

The Relationship between Social Cohesion and Electronic Aggression: A Theoretical Approach to a Contemporary Social Problem

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Abstract

The relationship between electronic aggression (cyber-bullying) and adolescents falls at the intersection of two theoretical frameworks: the theory of adolescent development and the theoretical construct of social cohesion. In this article, the discipline of psychology helps to provide information about adolescent development, specifically the significance of group involvement, and the sociological perspective informs about group involvement and social cohesion as a social phenomenon. The marriage of these two theoretical backdrops is instrumental when studying social phenomena in adolescent peer groups. In this paper, social cohesion, viewed in a theoretical context, will compliment developmental theory and will be applied to the study of adolescent electronic aggression.

Adolescent Development & Group Formation

In the body of theoretical research that makes up developmental psychology, there are several theories that explore the unique period of development that exists between childhood and adulthood, called adolescence. Erik Erikson's (1950) stage theory of development provides a unique way of understanding adolescent development and the phenomenon of group formation in adolescents. Erikson characterizes eight stages of development that one passes through in sequence from birth to adulthood. At each stage, Erikson identifies one major conflict that an individual may experience. He explains that at best, one successfully navigates this conflict as he/she continues through subsequent developmental stages. Newman and Newman (2003) explain, "Predictability is found in the sequence of psychosocial stages, in the central process involved in the resolution of the crisis at each stage, and in the radius of significant relationships" (p 58). According to Erikson (2005), failure to resolve a particular conflict may lead to maladjustment.

The typical adolescent may experience many challenges, such as identity formation, autonomy from parents, social stresses, and emotional strains (Newman & Newman, 2003). Another expected change associated with adolescence is a social change in relation to the peer group (Newman & Newman, 2003). Erikson identifies the major psychosocial crisis of adolescence as identity versus role confusion, which may arise as adolescents begin to form peer groups.

The peer group becomes a central structure in adolescence. As children move from childhood into adolescence, they become increasingly concerned with their perception of how others view them. Adolescents typically begin to spend less time at home and more time with their social group. Friendships may take on a new meaning as adolescents begin to count on their friends for social support more than they did in the past. It is during this stage that the adolescent tries to achieve autonomy from his/her parents (Newman & Newman, 2003). Newman and Newman (2003) explain "new layers of peer relationships, sometimes known as the

clique and the crowd begin to take shape” (p. 307). Adolescents want to be part of a group and alienation is feared.

According to Erikson, as one reaches adolescence, s/he is ready to create group affiliations, even if it will require compromises and sacrifices (Erickson, 1950). The specific rituals and behaviors of a particular social group become confirmation of membership and identity with that particular group. As adolescents begin to explore these affiliations and partnerships, they may even begin to exclude others. Erikson (1950) goes on to say that “young people can also be particularly clannish and cruel in their exclusion of those who are different” (p 262). He explains this behavior and intolerance of others as a defense against the risk of role confusion (Erickson, 1950).

Social Cohesion and Adolescent Development

Cohesion is a term that refers to groups. Social cohesion, group cohesiveness, network formation, and group solidarity are all overlapping components in the phenomenon of groups (Friedkin, 2004). Members of a socially cohesive group are likely to defend and uphold group standards. Those in a highly cohesive group are more invested in the group compared to those in a less cohesive group. This may breed “better attendance, participation, and mutual support” (Yalom, 1995, p. 48). Groups may become more cohesive when the members feel positive attitudes towards others in the group. Interpersonal interactions can help to maintain, or break, social cohesiveness (Friedkin, 2004).

Currently, social cohesion is an ill-defined term (Chan et al., 2006). Many researchers in the fields of sociology, psychology, and economics are challenged to create a formal definition (Friedkin, 2004). Social cohesion is yet to be given a singular definition (Chan et al., 2006; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; McMillan & Chavis, 1986; Zani, Cicognani, & Albanesi, 2001). Some definitions of social cohesion focus on group solidarity while others focus on social capital (Chan et al., 2006). As more disciplines become involved in the discussion of social cohesion, it becomes more difficult to create a concise explanation and definition of it.

