

THE EFFECT OF EMPATHY ON INVOLVING IN BULLYING BEHAVIOR

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The aim of this review was to provide an overview of research into the relationship between empathy and bullying. Therefore the review indicated a number of researches that show different effects of empathy on bullying, regarding the type of bullying, roles in bullying behavior, as well as gender. From a review of research it may be concluded that empathy significantly contributes to a reduction in various forms of violence. Most research indicates the importance of the affective component of empathy compared to the cognitive component. The results of research into the relationship of empathy and its role in bullying behavior were less consistent. For this reason, the review highlighted methodological difficulties in the study of bullying and empathy. **Conclusion** - In conclusion it could be said that most studies show a negative correlation between empathy and various types of violence. Furthermore, it is evident that different components of empathy have differing degrees of influence in direct and indirect forms of violent behavior.

Key words: Bullying ▪ Roles in bullying ▪ Empathy

Introduction

Bullying has become an important public policy issue. To prevent violence and reduce its consequences, it is necessary to understand its etiology. One of the most significant predictors of violence is an individual's ability to empathize with others. The results of two studies indirectly showed the potential impact of this construct. Hobson (1) found significant difficulties in social behavior in children with autism and psychopathological disorders. He assumed

that their behavior is not sensitive to social rules, primarily due to their inability to understand the emotions and behavior of other people. This implies the correlation between low empathy and various forms of antisocial behavior. On the other hand, research by Karkiainen et al. (2) indicated that social intelligence significantly correlates with violence. The authors point out that social intelligence is probably one of the aspects of empathy. Empathy has further been described as the ability to understand the emotions of others as well as the ability to express those emotions. The question is if empathy is one of the basic elements of prosocial behavior, and are the persons who possess a high level of empathy less prone to violent behavior or does understanding the emotions of others give them an incentive to recurrent abuse?

Therefore, the primary aim of this paper is to provide an overview of research dealing with the relationship between empathy and bullying, taking into account the roles in bullying and various forms of violent behavior.

Aggressive behavior

There are many definitions of aggressive behavior. However, different researchers agree that it is a behavior that is intended to harm another person (3). The most common classification of aggressive behavior is reactive and proactive aggression (3). Reactive aggression is behavior that occurs in response to specific situational conditions, such as threats and provocations, and is accompanied by changes in the physiological and emotional level. Proactive aggression is intentional behavior caused by anticipation of a desirable goal, and is controlled mainly by external reinforcement (3).

Bullying represents a form of aggressive behavior. It is a subset of proactive aggressive behavior. It occurs due to the anticipation of someone's desirable goal (which can be

achieved by aggressive behavior) or domination over others, such as abuse (4).

Bullying

There are numerous definitions of bullying, but they all refer to bullying as repeated intimidation, over time, of a physical, verbal and psychological nature, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons. It is repetitive and encompasses an intrinsic power imbalance between the bully and the person being bullied, who generally is incapable of self-defense (5).

Any form of intentional negative action can be divided into two categories: direct and indirect violence. Direct violence is openly aggressive behavior happening "face to face". There are two subtypes of direct violence. Physical violence is the intentional infliction of bodily injury such as pinching, shoving and poking, punching and kicking, slapping, beating etc. Verbal violence often accompanies physical and it includes insulting remarks, spreading rumors, verbal teasing, name calling etc. Indirect (relational) violence involves socially manipulative forms of aggressive behavior that aim to hurt the other person emotionally. This kind of violence is manifested by the threat of social isolation, gossip, exclusion from the group, rejection, etc. Cyber bullying has recently emerged as a new form of bullying, which is a form of potentially offensive behavior over the Internet or mobile phone (5).

There are four characteristic profiles that can differ in bullying: children who are exposed to bullying or victims, children who bully others or bullies, children who experience bullying but themselves behave violently or bully/victims, as well as the children who are not in any way involved in bullying, or neutral children (6). Bullies are portrayed as academically uneducated, anxious, insecure persons prone to violence in order to solve

daily problems (6). Unlike the bullies, victims are individuals who often suffer from low self-esteem, anxiety, depression, and are exposed to a number of academic difficulties (6). Bully/victims are characterized as those that are at risk for a variety of behavioral problems, such as addiction to alcohol, delinquency, etc. (7). The group of children who defend victims or neutral children are children who have high levels of prosocial behavior and negative attitudes towards bullying (8).

