Beliefs & Bullying: Factors Associated with Peer Victimization among Youth

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to identify and discuss various aspects associated with peer victimization (bullying) among youth. In particular, this analysis will investigate several critical factors (e.g. causes, consequences, etc.) related to peer victimization from relevant empirical studies. Intervention measures are suggested.

Keywords: Bullying, peer victimization, peer relations

Introduction

The harsh reality of the bully/victim dyad is experienced by thousands of children every day (Espelage & Holt, 2001). Chronic victimization of students by their peers is a significant issue in America's schools. A recent national study conducted in the United States of over 15,000 junior high and high school students found that 8.4% of those surveyed reported being bullied once a week or more during the current semester (Nansel et al., 2001). Such maltreatment by peers has been detected as early as kindergarten (Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996). To this end, we will examine several factors associated with bullying (also known as peer victimization) among youth. In particular, the factors examined include individual and social variables, theoretical explanations, and the consequences associated with bullying. In addition, retrospective studies and intervention measures related to peer victimization are also addressed.

Social factors associated with bullying

Current research reveals that bullying, no longer viewed simply as a dyadic interaction between a perpetrator and victim, is increasingly situated within larger social systems like peer groups, families, and schools. For example, Salmivalli (1999), who studied how bullying unfolds in peer groups, identified a variety of roles that peers can play in bullying situations. For example, "assistants" participate in secondary roles by helping the bully commit the act; "reinforcers" provide verbal encouragement to the bully as the act occurs. "Onlookers," although not directly engaged in the bullying, are an audience for the bully and tacitly reinforce the aggression with their attention (Craig, Pepler, & Atlas, 2000).

Studies indicate that bullying frequently occurs in the presence of peers and that the actions of peers more often encourage the bullying than stop it (Craig & Pepler, 1997; Sutton & P. K. Smith, 1999). Parents and home environments also contribute to bully/victim problems in children. Children who bully tend to come from homes where aggression is a favored problem-solving method, negative emotional attitudes (e.g., lack of warmth and involvement) are common, and the children are encouraged to fight back when harassed (Glover et al., 2000). Furthermore, research indicates that chronically victimized children may have histories of insecure parental attachments in infancy and are subject to intrusive and overprotective parenting (Perry, Hodges, & Egan, 2001). Conversely, parents who communicate love and warmth, monitor their children, set age-appropriate limits, and use non-physical punishment to deal with misbehavior constitute an important protective factor against involvement in bully/victim problems (Orpinas & Home, 2005).

Individual factors associated with victims of bullying among youth

Several studies have found that victims tend to display non-assertive behavior (e.g., Patterson, Littman, & Bricker, 1967; Perry, Willard, & Perry, 1990; Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Research has also found that victims of bullying are prone to cry easily

(Patterson et al., 1967; Perry et al., 1990; Pierce, 1990), and they tend to hover rather than try to enter the peer group (Pierce, 1990). A recent report using a sample of more than 5,000 11-16-year-old boys and girls found that a higher body mass index was associated not only with increased likelihood of being a victim of bullying but also with an increased likelihood of being a perpetrator of bullying for the older children in the sample (Janssen et al, 2004).

Children who are victims of bullying are frequently socially unassertive, submissive, often physically weak (if boys), and low in self-esteem (Perry et al, 1990; Schartz et al, 1993; Olweus, 1991). They may reward their attackers with tangible resources (e.g., money, toys) and signs of distress, and tend to be unlikely to retaliate against them, thus perpetuating their role (Schwartz, Dodge, & Coie, 1993). Some victimized children also display externalizing problems, such as disruptiveness, aggression, and socially inappropriate behaviors, which are thought to irritate and provoke bullies (Coie & Dodge, 1988; Dodge, 1983; Troy & Sroufe, 1987).

Individual factors associated with youth who are considered bullies

Research on bullies has focused on their tendency to attribute hostile intentions to others, resulting in conflict. Olweus (1980) wrote that the aggressor is "characterized by an aggressive personality pattern, with a tendency to react aggressively in many different situations, with fairly weak controls or inhibitions against aggressive tendencies, and with a positive attitude towards violence" (Olweus, 1980: 644). Aggressors are noncompliant with authority figures and use physically assertive behaviors to display dominance over rivals or weaker peers (Pellegrini & Smith, 1988). There is some evidence that aggressive children may differ from other children in the way that they process social information (Dodge, 1983; Crick & Dodge, 1994). Crick and Dodge (1994) suggest that aggressive children interpret environmental cues differently (e.g., a friendly shove may be perceived as a threatening act) and generate more hostile responses to neutral stimuli (Crick & Dodge, 1994).

Theoretical framework

In terms of theoretical explanations associated with bullying, a host of theoretical paradigms are offered within the juvenile justice and child development literature. For example, drawing on Anderson's "code of the street" thesis, research conducted by Stewart and Simons (2006) suggest that neighborhood context, family characteristics, and racial discrimination directly influence adopting the street code, and serves to partially explain violence among peers (which includes bullying) indirectly through the street code (Stewart & Simons, 2006). Another theory which may explain bullying among youth is the dominance theory. The dominance theory posits that students use aggression against weaker students to gain access to resources, including high socio-metric status among peers (Hawley, 1999).

Perry, Willard, and Perry (1990) suggested that Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) could be used to explain the association between individual behaviors and peer victimization. The theory proposes that people have beliefs (outcome expectancies) concerning the rewards and punishments for their behavior in different

types of situations, and this determines their behavior to some extent. Also, behavior is thought to be influenced by how much value people attach to the consequences of their actions (outcome values). In the bully-victim context, aggressors are thought to interpret the perceived weak and submissive stance of peers as an indication that they will receive the positive outcomes (e.g., appearing dominant and powerful) that they value highly. According to this view then, the behavior of victims is believed to reward and thus reinforce the bully's behavior.

