Understanding the Role of Bystanders and Peer Support in School Bullying

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Research into school bullying has traditionally focussed on the actual protagonists – the perpetrators and the targets. Consequently, we know a great deal about the psychological characteristics of bullies and victims and the consequences of bullying in undermining the emotional well-being of both targets and perpetrators. While an understanding of the personal aspects of the bully-victim relationship is important, it only addresses part of the issue. Bullying is experienced within a group of peers who adopt different participant roles and who experience a range of emotions. In this article, I argue that bullies do not act alone but rely on reinforcement from their immediate group of friends as well as the tacit approval of the onlookers. This article explores the conflicting emotions often experienced by the bystanders. It also makes some suggestions about interventions to empower bystanders to take action against bullying through, for example, such interventions as peer support.

Keywords: bullying, peer support, participant roles, bystanders

Introduction

Research into school bullying has traditionally focused on the actual protagonists – the perpetrators and the targets. Consequently, we know a great deal about the psychological characteristics of bullies and victims and the consequences of bullying in undermining the emotional well-being of both targets and perpetrators. While an understanding of the personal aspects of the bully-victim relationship is important, it only addresses part of the issue. Bullying is experienced within a group of peers who adopt different

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participant roles and who experience a range of emotions. Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen (1996) proposed that perpetrators seldom act alone but are usually supported by their immediate group of *assistants* and *reinforcers*. The bullying escalates further as a result of the responses of the bystanders as *outsiders*, whether they react with indifference to the plight of the victim or implicitly condone what is happening. Only a small proportion of bystanders will act in the role of *defenders* who offer emotional support or protection to the victims.

The role of bystanders in school bullying

When asked directly for their views on bullying, most children and young people report that they dislike it (Boulton & Underwood, 1992; del Barrio, Almeida, van der Meulen, Barrios & Gutièrrez, 2003) and judge it to be immoral (Shaw & Wainryb, 2006). Batson, Ahmad, Lishner and Tsang (2002, p. 488) identify the source of the young people's altruistic behaviour as "empathic emotion for someone in need" and argue that empathy-based socialisation practices can encourage perspective-taking and enhance prosocial behaviour, leading to more satisfying relationships and a greater tolerance of stigmatized outsider groups. But the reality for many victims of bullying is that typically only a minority of bystanders will intervene to help the victim. One explanation is provided by Salmivalli (2010, p. 117) who proposed that bystanders are "trapped in a social dilemma". They understand that bullying is wrong and at least some wish that they could do something to stop it, but they are at the same time acutely aware of their own needs for security and acceptance within the peer group. This interpretation of the bystanders' dilemma is confirmed in a study by Jennifer and Cowie (2012) who explored 10- and 11-year-old students' (N = 64) moral emotional attributions in relation to other and self in peer-to-peer bullying scenarios, as portrayed in a series of pictorial vignettes. In stepping into the role of each of the characters in the hypothetical story, both as *self* and as *other*, participants mostly cited worry and shame in taking the role of the bystander.

The characterization of the bystander as worried and ashamed is illuminating and demonstrates children's understandings of others' moral emotions that go beyond the bully/victim dyad to include the wider social group within which bullying takes place. While participants' responses demonstrate the bystander's concern for the victim (feeling sorry, worrying about the continuation of the bullying, worrying about the intensity of the bullying), their responses also suggest an awareness that the bystander fears the personal consequences of their bullying behaviour more than they fear the consequences of their actions on the victim. This can cause acute emotional distress in some of those who witness bullying (Rivers, Poteat, Noret & Ashhurst, 2009). Others, more pragmatically, perceive the bystander's behaviour to be justified, because it offers protection against becoming the next victim, suggesting that such behaviour is deemed to be personally and socially acceptable through a process of moral disengagement, that is, in terms of personal gain (Jennifer & Cowie, 2012).

