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Bullying in schools: Can self-concept theory shed any light?

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ABSTRACT

There is a growing concern about the apparently increasing amount of violence and aggression in our schools. This increase in violent behaviour has also been accompanied by a decrease in the average age for violent offenders. In the school setting, aggression and victimisation is increasingly being recognised as psychologically, physically, and academically damaging. This aggression and victimisation can readily be observed in acts of peer bullying. Bullying may take the form of a range of anti-social behaviours such as name calling, extortion, physical violence, nasty rumours, exclusion from the group, damage to property, and threats; and may occur in 10% of students in Australian schools at least once a week. For bullies, aggression may persist into adulthood in the form of criminality, marital violence, child abuse and sexual harassment. For victims, repeated bullying can cause psychological distress and many related difficulties, and even suicide. However, despite the pervasiveness of the issue and the handful of intervention programs that have been designed to prevent bullying, there have been few attempts to explain the possible reasons of why bullying occurs or is maintained within the school setting. This theoretical paper examines the contribution which self-concept theory may bring to this vexing issue, how self-concept may have differential influences on bullies and victims, and what implications these influences have on educational and health practices. The paper also describes a collaborative project that is currently looking into this question.

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Introduction

There is a growing concern about the amount of violence and aggression in our society. Youth violence in particular has been a focus. The antecedents of aggression are known to be early in human development (Patterson, DeBaryshe & Ramsey, 1989). These include both familial and peer-group factors. Bullying has been identified as one of the links in the chain from childhood to adulthood violence (Olweus, 1997a, 1995). Victimising peers in the school may be one of the early behaviours that contribute to the development of long-term antisocial behaviour patterns (Farrington, 1993), and can be a precursor for antisocial behaviour and criminality (Colvin, Tobin, Beard, Hagan, & Sprague, 1998). Bullying and victimisation in the school has been universally recognised as damaging psychological, social and even physical development of children (Slee, 1995a; 1995b). This fact has been recognised by the NSW Department of Education Training. One of its most recent publication states that:

"Students learn best in environments in which they feel safe. Bullying devalues, isolates and frightens people so that they no longer believe in the ability to achieve. It has long term effects for those doing the bullying, their targets and the onlookers. Every student has the right to expect that he or she will spend the day – both in and out of the classroom – free from bullying and intimidation it is the responsibility of the whole school community to maintain the right to feel safe and valued at school."
(NSW Department of Education and Training, 1999, p. 1).

The purpose of this paper is to examine the possible contributions which self-concept theory can make in understanding this complex issue.

The Implications of Aggression and Victimisation in the School

Bullying incorporates a wide range of behaviours: name calling, extortion, physical violence, slander, exclusion from the group, damage to others property, and verbal intimidation (Smith & Sharp, 1994). It is differentiated from other forms of aggressive behaviour in that it involves a more powerful group/individual dominating through violence, aggression or intimidation a less powerful group/individual over an extended period of time (Olweus, 1997b). The extent of the problem is gauged by prevalence studies conducted in Australia and elsewhere. Rigby (1995) reported that 1 in 6 students in Australian schools reported being bullied at least once a week; 1 in 10 reported being an active bully, and many students admit to – even boast about – bullying others. Similar situations were found in schools in Canada, Scandinavia, Ireland and England (e.g., Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Olweus, 1997a). Victimisation is also highly stable over the school years (Hodges & Perry, 1996). In contrast to commonly held beliefs, bullying is not a result of large or small class sizes or academic competition, and, although student personal characteristics which deviate markedly from the norm may contribute to being a victim of bullying, their contribution is not a sufficient factor to become a victim (Olweus, 1996).

