

BULLYING AND EMOTIONAL MANIPULATION IN CLASSROOM ENVIRONMENT

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Abstract:

School bullying, as a form of victimization, is distinguished by its intentionality, power differential, and repetition. It is a form of psychological manipulation, more subtle and thus more sinister than physical acts alone. Types of bullying encompass verbal, physical, and relational aggression. This has been exacerbated by cyberbullying, which has provided children with a level of anonymity to engage in their vicious campaigns outside the walls of the school. They are reinforced by the peer context within which these behaviours are employed and flourish in unsupportive school cultures. The stakes are high and irreversible. The effects of victimization on both disengagement and achievement suggest that victimization represents a risk factor for school dropout. Psychological symptoms include anxiety, depression, social isolation, and somatic symptoms. Such trauma may also impact the functioning of the stress response system and increase risk for the students' psychopathology. Therefore, the school leadership should focus on establishing a supportive school environment to the learning activity of the students.

Keywords: *Bullying, Emotional Manipulation, Coercion, School Climate, Cyberbullying*

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Introduction:

School bullying is a severe problem and it is defined by a deliberate act of aggression, a power differential, and repetition (Olweus, 2013). It is not only necessarily physical, but also subtler forms of psychological manipulation and control can be more severe. Coercion occurs when power is exerted over students to do something against their will through some kind of threat or intimidatory act; this propels the bully into enforcing their will on others, whether for compliance or property (Babad, 2009). Indeed, the emotionally manipulative behaviour described in later forms of peer abuse is advanced fare; it includes relational aggression, which involves using relational methods to harm others, and gaslighting, which causes victims to doubt their own sanity (Crick et al., 2006; Sweet, 2019).

These behaviours are grounded in the social learning theory of aggression, which posits that aggression is learned and maintained through observed imitation and the receipt of rewards, such as prestige (Bandura, 2002). In a related process, the school social ecology provides an arena for peer contagion, and thus, reinforcement of these types of coercive dynamics occurs within peer groups on school grounds (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). Cyberbullying has become a new form of bullying as a result of the prevalence of digital media today. This bullying damages its victims, created by strangers with anonymized or potentially unlimited access to them (Ansary, 2020; Kowalski, 2008). The impact of these experiences underscores the urgent need for science based, multitiered prevention and intervention strategies to protect student populations.

Conceptual Frameworks of Bullying, Coercion, and Emotional Control:

Aggression in the school context is a multifaceted construct that requires the clarification of the conceptual distinctions. At the root is bullying, which Olweus (2013) characterizes as a form of aggression that is intentional, repetitive, and power-imbalanced. This power need not be a physical one and might also be linked to elevated social status, popularity, or ability in the realm of verbal repartee – all factors that complicate the defense of victims. Bullying can be overt, including physical assault or verbal insults, or relational, including ostracism and rumor- spreading.

Coercion is a major contributing mechanism to the process of bullying. Coercion is described by Babad (2009) as the manipulation and use of threats to control the behaviour of others and engender compliance, or to force people against their will. In schools this might mean a request for property or services under the implicit or overt threat of an “if not” – the physical absence or social isolation if the order is not obeyed. It reinforces a context of fear and compliance that often increases through peer contagion in social networks (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011).

Still more insidious are emotional control and psychological manipulation, which serves to undermine a victim’s mental health and social honor. One form is relational aggression, which is intended to harm peers’ relationships with, and feelings of acceptance by, others via attempts to socially ostracize peers, spread rumors about or otherwise manipulate the friendships of peers (Crick et al., 2006). Gaslighting, meanwhile, involves “a series of manipulations that cause the victim to doubt him/herself and believe that their perception of reality is inaccurate” (Sweet, 2019) and is a more severe variation of disinformation warfare. The objective is to wear down self-confidence and instill psychic dependence.

This pattern of behaviour is expressed in many ways. Physical bullying such as hitting and kicking are the most obvious. The psychological harm produced by verbal violence in the form of name-calling and threats can also be internalized, as youth may become more likely to accept the negative self-concept. Relational aggression can be hard for parents or teachers to observe as it is much more covert than other behaviours, but is often particularly powerful during adolescence. Finally, cyberbullying is the use of digital technology in order to harass others (Kowalski, 2008). Specific features of cyber aggression, such as the constant and global presence of online content, its perceived permanence, and the anonymity of offenders, can exacerbate its psychologically damaging nature of the cruelty, and the humiliation that characterizes it (Ansary, 2020; Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Identity is also related to experiences of bullying. But, studies have revealed gendered trends such that boys report higher levels of physical victimization while girls report higher levels of relational aggression (Smith et al., 2019). Plus, those already in more vulnerable populations such as LGBTQ+ youth are also over-represented in identity-based victimization exposures, and also face unique psychological risks (Rivers, 2011). This highlights that bullying is not a uniform

experience, but rather a gendered and social process (Mishna et al., 2020).

Dynamics of Coercion within School Settings:

Coercion is identified by the use of these power differentials, in the form of threats and social consequences. It coerces students into action against its' will, from requesting homework to ostracizing students. Peer contagion is a primary driver of this process, facilitating the spread and amplification of these coercive processes within peer groups (Dishion & Tipsord, 2011). This can also be used as a psychological weapon, generating fear in onlookers that they themselves will be the next victim should they step in front of the abuser or notify authorities (Jenkins & Nickerson, 2017). It is indeed also linked to the broader school climate. In areas where teachers are viewed as detached, unsupportive and unfair, coercion can flourish (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Pelletier, 2008). The discrepancy in follow-through can indicate to the bullies that their behaviour is acceptable, and victims lose faith in reporting the incident. In contrast, a favorable school climate represents one of the most substantial buffers. As long as there are clear norms, high levels of teacher-student connection, and high staff collective efficacy, students feel that reporting will result in fair action (Nickerson, 2019). Such a support system is inherently antithetical to the power dynamic that coercion relies on, thereby making the learning environment more secure for all students.

