New Theoretical Perspectives on Bullying: Broadening our Understanding of the Psychology of Peer Abuse

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Research into bullying in recent years has focussed primarily on defining its parameters and describing the experiences, attitudes and perceptions of individuals involved in the paradigm. The nature of bullying in terms of frequency, types of behaviours and the characteristics of bullies and victims have been thoroughly explored and reported. We can describe cultural, gender and age-related differences in involvement as well as the impact of the behaviours. What has not been fully addressed in recent times are several psychological components of bullying in young people and this is the focus of the research reported here. As an outcome of analysis of a substantial database of responses from over three thousand high school students several new theoretical perspectives emerged, specifically: resiliency as a critical factor in resisting bullying, and the practicality of teaching this attribute to victims; the notion of Peer Advocacy as a functional response to support victims of bullying is also reviewed and described; peer abuse as a correlate of child abuse and the applicability of child protection legislation to the issue is reviewed for the first time; and the perception that violence viewing influences young people to engage in violence is challenged.

Fundamentally, it is timely to attempt to extend our understanding of peer abuse beyond descriptive and quantitative analyses to a deeper knowledge of the psychological influences and impact of the phenomenon, utilising new explanations supported by innovative interpretations and reflection. Therefore, additionally a model is presented which differentiates individual intervention for bullies and victims along a continuum and in particular explains the process by which passive victims can be supported to develop resistance, assertiveness and resiliency through a structured program of skill development.

Introduction

This paper describes the emergence of new theoretical perspectives which extend current understandings of bullying in schools. These perspectives emerged over the course of the program of research and intervention which may be seen to challenge current practice and theory in regard to the interpretation and analysis of bullying in schools. The data comprise responses from over three thousand high school students and are described elsewhere but outcomes of the analyses revealed new perspectives briefly articulated in this paper. These include: resiliency as a critical skill for resisting bullying; Peer Advocacy as a functional approach to intervention; peer abuse as a child protection issue and the reassessment of violence viewing as a credible origin of aggressive behaviour.

Resiliency As A Critical Skill For Resisting Bullying

Resiliency is a critical skill for resisting bullying which may be taught to victimised individuals. A pedagogical model for simulating the acquisition of the attribute of resiliency, previously considered developmental, emerged in light of data which revealed variations in student capacity to respond effectively to bullying. Cultural and gender differences in the interpretation of, and tolerance for peer abusive behaviours were also revealed.
Victims of bullying or peer abuse do not form an homogeneous group and their capacities to resist the bully differ along a continuum from passivity and surrender to resilience and recovery. (Rutter, 1993) Resilience may be seen as an attribute which is measurable and quantitative and therefore clearly identifiable as a personality and behavioural trait in particular individuals. (Blankenship, 1998; Freitas & Downey, 1998; Gardano, 1998). There is some discussion in the literature of the notion of protective factors residing within individuals who respond in a more resilient fashion to abusive situations and these include intellect (Carver, 1998), perceived social support (Byrne, 1993), and effective social skills (Doll & Lyon, 1998). Nevertheless, we can assume that the abusive behaviour is just as damaging to these individuals but that they have developed overt responses which offer psychological buffers rather than passive responses which expose them to further incidents of abuse.

This is relevant to intervention in that the emotional responses of the victim must be a paramount consideration and be fully understood and accepted if the victim is to be successful in establishing more effective and assertive responses. Individuals who exhibit resiliency in response to bullying cannot be considered less harmed than individuals who exhibit less effective responses.

However, if ineffective victims can be taught to exhibit more resilient behaviours such as help-seeking, avoidance of the bully or peer advocacy, their experience of bullying may have a reduced effect. Kinard (1998) points out that the factors which define resilience are sometimes also reported as capacities which lead to the development of resilience. Having good self-regard, for example may indicate resilience is present or it may facilitate the establishment of resilient behaviour where none was previously demonstrated perhaps due to the absence of adversity. This becomes a critical matter in the discussion of responses to, and the impact of bullying. While some children may experience chronic life stressors such as poverty, maltreatment and school failure, others may be exposed to relatively short-term adversity such as bullying. The literature with regard to resilience more often refers to the former circumstance and the plethora of research and discussion on the subject is devoted mainly to the characteristics and indicators of resilience and analysis of the source of such competence given the negative outcomes of abuse which are generally consequent for the child. (Carver, 1998; Wilson and Gottman, 1996).

