Attachment Styles among Teachers with and without Victimization Experiences in Estonia

Kristi Kõiv PhD
University of Tartu, Estonia
kristi.koiv@ut.ee

Abstract: The present study examined attachment styles (secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent) that differentiated teachers as victims of student and adult bullying and non-victims of bullying in school settings. A total of 576 teachers as two-stage cluster sampling in Estonia completed a self-reported measure to determine the victim-categories (victims of student bullying N = 77; victims of adult bullying N = 64; victims of student/adult bullying N = 74; and non-victims N = 361), and a self-reported measure to examine the three attachment styles (Multiple-item Attachment Scale: Simpson, 1990). Results indicated that teachers as single-target victims of students and adults bullying and teaches as multi-target victims of bullying in school settings had higher scores in avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment scales than non-victims of bullying. There were no statistically significant differences across scores of secure attachment among four study group members. Findings reflect the role of insecure – avoidant, anxious/ambivalent, attachment in the vulnerability to victimization of teachers by students and adults.

Keywords: attachment styles, victimization, teacher-targeted bullying, school settings, school education.

Introduction

Bullying occurs across variety of contexts (e.g. schools, prisons, residential homes, workplace) during childhood, adolescence and adulthood (Coyne, Monks, 2011). Most studies of school (Smith, 2011) and workplace (Coyne, 2011) bullying define bullying as a form of aggression, involving repetition and an imbalance of power. Bullying in a school context has received attention over more than three decades with research focus on bullying among students (Smith, 2011) and among schoolteachers at workplace (Edelmann, Woodall, 1997; Hubert, van Veldhoven, 2001; Malinauskienė, Obelenis, 2005). Bullying in schools overwhelms complex dynamics (Parsons, 2005) – teachers may be bullied by other teachers, students, staff, principals, parents, and may bully other teachers, staff, parents and students.

Teacher-targeted bullying is an issue of international studies providing predominantly evidence about its overall prevalence, and showing an increase in the prevalence during last decade (Kõiv, 2015a; 2015b; Workplace bullying..., 2012). Studies on the issues of teacher targeted bullying prevalence have looked at the problem from the perspective of victimization of teachers by students De Wet, 2006; Kauppi, Pöröhölä, 2012; Ozkilic, Kartal, 2012; Pervin, Turner, 1998; Terry, 1998) and victimization of teachers by multiple individuals (e.g. Benefield, 2004; Kõiv, 2011; Workplace bullying..., 2012; Riley, Duncan, 2011) within the school settings. Also, it was found that teachers reported substantially more victimization in their workplace compared with university students’ reports (Schäfer, Korn, 2004); and bullying against teachers came primarily from students followed by others adults in school settings (Benefield, 2004; Kõiv, 2011).

Attachment theory, as a developmental theory, offers a potentially useful conceptual framework for explaining bullying (Coyne, Monks, 2011). Empirically supported attachment theory reflects the nature of the parent-child bond across lifetime (Bowlby, 1969; Hazan, Shaver, 1994). An important component of attachment theory is that individual’s develop schemas or styles of attachment that continue throughout their lives (Bowlby, 1969), classifying traditionally children’s attachment quality into discrete categories – secure, anxious/ambivalent and avoidant (Ainsworth, Blehar, 1978).

Previous first studies, classifying toddlers’ attachment status, have demonstrated that preschool children with history of insecure attachment were more likely to be involved in bullying (Troy, Sroufe, 1987), and were less socially competent in interactions with peers (Jacobson, Willie, 1986; Pastor, 1981) in play situation. Specifically, M. Troy and L.A. Sroufe (Troy, Sroufe, 1987) found evidence that preschool children classified as avoidant type were most likely to bully others and those with ambivalent attachment styles were more likely to be the victims of bullying. Also, toddlers’ antisocial behaviour...
was predicted by history of avoidant attachment and passive-withdrawal behaviour by anxious/ambivalent attachment status for boys (Renken, Egeland, 1989).

