

EGA091436 School Bullying: The Role of Forgiveness

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ABSTRACT

Bullying is a serious problem for school students throughout the world. When students experience bullying, they are placed at greater risk of a range of negative outcomes, including mental distress, physical illness, and social isolation. To date, most anti-bullying efforts have focused on reducing or eliminating bullying, and not on helping bullied students to overcome the negative effects of having been bullied. This paper suggests that forgiveness could play a key role in helping bullied students to cope with and overcome the negative emotions elicited by bullying. This novel approach to mitigating the impact of bullying could help address the shortcomings of traditional anti-bullying measures, and thereby improve the educational experiences of school students.

Introduction

Every day, in every school, and in every country, school students are victimized by their peers (Schwarz, Chang, & Farver, 2001; Smith & Brain, 2000). School bullying can have a devastating effect on the health, well-being, and safety those subjected to it. Recent media coverage of suicides committed by the targets of online bullying (who were harassed via social internet sites) has come as a forceful reminder of this unfortunate reality. It is encouraging that so many educational researchers and school administrators have implemented programs aimed at reducing or eliminating school bullying. But what of the targets of bullying? Anti-bullying interventions often seek simply to reduce the prevalence of bullying, but there is a clear need for interventions that also help the targets of bullying to overcome the emotional damage inflicted on them. As this paper will argue, forgiveness may be a process by which bullied students could cope effectively with the negative aftermath of peer victimisation.

School bullying

While many definitions of school bullying have been constructed, they all characterise it in similar ways. Olweus (1995) stated that a student is the target of bullying when he or she is “exposed repeatedly, and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 197). An isolated negative event is unlikely to be seen as bullying. Bullying involves the deliberate, iterative mistreatment of students by those with more power (Hazler, 1996; Olweus, 1991; Smith & Sharp, 1994). Bullies may not necessarily have greater physical strength than their targets; they may instead be more psychologically manipulative, have a higher social standing, or possess some other advantage (Hazler, 1996; Reid, Monsen, & Rivers, 2004).

To understand the extent of school bullying, it helps to consider three key ways in which it is categorised (see Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, & Kaukiainen, 1992; Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Rigby, 1997; Underwood, 2002). Physical bullying, more common among boys, involves straightforward physical actions such as punching others, stealing their belongings, or throwing objects at them. Relational bullying, more common among girls, involves subtler actions such as spreading rumours about others, excluding them from social groups, or subjecting them to intimidating body language (e.g., threatening stares). Verbal bullying, equally common among boys and girls, involves straightforward verbal behaviours such as teasing others, yelling at them, or making threatening statements toward them. Recently, another form of bullying, labelled ‘cyber bullying’, has been recognised. Cyber bullying involves the delivery of hurtful messages, images, videos, etc., using modern inventions such as mobile phones and the internet (Slonje & Smith, 2008).

It should be clear that bullying encompasses a wide spectrum of negative behaviours, but since many of these actions are relatively covert or indirect (especially in the case of relational and cyber bullying), many teachers and parents are often unaware of the prevalence of bullying and the extent of the harm it causes (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith & Brain, 2000). In past decades, it was even common for adults to view school bullying as just a necessary part of growing up, with a child’s character seen as being forged in the fire of victimisation (Smith & Brain, 2000). But recent scientific findings have shown that bullying is highly detrimental to school students, and that students are far more likely to flourish when the prevalence of bullying is reduced.

The negative impact of school bullying

Targets of school bullying have been found to have higher rates of psychological ill health, psychosomatic symptoms, academic difficulties, psychosocial maladjustment,

suicidality, and physical health complaints (see Carney, 2000; Due et al., 2005; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpela, Marttunen, Rimpela, & Rantanen, 1999; and Schwartz et al., 2001; for evidence of some of the key negative correlates of school bullying). The more extensive the bullying, the greater the number and severity of mental and physical health problems reported by targets (Due et al., 2005). These cross-sectional findings are complemented by longitudinal studies that have tracked the relationship between bullying and maladjustment (e.g., social dissatisfaction, loneliness) over time (see Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1996; Kochenderfer-Ladd & Wardrop, 2001). Carry-over effects have been observed, with the negative effects of bullying continuing in bullied students even once they have ceased to be targeted. When interventions have been implemented to reduce school bullying, emotional and behavioural problems in students have decreased, and social and educational outcomes have been enhanced (Olweus, 1994; Twemlow et al., 2001).

Retrospective studies suggest that school bullying is damaging in the long-term. Childhood targets of bullying are more likely to report the following issues as adults: feelings of hurt, unhappiness, anger, embarrassment, and shame (Crozier & Skliopidou, 2002); depression, trait anxiety, and social anxiety (Roth, Coles, & Heimberg, 2002); social anxiety and social phobia (McCabe, Antony, Summerfeldt, Liss, & Swinson, 2003); and suicidal ideation, workplace bullying, low self-esteem, loneliness, emotional maladjustment, and relationship dysfunction (Schafer et al., 2004). This array of negative outcomes confronts us with the fact that being bullied at school may have serious consequences that reach well into adulthood. School bullying very likely compromises the safety and well-being of individuals not only during their school years, but also as they go about their adult lives.

