University of Southampton

Doctoral Programme in Educational Psychology

Title: Traditional Bullying and Cyber-Bullying: The Protective Role of Peer Relations

Author: Jerry Brown

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Abstract

Cyber-bullying has become recognised as a recent form of traditional bullying that uses electronic means. In traditional bullying the quantity and quality of someone's social network has been shown to play a somewhat protective role in warding off victimisation, but the corresponding research in cyber-bullying is limited and more equivocal. Indications are that any protective factor is much reduced and may be absent. The reasons for this are unclear and may include the potential anonymity of the bully and the lack of face-to-face communication. There are also fundamental differences in the way that those involved conceptualise cyber-bullying from traditional bullying and these may manifest themselves in a belief that peer support can play little or no protective role. An alternative interpretation is provided of the lack of protection provided by peer support in the online environment that owes less to how the online environment may dilute any protective effect and more to the merging of online and offline friendships and the heightened vulnerability to cyber-bullying that this brings. Implications for EPs are tentative given the lack of research on peer relations in cyber-bullying, but they should guard against simply transferring solutions for traditional bullying into the cyber-context and seek more robust theoretically-based interventions that acknowledge how different traditional and cyber-bullying are.

Since its origins in the 1970s (Olweus, 1978) research into traditional bullying has established itself as a major focus for those interested in the psychological well-being of children. Over the past few decades a generally agreed definition of such bullying has been established focusing on four key aspects: the intent to cause harm committed on a repeated basis by someone with a power superiority over the victim (Olweus,1994; Peterson & Rigby, 1999). Over the past ten years or so the phenomenon of bullying via electronic means has been identified and, although there is as yet no universally agreed label, can be referred to as cyber-bullying (Tokunaga, 2010). This has largely adopted the same definition as traditional bullying, although there is still some debate over what constitutes repetition in the cyber context and whether the imbalance of power is still a valid criterion (Langos, 2012; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013).

This essay will look at the issue of peer relations within bullying and specifically the protective role they may play in traditional victimisation and cyber-victimisation. It will discuss whether key differences between traditional and cyber-bullying mean that peer relations operate differently in the two environments. Finally, it will consider what the implications are for practising EPs and other education professionals.

Peer Relationships and Traditional Bullying

Peer relationships have been recognised as playing a highly significant role in children's development (Hartup, 1996) and also in influencing victimisation from traditional bullying. Cook and colleagues' meta-analysis of 153 studies (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010) identified peer status (a general description covering rejection, isolation, popularity, and likeability) as being the most significant predictor of victim status. Similarly, Card (2003, cited in Smith, 2004) from a review of 205 studies highlighted peer rejection and poor friendship quality as having a particularly significant association with victimisation. The

nature of peer relationships evidently has a key role to play in determining who is a victim or not, but what the key elements of such relationships are is far from clear.

One element that has received much coverage is the notion of peer rejection. Salmivalli and Isaacs (2005) demonstrated that over a 12 month period victimisation was consistently associated with peer rejection. Support for such findings can be found in a study by Putallaz et al. (2007) who found that rejected children (as nominated by their peers) were more likely to report themselves as victims and be identified by their teachers as victims than other children. Overall, Schuster (2001, cited in Gifford-Smith & Brownell, 2003) finds that the correlation between peer victimisation and peer rejection is robust and has a large effect size averaging around .50. A common feature of both peer rejection and victimisation may be a lack of social skills. Hay, Payne, and Chadwick (2004) propose a model that implicates dysfunctional social skills in causing peer rejection. Children lacking emotional and self-control tend to struggle to develop successful and functional relationships with their peers. This in turn leads to a lack of social skills, shyness and externalising problems that would normally be developed in the course of typical relationships, thereby exacerbating their rejection by peers. These attributes are also associated with peer victimisation (Card & Hodges, 2008) indicating a complex three-way interaction between peer rejection, victimisation and deficient social skills. Another manifestation of absent elements is the complete absence of friends which has been associated with victimisation although to a lesser degree than peer rejection (Salmivalli & Isaacs, 2005). However, it is not the case that victims are always without peer support or experience peer rejection. Although Eslea and colleagues (2004) found that victims had fewer friends, they were still averaging over 3 friends each in class.