Some authors (Chan et al., 2006; Forrest & Kearns, 2001; McMillan & Chavis, 1986) agree that there are different dimensions of social cohesion. Even though the exact dimensions may vary, these authors believe that social cohesion is made up of multiple components. Forrest and Kearns (2001) identify the aspects that make up social cohesion as a “Sense of morality and common purpose; aspects of societal control and social order; the threat to social solidarity of income and wealth inequalities among people; groups, and places; the level of social interaction within communities and families; and a sense of belonging to place “ (p. 2128). Zani, Cicognani, and Albanesi (2001) quotes McMillan and Chavis (1986) who say that sense of community is made up of four dimensions. They are membership; influence, fulfillment of needs and emotional connection and support (p. 476).

Chan, Ho-Pong, and Chan (2006) define social cohesion in the following way:
Social cohesion is a state of affairs concerning both the vertical and the horizontal interactions among members of society as characterized by a set of attitudes and norms that includes trust, a sense of belonging and the willingness to participate and help, as well as their behavioral manifestations (p 290).

Chan et al. (2006) explains that vertical interactions are interactions between members of society and authority figures, such as the government, and horizontal interactions are those

among members of society. Essentially, social cohesiveness is a measure of how well members of a group “stick together” (Chan et al., 2006). Chan et al. (2006) suggest that members of a socially cohesive group simultaneously meet the following three criteria:

1. They can trust, help and cooperate with their fellow members of society;
2. They share a common identity or a sense of belonging to their society;
3. The subjective feelings in 1 and 2 are manifested in objective behavior (p. 289)

Both psychological and sociological perspectives acknowledge the importance of peer group membership and the possible associations and correlations it can have with behavior problems in adolescents. As discussed above, a sense of group belonging can be of great importance to normative adolescent development. Contemporary literature adds to the body of research on adolescent development and the need for group membership. Beam, Gil-Rivas, Greenberger, and Chen (2002) identify integration into a peer group, or social cohesion, as a protective factor in the prevention of behavior problems. They suggest that when peer group membership is valued by an adolescent, a lack of social cohesion may contribute to the risk of behavior problems affecting that adolescent; behavior problems are more significant for adolescents who value group membership but do not have a positive sense of group belonging and do not feel they hold any positive group affiliations.

Newman, Lohman, and Newman (2007) studied three aspects of peer group membership in adolescence: peer group affiliation, the importance of group membership to the individual, and a sense of peer group belonging. They studied behavior problems in adolescents against a backdrop of peer group affiliation and the need for group membership, noting several differences between males and females. The authors suggest that the adolescents in their sample who reported that peer group membership is very important to them, generally had a positive sense of peer group belonging. These same adolescents reported fewer behavior problems than adolescents who said group membership is important but did not have a positive sense of peer group belonging (Newman, Lohman, & Newman, 2007). This suggests that when adolescents value peer group membership, a lack of positive sense of group belonging seems to be one contributing factor to behavior problems.

Because adolescents spend most of their time in school, it becomes the setting in which many groups form. Social networks develop easily in schools because of similar interests, the amount of time students spend together, and the desire to belong to a peer group. Membership in a peer group begins to inform adolescents’ identities and the way in which they may make decisions. It becomes challenging to define and identify adolescent peer groups. Membership in such groups can shift quickly. Groups often share unique interests. When adolescents begin to form cliques and groups in social settings, there are bound to be some who do not fit in, either by choice or by the exclusion of others. Some adolescent groups may condone and publicly participate in aggressive behavior (Newman et al., 2007, p 245). Erikson (1950), among other theorists, says that adolescents who do not affiliate themselves in groups sometimes experience a sense of isolation and rejection. Some researchers seem to agree that rejected youth often become withdrawn and may be more likely to be victimized by their peers (Newman et al., 2007, p 245). Oftentimes other people tend to interact with them less for fear of being affiliated with the victim and treated in a similar way.

While group identity can contribute to adolescents’ successful participation in the development of identity, some research indicates that social exclusion can sometimes have a negative affect on adolescent development, and has been associated with problems in adjustment

(Newman et al., 2007). This includes rejection, social exclusion, and even the perception of being excluded from desired relationships or peer groups (MacDonald & Leary (2005) as cited in Newman et al., 2007, p. 244). Social pain and devaluation can be very distressing to adolescents and can have social consequences for the individual.