Consideration is also given to the effects of abuse on both resilient and non-resilient individuals to determine whether resilience provides protection from distress and the capacity to resist or avoid bullying. The possibility of teaching resiliency skills to individuals who do not demonstrate a natural psychological capacity to recover from abuse is proposed. The notion that resistance to bullying is not simply an intra- or interpersonal skill, but that it resides within a social milieu which may well support the abuser is also given credence through the research data.

**A Model for Individual Intervention**

A comprehensive approach to intervention in bullying in schools has been described (Healey, 2003) whereby research–based policy development, teacher in-servicing, whole school commitment and generic anti-bullying or other anti-violence strategies, as well as individual interventions for bullies and victims are employed to reduce the likelihood of effective bullying. The appended figure describes an individual intervention for victims as part of the comprehensive approach needed in schools.
The model depicts the progress of the victim along the coping and resistance continuum as an outcome of a specific program which includes resiliency training, and which is delivered within a supportive environment.

Figure 1 illustrates the gradual development of skills by the victim as an effective response to bullying. This follows the application of a research-based intervention program, delivered in an environment committed to bullying prevention through the provision of supports. It also describes the relative positions of the protagonists.

The model has been devised to illustrate the outcomes of an intervention which takes account of the factors discussed so far and which is intended to assist in the development of effective resistance to bullying. It illustrates progress along a continuum towards effective and appropriate peer interaction behaviours for victims of bullying. The victim may enter the paradigm exhibiting passive and ineffective responses to their victimisation. There is a tendency to believe that victims are always weak and ineffectual individuals mercilessly tormented by dominant bullies.

This perception needs to be challenged if effective interventions are to be developed. The capacities of victims cover a wide spectrum of behaviours some of which are less assertive and effective than others, but which cannot all be classified as passive. The purpose of the intervention is to enable victims to eventually normalise relations towards neutral co-existence as a peer of the bully.

**Peer Advocacy As A Functional Response To Bullying Intervention**

Advocacy has been accepted in the literature as an established and effective means of providing qualified support for needy individuals in the quest for improved services otherwise denied them as a consequence of their personal incapacities or lack of skills (Ward & Page-Hanify 1986). Advocacy is proposed in a range of circumstances including advocacy for children who are abused, neglected or exhibiting mental health difficulties or disabilities (Balcazar, 1996; Knitzer, 1996; Paull, 1998; Watkins and Callicut, 1997) It is described as a process whereby a skilled individual acts on behalf of a person with disadvantage to ensure their rights and welfare are protected (Stroeve, 1998). The impact of the process of advocacy is discussed in terms of positive outcomes for individuals including satisfaction through participation (Ward et al), but also stress (Doueck, 1997; Goodley, 1997). There is a strong tradition of advocacy practice in the field of special education and disability services which provides a substantial framework and foundation for the introduction of Peer Advocacy as a bullying intervention in schools.

The specific application of Peer Advocacy to bullying intervention also evolved as a result of research which indicates that victims of bullying will seek the help of peers (Rigby & Slee, 1993) and that they hold unfavourable views of the capacity and willingness of teachers to assist them when complaints about bullying are made (Healey, Dowson & Bowen 2003). The elevated social status of bullies and the fact that peers were in general unsympathetic towards victims was also revealed in the research data. From this, the concept and processes of Peer Advocacy developed and the social imperative of using this specific strategy to address peer abuse unfolded. The critical factor in peer abuse or bullying is obviously peer attitudes and behaviours and the most potent intervention is therefore, of necessity peer-focused. Peer Advocacy is a functional new response which may be taught to peers of victims as an intervention in bullying. It is a helping strategy which provides victims of bullying with an individual mentor to assist them in their efforts to resist bullying.
Peer Advocacy is an innovative adaptation of the advocacy process which has more often been employed to support individuals with disability and other community members who seek justice through the aid of knowledgeable and capable others. It is a new approach to intervention in bullying as it recognises that without the acceptance and assistance of peers for the problems faced by victims of bullying, very little will change in the current social responses to bullying and victimisation.

