Feelings of inferiority as a catalyst for bullying behavior among Indonesian secondary school students: A literature review

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Abstract

Bullying remains a critical issue in Indonesian schools, identified by the Ministry of Education, Culture, Research, and Technology as one of the "3 deadly sins" in the education system alongside sexual violence and intolerance. Recent reports from the Federation of Indonesian Teachers' Unions (FSGI) indicate high rates of bullying across all school levels. However, current interventions largely focus on victim support, leaving the psychological roots of bullying behavior among perpetrators underexplored. This literature-based study investigates the role of feelings of inferiority as a key driver behind bullying behavior in adolescents. Drawing on Adlerian counseling theory, the study suggests that adolescents may resort to bullying as a way to mask feelings of inadequacy, seeking dominance to counter feelings of inferiority. Influencing factors, such as family environment, peer dynamics, and societal norms, contribute to this behavior. Using qualitative, descriptive analysis, findings underscore the need for therapeutic interventions that help perpetrators reframe their self-perceptions and set constructive life goals. Comprehensive support for both victims and perpetrators is necessary to address the root causes of bullying and foster a healthier school climate.

Keywords: Adolescence; bullying; counseling; inferiority.

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1. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, the Minister of Education, Culture, Research and Technology of the Republic of Indonesia, Nadiem Makarim, identified three major problems in Indonesia's education system, which he referred to as the "3 deadly sins." These include bullying, sexual violence, and intolerance. The statement revealed that bullying was one of the three serious problems in education that were currently surfacing in the Indonesian education environment. This finding is in line with the report of the Federation of Indonesian Teachers' Unions (FSGI), which noted the high number of bullying cases at various levels of education, such as elementary schools (25%), junior high schools (25%), high schools (18.75%), vocational schools (18.75%), MTs (6.25%), and Islamic boarding schools (6.25%). Unfortunately, the handling of bullying behavior in Indonesia still focuses a lot on handling victims, while the perpetrators of bullying are only treated as "guilty" individuals. So, the handling only focuses on providing punishment without any deeper exploration of the motives and background of why bullying behavior can occur. To break the "vicious cycle" of bullying behavior, both victims and perpetrators should receive expert treatment.

According to Fathonah & Minsih, (2021) and Hikmat et al., (2024), bullying is the action of a person or group to hurt or injure a person or group that is considered weak and occurs repeatedly. These actions can include hitting, kicking, mocking, spreading rumors, sexually taunting (catcalling), bullying, calling bad names, or forcing someone to do something. There are several forms of bullying behavior, including; physical bullying, verbal bullying, relational bullying, and cyberbullying (Agisyaputri et al., 2023). There are several characteristics of children who have a greater chance of becoming bullying perpetrators, including; (1) Confident types, popular, having many friends, coming from affluent families; (2) In certain situations having been victims of bullying; (3) Anxious types, namely types who feel inferior because they are academically weak and less popular. Furthermore, Zakiyah et al., (2017) mention several causes of someone becoming a bully, including family factors, school factors, peer group factors, social environment factors, and media viewing factors.

In Adlerian counseling theory, a person who engages in bullying behavior is assumed to have feelings of inferiority, which drives them to adopt a bullying lifestyle to achieve feelings of superiority. According to Adlerian theory, feeling inferior is a common experience for all individuals, and this feeling becomes the motivation to overcome discomfort and achieve a state that is perceived as superior. Adlerian therapy considers that each individual's actions aim to overcome feelings of inferiority (Corey, 2013). The challenge arises when the concept of superiority formed by the individual's subjective reality is not in line with the norms and rules of society, causing their behavior to become problematic. Therefore, Adlerian counseling theory is needed to help individuals see themselves, others, and life in a new way. The main goal of this counseling is to change the lifestyle of individuals by changing their views so that they can achieve healthier life goals that are by objective reality. Hopefully, after undergoing the counseling process, bullying perpetrators can redefine their life goals and subjective reality, become healthier individuals, and make positive contributions to society.

