

The relationship between bullying and the self-concept of children

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Abstract

Bullying is a problem with serious consequences. One consequence is an altered self-concept. The children involved in bullying are divided into victims, bullies, and bully/victims, although some researchers argue that there are still other categories of children who play a role in bullying. Bullies seem to suffer the least from their negative self-concept, while bully/victims seem to have the most negative self-concept in almost all areas. The bullies have high social and athletic competences, whereas these self-concepts are negative in victims, and that makes them an easy target for the bullies. Factors that could influence bullying are inter-parental discord, the responsiveness of the victim's mother, and learning difficulties. Because bullying and becoming a victim are related to a negative self-concept, interventions should focus on enhancing the self-concept.

Keywords: bullying, self-concept, victim, bully, bully/victim, learning difficulties, inter-parental discord

Introduction

Five percent of all students in Europe and the United States have been affected by serious bullying and between fifteen and thirty percent have been the victim of less serious bullying. These numbers indicate that bullying is a serious problem. Olweus (1989, in Houbre, Tarquinio, & Thuillier, 2006) described bullying as “being exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more students”. The consequences of bullying can be very serious and can take several forms. The adverse effects resulting from being victimized by bullying vary from health problems to psychological traumas and a compromised self-concept. This article will focus on the effects of bullying on self-concept. A self-concept is the set of attributes, abilities, attitudes, and values that an individual believes defines who he or she is (Berk, 2009). Houbre and colleagues (2006) even found that a changed self-concept may alter the child's relationship to the outside world, which could have the consequence of developing a more serious problem, such as a mental disorder. Because of these consequences, it is important to understand the relationship between being involved in bullying and self-concept. How does bullying affect the self-concept, and how do factors like parenting and learning difficulties influence this relationship? Once this relationship is understood, interventions can be devised to reduce bullying. The issues that will be addressed in this article concern the relationship between bullying and children's self-concept, the effect of parenting and learning difficulties, and possible interventions aimed at enhancing the self-concept.

Three categories of students involved in bullying will be discussed in order to explain these issues, namely victims, bullies, and bully/victims (i.e., students who are both a bully and a victim) (Austin & Joseph, 1996, in Houbre et al., 2006). First, the process of bullying will be clarified. The link between the victim and self-concept will then be considered, along with the question of whether a negative self-concept is a consequence or cause of being bullied. The relationship between the victim, self-concept, and parental style will be considered as well. Subsequently, the relationship between being a bully and self-concept will be discussed, and the influence of inter-parental discord and learning difficulties on bullying behavior will be explored. Afterward, the relationship between being a bully/victim and self-concept will be briefly explained. Special-education children are more likely to be bully/victims, a phenomenon that will also be addressed. The question of whether non-involved children really are non-involved will also be explored. Finally, possible interventions for reducing bullying will be considered.

Bullying

Bullying can be expressed in a number of different ways. First, bullying can be either direct or indirect. Words, physical contact and social relations (e.a. manipulating friends) are also ways in which bullying can be expressed (Berkowitz, 1993; Dodge & Coie, 1987; Olweus, 1984; Smith & Sharp, 1994, in Houbre et al., 2006). Despite these differences in expression, it is possible to identify three distinct characteristics of bullying behavior: frequency, intention to hurt, and an asymmetric relationship

between the bully and the victim (Houbre et al., 2006).

In addition, there appeared to be a difference with regard to bullying between boys and girls. Houbre and her colleagues (2006) found that boys and girls seemed to express bullying differently. Girls bullied more readily in indirect, more subtle forms like rumors and manipulating friends, while boys bullied in a more overt and physical way. Boys were also more involved in bullying than girls, and the girls who were involved were more likely to be the victim of bullying instead of the bully.

The victim and self-concept

Several studies revealed that victims of bullying tend to have a more negative self-concept in comparison with the other schoolchildren (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Graham et al. 2007; Houbre et al. 2006; Lagerspetz et al. 1982; Lodge & Feldman 2007; Olweus, 1978, 1984; Yang et al. 2006, in Houbre, Tarquinio, & Lanfranchi, 2010). Houbre et al. (2006) showed that victims' self-concepts about their social competence, physical appearance, global self-worth and athletic competence were negative in comparison with the control group. This means that victims have difficulties making friends easily and are not very popular. Victims also appear to be unsatisfied with their looks, and they do not have a high overall self-esteem. They think that their physical and sports abilities are bad too.

