

Chapter 66

Cyber–Bullying, Personality and Coping among Pre–Adolescents

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study was to investigate the association of personality (Five Factor Model), coping and cyber-bullying/victimization experiences among 300 Greek pre-adolescent students attending the upper two primary school grades. Boys reported more frequent involvement in cyber-bullying incidents, while there were no significant gender differences in terms of cyber-victimization. In terms of participant roles, non-involved students scored higher in Conscientiousness, and cyber-bully/victims in Emotional Instability. The latter also tended to use maladaptive coping strategies more frequently, while cyber-bullies reported using more aggression and resignation to cope with interpersonal conflicts. Multiple regression analyses indicated that low conscientious boys who use passive avoidance and aggression were more likely to cyber-bully, while those who use aggression, passive avoidance and situation control to cope with interpersonal stressors were more likely to be cyber-victimized. Implications of the findings are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying constitutes a widespread phenomenon which can be damaging for students' mental health and academic achievement. It has received enormous research attention, but recently a new form, cyber-bullying (CB), has emerged due to the widespread use of information and communication technologies (ICT). Although there is no agree-

ment on the definition of CB, Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, Fisher, Russell, and Tippett define it as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or an individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (2008, p.376). Common means of CB are e-mails and social networking websites (Price & Dalgleish, 2010), while with regards to its frequency, inter-

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national research indicates increasing prevalence rates (Steffgen & Konig, 2009). Several researchers have proposed various forms of CB, with regards to the type of behavior (Willard, 2007) or the mean used (Smith, Mahdavi, Carvalho, & Tippett, 2006), while similarly to traditional bullying, CB participants can be categorized as *pure bullies*, *pure victims*, those adopting a double role (*bully-victims*), as well as *bystanders* (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012).

Although most pre-adolescents and adolescents make daily and even heavy use of ICT, they are not equally involved in cyber-bullying/victimization (CB/V) incidents. In terms of participants' socio-demographic characteristics, research findings indicate that, although both sexes are equally involved in CB, girls are more likely to participate as bullies or as victims (Tokunaga, 2010), while regarding participants' age, they are mostly junior high school freshmen (13 to 14 years old) (Price & Dalgleish, 2010). As far as the social-economic circumstances (SEC) are concerned, findings are controversial. Although, evidence suggests that young people from high income families, are more likely to have Internet access and consequently join more often in CB (Shiraldi, 2008), children from low SEC families, use the Internet more dangerously, due to their parents' lack of knowledge and rule setting (Livingstone & Helsper, 2008).

As there has been relatively little writing and effort devoted directly to understanding the role of personality and coping of early adolescents involved in CB/V, this literature review depends upon studies and theories that are implicitly relevant, which provide the background to link together participants' personality, coping, and CB/V involvement.

Personality is related to aggressive behavior and to problematic peer relations among children and adolescents (Jensen-Campbell, Adams, Perry, Workman, Furdella, & Egan, 2002). The Five-Factor Model (FFM) is a widely accepted construct, describing personality variation along

five dimensions (i.e., the Big Five): Extraversion (E), Openness to experience (O), Conscientiousness (C), Neuroticism (N), and Agreeableness (A). The FFM has traditionally been used in research assessing adult personality and has proven robust and stable over time (McCrae & Costa, 1990). Although there still are some unresolved issues concerning the predictive validity of Big Five measures for understanding children's adjustment and functioning, an increasing number of studies in middle childhood and early adolescence have demonstrated that the broad five dimensions are useful predictors of important developmental outcomes (e.g., Kokkinos, Panayiotou, Charalambous, Antoniadou, & Davazoglou, 2010).

Research regarding the personality characteristics of those involved in CB/V suggests that cyber-bullies are likely to be impulsive, with aggressive tendencies (Kildow, 2008), and more anti-social personality traits (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012; Van Baardewijk, Stegge, Bushman, & Vermeiren, 2009). Furthermore, they are more likely to exhibit decreased empathy compared to non-involved students (Steffgen & Konig, 2009), and are also characterized by high levels of narcissistic exploitativeness and normative beliefs regarding aggression (Ang, Tan, & Mansor, 2011). Adolescents with low levels of E, A and N, have increased probabilities of Internet misuse and low self-reported well-being (Van der Aa, Overbeek, Engels, Scholte, Meerkerk, & Van den Eijnden, 2009). Limited though are the findings regarding the personality of cyber-victims and cyber-bully/victims. Campfield (2008), for example, showed that students who had been victimized through the Internet had lower self-esteem, compared to the control group, while other studies have indicated that chat room victims have higher scores in N (Corcoran, Connolly, & O'Moore, 2008).

However, students who face negative encounters through the Internet will not always become cyber-victims due to the coping strategies they use. Indeed, those who survive negative experiences are more capable of using adaptive coping.

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