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Exploring the Psychological Mechanisms Linking Adolescent Bullying to Violent Crime

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Abstract. Crime has always been a topic of great concern. In recent years, the onset age of criminal behavior has shown a noticeable downward trend. At the same time, adolescent bullying is also a popular topic of continuous discussion. Therefore, by reviewing and synthesizing previous studies, this article aims to explore the psychological mechanism behind the criminal behavior caused by adolescent bullying. This article will summarize and analyze the research of predecessors, and build a psychological path mechanism from bullying to crime from the three perspectives of self-esteem, psychological disorder and imitation behavior. The study found that the low self-esteem, psychological disorders and imitation behaviors caused by campus bullying all had a promoting effect on crime. Therefore, the governments should strengthen the management of adolescent bullying and the attention and protection of the mental health of teenagers. This study emphasizes the necessity and importance of positive psychological guidance and campus bullying defense as soon as possible. Furthermore, this study also provides a foundation for future research on juvenile criminal psychology and bullying psychology.

Keywords: Adolescent bullying, crime, psychology

1. Introduction

In recent years, adolescent bullying has attracted much attention. According to a survey by the United Nations and the World Health Organization, about one-third of teenagers in the world have experienced bullying in their studies. Youth bullying is seriously harmful to their physical and mental health. Therefore, it is urgent to properly control the bullying of teenagers. Many countries have also taken a series of measures to show the importance of youth bullying. For example, most countries have established anti-campus bullying laws. At the same time, the United States has implemented the Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) policy, and China has also revised the Public Security Management Penalty Law, clearly making a legal system for teenagers aged 14-18. However, nowadays, crime is gradually becoming younger. More and more juvenile crime cases have emerged, causing social instability and causing serious harm to the development of teenagers themselves. Based on this, by exploring the impact of juvenile bullying on crime, this article aims to analyze the psychological mechanism behind crime in a more targeted way, so that it can play a more direct and effective role in controlling campus bullying and effectively controlling criminal behavior. At present, most studies focus on the impact of single variables on juvenile

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bullying or criminal behavior. This article will specifically explain the relationship between self-esteem, psychological disorders and imitation behavior and juvenile bullying, and explain how to affect crime.

2. Core concept

2.1. Adolescent bullying

Olweus clearly defines the three elements of bullying, namely intentional behavior, repeated behavior, and a power gap between the perpetrator and the victim [1]. Adolescent bullying usually refers to individuals aged 12-18 who have four forms of aggressive behavior: physical bullying, verbal bullying, social bullying and online bullying, causing physical damage, psychological trauma or property loss to the victim [2-4].

2.2. Self-esteem

Self-esteem includes self-worth and self-competency. Self-worth is the affirmation and respect of oneself. Self-competency is an assessment of individual ability, believing that individual have the ability to solve something or accomplish something [5]. Self-esteem plays a crucial role in the multi-faceted development of adolescents, such as cultivating the complete personality of adolescents, enhancing positive mental health, and improving social aspects. Self-esteem can be divided into high self-esteem, low self-esteem and unstable high self-esteem. High self-esteem is often accompanied by positive self-awareness, strong psychological resilience, and can accept shortcomings and actively correct them [6]. Low self-esteem is usually accompanied by low self-esteem, social avoidance, anxiety sensitivity, excessive dependence on others' evaluation, etc [7]. Unstable and high self-esteem mostly show superficial confidence but internal vulnerability, and are prone to defensive aggression [8].

2.3. Psychological barriers

Psychological disorder is a healthy state that affects individual emotions, behavior, and interpersonal socialization. It is often negative and accompanied by painful emotional function impairment [9]. In adolescence, psychological disorders can be divided into emotional disorders, behavioral disorders, trauma-related disorders and personality tendencies [10,11]. Emotional disorders are generally manifested as depression, anxiety and other negative emotions. Behavioral disorders have aggressive behavior or impulse control disorders. Trauma-related disorders usually have post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). Personality tendencies are personality disorders, such as antisocial personality or marginal characteristics.

2.4. Imitative behavior

Imitation is an individual's innate ability, which exists from infancy [12]. Imitation behavior can be divided into direct imitation, which involves replicating other people's behavior; deferred imitation, which is an indirect, delayed imitation; symbolic imitation, which imitates other people's symbolic language, such as values; and emotional contagion, which imitates other people's emotions. Imitation has an important impact on the development of teenagers. Positive imitation can make them form good behavioral habits and improve positive values. However, the negative impact may cause teenagers to have aggressive behavior, antisocial tendencies, and even commit crimes [13,14].