Social Cohesion and Bullying

There is a small but important body of literature that focuses on the relationship between the social context of peer groups, bullying, and aggression (DeRoiser, Cillessen, Coie, & Dodge, 1994). A social cohesion framework can be applied to these studies. Bullying is “when a student is repeatedly exposed to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” that creates an imbalance of power (Olweus, 2001, p. 24). If a school culture views bullying as acceptable, there will likely be a higher level of bullying because there is a moral approval of the act and bullying has become more normative (Williams & Guerra, 2007). Williams and Guerra (2007) suggest that if students feel they have more social ties to their peers, they are less likely to be in a bullying scenario. Williams and Guerra (2007) found that “If students believe that bullying is acceptable and if they feel disconnected and unsupported at school and by peers, they should be more likely to engage in all types of bullying behavior, including internet bullying” (p. 15). Those who do not feel part of a cohesive group may be more likely to exhibit a behavior that is not in the best interest of others.

Salmivalli, Ojanen, Haanpaa, and Peets (2005) found that peer relationship schemas affect social behavior. Being part of a peer group is an important part of adolescence and being part of a group that promotes a feeling of trust and a common identity can contribute to, and may dictate, social behavior. This study shows that children who do not feel like they are part of a group are more likely to be further isolated and socially withdrawn. This study supports that idea that there is a relationship between feeling part of a socially cohesive peer group and bullying.

A social cohesion framework has been applied to several different research studies that focus on peer groups and aggressive behavior. Espelage, Holt, and Henkel (2003) discusses the concept of group membership in light of aggression and delinquency in adolescence. This research also underlines the connection between social cohesion and bullying behaviors. Selective association (when children who hold the same qualities are attracted to one another) is relevant to the discussion on bullying and social cohesion. Children may affiliate themselves with other children who bully at the same frequency (Espelage, Holt, & Henkel, 2003). Being a member of a peer group allows for the opportunity to feel connected to others. Members often build an identity through the peer group and demonstrate behaviors that support the interests of the group.

DeRoiser et al. (1994) examined the relationship between “aggressive episodes” and “social cohesion” (p. 1070, p. 1071). DeRoiser measured group cohesion by studying behaviors that he believed to reflect the level of cohesion among group members, including “attending the same activity, maintaining physical proximity or visual contact, and mutual conversation” (De Roiser et al., p.1071). DeRoiser et al. (1994) found that groups that had a lower level of social cohesion had a higher likelihood of the group members being aggressive. This suggests that cohesive groups may promote a friendly environment. Moreover, this study shows that group context can influence aggression, which warrants further study in this area.

Zani et al. (2001) believe that as social researchers employ more ecological perspectives of development, the environmental and social context of adolescents is “an issue of considerable theoretical interest” (p 486). Zani et al.’s (2001) research examined the relationship between the

adolescent's feelings of safety, their perception of social support, and their sense of community. Zani et al.'s (2001) study examined the relationship between peer groups in schools and electronic aggression. The results from this study suggest that social support plays a part in an adolescent's sense of safety. They found that group membership and being in the company of friends also tended to reduce the adolescent's fear of victimization more than when the adolescent was alone. The sense of belonging, the sense of community, and the sense of being surrounded by a social group positively correlate to an adolescent's feeling of safety. Studies like Zani et al.'s (2001) are ways in which the framework of social cohesion can be applied to the study of adolescent peer groups. The research that exists illuminates the need for more such studies that look at adolescents, aggression, and violence within a social context.

Conclusion

The importance of peer groups, as outlined above, substantiates the need for further study about social cohesion and electronic aggression. Because adolescents thrive in cohesive groups, there is a need for further investigation in this area. Against the backdrop of developmental psychology, a social cohesion framework clearly explains the importance of group membership in adolescence. The relationship between social ties and various types of violence and victimization is becoming better understood through empirical research. The knowledge base must continue to grow by examining the relationship between social cohesion and electronic aggression. Traditional concepts and notions of social cohesion are becoming increasingly challenged by electronic communication. In response to the growing use of the Internet and the use of technology by adolescents who bully, there should be a growing focus in research and literature addressing electronic aggression in the context of social cohesion.

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