Social Situations and Their Influence on Bullying

Shyann A. Rainey

Angelo State University
Abstract

This study investigated helping behavior in response to bullying. We hypothesized that individuals would be more likely to help someone being bullied in a face-to-face situation rather than a cyberbullying situation. To conduct this study we used two scenarios, each followed by a questionnaire asking about the participants’ feelings towards the situation and what action they would take, if any. We included visual images that illustrated each scenario in hopes that the images would lead the participants to feel more emotionally involved in the situation. Consistent with our prediction, we found a significant difference between bullying situation; people reported a greater likelihood of helping the victim in the face-to-face bullying situation compared to the cyberbullying situation. Future research should be conducted on these types of bullying situations to help improve our understanding of why and when individuals decide to help in bullying situations.
Social Situations and Their Influence on Bullying

Today a bullying situation can affect any age group, from elementary into middle school, high school, college, and could also continue into a person’s working years. Bullying is defined by Brody and Vangelisti (2016) as “an intentional, aggressive, repeated act in which there is frequently a power difference between bully and victim” (p. 3). The research being conducted on bullying, cyberbullying and bystander intervention is important in today’s society. Before being able to solve a problem like bullying, researches must understand what and why these things are happening. It is through research that our society will be able to stop bullying incidents not only in school but in all aspects of life.

There are several documented research studies on bullying, in part because it is becoming a widespread epidemic. One study conducted by Chen, Chang, and Cheng (2016) interviewed 24 secondary students ranging from the age 13 up to 15. In their study they were not measuring whether or not these students would engage in bullying, but instead what it is that would cause them to intervene with the bullying situation. Before starting their interviews instead of using a random sample, they asked the students in a classroom to nominate fellow classmates who fit the description of a defender or a bystander. Once the results were tallied the researchers picked 12 students who scored highest in the bystander category and 12 students who scored highest as defenders. The interview process included five questions. One of these being “Have you witnessed any school bullying incident in which you did not want to intervene? Why?” (p. 4). The purpose of this question was to look deeper into what would cause someone who would usually help a victim, like a defender, to take on the position of a bystander. Some of these reasons included being threatened or intimidated by the bully. Another possibility for a defender to become a bystander is if the victim had ‘deserved’ to be bullied in the eyes of the bystander. In
that case the students put blame on the victim of the situation because he or she was acting in such a way that the bullying was more of retaliation.

In contrast to Chen, Chang, and Cheng’s (2016) study, the purpose of our study was to find if a person would engage in bullying because of a certain social situation. We believed that participants would be more likely to help in a face-to-face bullying situation rather than an online. This concept is discussed by Brody and Vangelisti (2016), “Research on mediated communication also has indicated that people’s identity is often anonymous in online environments, and that the perception of anonymity affects the enactment of...anti-social behavior” (p. 5). In their study Facebook was the social network used when they asked their participants to recall a time when they witnessed a cyberbullying attack. Brody and Vangelisti (2016) used Facebook because it is the most widely used social networking site (which is also being used in our study). We picked Facebook for a similar reason; we thought that it would be more relatable than other sites. Two factors that are similar between our study and theirs are measuring how hurt the participant feels about the cyberbullying incident and also bystander behavior. To measure how hurt the participants felt about the incident they were asked to label on a Likert-type scale how upset it made them, and whether that upset feeling was severe or minor. Asking this type of question gives the researchers insight to the participants’ feelings, whether they were a bystander or a defender. For the bystander behavior, the participant was given two statements “’I told the perpetrator to stop their behavior’ (defender) and ’I stayed outside the situation’ (outsider)” (p. 10). These statements were put on a Likert-type scale ranging from strongly agrees to strongly disagree and were used to evaluate whether or not the participant would experience the bystander effect. Our study has questions similar to this asking if the participant would intervene or do nothing about the cyberbullying situation.
Bullying is said to become increasingly common by the age group of fourth and fifth graders (Hubbard & Hyde, 2013, p. 4). Although it starts to become common at this age it continues throughout most phases of life. The use of children in Hubbard and Hyde’s (2016) study was to extend research on this age group. They had two phases of data collection, the first in a classroom and the second in a laboratory. In the classroom phase children were administered a self-report portion and a peer-report portion. During the peer-report section students were provided with a definition of bullying and then asked who fit the description of someone who would stop this type of bullying. All the children in the classroom had their names on a roster that each student could pick from to answer the previous question, individually. For the self-report portion the researchers were targeting peer victimization. The students were asked “which of two statements (one indicative of peer victimization and the other not) was more like them” (p. 6). The next factors evaluated included efficacy in confronting peers, emotional expressiveness, and affective empathy; all measured through self-reports. To determine whether the students would confront their peers a few statements were given, these involved things like would you “stand up for yourself when you feel you are being treated unfairly” (p. 6).

