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The Chain, Consequences, and Care of Aggravated Bullying Victimization:

Based on a sequential process model

（いじめ被害の悪化とその影響及びケアに関する検討）

School bullying is widely recognized as a critical global issue, with data showing that an average of 36.4% of adolescents across 168 countries and regions have experienced bullying at least once in the past couple of months. Despite decades of research and intervention efforts, bullying remains a persistent and complex problem. Although research on school bullying has grown significantly—by 23.9% annually between 1990 and 2022—the complicated dynamics of bullying leave many questions unanswered. This thesis offers a comprehensive examination of school bullying in Japan, providing insights into its prevalence, patterns of escalation, lingering psychological and social effects, and the cyclical relationship between victims and perpetrators. It begins with a theoretical overview of school bullying, reviewing definitions, forms, and the conceptualization of bullying victimization as a process in Chapter 1 (Study 1). Drawing on Nakai's "Political Science of School Bullying" (1997) and Toda's "Process Model of School Bullying" (2008), bullying victimization is analyzed in four stages: occurrence, escalation, responses, and lingering effects. The phenomenon of the bully-victim cycle is introduced, emphasizing the transformation from victim to perpetrator as both a lingering effect and a trigger for new bullying incidents.

The purposes of this thesis were established in Chapter 2. Specifically, this thesis aimed to 1) conduct empirical study to investigate the dynamics of the aggravation of bullying victimization, 2) provide understanding for the lingering effects of bullying victimization and the bully-victim cycle, and 3) propose potential strategies for interrupt the bully-victim cycle and mitigate the lingering effects of bullying victimization. These three primary purposes were subsequently examined in Chapter 3 and beyond.

In Chapter 3, two studies were conducted to investigate the prevalence and related factors of the repetitive bullying victimization (Studies 2 and 3). The prevalence of bullying victimization recently was investigated first in Study 2. The results showed that although there was a slightly decline in overall prevalence of bullying victimization, there hardly any change in the high-frequency bullying victimization (i.e., the repetitive bullying victimization). Also, the prevalences of those who victimized several times a week were almost higher than all of the other frequencies except those who victimized only once. This result suggested that the repetitive bullying victimization was still a serious issue in Japan, and it is necessary to study bullying victimization by focusing on the repetitive segment of it.

To further valid this necessity, Study 3 used a hurdle model to confirm whether differences exist between the occurrence and the repetition of bullying victimization in terms of their risk factors. The results demonstrated a quite different pattern of risk factors between the occurrence and the repetition of bullying victimization: gender may not relate to the occurrence of bullying victimization but significantly related to the repetition of it, and whether the victims have an experience of perpetrating school bullying showed a stronger effect on the occurrence of bullying victimization than its repetition. These results suggested that the repetitive bullying victimization may have its own unique characteristics, and it is necessary to study it separately. Also, the findings suggested that the bullies are also in a higher risk of being the target of bullying victimization, which indicating there might be some potential factors especially contribute to its occurrence.

In Chapter 4, three studies were conducted to explore the aggravation of bullying victimization, how victims responded to their situation, and the cumulative effects caused by bullying victimization (Studies 4, 5). Study 4 reviewed previous studies on the definition of severe

bullying victimization and proposed a frequency standard (occurring several times a week) for identifying “severe cases” in school bullying. Additionally, Study 4 used latent class analysis to examine the overlapping nature of bullying victimization, revealing four distinct patterns (i.e., latent classes) of victimization. These patterns can serve as a content standard (where multiple forms of victimization overlap) for identifying severe cases of school bullying.

Study 5 further investigated the tendencies and efficacy of employing different coping strategies within these patterns. The results indicated that victims in different latent classes attempted to use the best coping strategies according to their situation. However, “fighting back” was a consistent coping strategy in all latent classes except the relational one. Despite this, such coping strategies were generally ineffective in resolving school bullying, and their efficacy decreased as the severity of bullying victimization increased (i.e., as victimization became more overlapping). The cumulative effects of bullying victimization on the mental health of victims were also confirmed. The overlapping of multiple forms of bullying victimization, combined with ineffective coping, significantly increased the likelihood of victims developing depressive disorders. Therefore, this chapter emphasizes the necessity of addressing bullying victimization before it becomes severe and urges efforts to reduce the cumulative effects of bullying victimization.

In Chapter 5, three studies were conducted to investigate the structure of lingering effects of bullying victimization, their related factors (i.e., duration, resolution, and attitude), and how these effects accumulate (Studies 6, 7, and 8). To better understand the structure of lingering effects of bullying victimization, Study 6 employed Exploratory Factor Analysis and Item Response Theory, confirming a three-factor structure (i.e., physical symptoms, activity reduction, and depression) with good reliability and validity.

Study 7 then investigated the related factors of the lingering effects of bullying victimization. The results showed that the attitude towards bullies was the most significant factor influencing the lingering effects: forgiving the bullies could contribute to a lower level of lingering effects, while avoiding them or seeking revenge could lead to higher levels of lingering effects. This suggests that forgiveness might be the most effective way to resolve the lingering effects of bullying victimization. Additionally, the duration of bullying victimization and its resolution were also found to be related to the lingering effects. Specifically, resolving bullying victimization consistently prevented all three factors of lingering effects, while victims who

experienced bullying for more than a year showed higher levels of physical symptoms and depression. Moreover, those who avoided their bullies experienced higher levels of activity reduction if the bullying lasted more than three months, and those seeking revenge had higher levels of activity reduction if the bullying lasted more than a year.

