endeavor to have a friend, for Maja, resulted in her inability to differentiate between real and false friends–those who are genuine in their support and those who are not. She also mentioned her attempts to work out her feelings and emotions to understand the nature of friendship:

First of all, I was trying to become friends with people who were not necessarily on my side as I wanted them to be. I had trouble distinguishing who was actually on my side and tried to be friends with people who weren't necessarily on that side. […] At the moment, I have to work out such relationships because what previously seemed to be friendship was not necessarily genuine. But there is a time when everything shall clear up, [and I shall distinguish between] who is a friend and who is not. (Maja)

Another respondent, 30-year-old Alina, reported being engaged in objectionable behavior to get along with groups of girls and taking up smoking in order to be accepted and approved. For her, friendship was a way to satisfy her desperate desire to have friends and feel acknowledged:

I never experienced physical victimization, but rather emotional and psychological by the whole class in middle school. It definitely affected the way I functioned and the way I viewed myself. It was a tough experience. On the other side…I had a group of friends, which probably wasn't the best group. Those were the girls who were smoking fags behind

school, so I naturally got hooked on smoking because of this. I have been regretting this ever since. But I wanted to be liked, so I reached for that cigarette. (Alina)

Alina's peer victimization experiences at school reinforced her negative self-image and self-esteem. Hence desperate friendship is key to her self-assurance and social attachment needs.

The greatest impact [of bullying] was in [creating] a distorted self-image–my body image [issues]–a strongly distorted image of my identity, who I am, what I am, what are my needs, and whether these needs matter in my world. [And], certainly, [causing] a lack of self-confidence. In fact, I had no confidence whatsoever […] I did not know where to head, I did not like myself, did not respect myself, so I withdrew even more. (Alina)

Therefore, desperate friendship-seeking manifests in a variety of behaviors among victims of peer bullying. This includes an anxious desire to make friends and become a part of a peer group through various means, while negative self-image and emotional instability lead to increasing resistance and social withdrawal in the long term.

Discussion and Conclusions

Bullying experiences cause particular sensitivity and emotional caution among school-aged children who have trauma from bullying (Olweus 1997), which affects their relationships with peers and friends not only during their school years but also in later life. Our study supports the finding that victimization's effects on attachments and social relations can last throughout the victim's life (see also deLara 2019; Jantzer et al. 2006; Lund et al. 2009; Ostberg et al. 2018; Smokowski, Evans 2019). The outcomes of this research demonstrate that school bullying effects the development of social competence and determines social attachment patterns in a relatively stable and constant manner over time.

Most of the study respondents (bullying victims) displayed a single social relationship type throughout their lives and hardly ever managed to establish long-lasting secure attachments. Overall, the study demonstrates that negative peer relations in childhood and adolescence contribute to the development of insecure social attachment patterns in early adulthood. Experiences of being bullied caused the study participants to exhibit three main patterns of social behaviors in terms of attachment: social cushioning, anxious withdrawal/avoidant, and desperate friendship-seeking.

Young adults who relied on familiar and secure social ties (via social cushioning) experienced an atypical form of security and protection when they were bullied in childhood and adolescence. Thus, they learned that relying on

trusted bonds became a "buffer" against extending victimization (see also Burton et al. 2013). The cautious approach towards making new contacts, as a result of bullying experiences (Olweus 1997), enabled them to avoid further victimization in later life. In early adulthood, they persisted in attachments within a limited comfort zone. Though they felt safe, this tactic is an anti-pattern for new social relationships, meeting people, and expanding one's contacts. The study's results support the earlier findings (Boulton, Underwood 1992) that bullying experiences do not fully exclude victims from social contacts, but rather contribute to the formation of a safety zone.

By contrast, in the second group characterized by anxious withdrawal social attachment, social skills and confidence were both markedly lower and caused problems for the young adults. The interviewees' self-perception was ambivalent even if they did not directly express a negative self-image. Social withdrawal preferences were driven mostly by fear and anxiety about being judged or singled out in different social environments, particularly in the workplace (see also Brendgen, Poulin 2018). The adults experiencing anxious withdrawal revealed a high level of awareness about their own shyness, sensitivity, and preference for solicitude, which supports the earlier findings of Rubin et al. (1995). The data suggest that clinical intervention (e.g., seeking mental health assistance) might help modify insecure attachment patterns, at least to a certain extent. In this regard, the study's results complement the findings of Pepler et al. (2006), showcasing the critical moments in victims' lives, for example, change of school, school-to-university, or work transitions that are likely to alleviate bullying scars (deLara 2019). The changes are often initiated by the victims, who seek an escape from perpetrators and adverse environments.

Finally, the third type of attachment pattern–desperate friendship-seeking–is compliant with the anxiously resistant pattern (Ainsworth et al., 1978). Characterized by limited consistency in social behaviors, it spans the range from a strong desire to make friends and be noticed to social ambivalence and resistance to social bonds. Despite being victimized in childhood and adolescence, the participants in this cohort were still driven by a strong desire to belong to a body during adulthood.

A distinction was also observed according to the length and level of the bullying experience: the longer the victimization, the poorer the social competence and the greater the preponderance for insecure social attachment patterns in adulthood. Moreover, prolonged victimization resulted in a higher level of mistrust, insecurity, and anxiety among the interviewed participants (see also Rubin et al. 2002; Jantzer et al. 2006; Smokowski, Evans 2019; Brendgen, Poulin 2018; Östberg et al. 2018; Ttofi et al. 2011).

This study has broad implications for social theorizing concerning the revitalization of the seminal work on attachment patterns (e.g., by Bowlby 1982;

Ainsworth, 1978) conducted through a qualitative and temporal lens. By considering childhood, adolescence, and young adulthood as being interconnected, we have shown that bullying gets narratively connected to social attachment problems and insecurities. Responding to the first research question, we posit that bullying in childhood and adolescence fosters a lasting tendency towards insecure attachment patterns in young adulthood. As the second research question implies, abusive social relations with peers can hinder opportunities for secure social attachment patterns.

We are aware of certain limitations of the study. First, as the study is based on qualitative methods, the results cannot be generalized. It would be advisable to verify the typology of attachment patterns of adult bullying victims in a larger study. Second, due to a broad definition of "bullying," its use in practice, and the lack of a single translation to the Polish language (the language used in interviewing), the respondents referred to different negative experiences and peer relationships. For this reason, we have adopted a wide definition of "bullying" as a range of negative actions toward victims, which has lasted for more than six months. The study indicates that the respondents rarely experienced one form of bullying (e.g., relational/social, physical, and/or verbal) and that the type of experience was secondary to the attachment pattern effects. Hence, the contribution of the paper lies not in expanding the catalogue of bullying definitions but rather in seeing it as a life-course phenomenon with prolonged consequences in later life.

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