Bullying in Adolescence: An Analysis of Two Studies on Cyber and Traditional Forms

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There is a growing concern among youth, parents, teachers, and individuals all over the world regarding bullying. Bullying is a dysfunction in peer relationships and is defined as repeated exposure over-time to negative actions by one or more persons that is intended to harm and includes a power imbalance (Espelage & Swearer, 2003). The reason bullying is a concern is because it has been related to a vast array of adjustment problems for victims including loneliness, anger, anxiety, depression/suicide ideation, decreased self-esteem, and a growing dislike for or avoidance of school (Moore et al., 2012; Shaffer, 2009). It is also a cause for alarm because of the high numbers of children who are victims of being bullied. Espelage and Swearer report in their review that 77% of children in middle and high school report being victims of bullying at school. Bullying at school can take many forms including physical, verbal, or relational, and recent research has also found that it occurs in cyberspace too (called cyber bullying) (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012; Moore, Huebner, & Hills, 2012).

This paper analyzes the findings of two empirical articles to highlight the incidence, nature, and effects of cyber bullying using social-emotional concepts and developmental theories.

**Article I Summary & Critique: Moore and colleagues (2012)**

The first article reviewed explored the nature and prevalence of electronic bullying and victimization. There are different terms for bullying via technology such as electronic bullying, cyber bullying, and online social cruelty. In this study the Center for Safe and Responsible Internet Use used online social cruelty and defined it as “a discourse that defames, constitutes bullying, harassment, discrimination, discloses personal information, and contains offensive, vulgar, or derogatory comments” (Moore et al., 2012, p. 430). Previous research had shown that millions of youth have been victims of electronic bullying and that there is an 85% overlap in bullying that takes place online and at school (see Moore et al., 2012). This means that although
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the bullying may take place outside of school, it may be carried into the school as well. This study included 855 participants that were in the seventh or eighth grade and in the South Eastern United States with relatively equal representation of males and females. Participants were asked to fill out the *Multidimensional Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale, Students’ Life Satisfaction Scale,* and *Electronic Bullying Questionnaire* which included family, friends, school, living environment, and the self. Researchers were examining the relationships between electronic bullying and being a victim with life satisfaction.

Moore et al.’s (2012) results showed that 14% of participants engaged in electronic bullying behavior and 20% were victims of electronic bullying. Electronic bullying was significantly correlated with gender, parent’s marital status, and self reported grades while electronic victim status was significantly correlated with ethnicity, grade, SES, parent’s marital status, and self reported grades. Males were more likely to have encountered electronic victimization while females were more likely to be electronic bullies. Global life satisfaction was significantly correlated with parental custody and marital status as well as with self reported grades. Across the domains, family satisfaction was correlated with parent’s custody and marital status as well as self reported grades. Friend satisfaction was correlated with gender, parent’s status, and self reported grades while living environment was correlated with grade, age, parent’s marital status, and self reported grades. The self was correlated with race and self reported grades and school satisfaction was correlated with gender, SES, and self reported grades. These results suggest that parent’s marital status and self reported grades may have a high impact on life satisfaction (including family, friend, and self satisfaction). Satisfaction factors associated with being a bully or victim include overall self-worth which includes scholastic competence,
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social acceptance, athletic competence, physical appearance, and behavioral conduct. Perception of self-worth in the text was related to both self-esteem and peer relationships (Shaffer, 2009).

The results of this study for electronic bullying and electronic victimization were not surprising because demographic factors may be used to create power imbalances among peers or cause the bullying or victimization. It is however, surprising that girls were found to more likely be bullies because research shows boys are more likely to be physically and verbally aggressive (Shaffer, 2009). It may be that girls are more likely to cyber bully because, as stated in the Shaffer (2009) text they tend to engage in more covert aggression and to have more tight-knit peer groups in adolescence which would both contribute to their ability to use and the potential impact of cyber bullying.

The sample is junior high students only so the findings may not be able to be generalized to other grades, also only a small percentage was identified as involved in cyber bullying which further limits the findings. This study used correlation and regression analysis which cannot show causation and limits conclusions about direction of effects. This research leads me to question what other factors might correlate with electronic bullying or victimization.

Article II Summary & Critique: Law and colleagues (2012)

Law and colleagues (2012) examined the roles of bullying online as a bully, victim, or bystander (witness) in article two. 733 eleven to eighteen year olds (62% female) were also asked to fill out the Social Responsibility on the Internet survey that looked at a difference in methods among cyber bullying. The results showed a variation in methods used but not roles. The two most common forms included aggressive messaging and commenting or posting embarrassing photos or videos. This part of the study also showed an increase in retaliation between the bully and victim which could be due to an increased perceived feeling of comfort saying things online due to anonymity of the internet. The finding that there was no variation in
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roles for cyber bullying means that participants were seen as both bullies and victims instead of being just one. It also showed the most common methods of cyber bullying and that it is more reciprocal because there is not a distinction between roles. Peer roles and statuses are important in adolescence and can lead to a reputational bias and cause rejection if students behave aggressively and the peer group does not support the use of aggression (Shaffer, 2009).

This article raises important implications for prevention and intervention of bullying, as well as for parenting. It shows that bully prevention techniques for cyber bullying should include teaching the differences of being a bully, victim, and bystander and that parents need to make their child aware that the computer is not a protective screen that allows them to say whatever they want to whoever they want. The sample size was quite large and the methods of obtaining the information were successful for the age group of participants. However, one of the limitations is that the findings may not have generalizability to the adolescent population as a whole. Another limitation is that participants may not have been honest when answering the surveys and provided false information, which would affect the results. The Shaffer (2009) text also notes that a limitation of this type of research is that it does not necessarily represent how people behave in the field so these results could be strengthened by observational research showing behavior online. This article further mentioned a need for future research regarding cyber bullying to be longitudinal to look at longer effects and see if there are changes in electronic aggression over the course of development (Law et al., 2012).