A limited amount of research has looked at the relationship between preadolescents’ (middle school children’s) bullying and victimization, and their self-reported current attachment styles. Findings along this line have revealed that a low quality of maternal attachment was related to both bullying and victimization of bullying (Walden, Beran, 2010); and the insecure parental attachment was associated with both self-report and peer-report measures of bullying (Eliot, Cornell, 2009). Comparison of preadolescents who classified themselves as securely or insecurely (ambivalent and avoidant) attached in close relationships revealed that securely attached reported less involvement in bullying and victimization (Kokkinos, 2013). It was also found that preadolescents with higher quality self-perceived attachment to their mothers (but not to father) were more likely to report standing up for victims of bullying than those with lower self-perceived quality of attachment (Nickerson, Mele, 2008). However, P.K. Coleman (2003) did not find significant relationship between preadolescents’ self-perceptions of attachment to both parents and their reports of being victimized by peers.

Previous studies have linked the quality of attachment with adolescents’ bullying behaviour, grouping respondents by different quality of attachment histories or by different bully-categories (bullies, victims, bully/victims, un-involved). The first mentioned study design was used by M.J. Dykas, Y. Ziv and J. Cassidy (Dykas, Ziv, 2008), with findings that insecure (dismissing) adolescents, compared to secure (autonomous) adolescents, were less likely to be socially accepted by their peers, less likely to be perceived as aggressive, shy-withdrawn, and victimized by peers. K. Kõiv (2012) found that bullies had higher scores in avoidant attachment scales than victims and non-participants of bullying; and victims demonstrated higher levels of insecure attachment than bullies and uninvolved adolescents. Z.A. Marini’s and colleagues’ (Marini, Dane, 2006) study revealed that bullies, victims and bully/victims had a lower maternal attachment than un-involved adolescents, with bully/victims having the lowest level of maternal attachment.

The theory of attachment as a framework for understanding interpersonal processes in the work context among adults has demonstrated links between adults’ attachment styles to their personality domain, leadership, trust, satisfaction, performance and other work outcomes (Harms, 2011) with pioneering work of C. Hazan and P.R. Shaver (Hazan, Shaver, 1990). Previous research (Bloodworth, 2015; Parens, 2012; Williams, Kennedy, 2012) have examined the relationships between adults’ attachment history and their aggressive behaviour in adulthood, indicating that insecure attachment styles had positive correlations with aggression. Also, demonstrating relationships between specific childhood attachment styles (avoidant and anxious) and specific types of aggression (physical and relational), it was revealed that (Williams, Kennedy, 2012): female young adults were more likely to report engaging in physical aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment avoidance to their mothers and higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their fathers; and female young adults were more likely to report engaging in relational aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their mothers, while male participants were more likely to report engaging in this form of aggression when they scored higher on measures of attachment anxiety to their fathers.

Another branch of studies had focused on connections between adults’ attachment styles and their retrospectively reported victimization experiences. Studies in this line have suggested that various victimization experiences in childhood may have a different impact on the quality of attachment styles in adulthood. Namely, it was shown that being teased in the social, appearance, and performance domains (versus academic and family domains) was significantly related to later attachment difficulties among university students (Ledley, Storch, 2006); and stable victims during schoolyears and secondary-school victims (versus primary-school victims) had significantly higher scores on fearful attachment style than non-victims among university students and teachers (Schäfer, Korn, 2004). Also, one pilot qualitative study (Kõiv, 2015a; 2015b) has demonstrated the prevalence of characteristics of insecure childhood attachment experiences tended to increase with the degree of frequency of teachers’ workplace victimization experiences – it was highest among group of teachers with frequent victimization experiences, expressed less strongly in the group of teachers with rare victimization experiences, and was lowest prevalence among teachers without victimization experiences.
Exploring connections between adult male prisoners’ current attachment style and their aggressive behaviour T.B. Hansen and her colleagues (Hansen, Waage, 2011) suggested that personality traits (e.g. agreeableness), but not adults’ current attachment style, were important in explaining convictions for violent crime; and adult attachment styles played a significant role in explaining aggression in intimate relationships. In another study in prison context (Ireland, Power, 2004) dealing with adult male offenders current attachment styles and their prison bullying behaviour, respondents were grouped into four bully-categories: pure bullies, pure victims, bully/victims and not-involved. Comparing differences between studygroups in terms of secure, avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment it was revealed that bully/victims reported higher avoidant scores than the other bully-categories, with pure bullies and those not-involved reporting lower avoidant scores.