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3. The associations of adolescent bullying

3.1. The relationship between self-esteem and adolescent bullying

Self-esteem plays a crucial role in adolescents' psychological development. Previous studies have consistently shown a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and adolescent bullying. For example, Tsaousis suggested in his meta-analysis in 2016 that there was a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and bullying behavior [15]. Self-esteem reflects self-respect and self-dignity, so when self-esteem is damaged, it is easy for people to commit violent acts that attack others in order to maintain their dignity. Once this behavior becomes a habit, it is called fixation in the cognitive bias of psychology, that is, using one method to solve all problems all the time, which will lead to campus bullying and even criminal behavior. Therefore, strengthening positive self-esteem and cultivating students' healthy psychology can help reduce adolescent bullying.

Researches show that low self-esteem is closely related to adolescent bullying. Whether it is the perpetrator or the victim, people with low self-esteem are often more likely to appear in incidents of bullying on campus. Palermiti pointed out in his study that groups with low self-esteem are more likely to show violent behavior or tend to be victimized [16]. Similarly, Olwues, an early researcher on adolescent bullying, showed in his research that most perpetrators have high but unstable self-esteem [1]. They appear to be ostentatious, but their actual self-esteem may be vulnerable. Therefore, when they want to maintain their superficial character or when their self-esteem is violated, they often maintain their self-esteem through violence. This is also elaborated in Donnellan's research. The study shows that low self-esteem significantly predicts violent behavior, including aggressive behavior and even antisocial behavior. People with low self-esteem are more likely to receive social shame, threats, etc., so they will take revenge through violence to maintain their self-esteem [17]. For victims, Tsaousis proposed that there is also a significant negative correlation between self-esteem and victimization. That is to say, people with low self-esteem are often more likely to be victims [15]. Low self-esteem undermines adolescents' sense of self-affirmation and belonging, leading to heightened anxiety and social withdrawal.

Overall, these studies have explained that low self-esteem has a certain impact on bullying, especially on campus bullying. Understanding this relationship can not only effectively enhance teenagers' self-esteem, but also solve the problem of campus bullying more efficiently. Future research should explore targeted interventions—such as cognitive-behavioral training or peer-support programs—to cultivate self-esteem and protect adolescents' psychological resilience.

3.2. Adolescent bullying causes psychological barriers

Mental health is crucial to the physical and mental development of adolescents and affects the future development of adolescents. However, research shows that campus bullying has a serious impact on various aspects of teenagers' mental health, including emotional regulation, self-concept, and interpersonal trust. Whether they are bullies or victims, adolescents involved in bullying may experience distinct psychological disorders, such as aggression in bullies and anxiety in victims. Arseneault, Bowes, Shakoor's research found that bullying can significantly increase the mental health risks of adolescents, such as anxiety, depression, suicidal thoughts and other problems; at the same time, there is also a higher risk of antisocial behavior and mental disorder disease in the future of bullies [18]. Moreover, such psychological disorders are not only prominent in the short term, but also have a long-term negative impact until adulthood. Therefore, exploring the psychological

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disorders resulting from bullying is essential for safeguarding youth well-being and developing effective anti-bullying strategies.

Specifically, from the perspective of the bullied, adolescent bullying can cause serious psychological obstacles to the victims. Copeland's longitudinal study found that bullying is significantly related to anxiety disorder in adulthood. Victims of bullying may have symptoms such as social anxiety, generalized anxiety disorder and panic disorder [19]. Moreover, Wilson proposed that the negative effects of bullying are long-term and diverse [20]. In addition to anxiety, it also includes depression, inferiority, loneliness and even sleep problems. In addition, Espelage and Holt found that bullying was significantly related to suicidal thoughts [21]. Wilson also found that being bullied is strongly associated with self-harm and suicidal behaviors, highlighting the role of persistent psychological trauma [20]. In the study of 2024, Walters put forward the psychological mechanism of adult crime between the perpetrator and the victim of bullying. In fact, victims will have emotional disorders after being bullied, and they will have revenge, which will turn into a criminal act [22]. Hence, it can be seen that the impact of youth bullying on victims is heavy, profound and lasting.

On the other hand, for perpetrators, bullying in adolescence can also have an impact on their psychology, mainly manifested as antisocial behavior and criminal behavior. According to a large number of longitudinal studies of Ttofi meta-analysis, bullying has a significant predictive effect on adult crime, and the perpetrator is the high-risk group of future crimes. Teenage perpetrators are twice as likely to commit crimes in the future as ordinary teenagers [23]. According to Walters' psychological mechanism of perpetrators, perpetrators are more likely to have antisocial behavior in the future, resulting in crime [22]. Therefore, the mental health deterioration caused by adolescent bullying not only harms individuals but also contributes to broader social problems such as increased violence and reduced social cohesion.

To sum up, adolescent bullying is a significant predictor of psychological disorders among youths, underscoring the importance of early prevention and intervention. For this reason, it is very necessary to protect adolescent mental health and control adolescent bullying. Understanding the impact mechanism of adolescent bullying on the mental health of adolescents can more effectively control and reduce bullying behavior, so that teenagers can grow up in a positive and healthy environment.