The need for coping strategies

Given the evidence that school bullying is harmful to students, it is no wonder that numerous interventions have been implemented in an effort to reduce the prevalence of bullying. Some interventions have been reasonably successful at doing so (Eisenberg & Aalsma, 2005; Olweus, 2005), but many others have resulted in either minor reductions or none at all (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Smith & Brain, 2000). Importantly, no intervention has ever resulted in the total eradication of bullying at a given school, which means that even when the best existing programs are implemented, some students inevitably continue to be victimised. This implies that there is a need not only for programs aimed at reducing the prevalence of bullying, but also for programs designed to help students cope with the negative effects of being bullied (Smokowski & Kopasz, 2005). Perhaps, at some point in the future, bullying will be completely neutralised, but until that day students will continue to suffer emotional harm at the hands of bullies, and as such they stand to benefit from effective coping strategies that restore emotional well-being. This is where forgiveness enters the picture.

Forgiveness

Forgiveness¹ has been the subject of scientific study for the past two decades, and it is currently understood as a coping strategy employed in response to interpersonal transgressions (Strelan & Covic, 2006). An interpersonal transgression is an act (or a failure to act) committed by one party against another, involving a violation of the legal, moral, ethical, or cultural norms that govern how individuals treat one another. Those hurt by interpersonal transgressions often experience a stress reaction known as 'unforgiveness', which is characterised by negative emotions such as anger, hostility, resentment, bitterness, anxiety, and even hatred (Berry, Worthington, Parrott, O'Connor, & Wade, 2001; Worthington & Scherer, 2004). Those experiencing unforgiveness are typically motivated

either to avoid or to exact revenge on the transgressor (McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough, Worthington, & Rachal, 1997).

Unforgiveness is not simply the absence of forgiveness, and forgiveness is not the only way in which to alleviate unforgiveness (Wade & Worthington, 2003). Exacting revenge, procuring compensation, reappraising the meaning of the offence, denying that the offence occurred – these are just some of the ways in which to deal with unforgiveness, although they may not all be equally effective or adaptive (Worthington & Scherer, 2004).

Forgiveness is conceptualised as an emotion-focused coping strategy, meaning that it is not used to neutralise the stressor itself (in this case, an interpersonal transgression), but to neutralise the stress *reaction* (in this case, the negative emotions of unforgiveness). Problem-focused coping strategies, which target the stressor, are often more effective than emotion-focused strategies, but, when the problem cannot be solved, emotion-focused strategies are more beneficial (Lazarus, 1999). In the case of interpersonal transgressions, problem-focused coping will often be inappropriate, because by the time a transgression has taken place it is too late to prevent its occurrence (i.e., solve the problem). In the wake of a transgression, the offended party may use problem-focused strategies in seeking restitution, in repairing any physical damage caused by the transgression, or in preventing the transgression from happening again, but the emotional damage caused by the offence will very likely require an emotion-focused remedy.

How does forgiveness facilitate emotional recovery? The process of *emotional juxtaposition* has been proposed as an explanation (Worthington & Wade, 1999). When an individual experiences forgiveness, his or her focus shifts away from the negative emotions of unforgiveness and toward the positive, other-focused, prosocial emotions of forgiveness. These emotions include empathy, sympathy, compassion, and love, among others (Worthington & Scherer, 2004), and they are juxtaposed onto the negative emotions caused by the interpersonal transgression. In this way, the negative emotions are displaced, and unforgiveness is reduced or even eliminated. As one goes through the process of forgiveness, avoidance and revenge motivations become weaker and benevolent motivations grow stronger (McCullough, Fincham, & Tsang, 2003). One adopts a neutral or even positive stance toward the transgressor, even if one does not have (or does not wish to have) any post-offence contact with the transgressor.

Importantly, forgiveness does not imply that the offended party no longer holds the transgressor responsible for his or her offence. Indeed, one must acknowledge the full nature, extent, and impact of a transgression before one may forgive it (see Davenport, 1991; Walrond-Skinner, 1998). Otherwise, what is one forgiving? Forgiveness does not involve “denying, ignoring, minimizing, tolerating, condoning, excusing, or forgetting the offense” (Witvliet, Ludwig, & Vander Laan, 2001, p. 118). When one forgives, one does not compromise one's values, ethics, or moral principles. Rather, forgiveness can be a principled response to an interpersonal transgression (Park & Enright, 1997). The attraction of forgiveness is that it provides emotional relief for the offended party; it is granted for the benefit of the offender party, not for the benefit of the offender. As the saying goes: forgiveness is the gift you give yourself.