So what are the factors that influence the responses of bystanders when they witness an episode of bullying? Gender and age appear to have an important impact on whether bystanders offer help to the victim, reinforce the bully or remain neutral (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi & Franzoni, 2008). Trach, Hymel, Waterhouse and Neale, (2010) found that secondary school boys were increasingly disengaged and passive in their

bystander responses in comparison with girls. Age was also a factor in that girls intervened less frequently as grade level increased but they continued to be more likely than boys to report helping when they witnessed bullying. The authors conclude that "The shift from direct intervention strategies (i.e., *telling the bully to stop*, *helping the victim*, *talking to an adult*) to more indirect strategies (i.e., *distracting the bully*, *talking to a friend*) appears to be a "slippery slope" for bystanders. Indirect strategies may imply less individual responsibility for intervention or may lower expectations that one's intervention will be effective, which could explain why the tendency to do nothing in response to bullying increased significantly with grade for both boys and girls" (Trach et al., 2010, p.126-7). Such research would suggest the need to change attitudes to peer intervention and bystander motivation as children move into adolescence.

In order to find out more about the emotional dilemmas experienced by those who witness bullying, Hutchinson (2012) interviewed eight volunteer bystanders aged 12-13 years. One participant; Kate, described her confusion on how to respond to bullying as being "like a clown with three balls", so creating the dramatic image of a circus performance. Hutchinson (2012, p. 435) comments:

> There is the obvious meaning here of juggling complicated options, leading to uncertainty and anxiety, but a more symbolic image is suggested. While the metaphor of the theatre has already been explored, for Kate this social event is more of a circus: the central "entertainment" involves a bully and a victim; the support act is "the clown", the lonely and undignified defender. The show is cheered on by an "obnoxious" audience, who "think it's hilarious to watch people get knocked on their arses". Without the "performers", there would be no audience and without the audience, perhaps the performers would drift off. Confusion and the sound of cruel laughter are what remain for this bystander.

Kernaghan and Elwood (2013), in the context of cyberbullying amongst adolescent girls aged 12-15 years, also use Goffman's (1959) concept of performance, complete with audience and setting, as a means of explaining why bullying is so widespread. By framing bullying as a performance, the researchers consider the ways in which different settings influence the responses of the audience, most of whom are bystanders. For example, many girls in this study reported that they enjoyed putting up flattering photographs of themselves and friends on their BeBo profile. But this carefully crafted image could be damaged when other people, without permission, posted unattractive photographs on their site. 32.2% of the participants reported that they had had embarrassing photographs posted on the internet against their will and 19.0% admitted to putting embarrassing photographs of another person on the internet without permission. As the authors indicate, due to the potentially large audience, this can cause great humiliation to the target as it contradicts the image that this girl is trying to cultivate. Again, the older girls in this study were more likely to engage in this more sophisticated form of cyberbullying than the younger ones since they could make use of their more advanced social and technical skills in order to remain anonymous. In terms of cyberspace, the audience was potentially huge and so could result in greater humiliation of the target than offline bullying. A great deal of time seemed to be used in deliberately constructing the 'performance' for the online audience.

Similarly Besag (2006), in her longitudinal study of girls' peer relationships, observed that bullies needed to be skilled at manipulating others if their bids to achieve dominance over the group were to be successful. If they overstepped the mark, the group had the power to challenge their intimidating behaviour.

Besag (2006) proposes that the most effective anti-bullying approaches involve the participation of the bystanders to create more harmonious relationships within particular groups.

Studies like these indicate the conflicting emotions often experienced by bystanders and the tensions between feeling powerless in the face of pressure to conform to the wider peer group and the wish for the strength to intervene in some way. Hutchinson (2012) proposes that adults can help the bystanders to become more aware that their inadvertent or deliberate reinforcement of bullying is unacceptable. The process of bystanders choosing to defend can have a dual outcome. It has positive implications for the well-being of the victim but it also provides the bystanders with a sense of autonomy, agency and identity by changing the behaviour and attitudes of the peer group in the direction of a more principled, moral stance. He concludes that:

- Bystanders are seldom neutral emotionally and, in fact, many experience considerable anguish at their failure to protect the victims;
- Bystanders can be viewed as 'co-victims' of bullying in that they are often emotionally disturbed by it;
- There are potential benefits to becoming an active defender through reduction in shame about failure to defend the victim and enhancement of pride in acting responsibly;
- Even the presence of one active defender can generate a pro-defending momentum amongst peers.

