Exposure to School Bullying and the Social Capital of Sixth-Grade Students

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Data from 91 U.S. middle school students using self-reports of social capital and bullying suggest a link between exposure to bullying and a decreased sense that people in general are trustworthy and fair. Implications for individuals and societies are considered.

Bullying is a form of interpersonal violence that is an increasing concern for millions of students, parents, educators, and communities not just in the United States but worldwide (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006; McLaughlin, Laux, & Pescara-Kovach, 2006). Physical harm and psychological risk, ranging from the problem of basic health concerns to serious difficulty in socialization, are well established in the literature as significant potential outcomes of being bullied (Chibbaro, 2007; Nishina, Juvenen, & Witkow, 2005; Wolke, Woods, Bloomfield, & Karstadt, 2000). Recent research has also led to the belief that bullying causes problems for those who witness it as well as those who are targets (Janson, Carney, Hazler, & Oh, 2009; Janson & Hazler, 2004). These findings suggest that bullying in schools goes beyond the immediate impact on individual targets to an influence on all those who are exposed to it in one way or another. Such a wide-ranging effect raises the question of whether the environment is changed in ways that influence people's sense of humanistic connections and confidence in self and others.

Humanistic theorists have long recognized the influence of significant others on human development during the preteen and teenage years. Erickson (1950) identified this as a high anxiety period during which children are seeking a sense of success in social relationships at the same time that they are struggling to find their unique identity. Maslow (1968) recognized that a sense of safety and affiliation with others are crucial human needs that must be met before significant degrees of self-esteem and self-actualization can be achieved. Yalom (1980) pointed out that if these needs are not met, a gulf could form between self and others (i.e., existential isolation) that...
promotes existential anxiety. Rogers (1959) spoke more directly to what he
saw as the primary deterrent to self-actualization, which is when significant
others communicate conditions of worth to young people that move them
away from trusting in their own organism (i.e., their self as a living complex
system of organs). These humanistic principles create a picture of young
people seeking interpersonal connections and confidence that others will
have their best interests at heart. These conditions, in turn, can promote a
sense of freedom to explore their self-actualizing tendencies.

One lens for viewing this humanistic sense of connection and confidence in
others is through the concept of social capital. Putnam (1995) provided a widely
accepted description of social capital as the degree of connection with others,
the trust that people have in community and social connections. For children
and adolescents, the basis of social capital is more directly defined by friend-
ships (Raffo & Reeves, 2000), family support, and a general belief in the ability
to depend on others as well as providing support to others as needed (Bubolz,
2001). In this study, we explored the possible connection between exposure to
bullying behaviors and the influence it may have on young people’s sense of
social capital in the form of the specific variables trust, fairness, and helpfulness.

The etiology and maintenance of bullying behaviors in school may be
explained by an ongoing cycle in the social environment, similar to the
basics of the broken windows theory (Kelling & Coles, 1996), which suggests
that problem behaviors in a community are the result of cyclical patterns.
For example, a neighborhood with one house on the street that has gra-
ffiti or broken windows will result in additional crime in the area because
the area now appears more conducive to crime (Kelling & Coles, 1996).
Research has found that similar neighborhood safety concerns are strongly
correlated with bullying behavior at school. Specifically, these perceived
unsafe environments expose youth to frequent neighborhood bullying and
aggression (Espelage, Bosworth, & Simon, 2000) that are in turn reenacted
in the school environment. The cycle then continues with the influence of
unabated bullying matching a pattern similar to that in the neighborhood.
Children who see other students being bullied may develop a greater sense
of distrust relative to the school community, which may in turn cause fewer
students to intervene to prevent bullying.

Humanistic approaches to prevention emphasize the development of trust
in others (Purviss, Cross, & Pennings, 2009) and the wider involvement of
bystanders (rather than involvement being limited to bullies and targets), sug-
gest that many people’s general sense of security and trust can be disturbed
when they witness bullying. Overall, a climate in which students experience
greater levels of bullying as either targets or bystanders may reduce their sense
of confidence in people and in the world around them. Alternately, the absence
of exposure to bullying could lead to a greater sense of confidence in others.

