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PSYCHOLOGY OF BULLYING

Abstract. According to World Health Organization 30 percentage of teenagers who have been diagnosed with long time depression were bulling victims. Bullying is a distinctive pattern of harming and humiliating others, specifically those who are in some way smaller, weaker, younger or in any way more vulnerable than the bully. Bullying is not garden-variety aggression; it is a deliberate and repeated attempt to cause harm to others of lesser power. Many studies show that bullies lack prosocial behavior, are untroubled by anxiety, and do not understand others' feelings. They typically see themselves quite positively. Those who chronically bully have strained relationships with parents and peers. Electronic bullying has become a significant problem in the past decade. The ubiquity of hand-held and other devices affords bullies any-time access to their prey, and harassment can often be carried out anonymously. Bullies couldn't exist without victims, and they don't pick on just anyone; those singled out lack assertiveness and radiate fear long before they ever encounter a bully. No one likes a bully, but no one likes a victim either. Grown-up bullies wreak havoc in their relationships and in the workplace. Bullying is a social phenomenon that transcends gender, age, and culture. While there are wide ranges in the definition of the term, *bullying* is essentially characterized by one or several individuals aggressing on a vulnerable peer, primarily to assert control or power. We undoubtedly see the victims of these behaviors in our practices—whether they disclose their plights or not. In this article, we discuss the potential psychological and somatic consequences of bullying, which may emerge in psychiatric as well as primary care settings. A number of studies have examined the psychological consequences in the aftermath of frequent bullying. One consequence is compromised social development. In a Korean study of seventh- and eighth-grade students, investigators found that being bullied contributed to an increased risk of social problems. In this study, social problems were described as acting younger than one's age, being overly dependent on adults, and behaving socially immature-all factors that heighten the risk of social isolation within the peer group.

Key words: bulling, aggression, prosocial behavior.

First in Scandinavia, then in England, Japan, the Netherlands, Canada, and finally, the United States, researchers have begun scrutinizing the phenomenon of bullying.

To understand the behavior of bullies is to see how aggression is learned and how well the lesson is taken to heart. The existence of bullies tells us that the social needs of human beings are vastly undervalued, at least in Western culture. For the social life of kids, often thought as an accessory to childhood, turns out to be crucial to healthy development. In the long run, bullying can be a way-a desperate and damaging way-for some people to maintain a circle of human contacts [1].

And bullying always has a very long run. Bullying may begin in childhood, but it continues into adulthood; it is among the most stable of human behavior styles.

There is no standard definition of a bully, but Dan Olweus has honed the definition to three core elements-bullying involves a pattern of repeated aggressive behavior with negative intent directed from one child to another where there is a power difference. There's either a larger child or several children picking on one, or a child who is clearly more dominant (as opposed to garden-variety aggression, where there may be similar acts but between two people of equal status). By definition, the bully's target has difficulty defending him- or herself, and the bully's aggressive behavior is intended to cause distress, observes Olweus, professor of psychology at the University of Bergen.

The chronicity of bullying is one of its more intriguing features. It is the most obvious clue that there comes to be some kind of a social relationship between a bully and his victims - and most bullies are boys, while victims are equally girls and boys. And it suggests that, contrary to parents' beliefs, bullying is not a problem that sorts itself out naturally.

The aggression can be physical-pushes and shoves and hitting, kicking, and punching. Or it can be verbal-name-calling, taunts, threats, ridicule, and insults. Bullies not only say mean things to you, they say mean things about you to others. Often enough, the intimidation that starts with a fist is later accomplished with no more than a nasty glance. The older bullies get, the more their aggression takes the form of verbal threats and abuse.

Figures differ from study to study, from country to country, and especially from school to school, but from 15 to 20 percent of children are involved in bullying more than once or twice a term, either as bullies or victims. In one Canadian study, 15 percent of students reported that they bullied others more than once or twice during the term. According to large-scale studies Olweus conducted in Norway in 1983, 7 percent of students bullied others "with some regularity" But since then, bully problems have increased. By 1991, they had gone up a whopping 30 percent [2].