As for the prevalence of bullying, studies indicate that the prevalence, examined in different countries, ranges from about 4.8% to 45.2% (9). Relational forms of bullying indicate twice the incidence compared to direct forms of aggressive behavior (10). However, it can also be seen that the incidence of bullying behavior gradually decreases with age and the student's progress through the grades (9). There are also significant gender differences (9, 10). In relation to girls, boys are more often exposed to bullying and more violent towards other children. In addition, exposure to direct forms of bullying affects boys more than girls, while girls in turn are more often exposed to different types of indirect forms of bullying (10).

In short, a clear division of roles and types of bullying, as well as the incidence of bullying, can be seen from the above. However, it is necessary to provide important insights into the risk factors for bullying. In this paper, the emphasis is placed on an individual determinant of bullying: empathy. Therefore, the emphasis of this paper will be an overview of the potential impact factors of empathy to bullying behavior.

Definition of empathy

The term empathy is of relatively recent origin. In psychological circles, this construct is accepted as a multidimensional construct that includes cognitive and emotional components (11).

Cognitive empathy is the drive to identify someone else's thoughts and feelings, being able to put yourself into their shoes, to imagine what is in their mind and how it can affect you. The emotional component of empathy is characterized by the response of the same or similar emotions in relation to the emotional experiences of another (11). Specifically, this component reflects the alignment of feelings with the feelings of another person.

However, despite the widely accepted definition of empathy as a two-dimensional construct, the affective component of empathy is pronounced, since it is considered that this component is essentially inherent to empathy. It is possible that the above mentioned is partially influenced by the method of measuring the construct. Empathy is generally assessed using an index derived on the basis of stories and pictures describing the situation of others, through assessment of other empathic reactions, based on a variety of experimental conditions in which empathy is provoked, which primarily reflects variation in the affective aspect of empathy.

Furthermore, the level of empathy development corresponds to the stages of cognitive development (12). During the first year of life, an infant gradually develops global empathy. Children behave as if what happens to others happens to them, because they are unable to distinguish between self and others as separate physical entities. The second stage, egocentric empathy, develops at the end of the first year of life. At this stage, the child is able to experience empathy, while also understanding that the other person, and not itself, is in trouble. But still, a child is unable to distinguish between their own internal states and others. Empathy for the feelings of others occurs between the second and third year of life, after assuming the role of another child. As a child becomes aware that other people have different feelings, the child gives more appropriate responses to the signs that

indicate the feelings of others. Empathy for another's life condition appears by the years of late childhood. Empathic induced affects are combined with the general state of the mental images of others. Empathic distress is the core feeling state of empathy, and this cognitive appraisal determines whether the person will have an emotional arousal.

Regardless of which part of the empathy we are talking about, the advanced construct allows a person sound judgment of emotional reactions of others, to provide individuals with a custom selection of social behavior.

Gender and age differences in empathy

The results of the studies that examined empathy have shown that there are undoubtedly a large gender differences in favor of females (11, 13-15). As for the components of empathy, it was found that girls scored higher on the affective component, compared to boys (13). This could mean that gender differences in empathy significantly depend on the quality of the operationalization of the construct (15)

The researchers point out that these gender differences can be interpreted in two ways (16). Firstly, due to the presence of stereotypes derived from the traditional male and female gender roles, whereby women are assumed to be 'natural' carers, it is possible that participants answer in that direction, confirming the stereotype. Secondly, perhaps gender differences in empathy arise because of the different modes of socialization associated with emotions. Girls are raised by the principle of care, to be compassionate towards other people, understanding their situation, personality traits, moods, while the boys are brought up to respect the principle of justice. This supports the principles of theory of evolution. Specifically, if men offer resources and physical protection of women,

they become more dominant and aggressive. Developed sensitivity and empathy in men are not desirable traits in this context. On the other hand, women's interest is to keep the man as a source of resources that will allow them to survive the context. It is therefore logical to assume that natural selection in women develops qualities of empathy and the ability to connect with others.

In addition to gender differences, there are also age differences in the level of empathy. Specifically, through age-related development of social cognition, it is possible to understand the emotions of other people, which are reflected in a high level of empathy (17). The affective component of empathy, providing the excitement and motivation properties of emotions, is developed first (18). However, with development, the cognitive component, which allows the formation and transformation of affective experience, becomes more pronounced (18). Accordingly, it is about the experience that develops due primarily altruistic, but later and egoistic motivation to help others.

The relationship between empathy and aggressive behavior

Most studies (13, 19) have shown that empathy is in a significant negative relationship with aggression or aggressive behavior. Comparing samples of children and adolescents, Lovett and Sheffield (19) showed a significant negative correlation only in adolescents. In this case empathy was measured by self-assessments. But a negative correlation existed even when using behavioral measures of empathy and was higher than those obtained by self-assessment.

