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Bullying May Be Fueled by the Desperate Need to Belong

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Abstract

Human beings have a fundamental need to belong, for ongoing positive interactions with others who provide companionship and caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995). Children may hit, exclude, or harass others electronically because when their own needs for belongingness are threatened, or when they want to enhance their own status, they lash out and hurt others in the way they think will be most painful, by engaging in behaviors that undermine the target's sense of belongingness. For reasons discussed below, children and adolescents might be especially vulnerable to desperate needs for belongingness. Viewing bullying as motivated by the need to belong has profound implications for prevention and intervention programs to reduce bullying.

From the time when young children learn to walk and talk, most (at least sometimes) hurt others physically (Tremblay et al., 1999), by hitting, kicking, biting and shoving, and socially (Crick, Casas, & Moshier, 1997), by social exclusion, friendship manipulation, and spreading rumors. These physically and socially aggressive behaviors are characterized as bullying when they chronically occur between the same perpetrators and victims and when there is an imbalance of power between the aggressor and the victim (Olweus, 1978). As children mature, online communication offers a context for experiencing connectedness with peers, but also a venue for engaging in bullying. Cyberbullying is defined as "intentional behavior aimed at harming another person or persons through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices, and perceived as aversive by the victim" (Schoffstall & Cohen, 2011, p. 588).

Many theories for why children and adolescents engage in bullying focus on individual characteristics, most of which are deficits: inadequate parental socialization (Baldry, 2003, Bauer et al., 2006), difficult temperament (Georgiou & Stavrinides, 2008), lack of emotional control (Shields & Cicchetti, 2001), lack of empathy (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009), lack of social skills (Crick & Dodge, 1994), moral disengagement (Correia & Dalbert, 2008), large physical size (Olweus, 1993), and interest in dominating others (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). All of these factors likely explain at least partially why some individuals engage in high levels of bullying behaviors.

However, there may also be more basic developmental forces at work for all children, and possibly adults, that may explain why some break others' hearts with bullying behaviors from such early ages. Children and adolescents may engage in different forms of bullying

because they desperately want and need to belong. Human beings have a fundamental need to belong, for ongoing positive interactions with others who provide companionship and caring (Baumeister & Leary, 1995), which builds and is transformed across development (Buhrmester, 1996). The fundamental need to belong may explain why social exclusion is so distressing, and in studies with adults, has been related to aggressive behavior toward others (Twenge, Baumeister, Tice, & Stucke, 2001), self-defeating behavior (Twenge, Cantanes, & Baumeister, 2002), and even physical pain (MacDonald & Leary, 2005).

Although it may seem counterintuitive to view such negative behaviors as bullying as deriving from the desperate need to belong, we will argue that the need to belong may fuel bullying behaviors in children and adolescents (and likely adults, too, but the focus here will be youth). Children may hit, exclude, or harass others electronically because when their own needs for belongingness are threatened or when they want to enhance their own status, they lash out and hurt others in the way they think will be most painful, by engaging in behaviors that undermine the target's sense of belongingness. For reasons discussed below, children and adolescents might be especially vulnerable to desperate needs for belongingness. Viewing bullying as motivated by the need to belong has profound implications for prevention and intervention programs to reduce bullying.

Children and Adolescents Desperately Want to Belong

Needs for belongingness may be particularly strong in middle childhood and adolescence (Buhrmester, 1996; Gottman & Mettetal, 1986; Sullivan, 1953). Needs for belongingness may be especially powerful for girls, whose self-construals rely heavily on relationships (Cross & Madson, 1997) and who crave intimacy in close relationships (Rose & Rudolph, 2006). Girls' peer groups emphasize close dyadic relationships and intimate self-disclosure (Maccoby, 1998), so the pain of being excluded might be especially acute for girls.

How exactly might the need to belong lead some children to engage in bullying and cyberbullying? In his *Interpersonal Theory of Psychiatry*, Sullivan (1953) proposes that individuals' personalities and relationships are formed around social needs, qualities we desire in our relationships with others, including warmth, companionship, acceptance, and intimacy (Buhrmester, 1996). These social needs expand with development: infants most desire tenderness from caregivers, preschool children also need play partners, children in the early elementary years need also to feel a sense of belonging and acceptance, preadolescents additionally desire an intimate relationship with a same sex peer ("chumships"), and adolescents wish also for sexual involvement. Sullivan argued that our character and our personality difficulties result from the ways in which we manage to meet these needs, or to defend ourselves when we cannot meet these needs and become anxious (Buhrmester, 1996; Sullivan, 1953). When we feel anxious, we engage in defensive attempts to avoid or ameliorate the anxiety, called security operations. These security operations may help individuals reduce immediate anxiety, but they can create serious problems in relationships. For example, a preschool child who is frequently ignored by his overwhelmed parents might learn that he only gets his parents' attention when he hits or kicks. Hitting and kicking are an effective security operation in the short term because they get the parental attention the child so desperately craves. However, hitting and kicking to get adults' attention when that same

child goes to kindergarten will likely undermine his relationships with peers and teachers and lead to peer rejection and serious academic difficulty (Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2007).