To confirm the causality between these factors and explore how these negative effects accumulate over time, Study 8 used a cross-lagged panel model. The results demonstrated that although bullying victimization may have immediate effects solely, these effects can continue to accumulate if not adequately addressed. Additionally, once the victimization is resolved, even after a long duration, physical symptoms and activity reduction may return to normal levels, while depression may remain a serious issue. However, if victimization is resolved promptly, almost no lingering effects are observed. Furthermore, despite the limitations of a small sample size and low statistical power, Study 8 found a preventive effect of forgiving bullies, particularly in the long term.

These results suggest that the lingering effects of bullying victimization, especially depression, can be a serious problem for victims, making resolution essential in all instances. Moreover, while forgiving bullies might be an effective way to mitigate these effects, avoiding them or seeking revenge may lead to higher levels of lingering effects.

In Chapter 6, two studies were conducted to determine whether the tendency to seek revenge exists in bullying victims and its underlying mechanisms (Studies 9, 10). Study 9 demonstrated a correlation between bullying victimization and bullying perpetration, with this relationship being more pronounced when the forms of bullying are the same. This finding suggests that victims may use learned behaviors from their bullies to seek revenge. Moreover, the likelihood of perpetrating bullying increased significantly with the severity of bullying victimization (i.e., overlapping multiple forms of bullying victimization), especially for cyberbullying and sexual bullying. Although other factors contribute to these types of bullying, the experience of bullying victimization plays a relatively important role.

Study 10 explored factors that may cause the tendency to seek revenge, aiming to differentiate the targets of revenge. The results showed that the experience of bullying victimization leads to a higher level of approval for seeking revenge against bullies. Additionally, victims of direct bullying may become aggressive toward unrelated students in a disruptive classroom

environment. These results indicate that direct bullying can influence every student in a pro-violence environment and explains how transformation within the bully-victim cycle may occur. Furthermore, Study 10's results indicated that retaliatory normative beliefs mediate the relationship between the experience of bullying victimization and the tendency to seek revenge.

In Chapter 7, two studies were conducted to explore the method which could prevent the bully-victim cycle and alleviate the lingering effects (Studies 11, 12). Using a laboratory design, Study 11 found that retaliatory normative beliefs fully mediated the relationship between the experience of bullying victimization and the tendency to seek revenge, suggesting that the acceptability of retaliatory behaviors is a direct condition for victims to seek revenge. Additionally, such tendencies can be prevented by employing self-distancing technique compared to self-immersed and control groups. This finding suggests a possible way to prevent the transformation within the bully-victim cycle and mitigate the negative effects of bullying victimization.

Study 12 conducted a network analysis to explore the relationship between spontaneous self-distancing and the lingering effects of bullying victimization, as well as daily habits related to self-distancing and forgiveness. The results showed that spontaneous self-distancing was significantly higher in the forgiveness group compared to the avoidance and revenge groups, with the revenge group showing the lowest level of spontaneous self-distancing. Furthermore, spontaneous self-distancing negatively correlated with some lingering effects of bullying victimization, directly or indirectly, except in the forgiveness group. This finding suggests that self-distancing may serve as a mechanism to mitigate the adverse effects caused by bullying victimization, particularly for those inclined towards revenge or avoidance.

Regarding daily habits, there was almost no correlation between these habits and spontaneous self-distancing in the forgiveness and revenge groups. However, some daily habits directly affected the lingering effects of bullying victimization. Notably, certain habits, such as writing down thoughts, may sometimes backfire without appropriate guidance. This indicates that the strategies and intentions behind doing them might be key to effectively addressing the lingering effects of bullying victimization.

By synthesizing the above results, the thesis proposes a sequential process model of bullying

victimization, illustrating how bullying progresses from initial occurrence to severe and overlapping forms, leading to lingering effects and the potential for victims to become perpetrators in Chapter 8. Bullying typically begins with a single act of aggression, which can occur in any environment and affect anyone, but it becomes persistent when specific conditions, such as poor teacher-student relationships or particular personal vulnerabilities, are present. As bullying continues, it tends to worsen in frequency and expand into overlapping forms, becoming increasingly severe. Notably, once aggression begins, its progression often depends on how the initial aggression is handled. Ineffective responses can perpetuate victimization, while effective intervention may disrupt this progression. However, severe bullying cases, particularly those involving overlapping forms, show diminishing help-seeking behavior among those victims.

The cumulative impact of prolonged bullying victimization is particularly concerning. Victims frequently experience fatigue, heightened sensitivity to others' attitudes, and diminished confidence. Over time, these feelings evolve into social withdrawal, loss of interest in daily activities, and depression. Long-term bullying, especially cases lasting over a year, tends to exacerbate these adverse outcomes. Additionally, some victims may adopt aggressive behaviors themselves, perpetuating the cycle of bullying. Classroom environments also play a role, as disruptive classrooms may create opportunities for new bullying instances, regardless of whether existing cases are being addressed effectively. The implications for school bullying studies, revenge studies, and healing approaches, as well as future directions, were also discussed.

In conclusion, this thesis underscores the critical need for early intervention and tailored strategies to address bullying victimization. Simply stopping bullying is insufficient, as lingering effects—particularly depression—may persist without targeted healing approaches. Self-distancing and forgiveness emerge as promising strategies, with self-distancing addressing immediate emotional needs and forgiveness facilitating long-term healing. Moving forward, future research should focus on refining intervention strategies and ensuring that effective, accessible, and sustainable approaches are implemented in school settings.