On the contrary, Jolliffe and Farrington (15) found a significant positive relationship between empathy and antisocial behavior. Also, this correlation proved higher among adolescents and young adults compared to

children. Empathic concern and compassion probably encourage an individual to aggressive behavior because these individuals are emotionally able to assess and predict negative consequences that would have negative impact on other people.

As for gender difference, Gini et al. (11) and Stavrinides et al. (13) found a negative correlation only in boys. From the above it can be said that empathy has a stronger effect on promoting prosocial, that is, reducing antisocial behavior in men compared to women. The stronger effect of empathy in boys may be due to the different aspects of socialization and the expectations that society sets for boys and girls (20). Social norms require girls to be less aggressive and more prosocial, regardless of whether they feel empathy or not. Due to such social pressures, the role of empathy as a motivator of prosocial behavior, that is, an inhibitor of aggressive behavior, decreases. In contrary, the boys decide freely whether or not to help others, whether or not to act aggressively, and in such circumstances the individual empathy can have a greater impact on behavior.

During testing of the multidimensional construct of empathy, it was found that both the cognitive and affective components of empathy reduce aggressive behavior (2). However, some studies have shown that only the affective component of empathy plays a significant role in reducing aggressive behavior (21, 22). Gini et al. (11) found that the affective component of empathy reduces aggressive behavior, in order to prevent the emotional stress caused by the situation.

The relationship between empathy and bullying

Bullying is a form of aggressive behavior (13). Study of the relationship between empathy and bullying is a relatively new research area. Nevertheless, from a review of the literature,

several studies point to the negative correlation between empathy and involvement in bullying others (11, 23).

Caravita et al. (14) suggest that gender is an important variable that moderates the relationship between empathy and bullying. It is possible that the mechanisms that lead to antisocial behavior are different for men and women (24). Therefore, the combination of men and women in one category may mask the impact of empathy on abuse. Since women, compared to men, score higher on the affective component, it is logical to expect different correlations in the group of boys and girls (11).

Jolliffe and Farrington (24) point out that the negative correlation between empathy and aggressive behavior is significant only for the affective component. These researchers emphasize that it is possible that bullies have cognitive empathy, but have reduced affective empathy. Probably the lack of affective empathy separated those who were prone to repeated, constant aggressive behavior. From the above it can be said that it is necessary to establish a clear distinction between the cognitive and affective components of empathy.

Stavrinides et al. (13) have found that children tending to express similar or the same emotions in relation to the emotional experiences of others are less prone to abuse children, and vice versa. Therefore, based on the above it can be said that bullies have the cognitive component of empathy and understand the emotions of others, but do not express them. Owning the cognitive component of empathy provides the ability to identify the emotional distress and suffering of the victim, which affects the need for repeated abuse.

However, the results of other studies do not support the above. In Finland, Kaukiainen et al. (2) reported that cognitive empathy was negatively correlated with bullying. If

the skill of perceiving and understanding others' emotions was higher than the level of exposure to bullying was lower. It should be noted that these results apply only to the direct forms of bullying. In indirect forms of bullying and relational bullying, the negative correlation was confirmed only for the affective component of empathy (25). With this type of violence, understanding of emotions does not lead to the reduction of violence, but the same level of emotional experience as the victim reduces the level of violence. In other words, the more we enter into the emotional state of another person, we are less willing to hurt him/her. Empathizing with another child would, therefore, need to override the aggressive impulses of potential abusers, or to stop the harassment started, or to encourage witnesses to stand up in defense of the victim.

Furthermore, it is possible that the negative relationship between empathy and bullying is not direct. Wentzel et al. (26) found that the relationship between a low level of violent behavior and a high level of empathy was influenced by many variables, such as expectations of peers, gender, etc. Miller and Eisenberg (27) found that the relationship between empathy and relational bullying became insignificant after the inclusion of socioeconomic status as a control variable. According to the authors, low cognitive ability or socioeconomic status significantly connects to the lower level of empathy, which in turn reflects on bullying. From this, it can be said that empathy is not always the key itself.

The relationship between empathy and "bullying roles"

The above mentioned empathic relationship with bullying implies a connection between empathy and bullying in the group of children who are violent towards others. Malti et al.

(28) showed that this group has a lower level of empathy in relation to others. The results are explained as a mechanism of social-emotional adaptation developed by children who have been exposed to violence. Often, preschool-age children exposed to abuse from an early preschool age are also socio-emotionally immature, without adopted adaptive skills to cope with -bullying. It could be said that lower empathy actually serves as a buffer to abused children and it protects them from subsequent emotional difficulties. In accordance to this, the results of studies show that victims with high or moderate levels of empathy have more emotional difficulties compared to children who have lower levels of empathy (28). Therefore, showing empathy does not necessarily have to be adaptive to the victim, but in turn can have negative consequences.