In a later study, Houbre, Tarquinio and Lanfranchi (2010) wondered if a negative self-concept is a cause and/or a consequence of bullying. Their research showed that self-concept can predict being bullied. An analysis of the relationship between long-term bullying and self-concept showed that certain negative levels of self-concept predict long-term bullying. It appeared that a negative self-evaluation in scholastic and social skills at a given time is the most predictive variable for later victimization. However, bullying seems to lower the self-concept as well. Even though victims seem to have a predisposition to be bullied over the long term, bullying also increased their anxiety and their lack of confidence through their internalization of the negative opinion of their tormentors. These results indicate that self-concept not only predicts long-term bullying, but is also affected by being bullied. Thus, one can conclude that a negative self-concept and victimization are interdependent and that they reinforce one another.

Victims and parental style

Research indicates that the way parents respond to their children is related to the child's self-concept, and especially to the child's self-esteem. Self-esteem is a part of the self-concept and also represents the evaluation of the self-concept. While the self-concept contains the cognitive aspects of the self, self-esteem contains the evaluative aspects that judge these cognitive aspects (Samilvalli, 1998). Georgiou (2008b) found that maternal responsiveness seems to protect the child against isolation and exclusion from peers. It may be that maternal responsiveness to the child's needs makes children feel more secure and may also enable children to have a higher self-esteem. This security and higher self-esteem makes a child express more empathy, kindness and compassion, so these children are less likely to be socially excluded or bullied. The way parents treat their children can be negative too. If the mother is overprotective, the child has a greater risk for being the victim of bullying at school (Georgiou, 2008a, 2008b). Very anxious and overprotective mothers make their children passive and submissive individuals who cannot deal with their own problems. This makes these children easy targets for bullies. As discussed above, victims of bullying already have a negative self-concept before they are bullied. When these results are combined with Georgiou's results (2008a, 2008b) it seems that very anxious and overprotective mothers make the child's self-concept more negative, which increases the chance of being victimized at school. However, the relationship between the mother's anxious and overprotective behavior and the child's anxious and submissive behavior is a correlation. Thus, it is also possible that the child's more negative self-concept causes the mother to become more anxious and overprotective.

The bully and self-concept

In comparison with the victims and the bully/victims, the bullies are the group of students who seemed to have the least problems with regard to their self-concept (Houbre et al., 2006). Although bullies seem to have fewer problems with their self-concept than victims and bully/victims, research by Christie-Mizell (2003) indicated that a negative self-concept is one of the most important predictors of bullying behavior among elementary and middle school children. However, bullies' self-concepts regarding social and athletic competence are more positive than those of non-involved students. It

turned out that bullies are in fact quite popular in their immediate peer group, but not outside this group (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; Cairns, Neckerman, Gest, & Garipey, 1988; Funk, 2001; Olweus, 1993, in Houbre et al., 2006). Bullies also have greater physical strength, which could be a reason why bullies see their physical and sports abilities in a more favorably way than victims. Some parts of the self-concept are thus reinforced because of bullying, while other parts tend to be more negative than the control group.

Bullying and inter-parental discord

Parents can influence their child's development of becoming a bully, but this influence is different than the influence of parental style on victims. The symbolic interaction theory gives a possible explanation for the fact that family has an influence on the child's bullying behavior (Christie-Mizell, 2003). The basis of this theory is the looking-glass self, constructed by Cooley (1902, in Christie-Mizell, 2003). A looking-glass self refers to the fact that the way other people see the individual is incorporated by the individual. The theory states that the looking-glass self gives an individual the opportunity to perceive how other people see him or her. These meta-perceptions are used to construct the self-concept (Cook & Douglas, 1998, in Christie-Mizell, 2003). Thus, a child's self-concept represents his or her internalized view of important people (Cook & Douglas, 1998; Cooley, 1902, in Christie-Mizell, 2003).

The way parents view their children can be communicated both directly and indirectly (Christie-Mizell, 2003). Different messages may be internalized into a child's self-concept if he or she lives in a home characterized by marital conflicts, violence and chaos rather than marital harmony, parental warmth and mutual respect (Felson, 1980, 1989; Matsueda, 1992, in Christie-Mizell, 2003). When the parents have lots of discord, more negative messages are internalized by the child and a more negative self-concept is developed. So, these positive, negative, direct or indirect messages that the children observe from their parents are internalized, and thus shape self-concept and motivate behavior.

