

Bullying, Victimization, Self-Esteem,  
and Narcissism in Adolescents

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## ABSTRACT

**Objectives:** The general aim of this research was to analyse the relationships between bullying (as a distinct form of aggression), victimisation, personal and collective self-esteem, and narcissism in adolescents. Baumeister et al. (1996) refuted the conventionally accepted view that low self-esteem is a cause of violence whereby, for example, those who lack self-esteem may use aggression as a means of dominating others and thereby gaining self-esteem. Instead, it may be that aggression is related to high self-esteem such that individuals with a combination of high levels of both self-esteem and narcissism are more likely to react aggressively to a perceived threat.

**Design:** After conducting a small pilot study ( $n = 112$ ), the main study employed a large-scale cross-sectional survey with self-report questionnaires administered to school students during class.

**Methods:** Participants were drawn from six metropolitan high schools in Adelaide (South Australia), resulting in 1,628 adolescents (665 females & 963 males, aged 12-17 years) completing the survey. The questionnaire battery comprised modified self-report bully and victim versions of the Direct and Indirect Aggression Scales (Björkqvist et al., 1992), personal (Rosenberg, 1979) and collective self-esteem (Luhtanen & Crocker, 1992) scales, the Narcissistic Personality Inventory (Raskin & Hall, 1981), and a measure of socially desirable responding (i.e., Impression Management; Paulhus, 1991).

**Results:** A variety of multivariate analyses controlling for socially desirable responses was employed to test and explore hypothesised relationships. Results showed no relationship between age and any form of bullying or victimisation. Boys reported significantly higher mean levels of direct and total bullying and victimisation, whereas girls reported higher levels of indirect bullying and victimisation. Victimisation was negatively correlated with personal self-esteem, and positively correlated with collective self-esteem. In contrast, bullying was positively correlated with personal self-esteem,

with no significant relationship found with collective self-esteem. Collective and personal self-esteem did not differentially predict different types of bullying or victimisation. Narcissism was positively correlated with bullying. The predicted interaction between personal self-esteem, narcissism and bullying was evident, although the predicted collective self-esteem interaction was not found. Impression Management (social desirability) was significantly negatively correlated with bullying and, to a lesser extent, with victimisation.

**Conclusions:** Research such as this into the possible causes and correlates of aggression and bullying will assist in the design, implementation, and maintenance of effective interventions. For example, as results corresponded with Baumeister et al.'s (1996) assertion in that bullying was related to high self-esteem, interventions that are designed to increase self-esteem might in reality be counterproductive and possibly contribute to an increase in bullying behaviour. Additionally, victims reported higher collective self-esteem than their non-victimised peers, clearly a novel finding worthy of further research. Findings suggested that, rather than running the risk of underreporting of socially undesirable behaviours, self-report methods provide a useful and valid means of measuring prevalence rates and internal states. Rather than underreporting aggressive behaviours, it is likely that respondents were being honest as they did not feel that these behaviours were, in fact, socially undesirable. The present sample reported bullying and victimisation prevalence rates that were comparatively high, despite using relatively conservative criteria, possibly due to an increased awareness of what constitutes bullying as a result of government and school anti-bullying policies and initiatives. The findings generally correspond with and build upon previous research. In addition, a number of the results are novel, providing numerous opportunities for future researchers to further explore and test the relationships between self-esteem, bullying, and victimisation.

DECLARATION

I certify that that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or a diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.

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Anthony L. Daly

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“The hawker shows you one in print,  
As fresh as farthings from the mint:  
The product of your toil and sweating;  
A bastard of your own begetting.” (1733)