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Studia paedagogica. 2018, vol. 23, iss. 4, pp. [119]-128

ISSN 1803-7437 (print); ISSN 2336-4521 (online)

Stable URL (DOI): <https://doi.org/10.5817/SP2018-4-6>

Stable URL (handle): <https://hdl.handle.net/11222.digilib/138821>

Access Date: 29. 11. 2024

Version: 20220831

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BULLIED ONLINE BUT NOT TELLING ANYONE: WHAT ARE THE REASONS FOR NOT DISCLOSING CYBERVICTIMIZATION?

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Abstract

Although telling an adult can be effective at ending bullying, not all bullied children tell someone about their victimization. The aim of the current study was to examine: 1) if being bullied online and not telling anyone was associated with the perceived intensity and harm experienced from being bullied, 2) the reasons for not telling anyone, and 3) if these reasons were related to the level of harm experienced from being bullied. The data used in this study consisted of responses from 451 Czech adolescents aged 12–18 who had been cyberbullied. The results showed that more boys (47%) than girls (19%) did not tell anyone about being bullied online. There was an association between experienced harm and cybervictimization disclosure; 42% of adolescents with little experience of harm did not tell anyone about it, which was more often than the case for those adolescents with a medium level of harm (19%), and those with intense harm (19%). The reasons for not telling differed among groups, where intensely harmed adolescents more often reported that they did not trust anyone and were afraid of making the situation worse and respondents with medium harm reported to a greater extent not having anyone who could help them. The most common answer for adolescents with a low experience of harm was that they did not tell anyone because they thought they would manage on their own (54%).

Keywords

cyberbullying, online aggression, adolescence, harm, telling someone about cybervictimization

Introduction

Bullying victimization is associated with mental health problems and bullied children continue to be at risk of poor social, health, and economic outcomes several decades after exposure (Bjereld, Daneback, Gunnarsdóttir, & Petzold, 2014; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). In a study of time trends during 1994–2006 including 11–15-year-old school children in 21 European and North American countries, the largest decrease in occasional and chronic bullying victimization was measured in the Czech Republic (Molcho et al., 2009). Compared to other countries, the prevalence of bullying victimization among Czech children has been low. Of 33 countries surveyed in 2010, only Italian, Spanish, and Swedish children reported a lower prevalence of bullying (Kayleigh et al., 2015).

Cyberbullying has become an international problem where anyone with access to technology could participate in or be at risk of cyberbullying (Paul, Smith, & Blumberg, 2012). Cyberbullying is constantly developing in line with new upcoming technologies. Cyberbullying can be defined as any behavior intended to inflict harm or discomfort on others performed through digital or electronic media by individuals or groups who repeatedly communicate hostile or aggressive messages (Tokunaga, 2010). Although more children are involved in traditional bullying than cyberbullying, there is a high degree of overlap where victims of cyberbullying are often exposed also to traditional bullying (Olweus, 2013). Similar to traditional bullying, cyberbullying is related to several difficulties for the victim, including psychosocial problems, declining academic performance, troubles at home, and decreased body esteem (Frisén, Berne, & Lunde, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2014; Tokunaga, 2010). In European countries in 2010, 6% of 9–16-year-olds had been bullied online during the previous year. In the Czech Republic, the prevalence was somewhat higher at 8% (Livingstone et al., 2011).

Children use a range of strategies for coping with cyberbullying, such as consulting friends, confronting the cyberbullies (Tokunaga, 2010), using such technical solutions as blocking contacts on social websites, seeking support (Machackova, Cerna, Sevcikova, Dedkova, & Daneback, 2013), and ignoring the bully (Machackova et al., 2013; Tokunaga, 2010). A common and encouraged strategy to stop bullying in schools is telling an adult, which has been presented as one of the most efficient ways of ending bullying among children (Black, Weinles, & Washington, 2010). If adults are aware of the bullying and react to it, in most cases the situation for the bullied child improves (Black, Weinles, & Washington, 2010; Smith et al., 2008). Still, not all adults will help a bullied child (Holt, Finkelhor, & Kantor, 2007) and sometimes adults' efforts to help do not improve the situation but instead

make the situation more difficult for the child that is bullied (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005).