Bullying in adolescents is often used as an attempt to gain higher recognition and is often accompanied by an arrogant attitude toward those around them. However, this is just a way to hide failure or feelings of inferiority that exist within the perpetrator. Inferiority refers to a state in which a person feels weak, helpless, incapable, and feels less valuable than others. Inferiority can also be defined as feelings of inferiority, inadequacy, and insecurity. Individuals who experience inferiority tend to feel insecure and less valuable, which can result in them withdrawing from the environment or even committing aggression against other individuals. Human inferiority and superiority arise in response to the primal drive to overcome feelings of inferiority and achieve feelings of superiority. As such, human behavior can be

explained by considering their goals and expectations for the future. Inferiority indicates a sense of weakness and inability to deal with real-life tasks or situations.

Bullying in the school environment can have a serious impact on learners. According to research by Darney et al., (2013), there are several consequences of bullying, including learners feeling alienated and isolated from their surroundings, sometimes even removed from playgroups and other social activities. As a result, learners experience difficulties in social interaction and difficulty building relationships with others because they feel rejected (Ahmed et al., 2022). It is important to note that the impact of bullying is not only felt by the victim but also by the bully. Bullies often feel inferior or inferior, and they try to compensate for these feelings through negative aggression, such as bullying behavior. Bullying perpetrators have a desire to dominate others, lack empathy for others, have difficulty fostering healthy relationships, have limitations in understanding other people's perspectives, and tend to consider themselves strong and favored. Through the act of bullying, the perpetrator feels in control of the situation. If bullying behavior continues, other forms of violence and criminal behavior may emerge. Therefore, it is important to address the issue of bullying in schools to prevent wider negative impacts (El Fatah et al., 2022).

1.1. Purpose of study

The rate of violence in Indonesia has increased in line with the times. A problem that often occurs is bullying cases affecting adolescents in the school environment. Although schools are supposed to be a place to get an education, in reality, some teenagers use the school environment as a place to carry out bullying behavior. Bullying, which involves mocking, intimidating, and hurting others verbally, physically, or psychologically, is a common phenomenon. Perpetrators of bullying are often motivated to feel powerful and dominating to be perceived as superior. This is partly a compensatory mechanism to cover up their feelings of inferiority by pretending to have advantages, which is often manifested through bullying behavior. Adolescents who engage in bullying behaviors tend to have feelings of inferiority, feeling inferior, incapable, and lacking strength. These feelings of inferiority are then expressed through aggression, which appears in the form of bullying behavior towards others. This research focuses on the literature on feelings of inferiority to explain that feelings of inferiority possessed by adolescents can be one of the triggers for bullying behavior in the school environment. The research method applied is a literature study by referring to sources such as articles, journals, reference books, and abstracts of research results. Data analysis was conducted through content analysis or content review. Various theories and research findings support the claim that adolescents with feelings of inferiority tend to bully in an attempt to overcome their inadequacies and shortcomings.

2. METHODS AND MATERIALS

This research is qualitative research, which is library research that focuses on books and other literature. Research that produces information in the form of descriptive information and data contained in the text under study (Mantra, 2008). However, in this case, the researcher does not only carry out recording and reading activities but the researcher must be able to process the data collected. Through qualitative research, descriptive analysis is needed. The descriptive analysis method provides clear, objective, systematic, analytical, and critical descriptions and explanations. After collecting all the data, the next step is for the author to analyze the data to conclude. The conclusion given is data in the form of words that need to be processed concisely and systematically.

2.1. Data source

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The data sources of this research are taken from books and journals that are relevant to the research title or variables studied. These books and journals are considered data sources to be processed and analyzed by examining them so that theoretical data can be obtained.

2.2. Data collection technique

Data collection techniques are related to data sources. Data collection techniques in literature study research use documentation techniques because data sources are in the form of written data. Researchers use documentation techniques to explore data and collect data from reading sources related to the problems in this study.

3. RESULTS

According to research conducted by Astuti (2015), Bullying, as a behavior of mental and physical abuse of power, appears as a way for adolescents to overcome feelings of inferiority and protect themselves. Adolescents in this condition are motivated to cover up their feelings of inferiority by conquering others along with the emergence of aggression in adolescents. Bullying is behavior that results from the abuse of mental and physical strength or power by a person or group. Where the perpetrator of bullying is a person who feels strong and the victim of bullying is a person who is considered weak so that he feels helpless.

In another study conducted by Rilla (2019), it was found that there is a significant relationship between bullying behavior in adolescents and self-concept. A positive self-concept, which includes self-acceptance and having rational goals, is associated with a reduced risk of bullying behavior. In contrast, adolescents with a negative self-concept, who tend to feel unaccepted in their environment, have a higher likelihood of becoming victims of bullying.

