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ABSTRACT

Although all people experience interpersonal conflicts in their lives, peer conflicts play a particularly important role for adolescents. Undergoing rapid cognitive, physical, and social changes, adolescents' peers assume increasing importance in their lives. The study reported in this paper focused on peer conflict among adolescents in order to examine how factors in a conflict affect one's beliefs about fairness. Subjects, 40 inner-city 7th graders, were interviewed and asked to describe a peer conflict, responding to questions about causes and progression of the conflict, perceptions of their opponent, and their beliefs about fair and unfair behavior. The findings indicated that: (1) conflicts pervaded adolescents' lives, offering opportunities for self-protection, social status, personal growth, interpersonal insight, conflict resolution, and heroic drama; (2) adolescents lacked conflict proficiency, and reacted instinctively; (3) peer conflict for adolescents had a different meaning than for adults, rendering adult intervention intrusive; and (4) one-third of the respondents may have been morally isolated from both peers and adults and may have been at risk for socially irresponsible living. Adults close to adolescents are well situated to offer adolescents a wider and richer moral perspective. Systematic attention to adolescents' peer conflict would not only enrich psychological knowledge of adolescence and counsel productive approaches to establish intergenerational links, but it also has the potential to effect social change. (Author/ABL)

The Risk of Violence:

Peer Conflicts in the Lives of Adolescents

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Abstract

Although all people experience interpersonal conflicts in their lives, peer conflicts play a particularly important role for adolescents. Undergoing rapid cognitive, physical and social changes, adolescents' peers assume increasing importance in their lives. This paper reports on a study conducted with 40 inner-city seventh graders. The findings indicate that: (1) Conflicts pervade adolescents' lives. In spite of conflict's dangers, respondents experience conflicts as important events that offer opportunities for self-protection, social status, personal growth, interpersonal insight, conflict resolution, and heroic drama. (2) Adolescents lack conflict proficiency. Respondents react to conflict instinctively, persisting in characteristic responses. When angered, respondents rarely discuss the issues or consider the alternatives to conflict resolution except for extremes -- fight or flee. (3) Peer conflict has a different meaning for adolescents than for adults. This isolates adolescents from adults and renders adult intervention intrusive and burdensome rather than helpful. However, adolescents who engage in moral discourse with adults possess a wider repertory of conflict skills. (4) One-third of the respondents may be morally isolated from both peers and adults. They "just know what is right and wrong." Lacking moral links to others, they may lack restraints that deter harmdoing and be at risk for socially irresponsible living.

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The Risk of Violence: Peer Conflicts in the Lives of Adolescents

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As part of my research on the scope of justice, I conducted a qualitative study on peer conflict among adolescents to examine how factors in a conflict affect one's beliefs about fairness. This paper reports on preliminary data from that study.

I chose to focus on adolescents because conflict with peers plays a prominent role in their lives. They are undergoing rapid cognitive and physical change; entering junior high school, they face new social dilemmas as their peer group assumes greater importance in their lives (Berndt, 1982; Damon, 1977; Douvan & Adelson, 1966; Haviland & Scarborough, 1981; Siegal, 1982).

Interestingly, the literature on adolescence provides little guidance for a study of adolescent conflict. Only a small proportion of the literature on moral development is devoted to conflict. It primarily addresses the child's relationship with adults, such as tattling (e.g., Harari & McDavid, 1969), learning aggression through imitation (e.g., Bandura, 1962), and conflict with parents. The literature on social competence studies younger children, and the literature on adolescent friendship rarely mentions conflict.

Yet, peer conflicts are a pervasive and prominent aspect of adolescents' lives. Interpersonal relations are an uncertain undertaking. Playful encounters can unpredictably escalate into violent and dangerous strife. Violence in peer conflicts takes

subtle and extreme forms, and generates both emotional and physical injury.

Methods

I conducted 40 interviews during the past year with seventh graders in a junior high school in the New York metropolitan area. Student participants were from lower- to middle-class backgrounds; half were male; 52% were Hispanic, 43% were Black, and 5% were white. They represented a wide range of academic abilities: gifted, honors, regular, and special education.

The semi-structured interview took approximately 45 minutes. Students chose a peer conflict to describe, then responded to questions that probed the causes and progression of the conflict, perceptions of their opponent, and their beliefs about fair and unfair behavior.