Bullies, for the most part, are different from you and me. Studies reliably show that they have a distinctive cognitive make-up-a hostile attributional bias, a kind of paranoia. They perpetually attribute hostile intentions to others. The trouble is, they perceive provocation where it does not exist. That comes to justify their aggressive behavior. Say someone bumps them and they drop a book. Bullies don't see it as an accident; they see it as a call to arms. These children act aggressively because they process social information inaccurately. They endorse revenge.

That allows them a favorable attitude toward violence and the use of violence to solve problems. Whether they start out there or get there along the way, bullies come to believe that aggression is the best solution to conflicts. They also have a strong need to dominate, and derive satisfaction from injuring others. Bullies lack what psychologists call prosocial behavior - they do not know how to relate to others. No prosocial attitudes hold them in check; they do not understand the feelings of others and thus come to deny others' suffering.

Bullies are also untroubled by anxiety, an emotion disabling in its extreme form but in milder form the root of human restraint. What may be most surprising is that bullies see themselves quite positively - which may be because they are so little aware of what others truly think of them. Indeed, a blindness to the feelings of others permeates their behavioral style and outlook.

Every attempt to trace aggression to its roots indicates that it starts in the preschool years and thrives in elementary and middle school. Up to grade six, Olweus reports, bullies are of average popularity. They tend to have two or three friends-largely other aggressive kids. And it's their physical strength other kids admire. As they get older, though, their popularity with classmates wanes; by high school they are hanging out only with other toughs. They may get what they want through aggression, and be looked up to for being tough, but they are not liked [2].

If their self-confidence survives increasing rejection by peers, it may be because bullies are unable to perceive themselves correctly in social situations, a part of their social blindness. Reports child psychologist Melissa DeRosier, Ph.D., of the University of North Carolina: "Bullies are clueless as to how little they are liked. They are out of touch with what kids think." As something of a threat to others, they are not likely to learn just exactly how other kids feel about them. And with their deficits in social cognition, they certainly don't see the impact of their own behavior on others [3].

It's possible that bullying is not the same in all the world's cultures and those American children suffer more severely at the hands of bullies-a suggestion borne out by the fact that bullies register less popular with peers here, especially as they get older, than they do in Scandinavia. There may be an intensity to bullying here that does not exist elsewhere. Dominance may be more valued; competition more accepted. Victimization may be more extreme. This intensity has many observers worried because violence is worsening in the U.S. and other countries. While that doesn't necessarily mean bullying is getting worse, there are disturbing signals. "Clinically, I see an increment in the aggressive fantasies kids now bring to therapy," confides Schwartz. "They talk about their dolls tearing the skin off each other."

Bullying exists, to greater or lesser degrees, in virtually every Westernized culture. It is a serious problem in Japan. It happens in China. No one knows for sure, because the same methodology has not been applied in every country, but there may be more bullies per capita in the U.S., England, Canada, and Ireland than in other countries. And bullyings not partial to cities; if anything, it’s more common in the one-room schoolhouse than in urban settings [4,5].

But no matter where they live, bullies find one place especially congenial to their nefarious activities: school. Most bullying occurs on the school playground, especially its unsupervised corners, and in the long and crowded corridors of most schools. Above all else, says Dan Olweus, bullying is a school problem.

It's not that bullying worsens at adolescence; in fact, it tends to lessen. But that's when sensitivity to rejection by peers takes a painful leap forward. Curtis Taylor probably could have told you that.

Up until about age seven, studies suggest, bullies pick on anyone. After that, they single out specific kids to prey on. And those bullied at one age tend to be bullied later on. Olweus calls them "whipping boys." Even the term is searing. Between ages eight and 16, about 8 or 9 percent of kids are the consistent targets of bullies.