In short, Christie-Mizell's (2003) research indicates that bullying behavior is associated with self-concept. As the symbolic interaction theory predicted, self-concept mediates the effect of inter-parental discord on bullying. When there is a great deal of inter-parental discord, there are more

negative appraisals internalized into the child's self-concept. Because of this negative internalization, the child develops a more negative self-concept, which contributes to bullying behavior.

Bullying and learning difficulties

Learning difficulties could be a risk for becoming a bully too. Kaukiainen and colleagues (2002) found that learning difficulties in combination with low social intelligence and high self-esteem predicted bullying behavior. It appeared that bullies have a high self-esteem. This high self-esteem may be entirely authentic, but it is also possible that it is inflated (Salmivalli, Kaukiainen, Kaistaniemi, & Lagerspetz, 1999). Salmivalli and colleagues concluded that bullies have a higher self-esteem, because they overestimate their self-concepts. Bullying may be a way to maintain this inflated self-esteem, because weaker persons are usually bullied and that enables a bully to easily impose his or her will on the victim. It turned out that male bullies with learning difficulties have a positive view of themselves (Kaukiainen et al., 2002). This inflated view of themselves could be especially true for children with learning difficulties. According to Kaukiainen and colleagues (2002), bullying may be an attempt to "keep up appearances", because these children have never experienced academic success. For children with learning difficulties, maintaining high self-esteem could be an important reason to bully others.

The bully/victim and self-concept

Bully/victims seem to have the most problems with their self-concept, because they have the problems of both the bully and the victim. Children who are both victim and bully have the most negative self-concepts in almost every area (Houbre et al., 2006). They had the most negative scores on social competence, physical appearance, self-control and global self-worth. Their athletic competence was more positive than the athletic competence of victims, but more negative than the competence of bullies in this area. This is a logical outcome, because bully/victims are not only a bully, but also a victim of bullying behavior. These results indicate that bully/victims are the least popular students and they also have the greatest difficulties with making friends compared to victims and bullies. Furthermore, they are the least satisfied with their looks, have the lowest overall self-esteem and have the lowest self-control as well.

The main area where bully/victims seem to differ from bullies and victims is their relationships with peers. Most peers reject bully/victims (Bowers, Smith, & Binney, 1992, in Houbre et al., 2006) and their social-acceptance scores are also the most negative of all students (Mynard & Joseph 1997, in Houbre et al., 2006).

Bully/victims and learning difficulties

Children with learning difficulties were found to be more involved in bullying and to have a greater chance of being a bully/victim. Whitney, Smith and Thompson (1994, in Kaukiainen et al., 2002) reported that children with learning difficulties bullied other children significantly more than the children without learning difficulties. However, those children who reported being a bully also reported being a victim of bullying. Whitney and colleagues suggested that children with learning disabilities provoke being bullied by their own aggressive behavior. When children with learning disabilities were placed in normal classrooms, their global self-concept generally tended to be more negative than those of their nondisabled classmates (Montgomery, 1994, in Kaukiainen et al., 2002). So these learning difficulties also make these children's self-concept more negative, which puts them at risk for becoming victims as well. More information about the relationship between special-education children and self-concept can be found in the Van den Bosch's article of the present volume.

Additional categories with regard to bullying

Although the children involved in bullying are categorized as victims, bullies and bully/victims, Salmivalli (1998) argues that there are more groups besides these three. Some researchers think that bullying should be seen as a group process where not only the bully and victim are involved (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996, in Salmivalli, 1998). Bystanders tend to support the bullying, defend the victim or withdraw from the situation. This means that there could be other categories, such as assistants of the bully, reinforcers of the bully, defenders of the victim, and outsiders.

Salmivalli (1998) showed that assistants and some of the reinforcers of the bullies could be characterized as bullies, because they have the same kind of self-concept. Other reinforcers scored negative on all domains of the self-concept. These children might support the bullying to secure their own position by becoming friends of the bully

instead of enemies. The children who considered themselves above-average in all areas of the self-concept were most likely to act as the defender of the victim. This suggests that their high self-esteem gives them the chance to defend the victim without the fear of being bullied. The fact that they have helped the victim can also give their self-esteem a further boost in a healthy way. At last, negative social and athletic competence and normal behavioral and family-related competence are most characteristic for outsiders who withdraw from the situation when someone is bullied. This means that children who withdraw from bullying do not feel they have the social and physical skills to intervene in the bullying process. These children behave according to the behavioral norms. However, the children who withdraw, as well as some of the reinforcers, are at risk of victimization, because of their negative social and athletic self-concepts. The reinforcers, who eventually become victims as well, could thus be considered the same as the bully/victims.