Emotional Control and Psychological Manipulation:

While coercion is premised on overt pressure, emotional control functions through psychological coercion. This is often even more damaging because it is hidden and it attacks the core of the victim's identity. Specifically, relational aggression is the most common form of aggression. The psychological wound is created because day in and day out, the individual is being systematically ostracized, otherwise sometimes known as being "passed by." The perpetrator uses rumors to make other peers dislike the victim, or body language to display contempt. Indeed, Crick et al. (2006) found that relational aggression is a distinct predictor of subsequent internalizing symptoms, including depression and social anxiety, apart from the influence of physical aggression.

Gaslighting is a more extreme and pathological form of emotional control. As outlined by Sweet (2019), gaslighting is “a master manipulator insist that a victim is simply mistaken about his or her own reality”. In a school context, this looks like a bully asserting without emotion that the event of exclusion never took place, convincing the victim that a harsh joke was “all in good fun”, or systematically distorting accounts in ways that characterized the victim as either unstable or untruthful. The overall result of this type of manipulation is a confused, utterly dependent, and emotionally insecure individual. Because they cannot trust their own reality and because they are not heard, they are isolated and become emotionally numbed and paralyzed, therefore even less likely to resist or seek help.

The extended manipulation of one’s emotions carries with it much psychological trauma. As a result, the experience of the victims likely includes a generalized feeling of social insecurity, chronic anxiety and hypervigilant temperament (Pörhölä et al., 2019). The strain of chronic exposure to this hostile social environment has biological implications; Vaillancourt et al.(2013), provide a context for the biology of peer victimization, explaining that chronic stress can alter the function of the body’s stress response systems including the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis. This neurobiological effect accounts for the real-world emotional distress of psychological bullying by showing how it directly impacts the mind by translating into veritable, long-term concerns for mental and physical health, that is, by making bullied adolescents more likely to be depressed and anxious adults (Copeland et al., 2013; Zwierzyńska et al., 2013).

Role of Technology on Coercion and Control:

Bullying has been significantly exacerbated by digital technology, greatly increasing coercion and emotional control. Because of the specific harmful characteristics of cyberbullying, it is a unique form of the behaviour (Kowalski et al., 2014). Technology is a force multiplier of this pandemic, as when perpetrators can hide their identity, inhibitions to act disappear, and they feel emboldened to threaten and blackmail women without risk of impunity (Ansary, 2020). Digital communication is also accessible 24/7, which prevents individuals from retreating to a safe space and, therefore, leads to a sense of helplessness (Kowalski et al., 2019).

Emotional manipulation through online media can also be heightened. Her personal information and rumors about her can be spread to a broad audience, much to her social detriment (Patchin & Hinduja, 2013). Their use of deliberate digital exclusion and online gaslighting – in which the user refutes having sent the abusive messages, such as gaslighting- systematically undermines a victim’s reality. Moreover, the effects are pronounced; cyber-victimization has been significantly linked to greater chances of depression, anxiety, and suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). The combination of in-person and online victimization has a “double whammy” effect that causes the worst psychological outcomes among victims (Li et al., 2024).

Academic and Psychological Consequences:

The academic and psychological impact of bullying and coercion is a lasting one. Rule infractions have a direct, negative impact on academic engagement and performance. Bullying is consistently associated with decreasing Grade Point Averages (Juvonen et al., 2011) via heightened anxiety that leads to an increase in school avoidance and inability to concentrate (Hutzell & Payne, 2012). Among the most influential factors is undoubtedly the loss of student’s school belonging; “as students become isolated and unsafe, it creates motivation to learn, which in turn affects performance” (Huang, 2022). The cumulative impact of these events increases the probability of eventually dropping out of school (Cornell et al., 2013), and longitudinal research indicates that peer victimization negatively affects academic success at school into early adulthood (Frick et al., 2024). The psychological damage is extensive. Victims are at high risk of developing internalizing problems such as psychosomatic symptoms (headaches and sleep troubles) (Gini & Pozzoli, 2013) as well as chronic loneliness, social anxiety, and clinical depression (Zwierzynska et al., 2013). The long-term news is even more terrifying; bullying can impact a person for decades to come. Two influential longitudinal studies showed that victims were particularly susceptible to developing anxiety disorders, depression, and suicidal ideation in young adulthood (Copeland et al., 2013). Coercive control and its forms can within intimate partner relationships produce psychological trauma and poor adult outcomes in affected individuals, such as financial struggles and an inability to sustain relationships (Wolke & Lereya, 2015). Most critically, traditional and cyber victimization represent well-established risk factors for suicidal ideation and behaviour among children and adolescents (Gini & Espelage, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2019). These findings point to the

fact that “once victimized,” the experience of being victimized shapes the course of the individual’s development in that it leaves a “lasting legacy of anxiety” that remains long after the experience has passed.

Conclusion:

Ultimately, bullying, coercion, and emotional manipulation through schooling have devastating and long-term educational and psychological effects on youth. Due to all-encompassing cyberbullying and the covert and hidden nature of psychological manipulation, this is a very serious and dangerous problem that requires immediate attention and a comprehensive solution. Prevention must also focus on evidence-based, multi-tiered approaches to create positive school environments, provide teacher-student support, and empower bystanders to take action. In reality, the matter cannot be framed as an ideal – it is a necessity; it is the number one responsibility to guarantee the welfare of students and to eliminate the continuum of peer victimization and the disastrous outcomes it has on students in the long-term.

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