

SOCIAL AND PSYCHOLOGICAL IMPLICATIONS OF BULLYING IN SCHOOLS

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Abstract

The aim of the present article is to emphasize social and psychological implications of bullying in school contexts. In order to accomplish this aim, 10 articles were reviewed. Psychological consequences of young students experiencing bullying in schools are discussed from a social psychology framework of group influence in shaping individual's own personality development. Also this article answers the question: Can bullying be seen as a dysfunctional group phenomenon?

Keywords: literature review, bullying, group influence, social and psychological consequences, school environment

Introduction

Social reality is a complex system of groups that builds norms, values, which assigns positions and has an important influence on the individual's development. The group plays a crucial role in a person's development. The group plays an important role in individual's early socialization. Generally, the group transmits the values of its society. The group gives individuals feelings of security. The group fulfils the individual's need of belonging.

Through its interactive dimension, the group represents the environment and a way for learning some social roles. The group forms the other's

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evaluation competences and can contribute to the development of its members (Neculau, 2004).

School bullying is an old phenomenon. A high number of students experience bullying in schools. School becomes the place with the greatest risk of peer bullying.

The past twenty years showed that bullying is not a harmless phenomenon. Scholars have shown that bullying is a form of violence with a devastating impact not only, on students but also, on teenagers and teachers. This phenomenon became of high interest for mass-media from all over the world through its gravity and its high frequency of manifested bullying acts.

Social psychology highlights the importance of a group and of its dynamics in learning processes of normative behaviours. By its dynamic dimension, groups help develop research skills of reaching the proposed goal. The group becomes a space of confrontations and of mutual learning (Neculau, 2004).

Young students are vulnerable to this phenomenon. In this age period they acquire new social skills through social learning processes and, of course, through social interaction so that the group's importance increases when it comes to the school context.

Any disorder or factor that appears in the school environment or in the classroom environment has a significant impact on shaping the individual's personality development.

Elton Mayo conducted the first research in social psychology on the importance of group processes in terms of influence. Through his research, the author highlighted the importance of group climate on changing attitudes and on feelings of belonging (Neculau, 2004). Moreover, MacIntosh, Wuest, Gray, and Cronkhite (2010) were interested in investigating the impact of workplace bullying in changing employee's attitudes toward work as a consequence of experienced psychological aggression. Results revealed that, after having experienced bullying, the employees developed negative feelings toward the work climate and developed various job related fears. These fears led to disengagement in work tasks, thus leading to a lower work quality. However, negative results do not only occur in the quality of health care provided in medical institutions but also in terms of individual and psychological consequences. Any change that appears in the attitude leads to a behavioural change. In general, an individual's behaviour is the reflection of the presence of

harmony or disharmony in his own life. The participants of the study have lost the meaning of work because of bullying. They renounced their profession. Furthermore, employees, who have experienced bullying, developed feelings of guilt and blame, considering themselves as being guilty for what happens in their own life and some of them have left their job without wanting to ever work in the health-care sector. From this point of view, also included are some negative impacts in terms of financial planning of the person (e.g. a lower annual family income), social status (e.g. the loss of medical employee status), professional status (e.g. blocks in career development) and in terms of personal negative outcomes (e.g. higher divorce rates, adapting issues to the new status, changing in personal connections).

Bullying definitions

Olweus' (1993) definition has the highest citation percentage: "*A person is the target of bullying acts when she's repeatedly exposed to negative actions made by one or more persons. An action is considered negative when someone, intentionally, causes or creates discomfort to another person*". These negative actions can take the form of physical contact, verbal abuse or rude gestures. In line with this, Coloroso (2002) stated that rumours spread and the victim's exclusion from the group are the most encountered forms of bullying and that a real or perceived power imbalance is necessary to exist between the victim and the aggressor. Perceived power imbalance and repetitive behaviours are the elements which differentiate between forms of aggressive behaviours and bullying acts (Schuster, 1996).

According to Olweus (1993), bullying is characterized by the presence of three criteria: (1) an aggressive behaviour intended to cause harm; (2) the behaviour is produced in a repeated manner over time and (3) in interpersonal relations, an imbalanced power is perceived. Similarly, in Japan a bullying definition was proposed: "a type of aggressive behaviour made by a person, having a dominant status, behaviour which includes intentional behaviour causing mental disorders" (Morita & Kiyonaga, 1994; Morita, 1985).

The "bully" term covers a wide range of physical and verbal behaviours such as antisocial and aggressive components (e.g., insults, teasing, verbal

abuse, physical abuse, threats, humiliation, harassment, mobbing). Smith (1991) argues that the most succinct definition of bullying refers to abuse of power in a systematic, repeated and deliberate way, prone to occur in stable social groups having a hierarchical structure and a weak supervision system. Ireland and Archer (1996) said that such groups could be school classes, army and prisons.

Bullying prevalence in school environment: Empirical evidences

An American survey shows that more than 30% of the participants were involved in bullying process. Bullying acts occur with a higher frequency to students in grades six and eight comparing to those in nine and ten grades and that playground or classes are the places with the highest prevalence rates (Craig & Pepler, 2007). Furthermore, 32% of participants indicated that: (1) they hit once a colleague during school hours and (2) the places with higher risk of bullying are buses, taxis, toilets and shower cabins. Moreover, fifty percent of teachers surveyed had allowed bullying to occur, 60% of them were found guilty of sexual bullying, 5% of teachers and 16% of students have considered bullying as a harmless phenomenon.