Intervention against bullying

While a negative self-concept constitutes a risk factor for becoming involved in bullying, several studies indicate that a positive self-concept may offer protection against involvement in bullying (Christie-Mizell, 2003; Kaukiainen et al., 2002). Children with positive self-concepts are less likely to be involved in delinquent activities or to be instigators of peer conflicts (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Rigby & Cox, 1996; Rogers, Parcel, & Menaghan, 1991; Rosenberg, 1965; Rosenberg & Rosenberg, 1978, in Christie-Mizell, 2003). So interventions should be focused on the development of a positive self-concept.

In the case of bullies, intervention should focus on inter-parental discord and inflated self-esteem. Christie-Mizell (2003) pointed out that it could be difficult to focus on inter-parental discord, since the child has been labeled as the person who has a problem and not the parents. It can also be very time-consuming and costly to involve the whole family in an intervention program. However, to establish normative behavior in bullies, it is crucially important to ensure that parents not only take responsibility for the child's behavior, but also that they understand that the bullying behavior of their child does not exist in isolation from family processes like inter-parental discord (Kinsman, Wildman, & Smucker, 1999, in Christie-Mizell, 2003). A second intervention for bullies could deal

with their inflated self-esteem. Boys with learning disabilities seem to use bullying as a way to keep up their self-esteem. Thus, identification of the child's strengths could constitute a remedial intervention. If bullies are able to identify their own abilities, they may not need bullying anyone to feel good. However, this intervention has not yet been investigated.

An intervention that involves the parents of the bully and changing the level of the bullies' self-esteem could also be useful as an intervention for victims. Although it is not known if the mother's anxiety and overprotection causes the anxious and submissive behavior of the victim (Georgiou, 2008a, 2008b), there is a relationship between overprotective parenting and a negative self-concept. One intervention could therefore be to try to change the mother's responsiveness to the child and make her less anxious and protective. To make the child less anxious and submissive, the intervention could heighten the child's self-esteem. As Houbre, Tarquinio and Thuillier (2010) pointed out, victims were chosen because they already had a negative self-concept. By increasing the child's self-esteem and lowering the mother's anxiety and protectiveness, the child could develop a more positive self-concept. Several studies (e.g. Kaukiainen et al., 2002; Houbre et al., 2006) also showed that victims have a low social competence. This suggests that a certain level of social competence is necessary for making and maintaining friends, which could protect against bullying. Therefore, another focus for victim intervention could be the training of social skills in order to increase the victim's social competence.

Conclusion

A review of several studies indicated that the child's self-concept has an important role in bullying, but bullying also influences the child's self-concept. Research showed that victims' self-concept was already negative before the bullying started, but that it became even more negative after being bullied. Meanwhile, bullies appeared to suffer the least from their negative self-concept. Bullies already had a self-concept that was a bit more negative than the control group before they started bullying, which could be caused by parental discord. Nevertheless, these children did have a more positive self-concept with regard to their social and athletic competence. While the other parts of the self-concept remained negative, these positive self-concepts about their social and

physical skills were actually strengthened because of bullying others. This causes them to have and maintain an inflated self-esteem. This could be especially true for bullies with learning difficulties, as a result of an attempt to keep up appearances, because of their less successful academic performances. However, children with learning difficulties are most likely to be a bully/victim. The bully/victims have the most negative self-concepts in almost all areas of the self-concept. According to Salmivalli (1998), bullies' reinforcers who have negative social and athletic competences most likely to become bully/victims because they hope that reinforcing the bully will protect them from being bullied themselves. Just like victims, they already had a negative self-concept, so being bullied will make it even more negative. In addition to the victims, bullies, bully/victims and reinforcers, Salmivalli (1998) also named assistants of the bullies, defenders of the victims, and the outsiders who withdraw when someone is bullied as relevant actors in the bullying process.

Developing good interventions to heighten the self-concepts of these children is very important for reducing bullying, because a positive self-concept protects children against being bullied or becoming a bully. Adequate intervention is not only important for the reduction of bullying behavior, but also for the prevention of other more serious consequences like mental disorders. Intervention should therefore be focused on children with a negative self-concept and who are therefore at risk for becoming involved in bullying. By explaining the effects of bullying, this article intended to show the relationship between bullying and self-concept. A better understanding of the factors influencing bullying, and of the effects of bullying, will lead to the development of more effective preventive interventions.

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