Theory Application

Two developmental theories were used to examine cyber bullying and its effects: Piaget’s Cognitive-development Theory and the Frustration/Aggression Hypothesis.
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Cognitive-development Theory

Cognitive-developmental Theory focuses on intellectual growth and development of reasoning over four stages: sensorimotor, preoperations, concrete-operations, and formal-operations (Shaffer, 2009). The participants in both of the studies from the articles fall under Piaget’s formal-operational stage so I will describe that stage in more detail. Children formal-operations are typically eleven years and older and in this children are able to think “rationally and systematically about abstract concepts and hypothetical events” (Shaffer, 2009, p. 61). Moore et al. (2012) results showed that middle school student’s parental marital status and self reported grades affect life satisfaction which suggests that they may be able to think abstractly about certain life events and apply it to their satisfaction in other life domains. However, while perfecting the ability to think hypo deductively, children make predictable errors in thinking in early adolescence which Elkind’s termed adolescent egocentrism. In adolescent egocentrism adolescents often develop the imaginary audience and/or hold a personal fable. An imaginary audience is when the child feels that they are always being looked at or observed by peers and being judged or concerned with their behaviors (Shaffer, 2009). This imaginary audience may be heightened for victims of bullying, whether the bullying is traditional or cyber. If the victim feels like they are always “on stage” because they are repeatedly bullied, they might feel a lack of peer acceptance and could be a reason for increased anxiety shown in victims. Law et al. (2012) suggested that the two most common forms of cyber bullying were aggressive messaging and commenting or posting embarrassing photos or videos which could create a larger imaginary audience for adolescents because more people have access to view negative posts/messages on the internet.
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The personal fable occurs when adolescents hold a belief that they are unique such that things that happen to others won’t happen to them, sometimes to the extent that they feel invulnerable (Shaffer, 2009). Victims bullying could lead them to feel unique and alone or that no one can understand their pain so they don’t try to seek help. The theorist Piaget might also say that power imbalance seen in bullying can be due to different cognitive intelligence and understanding. A bully might rationalize actions or behaviors differently than a victim. Also, bullies and victims might have different hypothetic-deductive reasoning, meaning they solve a problem differently which could be why the bully uses bullying as a tactic for conflict resolution or to show power.

Frustration-Aggression Hypothesis

The second theory speaks to the possible overlap between traditional and cyber bullying with traditional moving into cyber space. Berkowitz created the revised frustration and aggression hypothesis from Dollard’s frustration and aggression hypothesis stating that frustration prepares us to act aggressively (Shaffer, 2009). Moore et al. (2012) suggests that there could be a frustration with gender, parent marital status, and self reported grades that can cause a person to act aggressively since it is correlated with electronic bullying. He also states that there are many things that can cause anger, including aggressive habits that have been obtained and that an “aggressive cue” must be present to evoke an aggressive response from a person (Shaffer, 2009, p. 291). This aggressive cues hypothesis considers that a stimulus that was once associated with aggression stimulates aggression from a person that is angry. This means that previously viewing cyber bullying as a bystander or witness could serve as aggressive cue. Law et al. (2012) results showed that there is more retaliation between bully and victim among cyber bullying which could be due to viewing other acts of cyber bullying as the aggressive cue. Even
traditional forms of bullying or aggression viewed on television or video games could serve as an aggressive cue. Berkowitz would claim that the reason cyber bulling was found to be reciprocal in Law et al. (2012) was because the act of being bullied creates a frustration in the victim and serves as an aggressive cue, readying the victim to retaliate. The perceived protection of the computer screen may make it easier for a victim to retaliate and relieve their frustration. Since cyber bullying is more accessible to a wide audience to part take as a bystander, Berkowitz could also hypothesize that cyber bullying could increase due to frustration building and obtaining the aggressive habits that the viewers see.

Conclusions

I am very glad I chose to explore this topic. Not only is bullying a topic of interest for myself, it is increasingly a point of interest for schools, the work place, and research field. I am also glad that I chose this topic because little research has been done on cyber bullying and this paper allows me to bring awareness to the topic.

While peer relationships in adolescence are important to social and emotional development in terms of social skills and identity development (Shaffer, 2009), this investigation shows that dysfunction in peer relationships like bullying can be harmful. Through doing this paper I learned that bullying is a problem that student’s face and that cyber bullying is an increasing problem. There are many risks and negative effects associated with being a victim of bullying and it needs to stop (Espelage & Swearer, 2003; Moore et al., 2012). Schools need to implement training for teachers and staff on how to spot bullying behaviors and how to prevent it, as well as how to handle the situation. Instead of punishing the bully, investigation should occur as to why the student might be bullying so we can take appropriate preventative measures. Parents need to learn signs associated with being a bully or victim so they can help their child and avoid negative risks they might encounter.
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As a future researcher, I can do my part by studying different risks and effects so that we can try to prevent and intervene as necessary. I can use Piaget’s Cognitive-development Theory to apply hypothetical events to bully and victim prevention because adolescent’s are able to think rationally about hypothetical events and can determine how to properly respond if put in real situations. I can use Berkowitz’s frustration and aggression hypothesis to study if seeing aggression online leads to aggressive acts by the viewers because of the aggressive cue present. It is obvious that there is much more research needed in this field so we can prevent the many risks associated with being a victim of bullying, whether traditional or cyber.
References