Conflict and Violence in the Lives of Adolescents

Because school is the center of the adolescent's social life (Coleman, 1961), it is not surprising that the majority of students described conflict in school. Although unprovoked and unexpected attack occurs in school -- "You have some people that just want to come up behind you and hit you for no reason at all" {33F}; "The other day this guy decked me... I don't know why he hit me" {17M} -- only 18% of the students described conflicts with strangers. More memorable and disturbing are conflicts with people they know well. Eighty percent of the conflicts occurred with close friends, classmates, and cousins or siblings. Except

for the 3% of conflicts that utilized discussions, almost two-thirds (63%) of the fights came to blows, and one-third (33%) were enraging, emotional exchanges.

In this charged atmosphere, conflicts have some distinctly destructive and constructive capacities for the adolescent.

Destructive outcomes

Conflict has the obvious negative potential of inflicting harm. Some no-holds-barred conflicts inflicted brutal injury. Most respondents, however, cite social injury and personal anxiety as more lasting and more distressing. Social injury takes the form of loss of status and social isolation. A fight is inevitably a public event. It rarely occurs in privacy, and even if it does, everyone learns the outcome. A young man describes the public way a fight feels: "Everybody's looking at you. When you lose everybody puts their backs to you."

Because two-thirds (70%) of the conflicts occurred with a close friend or classmate, respondents described an uncomfortable aftermath that could last weeks or months. Forced by their school schedule to spend much of their day in the presence of their adversary, they feared resumption of hostilities, and infectious rejection as their opponent's allies took sides. Attending school became more stressful, and academic work sometimes suffered. If the relationship between adversaries had been close, they had no one to whom they could turn and were discomforted by social isolation.

As I will subsequently describe, conflicts rarely utilize discussion to explain positions and feelings; therefore, an often cited disquieting aftermath is lingering self-doubt. A young women, wondering if she did something injurious that she is unaware of, cannot experience closure about the conflict; she fears she might again commit an unknown social gaffe:

> I'm not gonna say that it was all her fault. Because it might have been something else that I had done to her already and maybe with that on top of it she said forget it. I don't know. Maybe it might have been something else that I had already done and never realized that I did {33F}.

Respondents described conflicts to me that occurred months before with remarkable detail and obvious affect. For some, anger, helplessness, and depression associated with the conflict continued to color their everyday lives.

Constructive outcomes

In spite of these negative outcomes, when asked, "Do you think that fights play an important role in the lives of kids your age?" more students think fights are constructive than those who do not, and they stated so articulately:

> "I think fights are important because next time they'll think twice before messing with you because they know you'll defend yourself" {7M}.

"In our age, it's like the most important thing, though, because you gotta show you're tough. And in some ways fighting also could bring you a girlfriend" {24M}.

"Without conflicts and fights you will never find out who you are and what type of person you like and what you want out of life" {33F}.

"You can find out how another person reacts to certain things... You can find out more about persons. Sometimes even the fights help you establish a relationship with somebody" {10M}.

[Fights are] one way to settle our difference, and it's fun {25F}.

[You can] "say who came out on top and who came out on the bottom" {10M}.

Most kids who get jumped they deserve it though. They go around talking about mothers and messing with kids' girlfriends. Then a whole bunch of kids jump them" {7M}.

To summarize, the respondents cite self-protection, social status, personal growth, interpersonal insight, and conflict resolution as positive conflict outcomes. As I will describe, one's conflict stance is a distinct and public component characteristic; the data suggests that winning fights may be a

more socially valued asset than those more typically cited, such as trendy clothes or academic and athletic achievement.

A final constructive value of conflict, intimated by most respondents, is that fights contribute heroic drama to students' lives. To the distress of adults, teenagers are clearly fascinated and drawn to conflicts. They like to start them, watch them, and hear about them. Peer conflicts generate an oral history of danger, heroism, good, and evil that persist for years. Recounting these events, and, to a lesser extent, moral discourse on fights, is an important part of social interaction with peers.

Having described conflict from the adolescents' viewpoint, the section that follows will discuss students' conflict responses, focusing on the relationship between their conflict response and the source of their beliefs about right and wrong.