Yani (2017) examined bullying in adolescence and found that adolescents with low self-esteem tend to feel helpless and have difficulty building social relationships. Low self-esteem can trigger aggressive behavior as a way to cope with feelings of inferiority. Teenagers who have low self-esteem will have an impact on the behavior of the teenagers themselves. Adolescents who have low self-esteem will be easily offended and irritable so as a result of this low self-esteem adolescents can take actions that harm and hurt others. Bullying is a form of aggression that shows an individual's attempt to compensate for feelings of inferiority by threatening, frightening, and hurting others. This indicates that the higher the learners' inferiority which is manifested by feelings of inferiority, helplessness, ostracized, and weak compared to other individuals, the higher the learners' drive for aggression which is manifested by the learners' desire to take actions that hurt, hurt other friends, which in turn will increase bullying behavior by bullying or bullying others because they feel unable to establish relationships with friends.

Research by Silvia and Muhammad (2018) shows that inferiority affects bullying behavior through aggression. Adolescents with higher feelings of inferiority tend to have stronger aggression urges, increasing their likelihood of bullying behavior. Feist et al., (2006) personality theory states that humans struggle from feelings of inferiority to superiority. Individuals who feel inferior tend to use aggression, such as bullying, as an attempt to protect fragile self-esteem. Humans strive for superiority or success as a way to replace feelings of inferiority or weakness. This weakness triggers feelings of weakness to have an innate tendency to reach for something whole or complete. Humans as a whole are constantly driven by the desire to be whole.

In addition, Alwisol (2014) emphasized that humans try to overcome feelings of inferiority and achieve superiority in everyday life. The desire to be whole and achieve success drives individuals to struggle through aggression, including bullying behavior. Kalaivani (2017) highlighted the inferior feelings often

experienced by school-aged adolescents. These feelings of inferiority can drive adolescents towards success, but if overdone, can take a toll on themselves. They try to be superior, pursuing personal goals with no regard for others. For example, by putting others down, shaming others, blaming others for their failures, and taking revenge to cover up their weaknesses.

Almahasnih (2019) and Zhou et al., (2024) proved that low self-esteem is the strongest motive for bullying behavior, where bullies want to show control and power over their peers. This happens because bullying perpetrators who have low self-esteem want to show control and power to their peers. These perpetrators try to compensate for their inferiority by attracting attention. This fact is based on the argument that bullying behavior is done in front of other peers and they are proud to do it.

According to Adler's theory, feelings of inferiority arise when a person finds himself in a situation where his abilities and attitudes are denigrated or rejected by others. Feelings of inferiority or lack of self-esteem can cause negative behavior in adolescents. The results of research by Kenchappanavar (2012) show that the inferiority complex correlates with frustration which can then result in aggression. Intense feelings of inferiority or low self-esteem are closely related to high levels of aggressiveness. Socially rejected adolescents are seen to be at risk of failure in interacting with peers, and adolescents with a sense of inferiority or low self-esteem feel insecure, believing that others will treat them badly, which can encourage them to start conflicts with peers. Lack of recognition and respect for one's identity can lead to aggressive behavior, and aggressive behavior tends to increase in adolescents with low self-esteem.

Bullying, as an act of violence usually perpetrated by identity-seeking adolescents, occurs due to adolescents' excessive aggressiveness and their inability to situate themselves. Bullying is also related to adolescents' self-concept. Handini (2010) found that adolescents with a negative self-concept (low) have a higher tendency to bully, while adolescents with a positive self-concept (high) tend to have a lower tendency to bully. Self-concept is closely related to feelings of inferiority, where self-concept includes a person's physical, social, and psychological perceptions. Adolescents who have a negative self-concept may exhibit negative behaviors, such as bullying.

Research by Surilena (2016) shows that bullying behavior is a form of aggressive behavior. Bullying often occurs during adolescence, when adolescents are experiencing emotional instability and seeking self-identity. Characteristics of bullying victims involve differences in appearance and daily behavior, as well as limited abilities such as learning disabilities or mental retardation. Adolescent victims of bullying tend to be anxious, nervous, and insecure and may experience behavioral problems and other developmental disorders. Bullying perpetrators, on the other hand, are hyperactive, aggressive, destructive, dominance-loving, and short-tempered adolescents.