The active presence of certain elements in terms of both the quality and quantity of the relationship that an individual has with other peers and how this impacts on victimisation has

been investigated. A significant association was found between the relationship a child has with his/her best friend and victimisation such that those with higher quality relationships were less likely to be victims (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005). A slightly different perspective was taken by Hodges and colleagues (Hodges, Boivin, Vitaro, & Bukowski, 1999) who found that the simple presence of a mutual best friend was a significant factor in avoiding victimisation. It may also be that the sheer physical presence of supportive companions, not necessarily friends, protects from victimisation. Boulton's (1995) playground study found no difference in the size of victims' and others' social circles, but victims had fewer peers they interacted with at any one time. Support of friends was shown to have a negative correlation with victimisation both at the start of the study and 12 months later (Kendrick, Jutengren, & Stattin, 2012). Finally, the sheer number of friends in class was found across 7 countries to be significantly lower for victims than for non-victims (Eslea et al., 2004).

The relative presence or absence of the elements listed above may combine to give an indication of the level and nature of peer support a child has. This may play a role in determining who becomes a victim and who does not. How the various elements combine to influence victimhood and the mechanisms in operation are moot points. The bulk of research has been cross-sectional (Kendrick et al., 2012) resulting in difficulties establishing whether victimhood comes first and then brings about the lack of peer support, or whether peer support is absent thus causing victimhood. It may also be that the social skills that someone deploys in order to create peer support are coincidentally the same skills needed to avoid bullying (Boulton, Trueman, Chau, Whitehand, & Amatya, 1999) such as negotiation, conflict resolution, behavioural regulation and problem-solving. If this were the case, it would indicate that it is not the level of peer support *per se* that provides protection but the skills demonstrated by an individual. However, it seems reasonable to suppose that an overt

manifestation of an individual's support network may provide protection. Within such relationships there may be more motivation to help one another to resist victimisation (Boulton et al., 1999) leading to a higher chance of mobilising peer support. This may make bullying more difficult in the first place (Sutton, 2001), reduce the chances of subsequent bullying (Kendrick, et al., 2012) as well as raise the chances of retribution (Pelligrini & Long, 2002) and make it more likely that the bully is identified and punished.

Despite the evidence supporting the protective role of positive and successful peer relationships, it is not conclusively the case that those who enjoy high levels of peer support always escape victimisation as studies documenting the existence of bullying between friends demonstrate (e.g., Mishna, Wiener, & Pepler, 2008; Wei & Johnson-Reid, 2011). A further complication is the fact that peer rejection and extensive peer support are not simply polar opposites of the same continuum. It is possible for rejected children to have large numbers of friends (Huttunen, Salmivalli, & Lagerspetz, 1996; Veenstra et al., 2005) and for those with few friends not to be rejected.

For traditional bullying it appears then that positive peer relations comprising elements such as the size and quality of friendship networks, the social skills of an individual as well as avoiding peer rejection play some role in protection from victimisation.

Peer Relationships and Cyber-bullying

Given the fact that cyber-bullying is a relatively recent phenomenon it is not surprising that research into peer relationships and cyber-bullying is scarce. The few studies looking at these areas indicate a mixed and incomplete picture.

There are few studies that have looked specifically at how peer relations in school are related to cyber-victimisation. Weak to moderate correlations have been found between peer rejection in school and both relational (social exclusion or relationship manipulation) cyber-

victimisation and verbal (insulting people or teasing them unpleasantly) cyber-victimisation (Wright & Li, 2013). Supporting this view, those with peer problems in the clinical range were almost five times more likely to be cyber-victims than those without such severe problems (Sourander et al., 2010). However, a more complex picture emerges with research showing that cyber-victimisation 12 months later was not predicted by an adolescent's popularity or self-perceived popularity in class (Gradinger, Strohmeier, Schiller, Stefanek, & Spiel, 2012) and that the number of friends someone had was not related to being a cyber-victim (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009).