Thus, few previous researches on quality of adult attachment and workplace victimization have concentrated to adult attachment styles, whereby there is a plenty of evidence (Hansen, Steenberg, 2012) that parent-child relationships characterized by insecure attachments styles are predictive of school bullying victimization. However, an under-researched area to examine relationship between teachers’ current attachment styles and their victimization behaviour in school settings emerges the new research question: Whether or not teachers who are victims of student and adult bullying in school settings can be distinguished by their attachment styles?

The aim of the present study was to investigate differences in attachment styles among teachers with and without victimization experiences in school context.

It was hypothesized that attachment style of the group of teachers who are identified as single- and multi-target victims of students and adult bullying should be more insecure compared to that of teachers who had no victimization experiences in school context.

Methodology

Study design and sample

Survey estimates are derived from a stratified, multi-stage cluster sample: in the first stage randomly selected three schools were selected from all 15 separate districts from Estonia representing basic schools and gymnasiums in rural and urban areas, whereby the ratio of different types of schools (basic schools versus gymnasium: 6 versus 4) among sample of schools corresponds to the whole-country school sample; in the second stage of sampling all teachers from in each school were selected; and during stage three teachers with and without workplace victimization experiences was identified.

In total, 576 teachers participated, representing a 41.8% response rate in relation to the online format individually sent questionnaire submitted by the author. Whole sample consisted of 576 teachers: 508 females (88.2%) and 68 males (11.8%). The mean age of the subjects was 46.4 years (SD=11.9) with youngest subject was 20 years old and the oldest was 71 years old. The average number of years in the teaching profession for the participants was 13.56 years (SD=4.82).

Of this sample of participants, 126 (22%) had bachelor’s degrees, 421 (73%) earned master’s degrees, and 29 (5%) had secondary or vocational education. The distribution of current teaching subjects for the sample was languages and literature 129 (24%), sciences 83 (14%), mathematics 80 (13%), social studies 69 (12%), technology and art subjects 65 (11%), physical education 41 (7%), and different subjects in primary level 109 (19%).

Instruments

Victimization of bullying

A self-reported instrument for the measurement of prevalence of different types of bullying of teachers by students and by adults (other teachers, administration parents and maintenance staff) in school context was developed (Kõiv, 2011) consisting of 15 items which described acts harming or hurting the target person. Participants indicated how often they had been bullied at school during last six month using a 3-point scale (never, often, very often) after a definition of bullying by following the pattern established by Olweus (1999). A person was considered a victim when he/she reported being bullied “often” or “very often” at least one out of a list of bullying items. Participants were classified into one
of four categories: “victims of student bullying”, “victims of adult bullying”, or “victims of student/adult bullying”, whereby the last victim-category consisted subjects who had been both victims of student bullying and victims of adult bullying. The fourth type of classification of teachers was “non-victims” - teachers without victimization experiences, when they self-reported being bullied “never” across all 15 questionnaire items in the school context related with their relations with pupils and adults.

Attachment style

Multiple-item Attachment Scale, developed by J.A. Simpson (1990), was used to define in terms of present reports of attachment. This measure based directly on C. Hazan and P.R. Shaver’s (Hazan, Shaver, 1987) attachment measure indicating three paragraphs corresponding to the three attachment styles: secure, avoidant, anxious/ambivalent. The participants were asked to rate 13 sentences: five items for secure (e.g., ‘I find it relatively easy to get close to others’), and four items for avoidant (e.g., ‘I am somewhat uncomfortable being close to others’) and anxious/ambivalent (‘I find that others are reluctant to get as close as I would like’) attachment style on a 7-point Likert scale, ranging from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (7). To measure each attachment style, the items corresponding to three paragraphs aggregated to form three attachment subscales, whereby higher scores reflected greater security, avoidance, or anxious/ambivalent attachment style.