Some forms of bullying may be security operations, behaviors that children and adolescents engage in to reduce their anxious feelings about being excluded. One security operation described by Sullivan is disparagement, and this phenomenon resembles some forms of bullying, such as social aggression. Disparagement is speaking derogatorily about those to whom we feel compared. According to Sullivan, when some youth feel a strong need to be liked by everyone and superior in every way, they cope with the inevitable disappointment resulting from other's success by disparaging the other, by maligning the other person's personality characteristics or abilities, and by "…pulling down the social standing of others" (Sullivan, 1953, p. 242). Many features of social aggression resemble Sullivan's description of disparagement. Relationship manipulation and social exclusion disrupt others' friendships and reduce their social standing, and the content of gossip is often disparaging rumors.

> One of the feeblest props for an inadequate self-system is the attitude of disparaging others, which I once boiled down to the doctrine that if you are a molehill, by God, there shall be no mountains.
>
> Sullivan (1953), p. 309

One of the most challenging features of Sullivan's theory is that the security operations, including but not limited to disparagement, arise from our efforts to meet the social needs characteristic of developmental stages and to contain our anxiety when our efforts are unsuccessful. Therefore, following Sullivan's argument, security operations are both normative and adaptive in that we engage in them in response to frustrated efforts to meet our developmental needs, but also maladaptive in that they serve only to contain our immediate anxiety and in the long run, create persistent difficulties in interpersonal relationships. Sullivan proposed that some children develop tendencies toward disparagement as a way of coping with the disappointment of others being superior in various ways and disparagement provides immediate relief from the anxiety of not being as good as someone else. However, if disparagement persists, it undermines the individual's sense of self-worth because no accomplishments, one's own or those of others, can be viewed as worthwhile and the person becomes just as disparaging of herself as she is of others. In Sullivan's words (1953), "Since you have to protect your feeling of personal worth by noting how unworthy everyone around you is, you are not provided with any data that are convincing evidence of your having personal worth, so it gradually evolves into, 'I am not as bad as the other swine'" (p. 242).

The Need to Belong Might Fuel Bullying

Bullying might be a type of security operation that children and adolescents engage in when their own sense of belongingness is threatened. Youth may engage in bullying to harm others' relationships as a way of protecting their own, and as a way of coping with their intense feelings of anxiety about feeling excluded. For example, a junior high school girl who feels excluded from a group of high-profile, affluent girls may start shoving the girl she perceives to be the leader of the group down the stairs daily after gym class. An elementary school boy who loves sports and takes pride in excelling may be threatened when a new

student who moves to town is even larger and more athletic, and may spread the rumor that the new student uses performance enhancing drugs. A high school girl who is upset that a girl one year younger has started dating a boy she has a crush on may go on the younger girl's Facebook page and make insulting, vulgar comments on every single one of her profile pictures.

All of these bullying behaviors may quell intense feelings of anxiety about being excluded or left out, at least in the short term. The girl who shoves the ringleader of a group she desperately wants to join may feel some satisfaction at having hurt someone she believes hurt her. The boy who spreads the rumor that a superior athlete uses steroids may take some short term satisfaction in having smeared the person's good name, in perhaps leading people to doubt that he achieved his academic prowess through talent and effort. The girl who writes nasty comments on all of a younger girl's Facebook profile pictures may fantasize that she will lead the boy she is interested in to break up with the other girl, or at least bring down her rival's standing in the eyes of other peers.

However, the relief provided from anxiety about belongingness by these behaviors is likely brief. The girl who shoves the ring leader down the stairs every day is likely to realize that her physical aggression makes the group she so desperately wants to join even more likely to exclude her. The boy who spreads the rumor that a stronger athlete uses drugs realizes that in the absence of proof, his repeated claims start to make him look petty and envious to his peers. The girl who writes profane comments about another girls' appearance on Facebook profile pictures may realize upon reflection that she has gone too far, when no one "likes" her mean comments or when a peer with the courage to intervene says, "Stop it. We all know you are writing these mean things because you are jealous." And, of course all of these bullying behaviors may lead to adult intervention, but should that happen, it might actually be less painful than the enduring realization that bullying behaviors only exacerbate the perpetrator's sense of being excluded, and perhaps lead to looking pathetic in the eyes of peers.