The positive impact of forgiveness

There is substantial evidence of the benefits of forgiveness. Choosing to forgive rather than to ruminate or to hold a grudge leads to better emotional and physiological responses (Witvliet et al., 2001). Possessing a more forgiving personality (i.e., being higher in *trait* forgiveness) is associated with better cardiovascular reactivity (Lawler et al., 2003) and with lower stress and better self-reported health (Berry & Worthington, 2001). Those with higher

trait forgiveness also report better physical health, greater life satisfaction, and lower psychological distress (Toussaint, Williams, Musick, & Everson, 2001). Those who display more forgiveness of a specific transgression (i.e., those indicating higher *state* forgiveness) exhibit healthier cardiovascular responses and report fewer symptoms of physical illness (Lawler et al., 2003), and report less anxiety at the state and trait levels (Subkoviak et al., 1995). In therapeutic settings, forgiveness-based interventions have led to higher levels of forgiveness, empathy, and self-esteem, and lower levels of depression, anxiety, and grief (Baskin & Enright, 2004). The benefits of these interventions were comparable to those of other forms of therapy, and were maintained at follow-ups (Baskin & Enright, 2004). Furthermore, Denton and Martin (1998) found wide-support for forgiveness-based treatments in a survey of mental health clinicians.

Forgiveness for school students

The preceding evidence was obtained in samples of adults; few studies of forgiveness have been carried out with children or adolescents. Hui and Ho (2004) implemented a forgiveness-based guidance program for adolescents from a Hong Kong boys' secondary school. The program was found to be effective in educating students about forgiveness and in encouraging its use, but it had no effect on the students' levels of self-esteem and hope. In a similar study, Hui and Chau (2009) carried out a forgiveness-based intervention with Hong Kong primary school students who were experiencing unforgiveness. Relative to a control group, the participants in the forgiveness intervention indicated a better understanding of forgiveness, lower levels of depression, and higher levels of forgiveness, self-esteem, and hope. So, there is some evidence that children and adolescents can benefit from programs and interventions aimed at promoting forgiveness. And, while Hui and her colleagues did not specifically address the issue of school bullying in their work, Hui and Chau (2009) proposed that enhancing students' forgiveness may benefit those who have been targeted by bullies.

There are also theoretical reasons to believe that forgiveness could benefit school students. Egan and Todorov (2009) argued that, of all the ways in which to address unforgiveness, forgiveness ought to be particularly beneficial to the targets of school bullying, who are often isolated, disempowered, or lacking in control over their environment. Forgiveness can be utilised by those who are isolated; unlike reconciliation, retaliation, and many other responses to interpersonal transgression, it does not require that the offended party involve anyone else in the process (of course, he or she may choose to work through the forgiveness process with others – including the transgressor – if that be desired). Forgiveness can be used by those who are relatively powerless; it is an emotion-focused coping strategy, rather than a problem-focused one. And forgiveness, in helping individuals to regulate their emotions, may enhance their sense of agency and control (see Egan & Todorov, 2009).

Forgiveness in school bullying contexts

Given the preceding empirical and theoretical discussion, how could forgiveness be *applied* in school settings for the benefit of bullied students? There are many plausible ways in which forgiveness-based programs, interventions, and initiatives could be delivered in school and classroom contexts (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Guidance, education, and instruction in forgiveness could be provided within existing anti-bullying interventions, such as those that follow the Olweus Method (see Liepe-Levinson & Levinson, 2005). Step 4 of the Olweus Method aims to promote empathy in school students. Given that empathy is crucial to the forgiveness process (Konstam, Holmes, & Levine, 2003; McCullough et al., 1998; McCullough et al., 1997), a forgiveness-focused component could easily be added at this step, building upon the empathy-focused content (Egan & Todorov, 2009). Alternatively, a

pre-existing forgiveness-based intervention for school students, such as that described by Hui and Chau (2009), could be modified so as to cater specifically to targets of school bullying, rather than to all who have been offended. In short, we have school-based programs that address bullying without a focus on forgiveness, and we have a school-based intervention that addresses forgiveness without a focus on bullying. If a program were to be created that addressed both bullying *and* forgiveness, the benefits for school students could be immense. As Egan and Todorov (2009, p. 209) put it:

...the conjunction of school bullying and forgiveness is a logical one: bullying is characterized by interpersonal transgressions, and forgiveness facilitates coping with such offenses.

Conclusion

Bullying is one of the most pervasive and damaging forms of interpersonal transgression (Reid et al., 2004), and yet no anti-bullying program or intervention has ever sought to utilise forgiveness, even though forgiveness is a coping strategy that exists precisely to help individuals to overcome the pain of interpersonal transgression. Hopefully, those who deliver future anti-bullying initiatives will recognise the potential of forgiveness, and will incorporate it into their work. Only then will it be possible to evaluate empirically the utility and benefits of forgiveness as a way by which school students may cope with the negative emotional impact of being bullied.

Endnote:

¹ Psychological researchers have examined many types of forgiveness, including interpersonal forgiveness (i.e., forgiveness of others), self-forgiveness, and perceived forgiveness by God/a higher power. However, the term 'forgiveness' is most commonly used in reference to the interpersonal type of forgiveness. It is in this sense that the present paper uses the term.

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