Australian and overseas research has shown that for victims, repeated bullying can cause psychological distress, severe depression, psychopathology and deteriorating physical health (Slee, 1995a; 1995b; Rigby, 1994; Slee & Rigby, 1993). Bullies are also disadvantaged in many ways. High levels of engagement in peer bullying are associated with delinquent behaviour in Australian teenagers (Rigby & Cox, 1996). Patterns of aggressive behaviour identified in the school years can also persist into adulthood as higher rates of criminality, marital violence, child abuse and sexual harassment (Haemaelaenen & Pulkkinen, 1995). Eron (1987) showed that bullies identified by age eight are six times more likely to be convicted of a crime by age twenty four and five times more likely than non bullies to end up with a serious criminal record by age thirty. The impact of bullying in the school years can therefore extend beyond the bully and victim to the peer group, school, and community at large in the form of criminality and mental health problems.

The economic and social costs of bullying have not been directly studied however, the link between bullying behaviours at school and future criminality, poor mental health and diminished school performance has been highlighted above. The first ever comprehensive survey conducted by the NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research indicated that 29% of secondary students in NSW reported having assaulted someone while 27% had maliciously damaged property (Baker, 1998) in another report NSW Criminal Court Statistics reveal that over 50% of all offenders in NSW are under the age of 25 with the largest group being 14 to 19 year olds (NSW Bureau of Crime Statistics and Research, 1997). The social and economic costs of violence and aggression are quite significant. It is estimated that aggressive crime cost Australian society \$18 billion per annum or 4% of GDP (Walker, 1997).

These facts highlight the need to develop research programs which not only shed light into the phenomenology and consequences of bullying but also attempt to explain the factors which contribute to its development, maintenance and prevention.

Theoretical Rationale Bridging Bullying Research and Self-Concept Theory

It has been observed that potentially powerful anti-bullying interventions that only target individual students are largely ineffective. In contrast, programs that target the whole-school community (students, teachers, and parents) in a way that changes the school ethos are more effective (Olweus, 1996). Self-concept theory (e.g., Marsh, 1990a) may provide a theoretical explanation for this difference. Self-concept is how a person views himself or herself. It is not defined by how other people (eg. teachers, friends or parents) view a person although these people can influence self-concept development (Marsh & Craven, 1997). Self-concept perceptions are formed through experience with and interpretation of one's physical, academic and social environments. Social factors such as social comparison processes are important. Students for example use performance of their classmates to establish frames of reference for evaluating their own performances (Marsh, 1990b). Self-concept is also influenced by the evaluation of significant others, experiences of positive and negative reinforcement generated by self-talk as well as external agents (Hattie & Marsh 1996; Marsh & Hattie, 1996). A paradox occurs when bullying and associated violent behaviours are accepted by the school community as natural phenomena. Bullies in particular achieve a personal sense of power and may receive social reinforcement through their peers for bullying behaviours and the intimidation of their victims. Within this social context, bullying behaviour and self-concept may be positively correlated. So long as the school ethos allows bullies to enhance their self-concept through this behaviour, interventions aimed at individual students are unlikely to be successful. When the school ethos is altered so that bullying is seen as an unacceptable form of behaviour that is no longer condoned by parents, teachers and, most importantly, other students, bullying behaviours will no longer contribute to a positive self-concept. Stigmatisation associated with being a victim of bullying, conversely, may be negatively correlated with self-concept.

There is some support in the literature already with regards to self-esteem, which is an aspect of self-concept, and bullying. For example aggressive adolescents and bullies who repeatedly victimise others have been found to have high self-esteem (Olweus, 1997a). A study of 281 14-15 year old adolescents looking at bullying and self-concept used cluster analysis to form groups with similar self-concept as measured by the Piers-Harris Children's Self-Concept Scale. Adolescents who tended to bully others had high social and physical self-concept although their views of themselves were rather negative on the other scales (academic for example). In this same study victims of bullying had low scores in all self-concept domains (Salmivalli, 1998). Other evidence also suggests that most aggressive children appear to have self-systems that are more polarised and rigid (globally positive or globally negative) when compared to non-aggressive children. They also tend to over

estimate their level of competence and the actual quality of their relationships with significant others (Edens, 1999).

