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Child Abuse & Neglect



Practical Strategies

Let's prevent peer victimization, not just bullying[☆]

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This commentary argues that it is time to make bullying less of the central concept in efforts to combat peer victimization.

Bullying has been a pivotal concept in the mobilization of effort in recent years to create safe environments for children. It has highlighted a phenomenon that seems to have universal resonance and is recognized internationally (Jimerson, Swearer, & Espelage, 2010). Prevalence for bullying has been measured in many countries, overall assessed as involving about 10% of the school aged population in its chronic form (Molcho et al., 2009). It is associated with serious outcomes (Klomeck et al., 2009) and is higher among abused children (Mohapatra et al., 2010). Public policy efforts are being made in many place to combat its occurrence and its effects (Howlett, 2011; Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, 2011; Salmivalli, Karna, & Poskiparta, 2011).

Much of the early pioneering work on this was done by the Norwegian psychologist Dan Olweus (Olweus, 1993). Olweus recognized that there was much peer conflict, and wished to highlight the most damaging part of the spectrum out of concern that not all of it was of equal seriousness. So he established the convention of defining bullying as incidents that involved not only aggression, but repeated aggression in a relationship where there was a power imbalance.

In Olweus' formulation: "When we talk about bullying, these things happen *repeatedly* and it is *difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself*. We also call it bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a mean and hurtful way. But we *do not call it bullying* when the teasing is done in a friendly and playful way. Also, it is *not bullying* when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight" (Olweus, 2007, p. 2).

This formulation has prompted a lot of useful research, and has been embraced by parents, educators and policy makers as demarcating a phenomenon of clear practical utility. Useful as this concept has been, however, it has a number of limitations that have not been resolved even though the field has been active and growing for more than 30 years.

Excludes serious peer aggression. Perhaps the biggest problem is what the formal definition of bullying excludes. So while it excludes trivial conflicts among peers, it also excludes very serious acts of aggression. A peer who whacks a schoolmate

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with a baseball bat and sends him to the hospital –this is not technically bullying if it occurs only once or if there was no pre-existing power differential. A student who sexually assaults another student– this is not technically bullying if it only happens once.

But the reality is that when schools adopt “bullying prevention” programs, they are trying to target and eliminate all interpersonal aggression, the bat assault and the sexual assault included, not simply the repeated aggression in unequal relationships. Teachers and peers are taught to recognize and interrupt all aggression. Why would researchers and practitioners who wish to improve child safety want to exclude or de-emphasize such serious acts?

Technical definition at odds with usage. Related to this, of course, is the fact that in colloquial usage, the technical definition of bullying has not caught on. It is used primarily among experts and researchers. When asked if they have been bullied, most students will think about the time someone was mean to them or teased them or threatened them, whether or not it was repeated and whether or not it was in an unequal relationship (Vaillancourt et al., 2008). “Jack was bullying me,” is a complaint a student might easily make about any nastiness they may experience from another child. Bullying also turns out to be a very hard concept to translate into some other languages, and may even have different meanings in different subcultures within the US (Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefvoog, 2002).

Even experts and researchers have not always sustained the technical definition of bullying as they have developed the field. For example, there is a rapidly growing literature and prevention effort around what has been termed “cyber-bullying” (Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, n.d.). But in the case of much of the meanness and harassment that has been referred to as cyber-bullying, it is not even possible to know who the instigator is let alone whether this person is more powerful or is repeating their insults. So here again the term bullying has shucked its official definition, and come to mean any belligerence, threat or harassment that occurs online.

Although efforts are underway by organizations such as the Center for Disease Control to develop a standard definition of bullying, it is not clear that consensus will be reached, or that the loose usage of the term will be curtailed by whatever experts do. This likely means on-going wrangling among parents, school officials, students and researchers over whether something is or is not bullying. This would be important if we were sure that it made a difference whether something was officially bullying or not (and not just an assault), but since we do not know whether it truly makes a difference (see below), such wrangling may just waste time.

Power imbalance difficult to define. A third problem with the bullying concept, and perhaps one that lies behind its squishiness, is the difficulty of defining clearly what a “power imbalance” is. It is often described as someone who is bigger, stronger or more popular. But these features are not always in alignment. If a stronger but less popular girl repeatedly intimidates a weaker but popular boy, is the controlling dimension popularity, gender or physical strength? Is all aggression by boys against girls eligible to be bullying, and no aggression by girls against boys?

