

Research Note

Moving From Traditional Bullying to Cyberbullying: The Role of Moral Emotions and Reasoning

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While the online world is an exciting forum for youth to expand their social and academic horizons, the proliferation of information and communication technologies (ICTs) creates new opportunities for victimization. Younger generations are the largest users of ICTs, which in turn, expose them to a higher risk of cyber harassment (Lenhart, 2007). Consequently, a new type of bullying has emerged in recent years; cyberbullying is defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying can result in exclusion, isolation, loss of self-esteem, physical and emotional harm, and even death (McQuade, Colt & Meyer, 2009; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006). Recent high-profile Canadian cases, such as the suicides of Amanda Todd in British Columbia and Rehtaeh Parsons in Nova Scotia, have garnered significant media attention and emphasized the devastating impacts of cyber-aggression on Canadian youth. Yet, despite international recognition of cyberbullying as a pervasive social problem, current research has predominantly focused on the prevalence of cyberbullying among adolescents (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Wade & Beran, 2011) and the co-occurrence of bullying in schools and online (Ybarra, Mitchel, Finkelhor & Wolak, 2007; Wade & Beran, 2011). There is little empirically based and theoretically grounded research aimed at understanding the psychological mechanisms that underlie children’s online behaviour.

In order to develop a more profound understanding of children and adolescents’ online engagement, as well as design effective pedagogical approaches aimed at addressing cyberbullying in schools, future research must investigate the psychosocial factors at play. According to Arsenio and Lemerise (2004), aggression can be examined through the lens of moral reasoning theories, since aggressive behaviours are evident moral transgressions. Literature on traditional bullying and aggression suggests that moral emotions are important regulators of harmful behaviour, as they are closely connected with one’s sense of responsibility toward another (Gini, 2006; Menesini, Sanchez, Fonzi, Ortega, Costabile, & Lo Feudo, , 2003). A theoretical distinction is made between two possible moral-affective processes. The experience of *morally responsible emotions*, such as shame and guilt, indicate a recognition of the harmful consequences inflicted on the victim (Menesini et al., 2003). Conversely, the experience of *morally disengaged emotions*, such as pride, suggest a detachment from the victim and the repercussions of one’s actions as a means of justifying the negative behaviour and protecting

oneself against self-blame (Bandura 1991, 2002; Menesini et al., 2003). Specifically, bullies have been found to experience less shame and guilt (Gini, 2006); to feel greater indifference to victims' suffering (Olweus, 1994); and to feel proud of the personal gains attained through bullying others (Menesini et al., 2003). By extending the current literature on traditional bullying to cyberbullying and utilizing theories of moral reasoning as a theoretical framework for inquiry into this new area, researchers can explore how children's moral affect connects with intentional victimization behaviour when engaging online. Accordingly, the current study aims to delineate the impact of context (cyberbullying or traditional bullying) and perspective (bystander or perpetrator) on children and adolescents' self-attribution of moral emotions.

Method

The sample included 60 students (38 boys), aged between 8 to 16 years, from diverse ethnic groups. In order to test the aforementioned research objectives, a 2 (traditional bullying vs. cyberbullying) x 2 (perspective of perpetrator vs. perspective of bystander) between-within-subjects design was used. These factors were manipulated in a series of 8 vignettes depicting hypothetical moral transgressions in cyberbullying and traditional bullying contexts. After random assignment to the cyberbullying or traditional bullying condition, participants were asked to evaluate 4 moral vignettes; to self-attribute the emotions they would feel in the role of the perpetrator (2 vignettes) and bystander (2 vignettes); and to justify their responses. Further, participants' experiences with peer aggression and victimization were assessed using the Multiple-Item Cyberbullying Scale (Menesini, Nocentini & Calussi, 2011) and the Revised Olweus Bully-Victim Questionnaire (Olweus, 1996). Lastly, in order to control for developmental trends in socially desirable responding, participants completed a short version of the Children's Social Desirability (CSD) Questionnaire (Crandall & Crandall, 1965; Miller et al., 2014).