Ervin Staub (1999) has proposed that the issue may not simply be the level of self-esteem but what it is based on. He further adds that aggressive children may not have the socially valued means to gain a positive image through competence and good performance. Therefore they organise their self-esteem around strength, power and physical superiority over others. Harming others may become a way of reaffirming self-identity and to compensate for frustration in other areas. Although this insight is of significant value there is little research to support the notion that bullying is related to self-concept in a significant, reliable and stable way. This is primarily due to the small samples used in the available studies, the different ways in which self-concept has been measured or conceptualised and more importantly the lack of longitudinal studies that observe the reliability and persistence of the relationship between bullying and self-concept. A novel interagency project, The Adolescent Peer Relations Project, is aimed at answering some of these questions.

The Adolescent Peer Relations Project

Expanding on existing anti-violence programs in Australia (Jenkin, 1996; Peer Support Foundation, 1998; Slee, 1997), the proposed program aims to:

- Design and implement a newly strengthened comprehensive Anti-Bullying Program for high schools.
- Critically evaluate the short-term and long-term effects of the Anti-Bullying Program on the frequency of incidents of bullying and secondary students' self-concept, self-esteem, and self-confidence in the context of a multidimensional model of self-concept.
- Identify the underlying factors that contribute to the rate of bullying in schools.
- Distinguish characteristics and attributes that may help to identify and differentiate between bullies and victims.
- Critically analyse the consequences of bullying on the psychological, emotional and mental health of both bullies and victims.
- Evaluate the role of self-concept as a mediating variable that facilitates the attainment of other desirable social outcomes.

Approach and Methodology

The proposed research involves a university-industry partnership between the Self-concept Enhancement and Learning Facilitation (SELF) Research Centre, University of Western Sydney, Macarthur; Western Sydney Area Mental Health Service, Department of Child, Adolescent and Family Psychiatry (Redbank House); and the Marist Education Centre, Catholic Education Office, Parramatta Diocese. These organisations have a mutual concern in stamping out bullying and violent behaviours in secondary schools and in improving and maximising self-concept, self-esteem and educational outcomes for secondary students. Each partner brings unique skills, knowledge and expertise to the project.

In pursuing the aims of the study a multicohort-multioccasion experimental design (Marsh, Craven & Debus, 1998) will be used that allows both cross-sectional and longitudinal comparisons. This provides a strong basis for evaluating the short-term and long-term effects of the Anti-Bullying Program and interpreting the causal influence of the program on frequency of aggressive and victimising behaviours, self-concept, depression and other desirable outcomes. Participants will be teachers and students in Years 7 to 9 in 2001 and the students in Years 7 to 10 in 2002 from 6 high schools in the Parramatta Catholic Education Diocese. Baseline data will be collected in 2001 at time 1 (T1, near the start of the

school year), T2 (18 weeks latter), and T3 (near the end of the school year). The intervention will be introduced in the first half of 2002 – the experimental year. Data in 2002 will be collected T4 (near the start of the year, prior to the intervention), T5 (18 weeks latter, at the end of the intervention), and T6 (near the end of the school year). This form of baseline control group ensures internal validity by including control participants from within each school and in order to meet desirable ethical guidelines in ensuring all participating schools benefit from the intervention. In this multicohort-multiocassion design, results for each year group during the experimental year will be compared to the group of students in that year group from the previous (baseline) year (a cohort comparison) and the results from the same group at T1 – T4 (a multiple occasion comparison). Thus, for example, Year 8 students in 2002 will be compared with: (a) results of the same group of students when they were Year 7 students in 2001, (b) results of the different group of students who were in Year 8 in 2001 and (c) against themselves at different points of the intervention.

Aggression and victimisation in the school may be reduced by creating a community that includes all students. By creating an environment in which self-concept is enhanced only through pro-social activities it is hoped that the incidence of bullying in Australian schools will be much reduced and further understood.

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