Note that Olweus himself complicates the problem when, in his questionnaires, he translates the power imbalance concept into the phrase, “it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself” (Olweus, 1996). Taken literally, this phrase itself does admit the possibility that we can recognize an incident in which a student was bullied, but was nonetheless still able to defend himself or herself, raising the question of why that should not also be called bullying. But in addition, a student may have difficulty defending himself for many reasons— surprise, fatigue, a commitment to non-violence, not just a power imbalance. Moreover, it is often difficult after aggression gets started to know whether there was a pre-existing power imbalance. Once someone has aggressed against you or beaten you in a fight you may be legitimately intimidated by them, but that may not mean that a power imbalance existed initially. Given these ambiguities, it is not surprising that the power imbalance component of bullying is widely ignored by parents, teachers and students and even by researchers, who do not have the leisure to fully assess the quality of the relationship (Austin & Joseph, 1996; Espelage & Holt, 2001). They simply call bullying episodes of repeated aggression. It is a disadvantage to organize a field around a concept whose definition is so difficult to pin point.

Distinctions among aggression contexts need an empirical foundation. Although all forms of aggression are worth preventing, Olweus is no doubt justified in his goal of highlighting some as more serious than others, given how common aggression is. But should power imbalance be the main dimension to attend to? It needs to be kept in mind that the bullying concept is in reality currently only a hypothesis. It is a hypothesis that peer episodes characterized by repetition and power imbalance have a special seriousness and commonality that deem them worthy of special attention. In recent writing, Olweus (2010) has re-emphasized his allegiance to this power imbalance concept, pointing to research showing that aggression combined with power imbalance can have more negative effects (Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2007). This is important research. But it does not answer the question of whether there are other equally serious types of peer aggression (demarcated by other criteria, for example, the use of a weapon or having sexual content) that should be highlighted along with power imbalance. So even evidence that power imbalance results in more harm is not an argument for limiting the definition of serious peer aggression to only such episodes.

By contrast, a more empirical and scientific approach often adopted in aggression research has been to define acts and behaviors in a broad fashion, and then to study the various contextual features that make such acts in some situations and relationships more harmful than others. Such contextual features can include the specific acts, the statuses of the actors and the type of relationship in which the aggression occurs. In the bullying field, unfortunately, whole categories of behaviors have been excluded a priori and not even studied.

It is important to note that in a number of related fields, an initially narrow, advocacy concept was expanded to allow a more empirical definition of seriousness, based on research and clinical experience. For example, the initial mobilization

around rape and rape prevention gave way to the broader terms sexual assault and sexual violence, in recognition of the harmfulness of many non-penetrative forms of sex offense (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). The research has shown that penetration is indeed associated with increased levels of seriousness (Finkelhor, Araji, Browne, Doyle Peters, & Wyatt, 1986), but it has also shown serious impact from non-penetrative acts which led to the use of a broader term than rape. Similarly, the initial focus on wife abuse gave way to a more general emphasis on spouse abuse and intimate partner violence, which includes dating violence (Saltzman, Fanslow, McMahon, & Shelley, 2002). Women may be generally at a disadvantage in spousal aggression, but research has established that some men are harmed, and other elements as well can play a role, which again led to a broader concept.

The lesson of these fields, applicable to bullying as well, is that peer victimization should be studied intensively to understand what contributes to harm, but that an a priori attempt to demarcate the concept may be an obstacle rather than a facilitator of progress.

Bullying imposes a school environment bias. A final problem with the bullying concept is that its research tradition is almost entirely limited to the school environment. Olweus' studies and instruments are concentrated on bullying in schools, as is almost all the other research. However, research on peer victimization shows that close to half of peer victimization episodes happen outside of school (Turner, Finkelhor, Hamby, Shattuck, & Ormrod, 2011). While the concept of bullying can in principle be generalized to apply to non-school aggression, in practice this has not happened. So the dominance of the bullying concept has also resulted in an overemphasis on schools, to the detriment of serious forms of peer aggression like dating abuse and sibling abuse that do not happen often in school. For research and advocacy to embrace this considerable problem of extra-school peer victimization, it may need to adopt another concept that is not so intrinsically linked to schools alone.

An alternative approach

One alternative approach is to call the domain of interest peer victimization and peer aggression. Victimization can be defined as harm caused by other persons, in this case, peers, acting outside of the norms of appropriate conduct (Finkelhor, 2008). Aggression can be defined as acts intended or perceived as intended to cause harm. Most peer victimization is aggression, but some acts like the stealing of property or some sexual offenses, such as flashing, are not necessarily intended to harm, but rather are selfish and entitled acts that violate norms of appropriate conduct.