The need for confidence and trust in people and the world is highlighted
in the description of the term social capital, “the good will that is engendered
by the fabric of social relations . . . that can be mobilized to facilitate ac-
tion" (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p. 17). It is a concept that has been the focus of considerable research that has supported the benefits of interactions for the general functioning of social networks, socially responsible behaviors, and overall well-being (Crosby, Holtgrave, DiClemente, Wingwood, & Gayle, 2003; Fitzpatrick, Piko, Wright, & LaGory, 2005; Runyon et al., 1998; Wright, Cullen, & Miller, 2001). Unlike simple behavioral issues among individuals, social capital speaks to the complexities of creating a shared sense of humanity among people.

Feeling an accepting connection to others during early childhood can provide a buffer against the detrimental effects of difficulties within families and other social settings (Criss, Petit, Bates, Dodge, & Lapp, 2002). Such supportive environments that include significant degrees of unconditional positive regard may increase social capital by promoting beliefs that people are trustworthy, are fair in their actions, and will be helpful when needed.

Behaviors such as school violence and teen suicide have been suggested as having a connection with a decrease in the fostering of trust, faith, and a belief in helpfulness relative to society as a whole (Hazler & Carney, 2002). When social capital is limited, the eventual outcome may be a disaffected view of humanity in general. An environment in which acts of unkindness or violence to other students are routine and typically go unchecked may result in students having a sense of low social capital. Low social capital equates to students believing in general that people (a) cannot be trusted, (b) are likely to treat others unfairly, and (c) will not be helpful or offer support when needed. The purpose of this study was to explore whether and how exposure to school bullying may impede the development of social capital in young people.

Low social capital may be connected to the detrimental physical, emotional, and social consequences of bullying and the regularity of their occurrence (Bernes & Bardick, 2007; Nansel et al., 2001). Such regular exposure to bullying has been associated with increased symptoms of anxiety (Craig, 1997) and depression (Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin, & Patton, 2001) as well as physical symptoms of headaches, stomachaches, enuresis, and poor sleep (Newman-Carlson & Horne, 2004; Rigby, 2008).

Targets of bullying may also be more likely to incur damage to their general sense of social support. Hazler, Miller, Carney, and Green (2001) have postulated that the targets of regular bullying are less likely than their nonbullied counterparts to have extensive social networks. It may be that regular abuse by a peer or a group of peers causes the individual to be ostracized by a broader social network or that exposure to repeated harassment or maltreatment causes the individual to retreat socially and become more isolated.

Victims are not the only individuals who appear to suffer from school bullying. Research in this area has expanded the focus in recent years to explore the impact on bystanders (Janson et al., 2009; Janson & Hazler, 2004) and how bystanders then choose to deal with bullying situations (Hazler, 1997). The impact on witnesses can be significant and long-lasting. When asked by researchers to recall witnessing bullying events, people,
even years later, continued to demonstrate physical stress symptoms of increased heart rate and skin conductance (i.e., perspiration; Janson & Hazler, 2004) as well as high levels of self-reported trauma (Janson et al., 2009). These studies parallel research of youth who have witnessed other forms of violence with results indicating that bystander symptomatic reactions have similarities to those of persons directly involved (Gilligan, 1991; Hosch & Bothwell, 1990; Safran & Safran, 1985).

The outcomes of high social capital in adolescence have been the subject of investigations that provide evidence to support a variety of potential benefits for youth. Adolescents who have a strong affiliation with their school, as indicated by self-reports of feeling connected both with the school in general and with their peers and teachers, were found to have a decreased likelihood of violent behavior (Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). One study conducted with African American adolescents found that simply sharing family dinners and having faith in the ability to turn to one's parents for support were linked to significantly fewer reports of depressive symptoms (Fitzpatrick et al., 2005). Other researchers investigating risky sexual behaviors found that higher levels of social capital tended to result in safer sexual behaviors among adolescents (Crosby et al., 2003).

This formative period for the development of social capital has the potential to be negatively influenced by bullying in such a way that youth could develop a less favorable outlook on humanity. The potential exists for children to develop a belief that the support of peers and family does little to fend off the potential for harm, which could limit the extent of trust in others, the sense that fairness is a part of the world, and the sense that people will be helpful more than self-serving.

The three factors of perceiving trust, fairness, and helpfulness in others that make up social capital have their own respective implications for individuals and society. If a belief that others are basically trustworthy is compromised by negative experiences in social networks during formative years, it is conceivable that these negative viewpoints could be generalized to society as a whole. Such distrust relative to a community has been found to be related to the level of violence in that area (Cuesta, 2009). A generalized sense of trust, on the other hand, can result in less fear of violence and less need to contemplate violence against untrusted others as a form of self-protection.

