

Technology-enabled Bullying & Adolescent Non-reporting

Breaking the Silence

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Abstract: Although early research has pointed to the fact that the successful intervention and resolution of cyberbullying incidents is to a large degree dependent on such incidents being reported to an adult caregiver, the literature consistently shows that adolescents who have been bullied tend not to inform others of their experiences. However, the reasons underlying reluctance to seek adult intervention remain undetermined. Understanding the factors that influence adolescent resistance will assist caregivers, teachers and those involved in the formulation of school anti-bullying policies in their attempts to counter the cyberbullying phenomenon should be a space before of 12-point and after of 30-point.

1 INTRODUCTION

The problem of adolescent bullying has evolved in tandem with the digitization of society. Bullying is a problem that transcends social boundaries and can result in devastating psychological and emotional trauma including low self-esteem, poor academic performance, depression, and, in some cases, violence and suicide. In its traditional context, it has been described as being characterized by the following three criteria: (1) It is aggressive behavior or intentional 'harm doing' (2) which is carried out repeatedly and over time (3) in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power. One might add that the bullying behavior often occurs without apparent provocation," and "negative actions can be carried out by physical contact, by words, or in other ways, such as making faces or mean gestures, and intentional exclusion from a group (Olweus 1999, pp.10-11).

Cyberbullying, which is bullying conducted through the medium of electronic communication tools (such as email, mobile phone, social networking sites, Personal Digital Assistants, instant messaging tools and the World Wide Web) has been defined by Willard (2007) as '... being cruel to others by sending or posting harmful material or engaging in other forms of social cruelty using the Internet or other digital technologies, such as cell phones. Young people may be the target of cyberbullying from others or may engage in such

harmful behavior. Direct cyberbullying involves repeatedly sending offensive messages. More indirect forms of cyberbullying include disseminating denigrating materials or sensitive personal information or impersonating someone to cause harm (p.10).'

As can be seen from the above definitions, there are important distinctions between cyberbullying and bullying. The first distinction relates to the nature of the bullying. Traditional forms of bullying are usually direct and bullies are visible, while cyberbullying can be anonymous and bullies in cyberspace do not have to be physically stronger or bigger than cyber-victims. Second, bullying occurs often at a particular time and place, whereas cyberbullying can happen anytime, anywhere including in the home. Third, cyberbullying can spread exponentially faster (e.g. copy and paste a message and send it around the world) than traditional forms of bullying. Fourth, cyberbullying can be preserved easily (such as saving messages on a phone, memory stick, disk, etc). Fifth, bullies usually have poor relationships with teachers but it has been noted that cyberbullies can have good relationship with teachers (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Finally, on the one hand, bullying commonly happens on school property; cyberbullying, on the other hand, frequently occurs outside school property which makes identifying and combating such behaviour much more difficult.

2 NON-REPORTING

Although even early research in this field (e.g. Olweus, 1993) has pointed to the fact that the successful intervention and resolution of bullying incidents is to a large degree dependent on such incidents being reported to an adult caregiver, the extant literature consistently shows that adolescents who have been bullied tend not to inform others of their experiences (e.g. Petrosino et al., 2010; Black, Weinles and Washington, 2010; Mishna and Alaggio, 2005; Naylor and Cowie, 1999; Charach, Pepler and Ziegler, 1995). For example, Ybarra et al (2006) found that 33% of victims of cyberbullying in their study did not tell anyone about the incident. More recent work by Petrosino et al. (2010) is of particular importance given that their data collection involved a nationally representative sample from American schools and was based on figures from the National Crime Victimization Survey School Crime Supplement (2007), which showed that 64% of adolescents between the age of 12 and 18 did not report their experience.

Smith, et al.'s (2006) study of 92 students across the UK found that almost one-third of students who acknowledged being targeted by cyberbullies chose not to speak about their experience when it happened. This figure is close to the findings of the NCH (2005) study, which revealed that 28% of those targeted by cyberbullies chose to remain silent rather than seek help in resolving the problem. Slonje and Smith (2008) state: 'Cyber victims most often chose to either tell their friends or no one at all about the cyberbullying, so adults may not be aware of cyberbullying' (p.147).