Individual differences in bullying may relate to factors that determine the extent to which adolescents meet their own needs for belongingness by harming others. When children and adolescents' needs for belongingness are threated, they have other options besides hurting others. The girl who wants to join a peer group could look for opportunities to engage in similar activities, could start making friendly conversation with the girls, and could ask them if she could sit with them at lunch, or could even invite them to do something with her. The boy who feels threatened by the superior athlete could talk to him about how he trains and what he has done to achieve his higher level of skill, and could invite him to work out together. The girl who is distressed by the younger peer dating someone she also likes could talk with the boy and make her interest clear, or could make a conscious effort to direct her romantic interests elsewhere. However, all of these alternatives require skills in regulating emotions and building relationships that children and adolescents who engage in bullying may not have. Most youth desperately want to belong, but some may lack the skills to cope with that need in developmentally appropriate ways, and therefore may lash out with bullying behaviors when they feel threatened or excluded.

The desperate need to belong may also in part explain why it can be so very difficult for most children and adolescents to stand up to bullying behavior and to defend victims. Bullying involves not only perpetrators and victims, but also bystanders, reinforcers, and defenders (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). Defending peers against all types of bullying may be daunting for some precisely because children's own desperate needs to belong lead them to believe that if they challenge the bullying behaviors, they will be the next targets.

To date, the little evidence available supports a relation between the need to belong and bullying behaviors. In a large study with middle and high school students, students identified as being in a high involvement group for bullying reported lower feelings of belonging than children not involved in bullying (Goldweber, Waasdorp, & Bradshaw, 2013). For 10 - 13-year-old boys, engaging in antisocial bullying was related to a desire to be accepted by other antisocial boys and that bullying was related to peer rejection by the larger peer group of boys (Olthof & Goosens, 2007). Additional research is needed to understand more precisely how the need to belong may fuel bullying behaviors and prevent more youth from defending victims.

Implications for Prevention and Intervention

If bullying is driven in part by the need to belong, then prevention programs could be augmented by addressing this issue explicitly. Children and adolescents could be helped to understand that we all desperately need and want to belong, and that it can be tempting to be mean to other people when our own sense of belongingness is threatened. Youth could be helped to reframe some of their bullying impulses and fantasies as motivated by the need to belong, and encouraged to consider other, more effective strategies for meeting these needs. Because these needs might be easier to recognize in others than in oneself, prevention programs could begin by discussing examples of others, with the goal of generating compassion for those who desperately want to belong.

If bullying is viewed as fueled by the need to belong, intervention programs for those already engaging in high levels of bullying will also need to be refined. When children and adolescents engage in high levels of bullying, it is often appropriate for there to be consequences, both the natural consequences of peer withdrawal and the more formal consequences imposed by authorities. However, sometimes these consequences, especially the natural ones, outlast the duration of the bullying behaviors. Even a child who engages in physical aggression only occasionally could become saddled with a peer reputation as someone who always fights, and even if that child's behavior improves, few peers include or give the individual a chance. This could exacerbate feelings of exclusion and increase the sense that belongingness is threatened, which could further fuel bullying behaviors. Even the formal consequences of bullying imposed by authority figures may also undermine a sense of belonging, because these punishments often involve isolating youth through detention, in-school suspension, or suspension from school.

Youth who have been involved in high levels of bullying could be helped to reframe these behaviors as driven by the need to belong. They could be taught more effective, appropriate

strategies for achieving these goals. Peers could be helped to see that others engage in bullying behavior at least in part because they feel left out, and could be encouraged to include those who sometimes bully when they are behaving well or when it makes sense in terms of shared interests or activities. The same youth with the courage to defend and intervene might be those brave and prosocial enough to try including a child with a history of bullying behavior.

Viewing bullying as fueled by the need to belong could also be extremely helpful for developmental theorists and researchers. This perspective humanizes those who engage in bullying behaviors, reminds us that the negative behavior may be driven at least in part by a basic, developmental need, and forces all of us to remember that bullying is a type of behavior, not a type of person. Viewing a young person as a bully makes it too easy to assume they will continue to engage in this behavior, too tempting to give up trying to help them, and blinds us to situations and contexts in which these children do well and are able to meet their needs for belongingness in more appropriate ways.

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