Each subscale of the Multiple-item Attachment Scale was assessed and the ‘secure’ subscale demonstrated adequate reliability for a scale comprising of five items, with an alpha coefficient of .57; the ‘avoidance’ subscale (four items) with an alpha coefficient value of .68; and the ‘anxious/ambivalent’ subscale (four items) with a standardised alpha coefficient of .76. Item-to-total correlations were all positive.

Results and discussion

Victim-categories

Within whole sample (N=576), participants were placed into one of four victim-categories: “victims of student bullying”, “victims of adult bullying”, “victims of student/adult bullying” and “non-victims”. Of the sample 13.4% (N=77) were placed into the victims of student bullying category, 11.1% (N=64) were placed in the victims of adult bullying category, 12.8% (N=74) were placed into the victims of student/adult bullying category, and 37.3% (N=215) were placed into the non-victims category.

Attachment style

The mean scores on the attachment measure were displayed across victim-categories (victims of student bullying, victims of adult bullying, victims of students/adults bullying, and non-victims) in the Table 1, whereby the higher scores were associated with an increased tendency to demonstrate each attachment style.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style</th>
<th>Victims of student bullying (N=77)</th>
<th>Victims of adult bullying (N=64)</th>
<th>Victims of student/adult bullying (N=74)</th>
<th>Non-victims (N=361)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>1.89</td>
<td>4.33</td>
<td>1.75</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>3.57</td>
<td>1.98</td>
<td>3.70</td>
<td>1.78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious/ambivalent</td>
<td>2.76</td>
<td>1.68</td>
<td>2.95</td>
<td>1.56</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

One-way ANOVA’s was carried out to assess differences across victim-categories for total scores on the subscales of the Multiple-item Attachment Scale.
The results, as shown in Table 3, indicated that there were several statistically significant differences with regards to teachers’ current attachment styles and their victimization behaviors: (1) non-victims of bullying reported lower avoidant attachment scores compared with victims of student bullying, victims of adult bullying and victims of student/adult bullying; and (2) non-victims reported lower anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than victims of student bullying, victims of adult bullying and victims of student/adult bullying, whereby there were no statistically significant differences in avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment scores across groups of victims of student bullying, victims of adult bullying and victims of student/adult bullying. Secure attachment style did not differentiated significantly non-victims, victims of student bullying, victims of adult bullying and victims of student/adult bullying.

Table 2

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Attachment style</th>
<th>(F/p) value</th>
<th>Victims of student bullying versus victims of adult bullying</th>
<th>Victims of student bullying versus victims of student/adult bullying</th>
<th>Victims of adult bullying versus victims of student/adult bullying</th>
<th>Victims of adult bullying versus non-victims</th>
<th>Victims of student/adult bullying versus non-victims</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Secure</td>
<td>(F) 0.19 0.09</td>
<td>1.03 0.02 2.09 1.88</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(p) 0.66 0.76</td>
<td>0.31 0.88 0.14 0.17</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Avoidant</td>
<td>(F) 0.77 0.51</td>
<td>3.37 2.31 6.27 3.98</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(p) 0.38 0.47</td>
<td>0.04 0.13 0.01 0.04</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anxious/ambivalent</td>
<td>(F) 2.23 1.44</td>
<td>14.07 0.09 13.34 18.35</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(p) 0.14 0.23</td>
<td>0.00 0.77 0.00 0.00</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Present empirical attempts to understand bullying-victimization issues in different contexts among children, adolescents and adults (Coney, Monks, 2011) from the perspective of attachment have been strongly influenced by Bowlby’s (1969) fundamental work. Attachment theory lays the groundwork for the present work focussing on teacher-targeted bullying in school settings, with generating the hypothesis that current attachment style of the group of teachers who are identified as victims of student and adult bullying in schools should be more insecure compared to that of teachers who were not victimized in school.