Consequences of bullying

Researchers have found that being bullied by peers may have serious short- and long-term consequences. Being a victim of bullying has been associated with a number of adjustment problems, such as depression (Neary & Joseph, 1994; Slee, 1995b), anxiety (Olweus, 1978; Slee, 1994), low self-esteem (Boulton & Smith, 1994), loneliness (Boulton & Underwood, 1992), common health symptoms (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996), school absenteeism (Reid, 1983), relationship problems in adult life (Gilmartin, 1987), and poorer health status (Slee, 1995a). A meta-analytic review of cross-sectional studies published between 1978 and 1997 found that while peer victimization was correlated with a range of psychosocial adjustment indices, the relationship was strongest for depression, and weakest for anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000).

Gender and bullying

In terms of gender and peer victimization, research suggest that boys and girls have different kinds of peer victimization experiences. For example, a study conducted by Grills and Ollendick (2002) reveals that for girls, the relationship between peer victimization and anxiety was mediated by low feelings of self-worth. For boys, feelings of self-worth moderated the relationship between peer victimization and anxiety. While high levels of self-worth served as a protective factor against anxiety following victimization experiences, low levels of self-worth served as a risk factor for anxiety (Grills & Ollendick, 2002). These findings suggest that girls internalize negative feedback from peers to a greater degree when compared to boys, resulting in a direct negative effect on self-worth. Some boys, on the other hand, might see bullying as a normal part of their peer relations and not be distressed by it.

Bullying comprises a variety of behaviors, but they can be sorted generally into two categories: direct bullying, which involves physical and verbal attacks on victims, and indirect bullying, which typically involves covert activities intended to isolate and marginalize victims (e.g., spreading rumors and excluding individuals from peer groups). Indirect bullying tends to be more difficult to observe than acts of direct bullying, making indirect bullying difficult for school authorities to detect. It appears that girls tend to favor verbal aggression or indirect bullying strategies, whereas boys most often use direct, physical methods (Crick & Nelson, 2002). Methods of bullying evolve through development, with physical bullying declining following its peak in early childhood, and verbal and indirect bullying increasing into adolescence before declining thereafter (Craig & Pepler, 2003).

Ethnicity and bullying

Some studies have explored differences in victimization experiences across various ethnic groups. Graham and Juvonen (1998) found that it was uncommon for African-American children to be victimized, but when they were, it was associated with poorer outcomes than when children of other ethnic backgrounds were victimized. African-American children who were victimized reported lower self-esteem and more loneliness than victimized children in other groups, suggesting that not fitting in with the normative perception of one's ethnic group might be associated with particularly poor outcomes (Graham and Juvonen, 1998). Another study found that overt victimization had more negative consequences for African-American and Hispanic elementary school students than relational victimization did (Storch et al, 2002). Finally, Storch and his colleagues (2003) found that rates of peer victimization, as well as psychosocial correlates, were similar in Hispanic and Caucasian elementary school students (Storch et al, 2003).

Retrospective studies

Recalled victimization has also been found to be associated with later problems with mood (Fabian & Thompson, 1989; Matsui et al, 1996; Olweus, 1993, 1994). In 2 studies by Gibb and colleagues (2004) college students were asked about victimization experiences by peers and boyfriends/girlfriends during childhood and adolescence. Students at high risk for depression (as assessed by measures of cognitive vulnerability for depression) reported significantly more victimization experiences, particularly by boyfriends/girlfriends, than students at low risk for depression did. This relationship held even when controlling for a number of relevant parental variables (e.g., parental cognitive style, parental history of depression).

One study examined the impact of childhood peer relationships on later educational achievement and employment status. While not focused on victimization specifically, the study looked at the relationship between peer relations at age 9 (as rated by teachers) and educational and occupational outcomes at age 18. Peer relationship problems during childhood were associated with poorer grades on national exams at the end of high school and a greater likelihood of being unemployed at the age of 18 years (Woodward & Kergusson, 2000).

Conclusion /Intervention Measures

In conclusion, assuming that school is the primary location of aggressive peer interactions, this would seem like an ideal area to intervene. To this end, school personnel should be better trained regarding identifying frequent recipients of aggression. Teachers often have difficulty detecting signs of internalizing distress (e.g., depression, anxiety) (Juvonen et al, 2003). Therefore, it is important to provide teacher education about the nature and characteristic symptoms of psychological distress (O'Moore et al, 1997; Whitney & Smith, 1993). Given this, teachers should be specifically trained in effective ways of intervening in bullying events ranging from breaking up a fight to addressing a rumor being spread.

In addition, school-based aggression prevention programs should be considered as one manner of addressing school-wide bullying (Leff et al, 2001). Besides implementing contingencies for aggressive behavior, such programs should consider including (or enhancing) students' education regarding the serious nature of victimization and ways to help victimized peers. Despite initial positive data in reducing overt victimization, however, relatively little attention has been paid to addressing relational forms of victimization.

To this end, research conducted by Mouttapa et al (2004) suggest that assertiveness training in handling aggressive situations are beneficial. Such training may help students defend themselves and their friends effectively from aggressors using nonviolent strategies (Mouttapa et al, 2004). In addition, research conducted by Dill et al, (2004) suggests that social skills training and active attempts to promote inclusion and friendships for shy and socially withdrawn children during the early elementary school years may be a crucial intervention in preventing victimization and the negative consequences that follow from such experiences (Dill et al, 2004).

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