Peer victimization and aggression can also be subcategorized along 2 dimensions: the violative behavior that is involved, and the relationship context.

Type of violative behavior. This dimension can be delineated in terms of some concepts that already have a long conceptual and research history. On the one hand, there is *peer violence*. Violence is well defined in the literature as physical acts intended to cause pain or injury and includes hitting, punching, kicking and hitting with objects to cause harm. There is also *property offense*, which is the intentional destruction or damaging of property (vandalism) or the taking of property without permission and refusal to return it (theft). There is also sexual victimization, which is nonconsensual touching to certain parts of the body, as well as nonconsensual witnessing and exposure, and sexually demeaning verbal behavior (Basile & Saltzman, 2002). Then there is *psychological or emotional victimization*—the hardest part to define—which involves words or actions intended to cause emotional pain. These are often operationalized by phrases such as “saying you are not wanted,” “calling you names,” “making threats,” “starting rumors or telling lies about you.” In the child maltreatment literature, attempts have been made to subcategorize emotional abuse: for example, Garbarino's rejecting, isolating, terrorizing, ignoring, and corrupting (Garbarino & Garbarino, 1986).

Among the other behavior features that are typically studied in aggression research are the use of objects and weapons, the frequency of occurrence, the resulting of physical injury and how much fear was provoked in the victim.

Relationship context. The second dimension of peer victimization and aggression is relationship context. A possibly useful distinction in this dimension may be between explicit and implicit relationship statuses. Explicit relationship statuses include sibling, dating partner, gang opponents, ethnic/racial grouping, friend, and acquaintance, all of which have been proposed as important subcategories of peer victimization and aggression. They are relatively apparent and somewhat static. Implicit relationship statuses include differences in popularity, in economic status, academic status that may be less apparent and need familiarity with the context to ascertain. A key challenge for the field is to establish some of the more harmful categories of peer victimization and aggression based on the behaviors and relationship context.

The peer victimization and aggression approach has been critiqued by Olweus, however. One problem of considerable concern to him about this approach is that minor episodes will be counted and made to seem more serious than they are. He cites as an example: “teasing. . . done in a friendly and playful way” (Olweus, 2007). But the peer victimization and aggression definitions can exclude such acts by emphasizing that to qualify as victimization the acts have to be intended to cause harm, and playful and friendly teasing is clearly not so intended. Similarly, Olweus and other bullying researchers are concerned that broader definitions like peer victimization and aggression will not exclude what that they refer to as “mere conflict.” But conflict and arguing are also not about trying to cause harm, but are disagreeing over who is right or has access to some good or privilege. They are also excluded by an intent to harm requirement.

Olweus also prefers bullying because he wants to exclude: “when two students of about the same strength or power argue or fight” (Olweus, 2007, p. 2). Physical fighting, by contrast, is about trying to cause physical harm, and it is not clear why a

safety program to prevent harm and improve interpersonal relations would not want to target physical fighting whether or not it was between those who are equally strong or powerful or equally weak and powerless.

Olweus is also concerned that defining victimization too broadly will lead to the mistaken conclusion that all aggressors are also victims (Olweus, 2010). But this is not an insurmountable difficulty. If we wish to define and identify classes of youth who are primarily aggressors and primarily victims, it is easy enough to define thresholds of frequency of victimization and aggression that identify separate groups. Note that the orthodox bullying literature too has not escaped the need to define some children simultaneous bullies and victims, who are referred to as bully-victims (Marini, Dane, Bosacki, & YLC-CURA, 2006; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). Moreover, the conclusion that aggressors suffer more victimization than non-aggressors may be an important lesson to learn about aggressors.

Conclusion

This commentary is not a proposal to abandon the bullying concept and the plausible hypothesis it asserts that power imbalance and repetition make for some particularly serious, enduring, and harmful kinds of peer victimization. Given its popularity and incorporation into law, such an effort would be futile. Continuing research to specify and understand the dynamics and impact of this phenomenon has great potential.

But we would propose that researchers and advocates, especially those working on “bullying,” increasingly emphasize that the domain of interest is “peer victimization and aggression” or “peer victimization, aggression and bullying,” explaining that it goes beyond bullying to include peer sexual assault, dating violence, gang violence and single episode assaults. As rape has come to be understood as a subcategory of sexual assault, the more common term in recent years, so bullying would be recognized as a subcategory of the more commonly used peer victimization.

Overall, the peer victimization concept has much more openness and flexibility. It would seem to provide a more empirical and less constrained and less problematic foundation for a field that is looking for to become more systematic and evidence based.

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