The results obtained from the study supported and specified this prediction. In general - there were significant differences in avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment styles between teachers with and without victimization experiences in the area of student and adult bullying. Specifically - there were differences between the teachers’ victim-categories with regards to insecure attachment style, but not in secure attachment style. This only held with regards to insecure attachment, however, with non-victims reporting lower avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment scores than the all other victim-categories (teachers as victims of student, adult and student/adult bullying). This result is in agreement with previous findings indicating that children with anxious/ambivalent attachment history had greater risk for victimization (Troy, Sroufe, 1987); demonstrating that preadolescents and adolescents with parental insecure attachment were more likely to be involved in victimization of bullying (Dykas, Ziv, 2008; Kokkinos, 2013; Kõiv, 2012; Walden, Beran, 2010); and revealing links between adults’ disturbed attachment styles and their childhood victimization experiences (Ledley, Storch, 2006; Schäfer, Korn, 2004), and adults’ victimization experiences and their attachment styles or attachment representations (Ireland, Power, 2004; Kõiv, 2015a; 2015b).

Our results found a meaningful pattern in teachers’ current attachment styles concerning with victim/non-victim status generally, rather consistent over different victim status groups (teachers as
victims of students bullying, teachers of victims of adult bullying, teachers as victims of student/adult) within the school relationship context. We concluded that teachers as victims of student and adult bullying – regardless of different victim status groups, rated the “avoidant” and the “anxious/ambivalent” profile higher than non-victims. This result reflects a trend that being a single or multi-target victim of bullying by students and adults in school setting had a negative impact on teachers’ secure attachment style.

The paper suggests that the teachers’ current insecure attachment, whether anxious or avoidant, may impact on their victimization behaviour in the school context. M. Schäfer and her colleagues (Schäfer, Korn, 2004) stated that attachment styles can be predictive of teachers’ and university students’ involvement in the retrospectively reported school bullying victimization; this study indicated that teachers’ attachment status can be contributing as a risk factor to the development of workplace victimization. Given the significant impact victimization can have on teachers in school social contexts, it is critical that researchers continue to examine this issue. A deeper understanding of the factors that are associated with victimization will better to deal effectively with the problem.

The current results, although providing some new direction insights into the attachment style quality and victimization experiences among teachers, are not without limitations. The overrepresentation of woman in the samples and the disproportion of males and females in school settings made it impossible to make conclusions about gender differences. The results of the current study were based on self-reports made by teachers and are not restricted to any other occupational group.

Conclusions

The focus of this study was on the attachment styles among teachers with and without workplace victimizations experiences, taking into consideration the measurement of self-reported frequency of victimization in school context. With regards to teachers’ current attachment style and their victim status (victim versus non-victim), significant differences were restricted to avoidant and anxious/ambivalent attachment: Non-victims reported higher scores than other victim-categories (teachers as victims of students bullying, teachers of victims of adult bullying, teachers as victims of student/adult). Consequently, we found that teachers, who were single and multi-target victims of children’s and adults’ bullying in school were more likely to exhibit avoidant and anxious/ambivalent current attachment compared with those who had no victimization experiences in school context.

Altogether, the current results fit well in the attachment theory and the evidence supports the idea that attachment problems are personal risk factors for teachers’ workplace victimization. Findings along this line are useful for planning effective prevention and intervention tools in teacher-targeted victimization from multi-level relationship network at school setting.

The current study was important because it was the first attempt to understand the role of attachment quality in the teacher-targeted victimization at school setting. In order to acquire more knowledge about personal risk and resilience factors with regard to adult workplace victimization, there is a need for more research to address the present research questions among other professionals’ groups.

Bibliography