The processes of Peer Advocacy are described elsewhere (Healey, 2002) and are based on specific operational and philosophical principles related to bullying intervention. Peer Advocacy proposes the inclusion of peers in a systematic process which demands a morally and legally conscientious response from those in authority. It necessitates the induction of young people into a training program to develop the attitudes, skills, knowledge, motivation and empathy to speak out and secure assistance for individuals who are being hurt through bullying. Peer Advocacy draws on the successful tradition of having others act on behalf of those in need and applies similar principles and practices to the training of young people to take responsibility for assisting peers who are victims of bullying.

**Peer Abuse As A Child Protection Issue**

Under-reporting of all forms of child abuse is an international phenomenon notwithstanding mandatory procedures present in most western nations (O’Toole, Webster, O’Toole & Lucal 1999) and Asia (Lau, J., Liu, J., Yu, A., & Wong, C. 1999). The declaration of the Children and Young Persons (Care and Protection) Act NSW 1998 extended the legal obligations of teachers for mandatory notification to include all forms of child abuse. However, despite the specific wording of the legislation that “all institutions responsible for the care and protection of children provide an environment for them that is free of violence and exploitation” (Chapter 2, articles 8 a & b) the issue of peer abuse has not been considered for inclusion. Further, the Act states that a child or young person is at risk of harm, when “the child or young person’s physical or psychological needs are not being met or are at risk of not being met” (Chapter 3(23)).

Nevertheless, there is little research or evidence that peer abuse is recognised as a form of child abuse nor that legal provisions are used in this way to protect children. The conceptualisation of bullying as a child protection issue and the possibility of using current legislation as a protective intervention emerged as bullying behaviours were revealed to correlate closely with commonly described child abusive behaviours. In terms of the types of behaviours endured, their intensity, frequency and psychological impact, peer abuse can readily be shown to parallel child abuse as defined in the legislation and the literature (Ambert, 1998; Portwood, 1999; Roscoe, 1990). The non-accidental nature of the injuries, the power relationships between the victim and perpetrator though not as obvious between peers, the threats of harm and demands for secrecy, which characterise peer victimisation, equate to child abuse on all levels of analysis. Ambert suggests that peer abuse is seen to differ from other forms of abuse on three key factors: the age of the perpetrator, formal power distinctions and neglect.

Barnett, Manly & Cicchetti, (1993) delineate six dimensions on which child abuse can be identified and analysed comprising: type of abuse, severity, frequency, developmental stage interventions and perpetrators. Peer abuse can be measured and analysed on each of these dimensions providing a comprehensive picture of its similar aetiology to other forms of child abuse. Peer abuse corresponds with child abuse across types, severity and impact as the data referred to here demonstrates.
The survey responses of students with regard to their experiences of behaviours identified in the current literature as typical of bullying were analysed. The behaviours were similar to those listed in the child abuse literature as typical of the behaviours endured by children and young people during abuse. Interpretation of the results of data gathered for this research program, in conjunction with the child abuse literature, exposed the close correlation between the two sets of experiences. As an outcome, the concept of applying the child protection legislation to the provision of protection to students in bullying or peer abusive situations emerged as a possibility. This, however has not been acknowledged in the recent literature.

Few references exist to support the proposal that the legislation devised in Australia and most other Western nations to protect children from abuse is also highly applicable in the case of peer abuse. Child protection legislation however can be extended to include peer abuse as a child protection issue under this new initiative.

**Challenging The Perception That Violence Viewing Influences Young People To Engage In Violence**

Violence viewing is commonly reported as a precipitous factor in the development of aggressive behaviour (Bjornebekk, 1998; Biggins, 1997). However it is proposed here that for the most part, previous research has been erroneous in suggesting that violence viewing is causal and instructive in the development of aggression. It is an important conceptualisation since violent and bullying behaviours must be attributed to other origins if violence viewing is eliminated as a cause.