There are also a limited number of studies that look at peer relations in school and associations with both traditional and cyber-victimisation. Here the evidence indicates that the school and online environments operate somewhat differently. A study by Wachs (2012) found that whilst having no friends in class was a significant predictor for both being a school victim and a cyber-victim, the effect was more powerful for the school than the online environment. Traditional victims were about 22 times more likely than non-victims to have no friends in class, but cyber-victims were "only" about 11 times more likely than non-cyber-victims to have no friends in class. Fanti and colleagues (Fanti, Demetriou, & Hawa, 2012) found a modest negative correlation between friends' social support and school victimisation, but a much weaker negative correlation between friends' social support and cyber-victimisation. Katzer, Fetchenhauer, and Belschak (2009) also found differences between the school and online arenas. They found no crossover between the traditional and cyber environments for popularity and victimisation. Any associations seemed to operate solely within their own environments, thus the level of social popularity in school did not predict cyber-victim status, nor did the level of popularity in chatrooms predict school victim status.

Given the relatively small amount of literature on cyber-bullying and peer relationships it is difficult to draw firm conclusions, however, it appears that peer relations have a stronger connection in the real world than online with protection from victimisation.

Differences Between Traditional and Cyber-bullying

The reasons for this difference may lie in the ways that cyber-bullying differs from traditional bullying. This essay will focus on three key differences and look at the effects this may have on how peer relationships operate with cyber-victimisation.

First, anonymity has been cited as a major difference (Mason, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). This would have relevance where a potential victim has a high level of peer support. Anonymity would bring evident advantages for the cyber-bully in reducing the chances of being identified and caught and therefore meaning a lower chance of the victim's real world peer support network being mobilised. If anonymity were assured then it would not matter how large or supportive someone's peer support network was, it would be irrelevant as a protective factor against cyber-victimisation. The other side of peer relationships is where there is an absence of support: namely peer rejection. Here whether a cyber-bully is anonymous or not, would theoretically not be expected to make any difference since the bully should have little to fear from persecuting those with low levels of peer support. Hence, the anonymity of the cyber-bully may well render the level of peer support irrelevant and this hypothesis is somewhat supported by some previously cited research (e.g., Fanti et al., 2012; Gradinger, et al., 2012; Katzer, et al., 2009) indicating an absence of correlation between cyber-victimisation and various measures of school popularity and peer support.

However, it is far from clear that cyber-bullies are anonymous. Studies have consistently found that people know who is bullying them. Figures for the proportion of cyber-victims who knew the perpetrator start as low as 31% (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), then rise to 43%

(Wolak, Mitchell, Finkelhor, 2007), 57% (Smith et al., 2008), 73% (NCH, 2005) and 89% (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Differences in definition of what is meant by "known" vary from "know in person" (Wolak et al., 2007) to "know the identity of" (Mishna et al., 2010) which may simply be the online persona of the bully, and this may result in more victims claiming that they know their bully.

The hypothesis that anonymity allows cyber-bullies to target both those with high and low peer support networks may be valid but does not seem to reflect the reality where all too frequently the cyber-bully is not anonymous. It may be the case that cyber-bullies are happy to abandon their anonymity but only in order to target those with low peer support. However, we would expect a far more robust and stronger correlation between peer support and cyber-victimisation, and the research evidence for this is lacking. Thus it appears that in the online environment we have the situation of bullies operating without anonymity and apparently without regard for the victims' popularity at school. A tentative conclusion can be drawn that anonymity does not provide a satisfactory explanation as to why real world peer support does not provide as much protection online as it does offline.

The second major difference is the lack of face-to-face interaction that eliminates the social communication between bully and victim that is present in the traditional environment. This lack of immediate feedback of consequences and harm caused has been signalled by parents as a reason for unacceptable behaviour online that would be constrained in the real world (Byron, 2008). This may be due to reduced empathy for the victim or remorse felt by the bully (Mason, 2008; Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012). Both these elements may combine to make online bullying easier to carry out (Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012), but reveal little about how the peer relations of the victim may impact in this environment. It may be expected that with a lack of face-to-face interaction those social skills associated with children with high levels of peer support cannot be deployed. In such an

asymmetric environment, pro-social skills such as the ability to negotiate, resolve conflict, regulate behaviour and solve problems are of no use. It could therefore be hypothesised that high levels of peer support (assuming they are a reasonable proxy measure for pro-social skills) would play no role in preventing cyber-victimisation and the evidence previously cited would support that. However, there is the intriguing possibility that online bullies may be particularly adept at picking up signals even in text- and picture-based online exchanges. They may detect that a victim either lacks social skills (for example by deploying self-defeating humour that has been implicated in traditional victimisation; C. Fox, personal communication, 1 May 2013) or possesses them. If this is the case then the level of social skills deployed may still be a factor. Further research is required before any conclusions can be drawn about whether the absence of face-to-face communication does prevent any social skills being demonstrated, and hence whether it can be an explanation for why they may not protect against cyber-victimisation.