Responses to Conflict

Each respondent can be located somewhere along a continuous dimension of conflict styles, anchored by "seekers" (bullies) and "avoiders" (wimps). This response style is a stable, prominent, and public part of his or her social identity; respondents could recount each classmate's conflict style. Those at the extremes of the continuum, seekers and avoiders, are at greatest risk of conflict. Retreat from conflict labels you a "wimp," a "nerd," a "softie," someone who "can't fight that good," and identifies you as a potential target for angry, upset kids who are having "a bad

time in their lives." At the other extreme, benign or ambiguous behavior of conflict seekers is often interpreted as aggression that warrants retaliation (cf., Dodge, 1980). It is hard to strike a balance in the middle. Many kids try, but it takes a mix of sensitivity, bravado, and good luck to pull off. Because conflict is often unexpected, disputants have little time to ponder or choreograph their response. Provoked, they respond instinctively, repeating their previous conflict behavior. Locked into a conflict style by reputation and reaction, students have a relatively meager repertory of responses.

Reactions to anger. In a question that taps habitual responses to anger, I asked students, "How do you act with other people when you are angry?" I found it striking that except for one young man who said "I tell it to them. If I'm angry at them, I tell them how angry I am" {37M}, and a young woman, who "wanted to tell her that I liked her, but that she was too much" {18F}, all the other respondents engaged in inward retreat ("hold it in," "act like nothing happened," "don't talk with them") or emotional outbursts ("scream," "yell insults," "stomp feet"). Discussions of feelings or information exchanges were virtually absent. The responses indicated a pervasive inability to handle anger in a satisfying or constructive way.

Alternatives reactions to conflict and source of moral beliefs. When incited to fight, most respondents considered virtually nothing else than their gut reaction. I asked about

the moment the fight escalated, "Were you aware of making a decision?" Typical responses were: "It just happened" {17M}; "I just did it. Threw him on the ground" {39M}. Those who considered options rarely pondered more than extremes: "Should I hit her?...No that won't solve anything, so I walked away" {31M}.

Interestingly, respondents whose source of beliefs about right and wrong is their family, two-thirds of the respondents, were more likely to have considered alternatives in the moment that they faced a conflict than those who cite themselves as the source of these beliefs. The explanation that those who cite their home are "good" kids or from "good" families that model constructive conflict skills lacks an explanation about what being "good" contributes. Respondents who credit adults with their values have probably engaged in some form in moral discourse with adults. One student mentioned an analytic discussion: "[My mother] helps me figure out what I'm actually feeling and not what I think I'm feeling" {5F}; student much more frequently mentioned proverbs: "She gives me advice... Don't count chickens before they're hatched. Or, never judge a book by its cover. She gives me these old sayings" {30F}. At first skeptical about their value, the data have persuaded me that proverbs have merit. In many traditional cultures, proverbs are a foundation for moral teaching; they are pithy, and they provide a ready, comforting resource during stress. Both proverbs and analytic discussion communicate interest and provide unintrusive

wisdom. Regardless of style, I conjecture that moral discussions can help establish a conceptual foundation that nurtures more varied and subtle interpretations of interpersonal behavior during conflict.

The next section describes risks of conflict from the perspective of adults, adolescents, and myself.

The Risk of Conflict

Adult's perspective

From the perspective of my respondents, adults fear that adolescents in conflict risk injury or trouble at school: "[Adults think] that [fighting is] for kids. They think you should sit down and talk things out, and walk away from fights... I think all adults think that fighting is not necessary, well, most" {25F}. Respondents often find their parents' advice to be contradictory ("don't fight unless...") or naive ("never fight"). Adult intervention is rarely helpful:

> And what got me a little upset that my mom did was, see, she figured that she'd call her mom and I told her not to and she didn't. She talked to Mr. Lee because she didn't want this interfering with my school work...But then they started calling me "Baby." And I had told my mom that I didn't want her getting involved with this. And it's sort of not her problem. It's sort of my problem and I would like to get rid of it but -- that was sort of the worst thing that

> happened... Because it was so -- it was interfering with me... I'm sort of ashamed that my mom had called {35F}.

Like parents, school personnel intervene to prevent conflicts from widening and to prevent student injury, but the effectiveness of teacher intervention is illusory. An unspoken understanding among combatants is that adult intervention means "time out" rather than the resolution they lead adults to expect. The fight resumes later.

Instead of ameliorating the dispute, intervention by adults complicates adolescents' conflict response and adds risk. Students know that failure to respond to provocation can pose a greater threat than suspension:

> If someone hits me I don't tell the teacher. I hit them back. Because if they hit you and then you keep running to the teacher, they'll just come back and keep picking on you. I have to show them that I can handle it myself. Otherwise, they'll keep coming back {8F}.