Empowering the bystanders through peer support

The presence of a peer support system in a school offers a framework within which bystanders can play an active part in challenging behaviour that the majority report to be distasteful. It would seem logical to mobilise peer support schemes to empower those bystanders who are willing to take the risk of expressing their dislike of bullying and their desire to support the victim in some way. Not only do peer supporters have direct knowledge of the complex network of relationships in the peer group, but they are trained to use effective strategies of intervention when an actual episode takes place. Thus they can extend protectiveness beyond the immediate friendship group and help to develop a school community founded on principles of equality, concern for others and empathy for others' feelings. Spanish educators call such community spirit *convivencia*—living and working together in harmony. The growing popularity of peer support systems in schools is a sign that these schemes are meeting a need and providing a vehicle through which bystanders can take action. The method of peer support has grown in popularity in recent years and is now used in many countries; for example, in the UK, the existence of such systems is reported in over 62% of English schools (Houlston et al., 2009). Peer support is now a widely used intervention to promote emotional health and well-being at school. Varieties of peer support programs have become more popular internationally as anti-bullying interventions that promote the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1991) and have the potential to improve pupil safety, emotional health and well-being (Cowie, Boardman, Dawkins, & Jennifer, 2004). Primary school schemes usually involve befriending/buddying, peer mediation and friendship benches. Secondary school peer support schemes usually involve peer mentors, who

may offer support to pupils with difficulties in a "drop-in" room, do group work with a tutor group, offer one-to-one contact with a pupil in need over a period of time, or run a lunchtime club for younger pupils (Andrès, 2007; Cowie & Wallace, 2000). Some secondary school pupils work as mediators to resolve conflicts through a structured process in which a bystander in the role of neutral third party assists voluntary participants to resolve their dispute (Fernandez, Villaoslada & Funes, 2002). Others work as cyber mentors to help prevent cyberbullying by offering support on the internet (Banerjee, Robinson & Smalley, 2012) or by providing advice in discussion groups on how to challenge cyberbullying when it occurs (DiBasilio, 2008).

Research consistently indicates advantages of peer support (Cowie & Smith, 2012). The outcomes of peer support schemes for peer supporters and users of the service are generally very positive, especially with regards to the personal development of the peer supporters themselves. Users appreciate the service for the most part and find it helpful. Those who do not need to use the service since they are not being bullied nevertheless find it reassuring to have a system of peer support in place in case they, or a friend, should need it. Peer supporters usually report that they benefit from the helping process, that they feel more confident in themselves and that they learn to value other people more. For vulnerable pupils, use of the peer support system can be a critical part of the process of feeling more positive about themselves and dealing with difficulties such as victimization. Teachers frequently report that the school environment becomes safer and more caring following the introduction of a peer support scheme and that peer relationships in general improve (Cowie, Naylor, Talamelli, Chauhan & Smith, 2002; Cremin, 2007; Houlston et al., 2011). With regards to changes in school ethos following the introduction of a peer support service, the results are difficult to quantify but in general both staff and students report that the school changes for the better. It would appear too that peer support systems work best in schools where there is an active whole-school approach to school bullying so that the work of the peer supporters is reinforced by other interventions that target both individual bullies and victims and that implement anti-bullying policies at class and whole-school levels. The degree to which the peer support strategy has been integrated into the whole school policy or "ethos" is often a contributing factor to its success. From the studies reviewed, schools that make pupils aware of the scheme, through the use of assemblies, newsletters, posters and presentations, often find that the scheme becomes more accepted, and the peer mentors earn respect and credibility from fellow pupils. The adoption of peer support within a whole-school policy can create opportunities for bystanders to be proactive in challenging bullying when they encounter it. Furthermore, with regards to cyberbullying, peer support can be extremely effective in creating a social environment in which bystanders refuse to collude with negative online behavior (DiBasilio, 2008).

Conclusion

In conclusion, research and practice consistently support the advantages of shifting attention away from individual protagonists in bullying to the wider peer group. Not only do we gain deeper insights into the phenomenon but we can also develop a wider range of interventions that actively focus on creating emotionally healthy relationships in the whole school community. The focus here is on sensitivity to emotional states and a responsible concern for the values of the school as a whole. A critical aspect of this

process involves consulting with children and young people themselves in order to build on their knowledge of the peer group and, in some cases at least, their genuine willingness to contribute to this community.

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