The third major difference between traditional and online bullying is that those involved actually perceive them as different entities. Here evidence from a number of sources appears to indicate that cyber-bullying is construed as a qualitatively different concept and experience from traditional bullying. One large-scale study of adolescents investigated the overlap between traditional physical victimisation, traditional relational victimisation and cyber-victimisation (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Nichols, & Storch, 2009) and found only a small degree. They concluded that the three entities formed different constructs and that cyber-victimisation was a separate form of victimisation and should be treated as such. The roles that seem relatively well-established in traditional bullying (bully, victim, bully/victim, bystander, Salmivalli, 2010) appear to be more confused and fluid in the online environment. Mishna and colleagues (Mishna et al., 2012) found the roles of bully and victim were highly inter-mixed, and Johnson (2012) found that teachers' perceptions were that online roles were

blurred, that bystanders could more easily become active participants, and bullies and victims could exchange roles more frequently. This perception is supported by Law and colleagues (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012) who found that 14 to 18 year olds did not distinguish between cyber-bullies and cyber-victims but saw the roles as interchangeable due to the nature of the environment enabling swift and easy retaliation.

If participants conceptualise and experience cyber-bullying as a fundamentally different construct from traditional bullying, this may be manifested in how peers interact with each other and what roles friends and companions are expected to fulfil when it comes to cyber-bullying.

One such manifestation may be the considerable amount of bullying that happens between friends online. Mishna and colleagues (Mishna et al., 2010) reported that 52% of cyber-bullies targeted their friends, and of those who were cyber-victims most claimed that the perpetrator was either a friend, or someone at their school. A qualitative study by Mishna, Cook, Saini, Wu, and MacFadden (2009) revealed similar themes of widespread cyber-bullying among friends and social networks. Similarly, Kernaghan & Elwood (2013) found that girls were frequently the targets of bullying from friends via their social networking sites and instant messaging, with the potential for real-world friendships to be used to access online information that could then be used to bully the victim online. Cyber-victimisation appears little different from traditional bullying with respect to friend-to-friend bullying but two aspects may provide a more subtle perception of peer relationships and their role in preventing cyber-bullying.

First, friendship and peer support rarely appear as recommendations from those involved as ways of stopping cyber-bullying. When asked what might prevent cyber-bullying no respondents mentioned anything to do with friendship or peer support (Smith et al., 2008).

Similarly, Slonje et al.'s (2013) respondents' favoured solutions that were technology-related with no mention of peer support; and when offered a choice of ten solutions including one "to develop a positive school culture where students learn to be kind to each other" this did not feature in the three most favoured solutions for adolescents (Cassidy, Jackson, & Brown, 2009). This contrasts with recommendations for preventing traditional bullying where 47% of respondents said "making new friends" (Smith et al., 2008), and 43% mentioned either being part of a popular group or having lots of friends (Ofsted, 2008). Secondly, cyber-victims appear reluctant to tell a friend. The reasons for telling a friend might be twofold: to gain emotional support and comfort that buffers them from the negative experience (Cohen & Wills, 1985) or to mobilise their support network in a practical way to prevent further bullying, although so far studies on this appear not to have probed the reasons. Studies report a low rate of cyber-victims informing a friend, typically around 25% or less (Aricak et al., 2008; Dehue, Bollman, & Völlink, 2009, cited in Slonje et al., 2013; Mishna et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2008), although half of children in the EU Kids Online survey reported telling a friend (Livingstone, Haddon, Görzig, & Ólafsson, 2011).