Compounding the problem is the fact that variation appears to exist between cultures. For example, a cross-cultural comparative study by Li (2008) showed that 9% of Canadian students reported their cyberbully experience to adults and less than one-fifth of those aware of a cyberbullying incident reported the issue to an adult. In comparison, 66% of Chinese students who experienced cyberbullying informed an adult and 60% of 'bystanders' reported the phenomenon to an adult (p.7). The reason for this significant difference in reporting behaviours between both countries and cultures may result from a combination of sociological and philosophical reasons deeply ingrained in the respective cultures.

3 RESEARCH INSIGHTS

Despite the fact that many studies have found that adolescents do not report their bullying or cyberbullying experiences, there is a dearth of empirical work examining the reasons for same. Two studies deserve particular mention. The first is a quantitative study by Holfeld and Grabe (2012), which replicated earlier descriptive research on the prevalence of cyberbullying and examined why students do not report cyberbullying. Using a sample of 383 students from four middle schools in a North American city (with average student age of 13.5 years), and using a subset of self developed measures to capture non-reporting (4 questions in relation to own experience and 3 questions in relation to reporting of peer experiences), they found that 16% of students reported being cyberbullied in the previous year and of those 62% were cyberbullied at least once or twice in the last 30 days. Only 11% of students reported cyberbullying others at least once in their lifetime and 9% in the last year. Cell phone cyberbullying was the method used most frequently. As a key point of that study concerns the reporting aspects of cyberbullying, the findings show that almost 30% of students who were cyberbullied in the past year did not report the incident. When asked to explain their reporting behaviour, 57% of the responses comprised they didn't feel it was a big deal or they felt they could handle it on their own. 29% of students considered that reporting would make it worse or were scared to tell. Whilst this study provides an empirical attempt to understand the issue of non-reporting in more depth, Holfeld and Grabe's work is limited in the sense that the number of questions used to capture non-reporting comprises a small number of self developed measures that are not validated or tested for reliability and the study was purely quantitative in nature and not followed up by in depth exploration of the issue. It is likely that our understanding of the factors that influence adolescent non-reporting would benefit from a triangulated approach to data collection.

A second study that has sought to bring greater clarity to this issue is that of De Lara (2012). Using a qualitative approach, she studied the non-reporting problem in four schools (two rural and two urban) in the New York region. The sample comprised twelve focus groups (3 in each school, comprising 97 students) and 51 individual interviews (with some cross-participation between students being involved in both focus group and individual interview) of which 52% were female and 48% male adolescents.

A significant finding of the research is that the reasons for non-reporting appear to be multifactorial with the results indicating that the adolescents in this sample did not report their experiences due to the ubiquitous nature of bullying; a sense of helplessness; concerns over inappropriate adult action; self-reliance; shame; parental omniscience; and a different definition of bullying than adults use (De Lara, 2012: 288).

Interestingly, students in the research considered bullying to be the norm or something to be expected whilst witnesses to such behaviour also perceived it as a normal rite of passage in school. They were despondent about the potential for successful adult intervention, as they feared that parental intervention could make things worse or, at the other extreme, that adults would not take the concern seriously enough. It was of particular concern that some reported being told by teachers to deal with the problem themselves – an obvious flaw in the duty of care by individual teaching staff. When adolescents seek help from an adult and the bullying continues unabated despite reporting the issue, the research shows that they are likely to withdraw from communicating the issue further to the adult caregiver (DeLara, 2008; Garbarino & DeLara, 2002). This confirms the findings of Petrosino et al. (2010) and Pepler et al. (2008) whose research shows that between 40-65% of adolescents never report their experience of bullying to an adult.

