

Navigating Emerging Adulthood with the Experience of Being Bullied in School

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Avhandlingen för avläggande av filosofie doktorsexamen i psykologi, som med vederbörligt tillstånd av samhällsvetenskapliga fakultetsstyrelsen vid Göteborgs universitet kommer att offentligen försvaras fredagen den 31 mars 2023, klockan 10:00 i sal F1, Psykologiska institutionen, Haraldsgatan 1, Göteborg.

Fakultetsopponent: Assistant professor Sara Pabian, Department of Communication and Cognition, Tilburg School of Humanities and Digital Sciences

Föreliggande uppsats grundar sig på följande artiklar:

- I. Lidberg, J., Berne, S., & Frisén, A. (2022). Challenges in Emerging Adulthood Related to the Impact of Childhood Bullying Victimization. *Emerging Adulthood*.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/21676968211051475>
- II. Lidberg, J., Berne, S., & Frisén, A. (2023). Bullying Victimization and Resilience – From Childhood Bullying Victimization to Good Psychological Health in Emerging Adulthood. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg.
- III. Lidberg, J., Berne, S., & Frisén, A. (2023). Is bullying victimization in school associated with body-related concerns in emerging adulthood? A prospective study over nearly two decades. [Manuscript submitted for publication]. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg.



Abstract

Lidberg, J. (2023). Navigating Emerging Adulthood with the Experience of Being Bullied in School. Department of Psychology, University of Gothenburg, PO Box 500, SE-405 30 Gothenburg, Sweden.

The overall aim of this thesis is to broaden the understanding of long-term outcomes of experiencing bullying victimization in school, related to the developmental period of emerging adulthood as well as how it can be understood in terms of resilience and outcomes of body-related concerns. **Study I** investigated how 15 emerging adults ($M_{age}=29.00$, $SD=0.37$), subjected to bullying victimization in school and suffering from poor psychological health in emerging adulthood, described their victimization experiences and perceived long-term outcomes of these experiences. The findings related to the time of victimization revealed a long duration of victimization, problems adjusting to the bullying; experiences of not receiving help from school personnel; and depression, anxiety and even suicidal thoughts. The perceived long-term outcomes were: feelings of insecurity; actively avoiding social situations; an identity of viewing oneself as worthless; and body image problems. Together, the long-term negative outcomes were found to have the potential to impair the developmental processes in emerging adulthood. **Study II** investigated how resilience was manifested in the experiences of 15 emerging adults ($M_{age}=29.13$, $SD=0.52$) with good psychological health despite experiences of childhood bullying victimization. Interviews were analysed, first deductively and then inductively, using concepts from resilience: protective factors and resilience as a dynamic process over time. The findings showed that the participants exhibited agency in handling the victimization, and that they had resources of social support who were prepared to help. As emerging adults the participants had been able to use their victimization experiences to help others, and perceived their experiences of handling the victimization as learning experiences that could be used in difficult situations as emerging adults. These findings indicate that resilience in relation to experiences of bullying victimization is best understood as an evolving process, whereby the individual interacts with their environment in an adaptive process, leading to positive development over time. **Study III** investigated the association between being bullied in school and body-related concerns – body esteem, body shame and body-ideal internalization – in emerging adulthood. The sample comprised 502 individuals (304 women and 198 men) who had participated in a longitudinal study when they were 10, 14 and 28 years old. The results showed that emerging adults who had been subjected to bullying victimization in school at age 10 and/or 14 had a poorer view of their general appearance and weight; they also reported more body shame than non-victimized emerging adults did. The results show that negative experiences of one's body and appearance are still an active agent of negative influence in emerging adults nearly two decades after they were subjected to bullying victimization in school. Taken together, the three studies in this thesis point to the importance of understanding how experiences of bullying in school are related to the period of emerging adulthood, a time of both challenges and opportunities. This can help us better understand how experiences of being bullied in school can come to be translated into problems later in life, with body-related concerns being an overlooked but important aspect of how experiences of bullying victimization can be engraved on a body that one has learnt to hate and reject. Furthermore, the studies in this thesis indicate that exposure to bullying in school is dependent on the context in which it occurs. Social support from both school and home as well as other social contexts outside school must be recognized as the potential resilience-building structures they are in preventing bullying victimization experiences from leading to negative long-term outcomes.

Keywords: bullying victimization, long-term outcomes, emerging adulthood, resilience, body-related concerns