

Chapter 5

Cyberbullying Bystanders: Gender, Grade, and Actions among Primary and Secondary School Students in Australia

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a relatively new and serious form of bullying with negative social and emotional effects on both victims and perpetrators. Like traditional bullying, cyberbullying is a social phenomenon and often unfolds in the context of a large network of bystanders. This study examined gender and age of cyberbullying bystanders out of 2109 upper primary and secondary school students in Australia. The actions the bystanders took when a peer was cybervictimised were analysed. The results of the study suggested bystanders to cyberbullying were most likely not to do anything or help the person cyberbullied at the time. Girls were more prosocial in helping students who were cyberbullied than boys. In addition, those students who knew someone who was bullied in both ways were more likely to tell their parents and friends about it than those who knew someone who was cyberbullied only. Implications for prevention and intervention in cyberbullying are discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

With the emergence of cyberbullying at the beginning of this century, there has been vigorous debate whether this kind of bullying through technology is a separate phenomenon or another form of bullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009). The definition of bullying is generally agreed to be a systematic abuse of power with physical, verbal and social forms often called traditional bullying (Smith et al., 2008). The debate centres on the theoretical and conceptual similarities and differences of cyberbullying and face-to-face or traditional bullying. While there are differences between traditional and cyberbullying, there are also differences between physical, verbal and social bullying. Despite these differences these forms of bullying are classified as bullying. The question becomes does cyberbullying have all the characteristics of a form of bullying with the intention to hurt, an imbalance of power and is usually repetitive or should the word bullying be removed from cyberbullying? Repetition in cyberbullying can be manifested in a different way, in that a single act may become viral and thus repeated but not necessarily by the same person. The intent to harm might be more difficult to detect with less emotional clues but as Langos (2012) argues following legal tradition that “intention is best determined based on how a reasonable person would perceive the perpetrator’s conduct.” (p. 288). It is often argued that the concept of imbalance of power is more difficult to distinguish in cyberbullying when the perpetrator is anonymous. However, returning to Olweus’s (1993) original concept that the imbalance of power means that the person victimised cannot get the bullying to stop, then cyberbullying could be considered to meet this criteria. In 2014 both the United States Center for Disease Control and the Australian Research Alliance for Children and Youth issued statements that cyberbullying could be considered to be another form of bullying (Gladden, Vivolvo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Hemphill, Heerde, & Gomo, 2014) although not all researchers agree.

One of the concepts first studied in traditional bullying is the role of the bystander. The prevalence and actions of bystanders are now the subject of examination in cyberbullying. The conception of bullying has progressed from a predominant focus on the bully-target dyad to a focus involving the social context in which bullying occurs and the many roles students play (Kochenderfer-Ladd & Troop-Gordon, 2010). Recognising the importance of the wider social context in bullying is consistent with viewing bullying from an ecological perspective (Rodkin & Hodges, 2003). The early work of Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, and Kaukiainen (1996) has been influential in identifying and naming the diverse roles of students in traditional bullying; as well as the bully, the victim and the bully-victim, there are four bystander roles of reinforcers of the bully, assistants of the bully, defenders of the victim and outsiders.

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