People who have more social capital have a greater level of confidence that they will be treated fairly by others (Putnam, 2000). This confidence is an acceptance that people in general are not automatically seeking personal benefit through taking advantage of others. Those with more social capital have a relationship model that presumes people will most likely try to be fair, resulting in a greater potential for taking the personal and professional risks with others that are necessary for social, emotional, and professional development. Alternately, the sense that one would not be treated fairly leads to less risk-taking and limited growth opportunities. Bullying may represent exposure to the unfair-
ness of people and society, particularly in instances in which bullying is witnessed but not prevented or punished.

A sense of trust and fairness in others does not in itself create the belief that people will be there to provide support as needed. Social capital increases as people come to believe that others can be expected to be helpful in providing support (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004). Putnam (1995) suggested that a decrease in civic participation may be related to the belief that no one else is willing to help improve society so contributions in general are a waste of time. Similarly, the student who does not believe that peers or adults will be helpful in a time of need may not be willing to reach out and help others. This mode of belief and the associated behavior pattern could be related to the reasons that bystanders who witness school bullying might not step in to support someone being victimized (Oh & Hazler, 2009).

The separate bodies of literature on social capital and adolescent school bullying are considerable but are only connected in theory at this time. Even less information exists on how they might be related in a school community. The purpose of this study was to explore the relation between bullying and social capital within the school community. We proposed the following two research questions to gain additional information on these issues: Does exposure to bullying reduce students’ sense of social capital (i.e., trust, fairness, and helpfulness)? Does witnessing of others’ attempts to stop bullying situations increase social capital?

METHOD

Participants

Ninety-one sixth-grade students from a rural midwestern school returned permission slips from home to take part in this study. The school district has approximately 2,000 students, with one middle school that averages 200 sixth-grade students and 600 students overall in Grades 4–6. More than one third of the students qualify for free or reduced lunch. Approximately 50% of the sixth-grade students volunteered to participate in this study. Their ages ranged from 11 to 14 years, with a mean of 11.5 years for the 55 girls and 36 boys. Self-reported ethnicity of individuals was reflective of the region: Euro-Americans (86.2%), African Americans (6.4%), American Indians (5.3%), and other (2.1%). Median household income in the district was reported to be approximately $35,000 per year.

Measures

Four specific components of the School Bullying Survey (SBS; Hazler, Hoover, & Oliver, 1991) were used for this study: the demographic information, a standardized definition of bullying, three items that map
exposure to bullying events, and three items related to social capital. The SBS itself is a 28-item paper-and-pencil measure, including items assessing general demographic information (e.g., age, sex, grade, and race) and specific items related to being (a) a bully, (b) a target of bullying, and/or (c) a witness of bullying during the current academic year. The SBS has been used in previous research on bullying (Carney, 2000; Hazler et al., 1991; Hoover, Oliver, & Hazler, 1992), although no validity or reliability scores have been reported on this survey instrument.

The SBS is structured so that participants first read a definition of bullying commonly used in research:

Bullying means: (a) repeated (not just once) harm to others by hurting others’ feelings through words or by attacking and physically hurting others; (b) may be done by one person or by a group; (c) happens on the school grounds or on the way to and from school; and (d) is an unfair match like the person doing the bullying is physically stronger or better with words or making friends than the person being bullied. (Hazler et al., 2001, p. 134)

The participants then answer the remaining items.

Exposure to bullying events (EBE) is a composite variable that we developed for previous research by combining participants’ response scores on two items from the SBS. The first item read, “How often were you bullied at school?” Six possible responses on a Likert-scale format ranged from 1 = not been bullied at school this year to 6 = bullied almost every day. The second item read, “How often did you see other students being bullied at school?” This item had four possible responses on a Likert-scale format ranging from 1 = not seen others being bullied at school this year to 4 = seen bullying every day at school this year.