Many children do not tell anyone that they are being bullied, and victims of cyberbullying report it less often than victims of traditional bullying (Smith et al., 2008). Prior research has studied why bullied children do not tell adults about their experience. One reason for not disclosing victimization is related to shame, which could be expressed as fear of being seen as a victim by others and feeling embarrassment about being a victim (Bjereld 2018; deLara 2012). In a study of traditional bullying, the coping strategies of telling an adult or a friend were associated with more serious bullying experiences (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001). Although girls are more likely to tell someone about bullying (Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007), one study showed how gender differences decreased and disappeared as the number of ways students were bullied increased (Skrzypiec, Slee, Murray-Harvey, & Pereira, 2011). Children's methods for managing cyberbullying have not been studied to the same extent as those for traditional bullying. Less research has been carried out on gender differences in reporting bullying online, but, similar to traditional bullying, male victims seems to be less likely to inform adults about being cyberbullied (Li, 2006). Cyberbullied children have reported that they do not tell adults about victimization because they felt a need to handle it themselves, fearing that they could get into trouble with their parents or fearing parental restrictions on their internet access (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2006). Instead, a large proportion of adolescents who have been bullied disclose it to friends and not adults (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Even so, there are adolescents that do not disclose their being bullied to anyone, friends or adults. It is that group of silent cybervictims which the present article focuses on together with their reasons for not telling anyone.

The aim of the current study was to examine: 1) if being bullied online and not telling anyone was associated with the perceived intensity and harm experienced from being bullied, 2) the reasons for not telling anyone, and 3) if these reasons were related to the level of harm experienced from being bullied.

Methods

Procedure

The present study was part of the "Coping Strategies with Cyberbullying among Adolescents" research project supported by the European Social Fund and Czech Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports. The project was based on international COST action IS0801 "Cyberbullying: coping with negative and enhancing positive uses of new technologies, in relationships in educational settings" (see, e.g., Smith & Steffgen, 2013). The Czech project focused on

adolescents' responses to cyberbullying and specifically aimed to discover the specifics of the coping strategies used by Czech adolescent victims of cyberbullying, the factors moderating their choice of coping strategy, and finally the effectiveness of the chosen strategy (for other outputs from the project focused on victimization, see, e.g., Bayraktar, Machackova, Dedkova, Cerna, & Sevcikova, 2015; Černá, Dědková, Macháčková, Ševčíková, & Šmahel, 2013; Machackova et al., 2013; Macháčková, Dědková, Ševčíková, & Černá, 2013; Ševčíková, Macháčková, Wright, Dědková, & Černá, 2015). Data were collected with an online survey of 2,092 Czech adolescents aged 12–18 ($M = 15.1$, $SD = 1.86$; 55% female) from a random sample of 34 primary and secondary schools located in the South Moravian Region of the Czech Republic. The survey started in November 2011 and finished in January of the following year. An anonymous online questionnaire was filled out in the schools' computer labs in the presence of a trained administrator who could answer the adolescents' questions and offer technical advice if needed. Informed consent was obtained from the principal of every selected school.

Measures

Cyberbullying experience. Respondents were provided with a description of cyberbullying as misuse of the internet or a mobile phone to purposefully harm or harass another person. The description was illustrated with examples of cyberbullying such as sending offensive and vulgar emails or text or chat messages and impersonating someone else. The respondents were asked a dichotomous question covering whether or not they had ever experienced anything similar. Respondents who answered “yes” ($n = 451$) were then, in addition, asked to recall the most severe incident or series of incidents and answer further questions with regard to the experience in question.