An indirect finding of DeLara's work that may also provide insight as to the reasons for non-reporting relates to the interpretive difference that adolescents and adults attribute to the term "bullying". For example, she found that many of the students in her sample, when asked to define bullying, described it as: 'when someone is *mean* to me' [italics mine]. However, 'mean' behaviour – is not reflected in current descriptions of bullying in the literature. This difference in interpretation was previously highlighted by Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, and Liefooge (2002) who found that adolescent perception of what constitutes bullying could differ remarkably from that of adults. For example, a student experiencing sexual harassment may not be aware that they are being bullied. It follows, therefore, that if students' understanding of bullying differs from adult understanding, the chances of reporting and intervening in such bullying behavior are reduced. This is of significance in implementing anti-bullying policies, educating students as to what constitutes 'bullying' and thereby encouraging them to come forward to relate their experiences to a significant caregiver.

Whilst the work of De Lara (2012) is valuable in that it represents an attempt to examine the issue of non-reporting, it was limited to four schools (2 urban and 2 rural) within the New York region, the sample was small and therefore the generalisability of its findings remain uncertain. It is possible that local and cultural factors may have impacted the reasons for non-reporting behaviour. However, whether this is the case can only be determined by additional research on this issue in other and broader contexts. Further study in an Irish context would be particularly valuable not only in providing insight into this issue in relation to the factors that predict Irish adolescent non-reporting, but also as a comparative measure to establish the culture independence of these factors.

4 THE IRISH CONTEXT

Despite awareness of a considerable number of adolescent deaths in Ireland that have been related to cyberbullying (most notably Lara Burns, Erin Gallagher, Ciara Pugsley and Leanne Wolfe), empirical research on this issue remains remarkably limited. The death by suicide in America of another Irish adolescent, Phoebe Prince, brought worldwide attention to the gravity of the problem but the factors linking cyberbullying and death by suicide need deeper research.

Whilst there is a dearth of empirical research on cyberbullying in Ireland, concern about this issue is widespread and would appear to be justified. For example, a joint Irish Independent and 'Prime Time Investigates' survey (Irish Independent, 2008) of students found that approximately 30% of students have endured all types of bullying at secondary schools within a 3-month period of 2008. It also found that 1 in 5 schoolgirls had experienced cyberbullying as compared to 1 in 8 boys. The research data provided by the Anti-Bullying Research and Resource Centre at Trinity College Dublin in 2008 revealed an unsettling picture of the growth in online and mobile phone intimidation among secondary school pupils and showed that children as young as 12 are being targeted through mobile phone calls, text messages, e-mails, internet forums, chat rooms and social networking sites. Recent research on the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying was conducted by Cotter and McGilloway (2011) and comprised a sample of 122 adolescents from two secondary schools in the South of Ireland. The findings showed that although cyberbullying within that sample appeared to be less

prevalent than traditional bullying, the adolescents concerned considered it to be worse than traditional bullying, with the exception of email.

Whether individual factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, family cohesion (unity) or religious belief influences cyberbullying remains undetermined. Equally, the influence of situational factors such as attendance at public or private school on cyberbullying outcomes has not received adequate attention. Understanding the influence of these variables would contribute to parents and educators' insight into the problem and increase their ability to address it. (O'Higgins-Norman and Connolly, 2011).

In order to understand the hesitance that predicts adolescent non-reporting of bullying experiences, it is important that the views of those who experience and witness such behaviour should be understood and factored into any intervention or policy formulation processes. However as school policies are directed from government level and implemented by individual school boards which are constituted by adults and therefore such policies are designed and implemented from an adult perspective. Therefore, in order to effectively address the problem of bullying, it is imperative that research on this issue should consider the views of the adolescents who actually experience the behaviour. As DeLara (2012) states:

The preponderance of research on bullying tends to neither include the perceptions of students nor provide understanding about their reluctance to rely on adults for intervention. Research has found that students may not tell adults about bullying experienced or witnessed despite repeated encouragement and directives from adults (p.288).