3.3. The impact of imitation on violent crime

Imitation plays a significant role in the development and escalation of criminal behavior, especially among adolescents. Psychologist Albert Bandura pointed out in his Social Learning Theory that human behavior is often imitated by observing the behavior of others [24]. The Imitation Theory of Crime proposed by French sociologist Gabriel Tarde also shows that crime does not occur in isolation but proliferates across society through social imitation mechanisms [25]. Therefore, in juvenile bullying, the perpetrator or victim is likely to lead to criminal behavior by imitating the violence of peers.

In Bandura, Ross & Ross's Bobo doll experiment, children will learn and imitate their behavior towards bobo dolls by observing adults' verbal and physical aggression towards bobo dolls [26]. Experiments prove that aggressive behavior can be learned and imitated only through observation. Farrington summarized a number of longitudinal studies showing that when children come into contact with or interact with peers who tend to be antisocial behavior, they will imitate these behaviors and even values, "normalizing antisocial behavior" and eventually causing crime. Therefore, criminal learning is social [27].

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Why is it easier for observers to imitate violence? Huesmann and Kirwil integrated multiple studies to construct a psychological model to explain imitation behavior [28]. First of all, they put forward the Social Cognitive Script Theory. When individuals repeatedly observe violent behavior, they will carry out cognitive storage and form a "behavioral script" in the brain, so when they encounter some problems or conflicts in the future, they will activate the observed violent behavior template to solve them. In juvenile bullying, for example, both victims and witnesses may store the violence they have experienced or observed, increasing the incidence of crime.Secondly, they also analyzed Emotional Desensitization, that is, when individuals are repeatedly exposed to violence, their perception of the pain of others will be weakened and empathy will decrease, so there may be a sense of guilt in real crimes, which heightens the risk of crime by diminishing emotional responsiveness and moral inhibition. Finally, Hostile Attribution Bias is also a major reason for imitation behavior leading to crime. When individuals are frequently exposed to the criminal environment, it will greatly increase their hostility to society. They define normal behavior as aggressive behavior, so it is easier to fight back with violence. Huesmann found that children who have been chronically bullied by peers are more likely to resort to violence, possibly due to accumulated emotional distress and learned aggressive coping strategies.

In summary, imitation has a promoting effect on violent crimes. Imitation is connected to the process of observing criminal behavior and practicing. Analyzing this phenomenon can prevent and reduce the risk of crime in a more targeted manner. Enhancing the social environment for adolescents entails implementing stricter violence prevention policies and promoting prosocial peer modeling in schools. Governments should strengthen the management of violent behavior and reduce the criminal tendencies of imitation behavior.

4. Discussion and suggestion

This article discusses the relationship between self-esteem, psychological disorders, imitation behavior and adolescent bullying, and explains how this relationship increases the risk of crime. Through this article, juvenile bullying will promote crime to a certain extent. Therefore, if the society want to reduce the risk of criminal behavior, people can prevent and reduce crime in a targeted manner from the perspective of controlling juvenile bullying. First of all, people with low self-esteem are more likely to experience teenage bullying. Both the perpetrator and the victim often show low self-esteem. Therefore, from the perspective of self-esteem, the society should cultivate teenagers' good self-awareness, enhance self-affirmation, encourage teenagers to face and accept their shortcomings, and strengthen timely psychological counseling aimed at emotional regulation, trauma recovery, and behavioral correction. Secondly, a series of psychological obstacles caused by campus bullying will also greatly increase the risk of crime. For example, depression, anxiety and other emotional disorders not only seriously damage the mental health of teenagers, but also increase their risk of anti-socialism and crime. Therefore, the state and the government should step up efforts to rectify the bullying of teenagers, implement relevant legal measures, and strengthen the timely psychological counseling of teenagers. Finally, imitation can also have an important impact on crime. Due to the innate imitation behavior of human beings, it is easy for teenagers to imitate their aggressive behavior in bullying, which increases the risk of crime. In this regard, the government should still strictly control the bullying behavior of teenagers. Teenagers should also establish correct values and views on right and wrong, and have the ability to distinguish between good and bad things to reduce the negative impact of imitation.

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5. Conclusion

This article aims to study how juvenile bullying affects criminal behavior and analyze the psychological mechanism behind it. It is explained in detail that low self-esteem, psychological disorders and imitation behavior all promote the risk of crime. This study establishes a psychological development mechanism from juvenile bullying to criminal behavior, which provides a basic framework for follow-up research. At the same time, it also reminds educators and the government that early prevention of bullying is the key to reducing criminal behavior. In the future, it is necessary to strengthen the mental health protection of teenagers and efficiently control bullying. Future studies can focus on the governance of cyberbullying, a comprehensive and complete psychological evolution path from bullying to crime.

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