Intensity of harm. We measured perceived intensity of harm with a single item that asked: “When it was happening, how much did it bother you?”. The possible answers were: (1) Not at all, (2) A bit, (3) Fairly, (4) Really a lot. We also measured the length of harm with the question “How long did it bother you?”, with the possible answers of (1) A few minutes, (2) A few hours, (3) Several days, (4) Several weeks, (5) Several months, (6) Longer.

Telling someone. Respondents were asked about their reactions to cyberbullying. The relevant coping strategy was measured with the single item “I told someone about it” (i.e., the cyberbullying experience), with the possible answers (1) Yes and (0) No. If respondents answered No, they were asked about the reason for not telling anyone (see Table 2) by being asked to select (1) Yes or (0) No to possible reasons.

Participants also reported their gender and age.

Analysis

To analyze respondents' reasons for not telling anyone, we first compared those adolescents who did not tell anyone (27%, $n = 114$) with those who did with regard to gender and age, using Pearson's chi-squared test to discover whether there was a relationship between the variables. Moreover, to capture differences in perceived harm that might differentiate the reactions of adolescents, we identified three subgroups of victimized adolescents: those who experienced little ($n = 129$), medium ($n = 144$), and intense ($n = 164$) harm. The categorization was carried out according to the length and perceived intensity of harm and is depicted in Table 1.

Table 1

Harm intensity categories based on perceived intensity and length of harm.

White = little harm, light grey = medium harm, dark grey = intense harm.

	A few minutes	A few hours	Several days	Several weeks	Several months	Longer
Not at all	36	0	0	0	0	0
A bit	53	37	46	7	2	5
Fairly	3	14	82	46	18	13
Really a lot	3	2	17	16	20	17

We then compared the intensity of harm between those who did and did not tell. Finally, we examined the reasons for not telling anyone among children with different levels of harm. All analyses were carried out using SPSS 22.

Results

Significantly more boys than girls did not tell anyone that they had been cyberbullied (47% of boys vs. 19% of girls; $\chi^2(1) = 36.940$, $p < 0.000$). There was with a correlation between experienced harm and reporting cybervictimization. Children who did not tell were more often in the group who were little harmed by the bullying experience (42%, $n = 46$) than in the groups who were medium or intensely harmed (both 29%, $n = 32$). These differences were significant ($\chi^2(2) = 14.493$, $p = 0.001$).

As shown in Table 2, the most common reason for not telling anyone was that respondents thought they would manage on their own (42%), while the least common reasons were that they did not trust anyone (16%) or were afraid that telling would make the situation even worse (16%).

Table 2

Reasons for not telling anyone in % (n)

I thought I would manage on my own.	42% (44)
There isn't anyone who would try to resolve it anyway.	40% (42)
I didn't want anyone to know.	36% (38)
I didn't know who to tell.	25% (26)
There isn't anyone who could help me.	19% (20)
I was afraid it would make the whole situation worse.	16% (17)
I didn't trust anyone.	16% (17)

Table 3 presents the reasons for not telling anyone separately for the three groups of experienced harm. With increasing harm, more respondents reported they did not trust anyone and were afraid of making the situation worse.

Table 3

Reasons for not telling anyone related to intensity of harm

	Little harm (n)	Medium harm (n)	Intense harm (n)	χ^2	<i>p</i>
There isn't anyone who could help me.	12% (5)	45% (13)	7% (2)	16.410	0.000
I was afraid it would make the whole situation worse.	2% (1)	14% (4)	39% (12)	16.848	0.000
I didn't trust anyone.	5% (2)	21% (6)	29% (9)	7.790	0.020
I didn't want anyone to know.	24% (10)	41% (12)	52% (16)	5.819	0.055
I thought I would manage on my own.	54% (22)	28% (8)	35% (11)	5.272	0.072
There isn't anyone who would try to resolve it anyway.	39% (16)	45% (13)	39% (12)	0.303	0.859
I didn't know who to tell.	20% (8)	35% (10)	26% (8)	1.992	0.369

Note. All *df* = 2.

Not telling anyone because there was not anyone who could help was most common for victims with medium harm, where 45% of respondents answered that there was not anyone who could help compared to 12% of victims who experienced little harm and 7% of those who experiences intense harm. The other differences in the reasons for not telling were not significant.