Wahyudi (2013) found a correlation between inferiority feeling and adolescent aggressiveness, where feelings of inferiority play a role in determining the level of aggressiveness. Adolescents use aggression, such as bullying, as compensation for the feelings of inferiority they experience. Aggression is a form of protection to maintain vulnerable self-esteem. The higher the self-esteem, the lower the tendency to bully, and vice versa. High self-esteem correlates with psychological well-being, happiness, and emotional maturity, while low self-esteem can trigger feelings of anxiety, loneliness, and depression, encouraging adolescents to commit acts of bullying in an attempt to fulfill their self-esteem needs.

Overall, these studies suggest a link between feelings of inferiority, self-esteem, and bullying behavior in adolescents. Feelings of inferiority can be a trigger for aggression urges that affect the likelihood of adolescents engaging in bullying behavior.

4.   DISCUSSION

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Based on the results of content analysis or content review of journals and books that contain feelings of inferiority and bullying in adolescents above. Bullying behavior is deviant and dangerous behavior, bullying cannot be considered ordinary juvenile delinquency because behind the bullying event are many problems that are often unknown and unnoticed by educators, parents, and society (Xia et al., 2024). The impact of bullying can be a traumatic event that is fatal and affects the development of adolescents in the short and long term (Ismaili et al., 2024).

Inferiority is stated by Alfred Adler that the feeling of inferiority is a sense of lack or inferiority that exists in every individual because humans are created or born in a weak and helpless condition. Feelings of inferiority or low self-esteem are not a sign of abnormality but rather a push toward progress or perfection in life. With feelings of inferiority that exist in adolescents, adolescents will improve and produce something beneficial to them. Feelings of inferiority are feelings experienced by individuals where they feel weak, helpless, incapable, and inferior. They think that they are useless people and have no power or power.

This feeling of inferiority is often found in adolescent children. This is because adolescence is a time when an individual is in a state of self-discovery, emotionally immature, unstable, and wants to get recognition from people around or peers. Self-identity search in adolescents encourages aggression as compensation for their feelings of inferiority.

Bullying events often occur in the school environment and can occur at all levels of education, one of which is in Junior High School (SMP). Where in junior high school students' adolescents enter the age of 11 to 13 years. Adolescence is a transitional period from childhood to adulthood. As well as many physical, cognitive, social, and emotional changes that also increase. Adolescents often experience emotional changes as a result of adjusting to new patterns of behavior. Emotional changes experienced are shown by irritability, not understanding how to express feelings appropriately, and easily displaying negative feelings to others. During adolescence, individuals want to be considered by their environment. Many cases of bullying are carried out by junior high school adolescents to be seen as strong by peers. However, bullying behavior is less considered in schools, because it is considered not to have a major influence on students. Students cannot learn if they are in a state of threat, or pressure, and someone oppresses them every day.

5. CONCLUSION

In Alfred Adler's theory of individual psychology humans struggle from inferiority to superiority or success. This feeling of inferiority is compensated by becoming better to achieve superiority or success. However, it will be different if this feeling of inferiority is then compensated with negative things such as intimidating, and attacking peers to be considered as individuals who have power. This feeling of inferiority is compensated by committing acts of aggression. Acts of aggression are deliberate actions both physical and verbal to harm and hurt others.

From the results of the research that has been reviewed, adolescents bully to cover up their feelings of inferiority. In other words, teenagers try to cover up their inferiority by bullying to be seen as great, strong, and powerful. From the discussion of the research results of the literature study on feelings of inferiority owned by adolescents on the tendency of bullying behavior of adolescents in junior high schools (SMP), it is concluded that adolescents with feelings of inferiority tend to bully at school as an effort to cover up their feelings of inferiority to look great and powerful.

Suggestions can be compiled from this study for future researchers to find the right way to compensate for feelings of inferiority so that they can become positive compensation so that bullying actions among adolescents in schools can be reduced. Because the variable of inferiority feeling inferiority feeling is still

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a little that researches, it is hoped that many researchers will be interested in conducting more in-depth research to help adolescents who have inferiority problems fulfill developmental tasks as adolescents optimally and positively and reduce bullying actions. From this literature study research, it would be nice if counseling teachers and related parties in schools could carry out early detection of bullying in schools.

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