Despite a prevailing community perception that viewing violence influences young people to engage in violent behaviour, (Arnow, 1995; Ballard, 1995; Irwin & Goss, 1995) attempts to establish a causal link between the types and amount of violence viewed and the consequent behaviour of young viewers have been unimpressive. Evidence of such a clear link would provide a ready solution for preventing violent behaviour. While violence viewing contributes nothing positive to the social and moral development of young people nor can it be blamed for precipitating violent behaviours despite sometimes- excessive viewing. A more parsimonious approach is to examine the social and psychological buffers which seem to protect most young people from violent media images and assist them in sustaining acceptable non-violent behaviours. Evidently there are strong mitigating factors at work in society and in particular in the world of young people which ensures that despite regular exposure to on-screen violence they most often choose socially acceptable behaviour.

Failure to differentiate real from simulated violence in experimental, observational and analytical studies lies at the foundation of this mistaken belief. The notion of ‘modelling’ aggressive and violent behaviours can be traced back to Bandura (1973) in his observational experiments of young children exposed to simulated violence. It cannot be extrapolated from observations of ‘pretend’ violence however, that children would similarly copy real adult violence and indeed they rarely do (Heuseman & Bachrach, 1986).

Children who observe or are witnesses to domestic or socially violent adult behaviour (ie. real violence towards real people) generally become and remain traumatised, as would be expected (Roberts, 1998; Spatz-Widom, 1995). Simulated violence is not violence. Violent behaviour is behaviour selected by an individual in order to inflict damage, harm or injury on another person or property. The reality and intention of the act are critical to the definition. If
there is no real harm, hurt or damage there has been no real violence. Violent simulations - unless enacted to be threatening or harmful-do not satisfy the definition. The vast majority of young people in our society are effectively immunised against the impact of violence viewing through the consistent influence of pro-social experiences and expectations. There are others who have developed a psychological or personal preference for violence and are likely to select violent viewing to reinforce their world view as well as for entertainment (Lefkowitz, 1977). It is nevertheless inaccurate to suggest that such media exposure is harmful or instructive for the greater population of viewers. Given that millions of young people daily watch on-screen ‘violence’ in a variety of forms such as cinema, videos and computer games without exhibiting violence it must be acknowledged that current socialisation processes are effective and powerful. Young people have usually already been exposed to well-established inhibiting social mores and values for a long period before they begin viewing media violence, and it would seem these provide the buffers necessary to assist them in differentiating what is promoted on screen as acceptable from what is actually acceptable to the people who are important to them.

Further, the issue of ‘desensitisation’ to violence is suggested as an outcome of exposure to media violence. While de-sensitisation to media violence may well result in young people seeking more and more graphic depictions of simulated violence it has not been established that this leads to desensitisation in those enduring or witnessing real life violence. Again, the great majority of young people are still sympathetic, anxious and afraid when real and even simulated violence is observed (Buckingham, 1997; Cantor, 1997; Ramsden, 1997; Van der Voort & Beentjes, 1997). Moliter (1994) expresses the concern that exposure to media violence desensitises children to real life aggression and Levine (1995) quotes numerous studies which have shown that media violence encourages aggression and desensitisation. Ageback (1997), on the other hand, states that “evidence proving familiarisation with media violence leads to indifference towards violence in real life, is yet to be unveiled”. The cognitive learning process is still the most credible explanation for the acquisition of violent behaviour since exposure to media models does not provide the consistency or immediacy of familial or social contact and reinforcement.

By reducing the reliance on media as a blameworthy instrument in the development of violent and bullying behaviours, other intra-personal origins must be sought.

Summary

This document describes briefly several new perspectives in the interpretation and analysis of the bullying paradigm. The perspectives arose from the analysis of data gathered for a large investigation of bullying in Australian high schools. The perspectives can contribute to an understanding of the psychology of bullying and bullying victimisation and inform interventions. The concept of resiliency as a critical skill for individuals to acquire is illustrated in the model presented. The process of Peer advocacy is described in detail elsewhere (Healey, 2001) as a generic curricular intervention for all students. The application of child protection legislation to peer abuse is an innovative, pragmatic and non-adversarial solution to the bullying issue. Reassessment of the impact of media violence on the behaviour of children is also important in assisting to refocus intervention. These perspectives are offered as innovative interpretations of familiar information and as such may contribute to the formulation of new theory.
References