These two SBS items about bullying experiences are designed to map the degree of exposure to bullying in school in a way similar to other research questions that reflect exposure to violence in a home or a community. The theory behind this type of research is that the tension and anxiety related to abusive acts in the home, the community, or school have an overall impact on people who observe it as a part of their daily life as well as on those who are direct targets of such acts or abusers. The EBE composite variable has been used in other published research (e.g., Carney, Hazler, Oh, Hibel, & Granger, 2010; Oh & Hazler, 2009) for similar purposes because both being a target of and witnessing bullying create problems for people, although being a target has greater consequences (Janson & Hazler, 2004).

The first step in creating the EBE variable was to combine responses from both SBS items. The combination resulted in 24 (6 x 4) ordinal scales ranging from no victimization (1) and no witnessing (1) to the highest victimization (6) and every day witnessing (4). A continuum was then developed that established bullying exposure on a 1–24 scale for each individual whereby a target of bullying always received more weight. The result was that a student who
reported being a target *several times a week* (5) and witnessed a bullying event *sometimes* (2) would be at a higher point on the ordinal scale, rating = 18, than another student who reported being a target *once a week* (4) and witnessed bullying *every day* (4), rating = 16. Because the first student was victimized more frequently than the second student, the first student ranked higher on the ordinal scale measuring the EBE variable (see Table 1).

The degree to which participants witnessed others intervening in a bullying situation was measured by the third SBS item, “How often did other students try to stop a student from bullying another at school?” Responses for this item on a Likert-scale format ranged from 1 = *never* to 6 = *almost always*.

In this study, social capital was measured using three questions that were originally used in the General Social Survey (GSS; n.d.). The GSS is a well-respected program of research that collects high-quality data designed to monitor social changes in the United States and to allow for comparisons of similar data from other nations (Putnam, 2000). Consisting of demographic, behavioral, and attitudinal questions, plus topics of special interest, the survey has provided data from 1972 to the present, making it a major source of information on societal trends. The GSS has been used as a resource for more than 15,000 scholarly publications, which makes it second only to the U.S. Census as a reliable data source (GSS, n.d.).

### TABLE 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>EBE Ordinal Scale</th>
<th>Victim Frequency</th>
<th>Witness Frequency</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td><em>not been bullied this year</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td><em>not been bullied this year</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td><em>not been bullied this year</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td><em>not been bullied this year</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td><em>bullied once or twice</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td><em>bullied once or twice</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td><em>bullied once or twice</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td><em>bullied once or twice</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td><em>bullied sometimes</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td><em>bullied sometimes</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td><em>bullied sometimes</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td><em>bullied sometimes</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td><em>bullied once a week</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td><em>bullied once a week</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td><em>bullied once a week</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16</td>
<td><em>bullied once a week</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>17</td>
<td><em>bullied several times a week</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>18</td>
<td><em>bullied several times a week</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>19</td>
<td><em>bullied several times a week</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>20</td>
<td><em>bullied several times a week</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>21</td>
<td><em>bullied almost every day</em></td>
<td>1 = <em>not seen</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>22</td>
<td><em>bullied almost every day</em></td>
<td>2 = <em>sometimes</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>23</td>
<td><em>bullied almost every day</em></td>
<td>3 = <em>many times</em></td>
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<tr>
<td>24</td>
<td><em>bullied almost every day</em></td>
<td>4 = <em>every day</em></td>
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survey has also been used as a reliable measure of social capital in previous research, because social engagement and reciprocity are believed to have a strong connection to social capital (Kawachi, Kennedy, Lochner, & Prothrow-Stith, 1997).

The three questions we used from the GSS are designed to measure people's sense of how trustworthy, fair, and helpful other people will be to them. Each question to assess social capital in this study was answered in a yes/no format. Whether people see others as trustworthy was the first question asked, "Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted, or that you can't be too careful in dealing with people?" The purpose of this question was to assess whether the student maintains a general belief that humanity can be trusted and that confidence can be placed in the majority of people where dependence and reliability are concerned. Responses were grouped into either the nontrust category (i.e., you have to be very careful in dealing with people) or the trust category (i.e., most people can be trusted). This question and the concept behind it have been connected in research to subsequent civic engagement and are a significant aspect of gaining and maintaining social capital (Putnam, 2000).

The issue of fairness was measured using a second question, "Generally speaking, do you think that most people would try to take advantage of you if they got a chance, or would they try to be fair?" This item assessed whether the student had faith that humanity in general subscribes to a sense of fairness, specifically that others believe in the importance of abiding by societal rules and regulations. Responses to the question were allocated to either the fair group (i.e., most people would try to be fair) or the unfair group (i.e., most people would try to take advantage of you if they got the chance). When considered along with the previous question, this item has been used in research as a general measure of whether a person can have faith that he or she will be treated fairly by others (Kawachi et al., 1997).

