

Chapter 73

Understanding Bystanders' Willingness to Intervene in Traditional and Cyberbullying Scenarios

Justine A. Walker
Northumbria University, UK

Debora Jeske
Edinburgh Napier University, UK

ABSTRACT

Bullying incidents in traditional and online settings are a cause for concern to many parties. The goal of the current study was to explore the extent to which a bystander would intervene in a bullying incident and the degree to which this behavior is influenced by group size (the number of other witnesses), the setting (traditional or cyberbullying), and gender of the victim. Using an online survey method, participants were presented with eight bullying scenarios, each of which involved verbal bullying of a victim. Participants ($N = 82$) were asked to report how likely they would be to intervene in each of these scenarios. Results showed that female victims were more likely to be helped than male victims. Furthermore, female participants were more willing to intervene than the male participants in the cyberbullying scenarios. Altruism was a positive predictor of participants' willingness to intervene. The present findings suggest that certain gender differences in helping behavior may depend on the context in which bullying is observed (traditional or cyberbullying).

INTRODUCTION

The adoption of technology from those as young as six years has produced a generation of children and adolescents who use social networks and instant messaging services on a regular basis (see Ofcom, 2014), making technology a pervasive part of their everyday experience and communication with others. As more and more young people adopt networked computers and mobile phones to stay in touch with their

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family, peers, and friends, cyberbullying has become more common (Beran & Li, 2007; Smith et al., 2008). This is in line with statistics in the UK. For the timeframe of 2011 to 2012, ChildLine reported that they were aware of 2,410 cases of cyberbullying. By 2013, this figure had almost doubled to 4,507 cases (Sellgren, 2014). Cyberbullying is therefore a worrying form of victimization which is on the increase, not only in the UK but in many other countries as well. Both traditional and cyberbullying have been examined in terms of their conceptual overlap, as well as the relation between these forms of bullying (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Jang, Song, & Kim, 2014; Law et al., 2012; Pieschl et al., 2013).

Bullying describes behavior that is aggressive and deliberate. Such behavior is carried out by an individual or a group, often repeatedly with malicious intent, against someone who cannot defend themselves so easily (Olweus, 1993). Cyberbullying has received more attention in the last decade (e.g., Li, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2006; Smith et al., 2008, Wang et al., 2011; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009) and has been defined as “an aggressive intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms” (Smith et al., 2008, pg. 376). Due to the nature of technology, bullying incidents can be more anonymous and more widely shared, making it harder for victims to control or remove bullying evidence themselves.

Bullying can take different forms. On the one hand, it may involve aggression that is immediately directed at the individual (such as insults, physical threats, or excluding individuals from activities). These reflect verbal, physical and relational bullying (Wang et al., 2011). Many of these are characteristics of bullying in traditional settings. On the other hand, bullying can involve aggression to inflict harm on a potential victim using more indirect (or covert) means. Technology provides bullies with numerous means to do this in online settings (e.g., spreading rumors via social media and messaging services; see Wang et al., 2011; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Cyberbullying often involves different technologies that are then used to tease, taunt and threaten another person (such as bullying by text/mobile device, computer, email, video etc., see Wang et al., 2011; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Verbal aggression is often a component of both traditional and cyberbullying (e.g. in text, video and email correspondence as well as face-to-face interactions) amongst both males and females. Particular examples of verbal bullying include bullying via flaming, online harassment, denigration and masquerade (Willard, 2007).

The consequences of bullying often vary in severity, as do the effects that such experiences can have on the social development of children, young adolescents and adults (e.g., Bastiaensens et al., 2014). The press has also reported several suicides linked to cyberbullying. However, in these cases, it is not always clear whether bullying alone is responsible, as other underlying factors might influence the likelihood of victims self-harming, such as depression, anxiety, and the social isolation experienced by many victims. There are also other consequences. Beran and Li (2007) found that students who were cyberbullied and bullied in school also performed less well, had lower concentration and were absent from class more often. Indeed, cyberbullying, when evidenced by a large online audience can trigger emotions in victims such as embarrassment, shame, and helplessness due to repetitive posting and sharing of online posts (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Similar emotions are also experienced by the bystander when facing a situation where they might experience potential embarrassment (Zoccola et al., 2011).

Verbal bullying, together with physical bullying, predicts significantly higher levels of depression among school-age victims (Wang et al., 2011) and poorer mental health (see Rivers et al. (2009). Indeed, witnessing the victimization of other peers can be highly stressful when bystanders feel empathy for and sympathize with the victims, thus they correspondingly suffer the negative effects of the bullying incidents they observe (D’Augelli, Pilkington, & Hersherberger, 2002).

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