4.1 Irish Non-reporting Behaviour

In Ireland, the issue of non-reporting of cyberbullying behaviour was initially identified by O' Moore & Minton (2011) who found that a distinct contradiction exists between intent and actual practice in terms of Irish adolescents reporting their cyberbullying experiences to adults. For example, they reported that whilst 14.6% of pupils stated that they *would* inform an adult at school if they were cyberbullied, *in reality*, only 6% of these pupils had actually reported their cyberbullying experience. Instead, the found that pupils were over twice as likely to do nothing at all, five times more likely to send an angry message back, and five times more likely to talk to a friend.

Recent research by Cotter and McGilloway (2011) of 122 adolescents from 2 schools in the

South of Ireland found that one quarter of victims did not confide in anybody. However, as only 25 respondents answered the question about whether they would report their experience or not to another individual, a broader sample of respondents is needed in order to have confidence that these results provide an accurate reflection of the general adolescent response pattern in relation to reporting cyberbullying.

The recently published HBSC report - 'Irish Health Behaviour in School-aged Children' (Kelly et al, 2012) – found that statistically significant differences exist by gender and age group - with more boys reporting having being bullied compared to girls and younger children more likely to report ever being bullied as compared to older children. These findings are particularly concerning in light of consistent evidence that girls tend to suffer more cyberbullying experiences than boys and that cyberbullying experiences tend to increase during adolescence. Whilst valuable in that it highlights age and gender distinctions regarding the self-reporting of bullying experiences in general, the HBSC measurement instrument does not provide the level of granularity necessary to determine the factors that are influencing adolescent resistance to report their cyberbullying experiences. Similarly, whilst providing evidence of adolescent resistance to report cyberbullying, O' Moore and Minton's (2011) study does not provide insight as to the causal reasons for that resistance. The authors speculate that the explanation for adolescent non-reporting may be a perception of greater self-efficacy than teacher efficacy in dealing with online problems or a lack of confidence in the school's abilities to deal with bullying (2011: 40). However, these are merely speculations, they are not empirically derived and simply are the interpretation of the authors. Consequently, neither study progresses our understanding of the factors underlying Irish adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences, nor provide insight as to whether individual or situational characteristics influence that resistance.

As previously noted, adolescent resistance to reporting is equally prevalent in the traditional (face-to-face) bullying context with evidence (Smith and Shu, 2000; Whitney and Smith, 1993) to show that 30-50% of pupils do not inform a parent or teacher that they had been a target of bullies. The influence of age on reporting behaviour is evident in Rigby and Slee's (1993) study which found that whilst approximately half of Australian students aged between 8 and 12 stated that they would like help

prevent others being bullied, as they increased in age, they became more reluctant to confide in or seek seeking adult intervention. However, the reasons underlying adolescents' reluctance to seek adult intervention or discuss the bullying experiences remain undetermined. Similarly, the degree to which gender, age or other variables apply in the case of Irish adolescents' resistance to report cyberbullying experiences has yet to be established.

5 CONCLUSIONS

The literature on cyberbullying is embryonic and as a consequence many deficits exist in relation to our understanding of the phenomenon. A growing body of evidence points to the fact that many adolescents who have been the target of cyberbullying behaviour choose to confide in peers rather than adult caregivers or teachers, despite having previously stated their intention to inform the latter should they themselves become the target of such behaviour. As a result, this behaviour remains unchecked and its impact unaddressed. The literature provides evidence that this chasm between reporting intention and actual behavioral outcome is consistent regardless of national differences. Despite this fact, remarkably little attention has been paid to understanding the factors underlying this resistance and the ensuring silence on the part of adolescents regarding their experiences of cyberbullying. Such insights are necessary if parents, teachers and those involved in the formulation of anti-bullying school policies are to be successful in their attempts to counter and eliminate cyberbullying behaviour. Research on the factors underlying adolescent resistance-to-report is therefore urgently mandated.

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