Adolescents' perspective

From the adolescent's perspective, the greatest risk of conflict is social humiliation. Although they cite the possibility of injury, most dismiss it as a secondary consideration: "He just hit me on my face and I hold the pain. It was not hurting much, cause I was mad. And when I'm mad and people hit me, I don't feel it" {40M}. Thus, adolescents

perceive their peer conflict very differently than adults. They slight the importance of physical injury, find the experience instructive and interesting, and focus on social factors. This difference in orientation distances adolescents from adults, and renders adult advice and intervention an intrusive obstacle rather than an aid.

Researcher's perspective

From my perspective, the greatest risk of conflicts for these young people is that, unaware, they become locked into a pattern of deficient and extreme responses to the inevitable interpersonal friction that they face. Because conflicts can be very threatening, and because there is little but peer input to understand them, students engage in ritualized posturing and fail to explore other, more productive responses. Because conflicts are so absorbing and important to them, their experience and interest is a resource that they could exploit to learn new ways of behaving. But to do so, they need help.

Very few respondents had discussed the conflict they described to me with an adult. Without adult input, it is difficult to develop the vocabulary, concepts, insight, and skills to deal with conflict in a flexible and constructive way. A "lady on a bus," a stranger, volunteered pithy advice to a respondent and her friend:

> My friend was gonna have a big fight with another girl because she was spreading rumors about her but

> this lady was saying on the bus -- 'cause it was on the bus -- "Well, if you think that you're gonna fight somebody every time somebody spreads a rumor about you, you're gonna be fighting for the rest of your life. Because there's always gonna be somebody there that's gonna ruin your day. So you better not start now" {35F}.

Her advice provided these young women with a longer-term outlook that permitted the recipients to move from simple retaliation to a more considered response.

More important, in this exchange of advice and attention, the "lady on the bus" and the young women were momentarily part of the same moral community, linked by values and concern. This anecdote illustrates how one's moral community can abruptly widen from family or friends to include distant or peripheral people, in this case, a representative of the larger society, and how a more inclusive moral community offers a more complex and variegated ethical outlook. In this instance, the young women, reaching out for insight, were receptive to adult input and incorporated this new insight into their moral outlook. The idea that enlarging one's moral community constitutes moral development departs from traditional approaches which slight social interaction and instead focus on either children's stages, or the adult role in socialization. In this view, consistent with social cognitive theory (Bandura, 1986), moral standards

emerge from and are enriched by valued others. This study raises interesting questions about the developmental origins of one's moral community.

The students at highest risk in the study are those who cite themselves as their source of morality, one third of the respondents. The following excerpt from an interview with a young man reveals a spare and deficient moral community:

> [Where do your beliefs about what's right and wrong come from?] From yourself. [How do you know what's right and wrong? How do you learn it by yourself?] Just know. I don't know. [Some people learn it from their own experience, from their family and their friends, from teachers, from church?] No... I just know what's right and wrong {39M}.

And this continues at greater length; he repeatedly denies any source but himself for his moral values.

It is alarming that this narrow and simple moral view is not an isolated case, but is espoused by one-third of the respondents. Those who lack moral links to others also lack the self-sanctions that foster selfish and defective excuses to harm others. (See Bandura [1986], Duster [1971], Kelman & Hamilton [1989], Opotow [1988], and Staub [1989] for descriptions of moral exclusion processes.) A narrow scope of justice may present grave risks for future socially responsive and responsible living.

I will conclude with the observation that as adults, we fail to heed the importance of peer conflict in adolescents' lives. Adults close to adolescents, such as family members and school personnel, are well situated to offer adolescents a wider and richer moral perspective. Unfortunately, this kind of exchange is institutionalized neither at home nor in school. Teenagers in conflict are often treated as children by the well-intentioned intervention of adults; they are not given the interested attention that adults experiencing conflict offer each other. Recent introduction of conflict resolution programs in schools may be an unintended experiment in an alternative approach because these programs legitimize conflict as a valid topic of discussion and study.

As psychologists, we also have much to offer. Systematic attention to adolescents' peer conflict would not only enrich psychological knowledge of adolescence and counsel productive approaches to establish intergenerational links, but it also has the potential to effect social change. Scholarly attention to peer conflict would convey the importance of these events in the lives of adolescents to the larger society.

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