And, says Illinois's Gary Ladd, bullies engage in a "shopping process" to find them. At the beginning of the school year, when children do not know each other well, about 22 percent of children report having a victimization experience on more than a moderate level, Ladd finds. But by the end of the school year, only 8 percent of kids wind up being regularly singled out by bullies. About half of all kids are victimized at least once a year [7].

Moreover, the younger a child, the more likely he or she is to experience aggression at the hands of peers. For if there's one thing bullies do, it's pick on children who are younger and smaller than they are. And weaker. Most bullies are physically strong and they specifically seek out kids who are ill-equipped to fight back.

Those who become targets also bear a particular set of psychological characteristics. They are more sensitive, cautious, and quiet than other kids, Olweus finds, and more anxious. They also have a negative view of violence. It's not just that they're non aggressive, for lots of kids are non aggressive. But these kids withdraw from confrontations of any kind and cry when attacked. They radiate what one researcher calls "an anxious vulnerability." Faced with conflict, they are gripped with fear. Their fearfulness and physical weakness probably set them up.

"The big question," says Ladd, "is where does victimization start. Do kids emit signals for others to test them? Or is it that bullies pick out those they see they can dominate?" He finds clues in the fact that some kids are victimized later in the school year but not early on. "Something increases their likelihood of being picked on—probably, vulnerabilities revealed in a class environment. Maybe they don't do well in gym, or fumble a reading task." [9]

And they easily acquiesce to the demands of bullies: They cry and assume defensive postures. Not only do they not fight back, they hand over their possessions - handsomely rewarding their attackers psychologically and materially - powerfully reinforcing them. The reinforcement is double: Bullies are unlikely to be punished by retaliation.

It's one thing to be submissive when challenged, but researchers now know that the children who become bully victims are submissive even before they're picked on. At Vanderbilt University, where he is a research associate, child psychologist David Schwartz conducted a novel study of children, none of whom knew each other at the outset. He silently monitored and videotaped them in a series of play sessions. "Even in the first two sessions, before bully-victim situations develop, these kids behaved submissively," Schwartz reports.

In nonconfrontational situations they showed themselves to be "pervasively nonassertive." Schwartz catalogues the ways. They didn't make overtures to others, didn't initiate conversation. They made no attempts to verbally persuade their peers - no demands, requests, or even suggestions. They were thoroughly socially incompetent, spending time in passive play, playing parallel to their peers, rather than with them.

Being submissive in non aggressive contexts kicks off a dizzying downward spiral of events. It sets them up as easy targets. "It seems to mark these kids for later victimization," says Schwartz. "And that only made them more submissive." Here's the catch - being victimized leads to feeling bad, feeling anxious, which then increases vulnerability to further victimization. This is the spiral Curtis Taylor couldn't - and shouldn't have been expected to - untangle by himself [7].

To say that victims are socially incompetent is not to say that they are to blame for the aggressive behavior of bullies. It is simply to recognize that certain patterns of social behavior make some children vulnerable, say investigators. After all, even the most passive child isn't victimized unless there's a bully in the room.

Just as certain as there will always be a bully around, victimization can lead to a host of social-psychological difficulties. No one likes a bully, but no one likes a victim either. The failure - or inability - of victims to stick up for themselves seems to make other kids highly uncomfortable. After all, says Ladd, "part of growing up is learning how to stick up for yourself." Gradually, whipping boys become more and more isolated from their peers. While bullying is painful, it is the social isolation that probably is most damaging to victims. An emerging body of research shows that social isolation, to say nothing of active rejection, is a severe form of stress for humans to endure. And rejection deprives these kids of the very opportunities they need to acquire and practice social competence.

Victims are rejected not only by the bullies but typically by other peers as well. Few children like them; many dislike them. In answering questionnaires they confide they are very lonely. They typically develop a negative view of school and hate going. They suffer headaches, stomachaches, and other somatic complaints. "We ask them how they feel in school," Ladd reports. "It's clear they're pretty unhappy. They want to get away from that environment."