Whether respondents thought people are helpful or not was determined by the following question: "Would you say that most of the time people try to be helpful, or that they are mostly just looking out for themselves?" This question assesses respondents' belief that others have a vested interest in supporting people like themselves and are willing to put the needs of society and others before their own. Responses to this question were grouped into either the humanity category (i.e., people usually try to be helpful to others) or the nonhumanity category (i.e., people are generally looking out for themselves).

RESULTS

All students reported being exposed to repetitive bullying either as a target (n = 35) or a witness (n = 68). Targets indicated varying chronic levels of bullying from almost every day (n = 6), several times a week (n =
1), about once a week (n = 2), sometimes (n = 12), to only once or twice (n = 14). Students reported seeing bullying in their school ranging from every day (n = 11), many times (n = 14), to sometimes (n = 43). Fifty-six percent (n = 51) of the students believed that others can be trusted in general, 36% (n = 33) indicated a belief that others are generally fair, and 38% (n = 35) believed that others are generally helpful rather than simply looking out for their own interests.

**Trust Versus Nontrust Groups**

A one-way between-groups multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was performed to answer Hypothesis 1: that there would be differences between the trust and the nontrust labeled students regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying. There was a statistically significant difference between the trust and the nontrust groups on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 82) = 5.79$, $p < .004$; Wilks’s $\Lambda = .88$; partial $\eta^2 = .12$. When the dependent variables were considered separately, frequency of exposure to bullying was found to have a statistically significant difference, $F(1, 83) = 4.96$, $p < .029$; partial $\eta^2 = .06$, as was witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying, $F(1, 83) = 8.22$, $p < .005$; partial $\eta^2 = .09$.

Separate independent sample $t$-tests were conducted to compare the mean scores of reports of being bullied and witnessing others intervene to stop bullying. Students in the nontrust group had significantly higher reports of exposure to bullying in the last year ($M = 2.15$, $SD = 1.51$) than did their counterparts in the trust group ($M = 1.48$, $SD = 1.09$); $t(86) = 2.4$, $p = .02$. Students in the trust group, however, had significantly higher reports of seeing other students attempting interventions to stop bullying ($M = 2.58$, $SD = 1.62$).

**Fairness Versus Unfairness Groups**

A second one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to answer Hypothesis 2: that there would be differences between the fair and unfair labeled students regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying. There was a statistically significant difference between the fair and the unfair groups on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 83) = 3.69$, $p = .029$; Wilks’s $\Lambda = .92$; partial $\eta^2 = .08$. When the dependent variables were considered separately, frequency of exposure to bullying was the only difference to reach statistical significance, $F(1, 84) = 6.70$, $p < .011$; partial $\eta^2 = .07$. An independent sample $t$-test was conducted to compare the mean scores of reports of exposure to bullying. Students in the unfair group had significantly higher reports of exposure to bullying in the last year ($M = 2.16$, $SD = 1.56$) than did their counterparts in the fair group ($M = 1.39$, $SD = 1.00$); $t(86) = 2.53$, $p = .013$.
Helpful Versus Nonhelpful Groups

A one-way between-groups MANOVA was performed to answer Hypothesis 3: that there would be differences between the helpful and nonhelpful groups regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying. There was no statistically significant difference between the helpful and the nonhelpful groups on the combined dependent variables, $F(2, 82) = 1.45, p = .241$; Wilks’s $\Lambda = .97$; partial $\eta^2 = .03$.

The overall results provided support for Hypothesis 1 (that there would be differences between the trust and nontrust labeled students regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying) because students in the trust group had significantly less exposure to bullying overall and significantly more exposure to students intervening to prevent bullying. Hypothesis 2 (that there would be differences between the fair and unfair labeled students regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying) was partially supported because students in the fair group had significantly less exposure to bullying overall, but not significantly more exposure to students intervening to prevent bullying. Hypothesis 3 (that there would be differences between the helpful and nonhelpful labeled students regarding exposure to bullying and witnessing others intervene to prevent bullying) was not supported, because there was no statistically significant difference between the helpful and nonhelpful groups.