In contrast, other researchers have shown that children exposed to bullying are successful in understanding the emotions of others (25). In relation to the bullies, children who are exposed to bullying, as well as those that belong to the group of prosocial children, have a greater concern for others (29). However, exposure to violence often results in anger and a desire for revenge, with the inability to control emotions, and it can be a significant determinant of victimization. Therefore, children who are exposed to bullying often become those that are violent towards others.

Caravita et al. (23) state that the defenders of children who are exposed to aggressive behavior have the highest empathy level. The positive relationship between empathy and prosocial behavior may be due to the fact that a sense of compassion or sympathy is followed by a desire to remove the hardship of another, as well as removing their own emotional distress. However, the introduction of gender in analyzing the differences between the roles in bullying and violent and prosocial behavior, the scale of affective

empathy remained significant only in men, which suggests that this relationship depends significantly on the gender of the respondents. Also, as stated earlier, these groups of respondent's defenders have generally negative attitudes toward violence, and higher social status (8). Specifically, in this group, social role predicts prosocial behavior, while empathy is an important mediator variable.

The relationship between empathy and forms of bullying

As regards forms of bullying from our review of the literature, only a small number of researchers examined the effects of empathy on the forms of bullying. There are three studies that have examined the type of bullying and the level of empathy.

Woods et al. (25) examined the differences in the level of empathy based on direct and indirect forms of bullying. The authors assumed that in indirect bullying a person who is violent possesses a high level of empathy, to successfully recognize the emotional weaknesses of another individual and the characteristics of the social situation. In contrast, direct forms of bullying are not strongly based on consideration of the characteristics of individuals and situations, so in this form of bullying a lower level of empathy is expected. The results did not support this hypothesis. Indirect forms of bullying did not include developed emotional skills in order to manipulate the individual in comparison to direct forms. Furthermore, it was found that children exposed to indirect bullying have lower levels of empathy, affective empathy, compared to children exposed to direct, physical bullying. The authors did not offer further explanations for this. They assumed that the lower empathy in children exposed to bullying indirectly contributes to repeated exposure to bullying in relation to direct bullying behavior.

Kaukiainen et al. (2) found lower levels of affective components of empathy for bullies in indirect forms of bullying. The authors assumed that the affective component of empathy is a significant negative predictor of relational bullying, while in turn a significant predictor of direct bullying is the cognitive component of empathy.

Steffgen and Associates (30) analyzed data of conventional direct forms of bullying and bullying through modern technology. In both types of bullying it was found that violent children have lower levels of empathy in relation to the remaining groups. Comparison between the two types was not tested and this is an important limitation in interpreting the results.

Methodological difficulties in investigating bullying and empathy

It is necessary to draw attention to the methodological limitations of the research which might have influenced the obtained results. Firstly, examination of bullying indicates a sensitive topic of an intimate nature. Due to their many unpleasant experiences, respondents may feel ashamed and be untruthful when giving self-reports. It is valid for the situation of the operationalization of violence through peer nominations. It is interesting that the correlation of self-assessment and peer nominations are very low, in the range of 0.2 to 0.4 (31). A problem of the operationalization of bullying is likely the result of the complexity of the construct. Inconsistency in the definition of violence does not provide clear monitoring of the same phenomenon in a particular place and time. In addition to the problem of generalization, which arises from different operationalizations of the term, the additional drawback is the categorization of subjects depending on their role in the bullying. Categorization is mostly done on the basis of answers related

to exposure to, and the frequency of different experiences. Based on this, the distinction between existing groups is not completely clear. Using a direct observation technique is less biased and more objective. However, it is difficult to perform a test on bullying in natural conditions and laboratory research has limited validity.

Finally, the retrospective method of researching testing bullying is also questionable. Respondents may forget certain events that occurred in the past. In addition, distorted testimonies about experiences of bullying may be due to psychological difficulties experienced by people exposed to bullying.

Also, regarding empathy, methodological difficulties arise in defining the construct of empathy, which might be due to the method of measuring empathy. The most commonly used method of measuring empathy is a measure of self-assessment, which was previously said to be a biased indicator. Using some physiological measures would give a clearer picture of the construct, and the presumed relationship. Using brain imaging techniques, Moya-Albiol et al. (32) found that the biological mechanisms involved in empathy and aggressive behavior are similar. Prefrontal, temporal cortex, amygdala and other parts of the limbic system, involved in aggressive behavior, also participate in the development of empathy. Specifically, during activation of the regions in the brain responsible for empathy, the activation areas for aggressive behavior were decreased. Therefore, in future research more reliable and more valid measures of empathy and violence should be used.