This reluctance to tell a friend may reflect a belief that friendships and peer relations are ineffective against cyber-bullying, hence the lack of recommendations of this nature to prevent it. It may also be that, in general, there is a belief that there are no effective strategies to resist cyber-bullying, and that peer relations would form just another one of those unsuccessful strategies. Studies have demonstrated the all-pervading nature of cyber-bullying (Mishna et al., 2009; Tokunaga, 2010) and the beliefs of some of those involved that there is nothing that can be done to prevent it (Livingstone et al., 2011; Sleglova & Cerna, 2011). For girls in particular, a fatalistic, passive coping strategy may be common (Lodge & Frydenberg, 2007). Additional support comes from a qualitative study by Ackers (2012) who found that

half of the participants felt that the indiscriminate nature of cyber-bullying meant that everyone was at risk, and that nothing seemed to provide a protective barrier.

Integration of Findings

The lack of research around peer relationships and cyber-victimisation makes it difficult to draw any firm conclusions as to the interactions between them. From the initial studies completed in these early days of cyber-bullying research it appears that the degree of protection afforded by real-world peer support from traditional bullying is either absent or much reduced when it comes to cyber-bullying. Why this is the case is, at the moment, largely the preserve of conjecture and hypothesis. The fact that cyber-bullying offers the opportunity for anonymity does not appear to have been taken up by many cyber-bullies, and so lacks coherence as an explanation. The lack of face-to-face contact may account better for why peer support is of little use in preventing cyber-victimisation but again an argument could be made that social skills can be manifested even in a purely electronic environment.

However, it is probably more fruitful to seek explanations in the different conceptualisations of what friendship and relationships mean in the online context. Anecdotally, what constitutes a friend is becoming blurred (M. Ackers, personal communication, 23 April 2013). The same term is used in both environments and people think relationships developed online are as real as real ones and apply the same characteristics to them (e.g., trust, meaning) (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009). As a result, people share information online that they wouldn't in the real world raising their vulnerability to being cyber-bullied (Ortega-Ruiz, Del Rey, & Casas, 2012*)*. Evidence also shows that people are more likely to create false identities or characteristics for themselves online (Livingstone & Bober, 2005; McKenna & Bargh, 2000) and that this may lead to greater disinhibition (Willard, 2003) leading to behaviour online (including bullying) that would not occur in the real world. Overall, the lack of protection afforded by friendship and peer

support may have less to do with how the online environment negates their effect and more to do with the blurring of real and online relationships that raises people's susceptibility to cyber-bullying.

Conclusion and Implications for Practice

EPs and other education professionals will be concerned both with preventing and alleviating the impact of cyber-bullying. Interventions to prevent cyber-bullying are few and recent reviews of their efficacy generally highlight a lack of rigorous methodology and measurement of outcomes (Perren et al., 2012; Mishna, et al., 2009) making assessment difficult. For the most part the assumption has been to apply the strategies for traditional bullying in the cyber environment (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011; Perren et al., 2012), focusing particularly on the use of whole-school strategies that appear to be relatively successful in combating traditional bullying (Ttofi & Farringdon, 2011). As far as programmes for addressing cyber-bullying that involve an element of peer intervention or improved social relationships are concerned, a few have shown a reduction in cyber-victimisation, such as the KiVa programme (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011) and ConRed (Ortega-Ruiz et al., 2012) although the reduction attributable to the peer support elements remains unclear. Other studies report little or no effect of peers in reducing cyber-victimisation (e.g., Menesini, Nocentini, & Palladino, 2012), a finding that is congruent with Ttofi and Farrington's (2011) meta-analysis of traditional bullying interventions which found very limited effectiveness of peer interventions, and occasional increases in bullying.

As far as it is possible to tell, the use of peer support in providing post-hoc buffering against the negative consequences for cyber-victims remains a valid intervention (Machmutowa, Perrena, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012), and there are no theoretical grounds to think otherwise. However, in terms of prevention, things are far less certain, and the

currently preferred option for victims and concerned adults is limiting exposure and accessibility (Johnson, 2012; Perren, et al., 2012).

Given the lack of psychological theory being applied to cyber-bullying interventions (Perren et al., 2012; Slonje et al., 2013) EPs and education professionals should retain a healthy scepticism about the ability of traditional solutions to work. They should be aware that peer support networks may still be fine for relieving the stress of victims but may not play much role (if any) in protecting from cyber-victimisation. They would be well advised to seek out interventions with a sound theoretical basis and those that also show a deeper understanding of the fundamental differences between traditional and cyber-bullying, particularly with respect to the rapidly changing nature of online relationships.

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