DISCUSSION

This study examined the potential relationship between the sense of social capital and frequency of exposure to bullying in sixth-grade students. The composite variable exposure to bullying attempted to capture students’ sense of their environment when their experiences as a target, bully, and/or witness to such events were combined. We used three items from the GSS to evaluate social capital based on the degree to which students believed that people in general could be expected to be trustworthy, fair, and helpful. Results indicated that trust in others was significantly related to less bullying exposure and more witnessing of intervention by others. Students’ sense of the likelihood of being treated fairly by others was significantly related only to less bullying exposure, and feelings that others would be generally helpful were not significantly related either to bullying exposure or to witnessing interventions.

Trust

Results of this study support the concept that bullying is associated with the damaged relationships and social mistrust that diminish the sense of faith in people and society, because trust was higher for students
who had been exposed to less bullying. Traumatic life experience is one of the strongest factors that reduce trust in other people (Alesina & La Ferrara, 2002), and this study’s results suggest that a similar effect for school-age children may be related to the trauma caused by bullying (Janson & Hazler, 2004; Janson et al., 2009). Chronic victimization by peers is internalized as a form of trauma for many youth and may have a long-lasting impact on many as they grow into adulthood (Carney, 2008). In his personality theory presented in 1961, Rogers (1995) emphasized the role of trust as being critical to positive human development. This trust in one’s own organism that is needed to acquire the most satisfying behavior can be diminished when the environment is hostile and unsupportive. Counselors of adults as well as youth should be aware of the personal and social implications of these issues for clients.

Some sense of trust in other people is required for the creation and maintenance of democratic societies and related social affairs (Cook, 2001). At some point, people must be willing to trust others, or they will either not engage or engage dishonestly in the social realm. Either one of these negative reactions that are due to a lack of trust diminishes productive relationships for the person, for others, and for the community as a whole. More trust, on the other hand, creates greater social and civic participation and is associated with less violence (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). These issues were the cornerstones of Rogers’s success using group work for peace among opposition groups in Northern Ireland (Rogers, 1987), South Africa (Rogers & Sanford, 1987), and Central America (Thayer, 1987). Greater participation and low levels of violence are hallmarks of productive social climates in neighborhoods, schools, and classroom communities. Investing in the social capital of youth can be seen as a lifelong approach whereby investments made now may benefit not only this generation, but also the next one.

This study’s finding that witnessing more people positively intervene in bullying situations is connected to greater levels of trust adds weight to the importance of supporting others during incidents of social injustice. Antibullying programs are built around encouraging students to stand up against bullying (Hazler & Carney, 2006) just as neighborhood watch programs are designed to do for adults (Bennet, Holloway, & Farrington, 2006). Encouraging abusive situations, observing abusive situations without acting to change them, or ignoring others who are in abusive situations not only hurts those directly involved, but also dehumanizes the environment as a whole. Those in the environment lose trust in the message of individuals, schools, and communities that one should stand up for what is right and denounce what is harmful to others.

Fairness

The more frequently students in the current study reported being exposed to bullying, the less they indicated that they believed that others
could be counted on to treat them fairly. Fear of being unfairly treated may interfere with youths’ ability to form the close friendships that can mitigate feelings of isolation. Persons of diversity have experienced something similar to this reaction when repeatedly viewing themselves as being treated unjustly, and as a consequence, having their faith in gaining fair treatment by police, courts, or the justice system as a whole negatively affected (Sherman, 2002). Anger, frustration, and depression are common in individuals who believe they will not be treated fairly (Craig, 1997), which promotes an unhealthy learning and personal growth environment for individuals, schools, or communities. The alternative buffer to these negative effects would be observing fewer injustices in their environment, which would then create a greater sense that they would be treated fairly. Providing consistent responses to mitigate the unfairness of chronic victimization is an important key to creating a healthy living and learning environment.

The variable witnessing people intervene in bullying situations did not reach significance when considered alone. This was different from the result for the trust variable, where witnessing intervention was significantly related independent of the EBE variable. The possibility that these differences might hold up in future studies deserves some consideration; specifically, why does witnessing people intervening in bullying situations appear to increase a person’s trust in people, but not a person’s sense of fairness in others? One possibility is that trust may be more closely associated with the individual, in that witnessing interventions in bullying situations increases trust that people can and will change bad situations. The idea of fairness, on the other hand, could be more sensitive to the situation itself where, by definition and observation, bullying situations are inherently unfair relationships.