Interventions for reducing the incidence of bullying

To reduce the risk factors and the negative consequences of bullying it is necessary to implement preventive measures, mainly at

the primary level of prevention. Primary prevention of bullying is aimed at families with children in the community regardless of whether they are at risk for bullying or not. In implementing prevention it is necessary to do more than just understanding the nature and consequences of bullying. Prevention should be based upon teaching certain behaviors, ways of thinking, as well as changing current maladjusted behavior.

However, recent research has shown that successful intervention programs are focused on social-emotional learning and positive behavioral interventions (33, 34). They are related to the adoption of training, recognizing and managing emotions, developing concern for others, as well as the education of children who are exposed to bullying and how to be assertive in defense against bullying.

However, these interventions should not only relate to the behavior of individuals. Interventions should include peers, in the development of teaching emotional skills. It should be recalled that it is necessary for both parents to be educated about the emotional education of their children. It is crucial for parents to be educated even when they have pre-school children, since socialization skills are acquired at that period. Specifically, in the primary stage of socialization, the child acquires the basic skills of communication and language, learns social roles and adopts social behavior. At this stage, the child collects knowledge and skills through play, imitation, observation and interaction with parents and other close family members. Raising children at this stage serves the formation and self-assembly of moral and social behavior. If a child at this stage adopted norms and rules of society that are not socially desirable it would not function effectively in the community, as the social skills adopted would be ineffective in interacting with peers. Therefore, we can say that education at school age does not have the same effect on preven-

tion as that at an early preschool age, when the skills have not been adopted and when the education of parents helps a child to learn effective socialization.

It should be stressed that in recent years, a submissive approach to education has been increasingly present. As a result of this upbringing, prosocial behavior is not taught so in later years in school it reflects the connection between submissive parents at an early age of the child and violence in the school age.

In the mid 90-years, the Roots of Empathy program was developed, which actually includes teaching empathy in interaction with peers and parents. This is a program that starts at a young age (35). Children learn to express their emotions and understand the emotions of others using a variety of training techniques, which are based on the individuals, but also interactive teaching. Specifically, the training includes discussions and reflections about their feelings, workshops related to the expression of their feelings through painting, musical expression etc. The results of the evaluation from 2009 reveal that children who attended the program were 39% less socially aggressive than the children of the same age who did not attend program (35).

Future research

In future research, it is necessary to control the mediator and moderator variables that could affect the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior. These are demographic, as well as numerous social and individual variables. In addition it would be interesting to see, by longitudinal research, the stability of the relationship between empathy and bullying behavior.

Furthermore, some studies have shown that only the affective component of empathy plays a significant role in reducing aggressive behavior. It is assumed that children

reduce violent behavior in order to reduce emotional stress, but future research has to determine the reasons why offenders repeatedly commit violence against others, and those that stop being violent toward others. Qualitative methodology would provide significant value to obtain such data.

Previous studies have examined the relationship of empathy and its role in bullying. However, it is necessary to determine what psychological effects respondents have from different levels of empathy, as well as their belonging to different categories. Specifically, are there some differences in the consequences of violence between individuals who are exposed to violence and have a high level of empathy and those who have low levels of empathy?

Finally, there is a lack of research to examine the differences between the various forms of bullying and empathy, depending on different roles in bullying. It is assumed that different levels of empathy are present in bullies of different types of bullying behavior, but also in those who are exposed to bullying. If there are differences in the level of empathy between the bullies using physical and verbal bullying, it could indicate that the cause of the occurrence of such behavior differs for different types of violence and this would significantly contribute to the development of successful prevention programs. This implies that developing skills of empathizing represents an important starting point for planning interventions.

Conclusion

Exploration of the relationship of empathy and bullying is relatively new, so the research results are rather poor. However, this paper aims to provide an overview of studies that look at the relationship between empathy and bullying, taking into account the different bullying roles and various forms of

bullying. From a review of the research it can be summarized that empathy plays an important role in reducing violent behavior. The higher the level of empathy, the lower the tendency towards violent behavior. However, the results in children who are bullies show that the affective component of empathy has an important role in reducing empathy in relation to the cognitive component. As for the people who are exposed to violence, the research results are not entirely consistent. It was found that defenders have a high level of empathy toward victims, particularly the affective component, which contributes to

prosocial behavior. Furthermore, the relationship between empathy and violent behavior does not vary significantly in relation to the type of violence. Studies have shown a negative correlation between empathy and various types of violence. However, it was shown that certain components of empathy play a more important role in direct and indirect forms of violence. Since the results of this study differ, further research should be done.

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