Results

Results of repeated measures ANOVA revealed that students were more likely to self-attribute morally responsible emotions (guilt, shame) compared to morally disengaged emotions (pride) across contexts, $F(1, 58) = 87.70, p < .001, \eta^2 = .602$. As shown in Figure 1, this effect was qualified by an interaction between emotion and perspective, $F(1, 58) = 18.19, p < .001, \eta^2 = .239$. Participants were more likely to experience a higher degree of pride and a lower degree of guilt and shame when assuming the perspective of the bystander, compared to that of the perpetrator. Further, no significant differences were found between cyberbullying and traditional bullying contexts.

Multiple regression analyses were conducted to determine whether demographic factors (gender and age) significantly predicted participants' moral emotion self-attributions. Results indicated that age significantly predicted morally disengaged emotions in the bystander perspective, $R^2 = .13, F(2, 56) = 4.19, p = .02$. As age increased, children were less likely to report feelings of pride ($\beta = -.30, p = .02$). Further, the regression model significantly predicted the self-attribution of morally responsible emotions from the bystander perspective, $R^2 = .12, F(2, 56) = 3.70, p = .03$. As age increased, children were more likely to report feelings of guilt and shame ($\beta = .26, p = .04$).

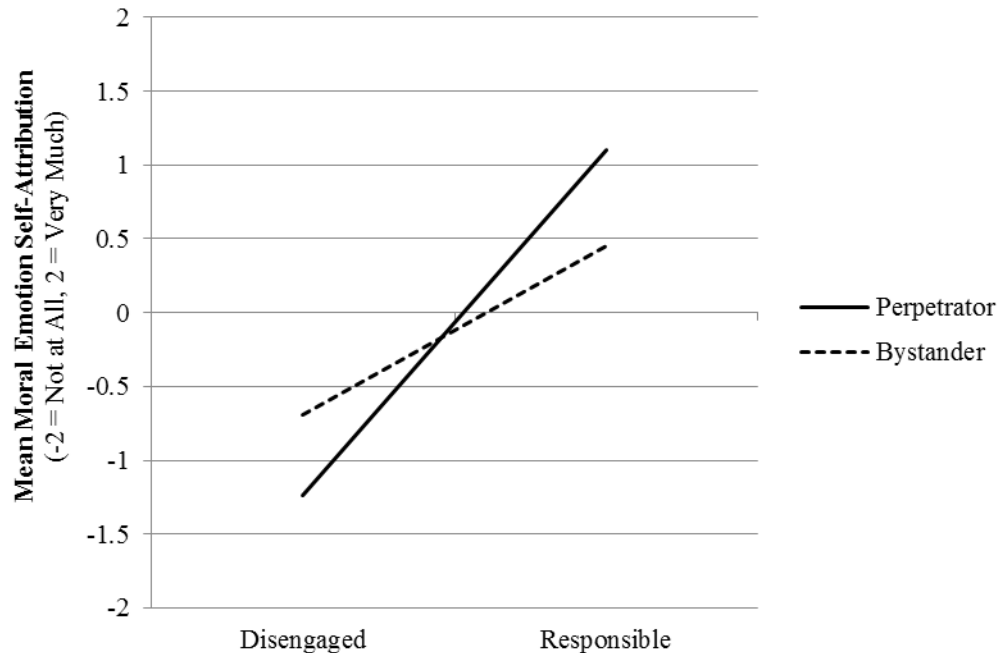


Figure 1. Mean Moral Emotion Self-Attribution Score by Perspective.

Conclusion

Results of the current study suggest that, while participants were more likely to experience morally responsible emotions (guilt, shame) overall for both traditional and cyberbullying events, marked differences in moral emotion self-attributions emerged within the bystander perspective. Participants attributed a higher degree of morally disengaged emotions to the self as a bystander, as well as lower moral responsibility, compared to that of the perpetrator. Further, older participants reported higher levels of guilt and shame and lower levels of pride when taking the perspective of the bystander, compared to younger children. Practically, the present findings highlight the need to consider developmental differences in moral affect, as well as the impact of perspective when designing effective pedagogical approaches and intervention strategies aimed at addressing cyberbullying in schools.

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