Helpful

Unlike the results for trust and fairness, no significant relationships were found for the expectation that people can be helpful aspect of social capital in the current study. Seeing less bullying or more people intervening when people are bullied did not appear to influence expectations that others could be counted on for support when needed. Whereas a combination of less bullying and more interventions against bullying could demonstrate that one can trust people and the system and that fairness will generally prevail, the students in this study were less convinced that people would actually come to their aid when help was needed. Previous findings with adults suggested that results for fairness and trust would be similar (Putnam, 2000), but the results of the current study suggest that there are potential differences in school bullying situations.

The nature of schools revolves around evaluation of individual achievement and behavior rather than behavior for pairs or groups. Although students
may trust the system and see it as fair, they also realize that they will be evaluated on individual accomplishments and behaviors independent of any help they might receive from others. In the context of bullying, they may see how the concepts and system are viable, while also sensing that help is less likely because they are expected to handle problems independently.

STUDY LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Limitations to this exploratory study need to be considered, even though the results do reflect reasonable connections to previous research. Participants comprised a relatively small sample of 91 sixth-grade students in a rural community and do not represent a nationwide sample. Measuring social capital with three self-report questions, even though these items have been used in national samples for years, only provides a limited sense of the participants’ personalized experience, with no specific information on their actual social support network. Moreover, the extent to which these measures have been utilized specifically with an adolescent population is limited. These limitations have relevance for future research where the concerns can be taken more fully into consideration. A possible avenue for further exploration would be developing a qualitative study to more thoroughly assess the ways in which students internalize the experiences of bullying, both as targets and as witnesses.

Implications for counselors include programmatic aspects related to the importance of developing and implementing effective bullying intervention programs and other programs designed to create more supportive and socially just environments. Assuming that there is a cycle whereby witnessing problematic behaviors reduces trust, which then causes more problematic behaviors in the school that further reduces trust, it seems warranted to implement programs that facilitate a greater sense of support and trust among students. Acquiring and maintaining social capital requires that people believe that others can be expected to provide helpful information and support (Schaefer-McDaniel, 2004), and additional research needs to identify best practice methods that serve this end.

Youth generally come to counseling because of behaviors identified by adults as problems. Expectations are that the counselor will work to change the behavior so that the child and adults will have a better experience. A more humanistic view recognizes that behaviors are only one aspect of any problem and simple diagnoses rarely sum up a child’s issues. An internal sense of the trust, fairness, and helpfulness available from people in general can be factors that promote positive behaviors. Deficits in these factors could be expected to produce any number of personally or socially problematic behaviors as protective actions against expected dangers. The broken window concept that a positive perspective increases the potential for positive reactions from others and a negative perspective increases negative responses should encourage counselors to go beyond basic reasoning and behavioral techniques to directly explore these more existential issues.
The impact of a child being a target of or a bystander who is a witness to bullying has been demonstrated to extend into adulthood, and it appears that related social capital issues would do so as well. Anger, depression, and frustration related to perceived social and personal injustices and a lack of help from others are common themes with adults. Counselors should be ready to explore these issues that may have been produced by experiences with bullying at home, in the community, at school, or in the workplace.

CONCLUSION

As a society, we have indirectly invested in the social capital of youth by encouraging and even legislating antibullying programs. Implementing programs on a widespread basis has fostered some degree of responsibility for intervention by peers. We must attempt to enhance this sense of responsibility to make a difference in the plight of those who experience abuse and take deliberate steps to have our youth understand the influence each of them can have on the climate for everyone in their environment.

We must make better use of the potentially strong ties connecting people within the system to help potential targets of bullying trust in the system and see that it is fair. These bonding relationships between students and school personnel, families, friends, and neighborhood communities act as the primary vehicles for reducing the amount of bullying that occurs and reducing the impact of the abuse on targets and witnesses of bullying. This enhanced involvement across the primary systems (e.g., family with school, school with community, family with community) provides additional opportunities for various networks to voice concern and create change for the victimized student. Opening the channels to resources that the various systems provide creates a formal avenue to effect this necessary change.

REFERENCES


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*Journal of HUMANISTIC COUNSELING* • Fall 2011 • Volume 50

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