Discussion

Why some children do not tell anyone about being cyberbullied could be partly understood according to how harmed they were by the bullying. Adolescents in the current study who were categorized as being intensely

harmed told someone about being cyberbullied more often than adolescents categorized as being less harmed did. More than half of the adolescents with little experience of harm thought they would manage on their own (54%). The results from this study indicate that experienced harm is one of the key factors in deciding when to tell someone about being bullied online. Similar patterns have been identified for traditional bullying, with individuals exposed to the most serious bullying being more likely to tell adults or friends about victimization (Smith, Shu, & Madsen, 2001).

The most common answer among adolescents in the intensely harmed group for why they did not tell anyone was that they did not want anyone else to know they were being bullied. From our data, we cannot tell the reasons why they did not want anyone to know, but prior research on traditional bullying has suggested shame and embarrassment about being a victim as reasons for not disclosing victimization (Bjereld, 2018; deLara, 2012).

Previous research has suggested that girls more often tell adults about cyberbullying than boys do (Li, 2006), which was confirmed in the present study. With increasing harm, more respondents reported that they did not trust anyone and were afraid of making the situation worse. This strategy of not telling is counterproductive to what is known from previous research on traditional bullying victimization, which has shown that the situation often gets better when children tell an adult (Black, Weinles, & Washington, 2010). Given the similarity between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, we would expect that telling an adult would be an effective strategy for cybervictims to manage the bullying. However, a significant part of the adolescents who had not told anyone answered that they did not know whom to tell or that no one would try to resolve it anyway. If adolescents do not know who to turn to or think that no one will resolve the bullying, it is reasonable not to tell anyone. It is the responsibility of adults, both school staff and parents, to make sure that all children and adolescents know that if they ask for it, they will be supported and helped in managing cyberbullying. If adults do not communicate that they will try to resolve the situation, without imposing restrictions on the victim's online activities, children and adolescents are not likely to tell an adult.

Knowing more about children and adolescents who do not tell anyone about being bullied online and their reasons for not doing so may help professionals and other adults find ways to support and empower children who may be bullied, for example by encouraging them to report and directing them to available resources. Intervention and prevention programs may be tailored to work with victims' belief that telling someone would make the entire situation worse. One challenge is that there is no guarantee that the adult will help. Even if it is more common that adult involvement improves the situation, sometimes the situation ends up more difficult for the child

that is bullied (Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-Vanhorick, 2005). Adults should also in general be better both at informing children and adolescents that they will receive help with managing cyberbullying if they ask for it and providing the efficient support that the child needs. Research on cyberbullying has predominantly been conducted through child-reported questionnaires (Slonje, Smith, & Frisé, 2013). Such studies have been able to identify several ways for victims to cope with cyberbullying and reasons for not telling adults or, as in this study, anyone at all. However, there is limited research that includes victims' understanding of what adult reactions and actions on cyberbullying would be perceived as helpful. Future studies should use qualitative methods to study helpful responses from adults after disclosure of cybervictimization from the victim's point of view.

Limitations

There are some limitations to consider in the present study. First, the survey had a cross-sectional design and it was not possible to establish causal relationships between perceived harm and the reasons for reporting. Second, it was not possible to study whether there were various reasons for telling different people, such as friends, parents, or teachers. It is also unclear whether those participants who did not tell anyone about being a victim of cyberbullying needed help to make the cyberbullying stop. The bullying may have stopped without adult intervention and the feeling of being bothered by the bullying might have disappeared. In such cases, it would no longer be necessary to tell anyone to get help, and it is possible that some of the adolescents answering that they did not tell anyone because they thought they would manage on their own did so because the bullying had already ended.

Acknowledgements

The authors acknowledge the support of the VITOVIN project (CZ.1.07/2.3.00/20.0184), co-financed by the European Social Fund and the state budget of Czech Republic, and the support of Masaryk University.

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