Asamu (2006) argues that bullying behaviours are more commonly encountered in secondary schools at lower grades (junior class, 22.5%) and that 21% of male students were involved in manifested bullying acts.

Olweus (1993) have shown that approximately 10-15% of students are regularly abused in secondary school environments. Moreover, Cox (1991) showed that during 2001, 25% of students from grades 7 and 12 were bullying victims. Regarding the evolution of bullying during the school period, Cox (1991) showed on the one hand, that direct bullying increases in elementary school, it registers a plateau in secondary school and decreases in high-school, and on the other hand, that indirectly bullying increases with time. If in lower grades direct bullying manifests with a higher frequency, in higher grades indirect bullying has the highest prevalence. Regarding gender differences of those involved in bullying processes, Cox (1991) showed that boys rather than girls engaged in bullying behaviours.

Psychosocial consequences of the bullying phenomenon

In general, psychosocial consequences include: (1) negative emotional responses (i.e. frustration, stress, anger, confusion, powerlessness, depression, humiliation, fear, doubts about own person); (2) identity crisis; (3) health problems (i.e. anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder); (4) somatic problems due to chronic stress; (5) negative responses to school environment (i.e. isolation, feelings of injustice, dissatisfaction and negative performances); (6) counterproductive responses (i.e. revenge, avoidance and withdrawal) and (7) minimized efforts in the learning processes (Focs & Stallworh, 2010; Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Britton, 2005; Kay, 2005; Nofziger & Stein, 2006). These symptoms appear with a greater frequency in the case of girls.

Felix and McMahon (2006) stated that bullying affects psychological and physical safety of students and that it is associated with psychosocial disorders. Longitudinal studies revealed that bullying affects student's normal development (Pepler, Craig, Jiang, & Cronnolly, 2008). These studies suggested that there are long-term consequences in terms of adjustment problems. Individuals who experienced bullying in schools, later presented problems of professional integration in their work environments. Several studies have examined the consequences of bullying and noted that, due to bullying, the problems appeared in childhood can persist into later adulthood (Olweus, 1993).

Bullying affects the school climate, teacher's morale, and indirectly affects the student's abilities to perform in learning activities. Experiencing bullying over a longer period of time causes mental, academic and social problems. Generally, victims consider school as an unsafe place and develop various concerns regarding this place. Anxiety, as a consequence of bullying, can turn into a variety of other emotional and mental problems. Moreover, even those, not directly involved in bullying (e.g. witnesses), are also affected by this phenomenon. The uncertain climate in which they learn produces fear of not becoming themselves targets of bullying. Furthermore, studies revealed that somatic problems appeared due to manifested bullying: bullying victims have headaches, stomach, sleep and eating disorders (Williams, Chambers, Logan, & Robinson, 1996).

Through their longitudinal studies, Hubbard and Boyce (2007) revealed that bullying causes a series of psychosocial problems such as: (a) high levels of depression, (b) poor self-image and (c) a higher dependence on adults. In line with this, Bhagwanjee, Penning and Govender (2010) highlighted the link between bullying roles and symptoms of anxiety, depression, posttraumatic stress disorder, anger and dissociation. The results revealed medium to large correlations between bullying roles and the five variables mentioned above.

Longitudinal studies emphasized more important results: 60% of students in grades from six to nine, who had an aggressor role during school committed a crime before the age of 24 years in adulthood (Farrington, 1993).

Conclusions

Even though during the past twenty years a high number of intervention programs for school-bullying have been implemented, only a part of them have been successful. Bullying researchers highlighted the importance of knowing as many bullying issues and school related variables as needed to make the intervention programs more effective.

Researchers are more and more interested in studying places with higher probability of bullying occurrence. According to these studies, places with higher rates of bullying occurrence are: sport halls, school bathrooms, the playground, school cafeteria, buses, and, of course classrooms.

In everyday life, the group represents the most important context in one's personal development. For children the family represents the first group where they learn the first behavioural and attitudinal norms. The school context represents a secondary group where they learn how to behave and communicate with others in the community. Any destructive factor appeared in school groups represents a real problem for a student's normal development.

The bullying occurrence in schools represents an old phenomenon. This was the reality of schools for a long period of time. Researchers started to investigate the problem since 1980 when Olweus started his first study in Norway. Some studies revealed that teachers are not aware of this reality and if they know about the phenomenon they will ignore it. Other studies revealed, not only that teachers know about the presence of the phenomenon in their

classes, but also that they contribute to its manifestation by not doing anything to stop it.

Its gravity is revealed through its social and psychological implications. In general, bullying victims are anxious, depressive, isolated and with low self-esteem. These characteristics impact not only the present time but also future activities. Longitudinal studies revealed that: (1) those who have experienced bullying in schools later in adulthood had integration problems in work contexts and (2) 60% of those who aggressed their class-mates in schools in adulthood committed a crime. Furthermore, those who assisted to bullying had psychological problems. They have experienced anxiety, fearing not becoming themselves targets of bullying.

Along with psychological problems there are also some social problems included. Students that have experienced bullying developed fear toward the school environment and refused attending school classes. The school-abandon rates have increased as a consequence of manifested bullying. There were cases where students had to change the school in order to continue their studies.

In conclusion, a group characterized by bullying acts, fails to accomplish its main goal: to help students develop their own personality. From this point of view, bullying can be seen as a destructive factor for the normal group functionality and for the group development.

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