Hubbard and Hyde (2013) also had a laboratory phase where the students were monitored with physiological equipment, like an ECG. To adjust to the equipment the researcher played games or did an arts-and-crafts project with the students until they were comfortable. Once the students felt comfortable they were shown eight videos, two being neutral, and the other six involving an episode of bullying. After watching each video the students were asked questions, and then shown nature videos to get their physiological arousal back to baseline. The next videos were shown to the students while they were alone, the researcher and parent watched via a video camera in an adjacent room. They were both looking for signs of distress in the students. After
each video the student was asked to rate how sad, scared, and mad he or she was. The results of the laboratory phase of the study included a positive correlation between bullying and emotional expressiveness, but a negative correlation between scared bullying and efficacy in confronting peers. There was also a positive and significant correlation between all mad, sad, and scared bullying. There is much research relating negative emotion and bullying, but there is still such a big bystander effect when it comes to these situations.

Our literature review provided us with helpful tools for our own study, such as definitions and also types of questions to ask participants. We specifically designed our study to investigate bullying situations and helping behavior. Our research hypothesis is that people are more likely to help in a face-to-face bullying situation rather than a cyberbullying situation.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants for this study include ASU students ranging from 18 to 30 years of age ($M = 19.82$, $SD = 2.77$). There were 86% women and 14% men. The participants’ race/ethnicity included 9% of Native American or American Indian, 0% of Asian / Pacific Islander, 9% of Black or African American / not of Hispanic origin, 41% of White or Caucasian / not of Hispanic origin, 36% of Hispanic or Latino, and 5% of participants selected other.

**Design and Procedure**

The design of our study is a within-Ss experimental study. The independent variable that is being manipulated is the type of bullying situation scenario; the variation is between an online situation and a face-to-face situation. What is being measured, the dependent variable is if the participant will intervene or help in the bullying situation.
For the stimuli used in the study there are two typed scenarios, both followed by an image that relates to the description. The first scenario describes the situation of a young girl being body shamed by other girls in her athletic class. These girls called her names such as “fatty”, “pig”, and “chunky”. The image followed by this scenario, which was found on a copyright free stock photo website, shows a larger-bodied girl with three girls sitting behind her pointing and laughing. The larger-bodied girl is clearly upset. The second scenario is of an online bullying attack on one of the participant’s Facebook friend who is a devote Christian accused of being a “slut”. The image provided illustrates the post on Facebook and the five people commenting and joining in on the bullying through the use of hateful words and false accusations. The Facebook post was made through the website: 

http://simitator.com/generator/facebook/status. This website has a program on it that we used to generate the Facebook posts by editing areas like profile picture, Facebook status, and comments on the post. Each scenario included about five sentences.

The questionnaire was created by the entire group, and was designed to measure the likelihood of a person helping the victim during a bullying situation. There were 12 questions following each of the scenarios. Two of these questions included, “how likely are you to be upset by this situation?” and “if there is a large crowd gathered around this situation, how likely are you to defend this person?” The questionnaire was scored on a Likert-type scale with 1 = not likely and 7 = very likely. Two of the 12 questions were reverse scored to insure that the participants were paying attention to the scale and not merely circling one number throughout.

To prepare for each study session I printed out the pages necessary, which included the demographics sheet, the two scenarios each followed by the questionnaire, the debriefing sheet, and the informed consent form. When the participants arrived they were each greeted and asked
to sit wherever they would like. The informed consent form was then handed to them and they were asked to read and then sign if they wanted to participate. They were also asked to silence their cell phones. Once the informed consent form was picked up, participants were given the packet (including the demographics, scenario, and questionnaire respectively) and asked to place the finished packet in a manila envelope. This was done to ensure the participants confidentiality by making it impossible for us to tell who turned in which scenario at what time. The participants were also informed that the debriefing sheet was available for them to have if they would like. On the debriefing sheet was important information about the study itself and information about where the participants could go for additional statistics about the study and the results. After the participants finished their packet and placed it in the envelope, they were thanked for participating.

Results

To test our hypothesis that people are more likely to help in a face-to-face bullying situation opposed to a cyberbullying situation, I used a paired samples t-test. Before running this test it was important to recode the four total reverse coded questions in SPSS to receive the correct results. To run the test I averaged the face-to-face bullying questionnaire results as well as the online bullying questionnaire results. After averaging these two factors, I ran the paired samples t-test to compare each mean to see if there was a difference. There was a significant difference found, face-to-face bullying scenario ($M = 4.13$, $SD = .47$) and online bullying scenario ($M = 3.78$, $SD = .50$), $t(21) = 2.97$, $p = .007$, $d = 1.40$. Our hypothesis was confirmed by this result, which is shown through the means of the questionnaires. The face-to-face bullying mean was significantly higher than the online bullying questionnaire. A higher mean indicates that the participant is more likely to show helping behavior, and intervene.
Discussion

Our hypothesis for this study was that people would be more likely to aide a victim in a face-to-face bullying situation rather than a cyberbullying situation. After we ran our paired samples $t$-test it was evident that there was a significant difference between the means of the face-to-face situation and online situation. When digging deeper into the $t$-test results the face-to-face mean is higher than the online mean, which would give reason to believe that our hypothesis was supported. Since the mean of the face-to-face questionnaire was higher it means that the participants were more likely to intervene in that situation.

The results we found were not shocking, in my opinion, because of the definitions given by Brody and Vangelisti (2016). In their study they defined several explanatory mechanisms for the bystander effect within cyberbullying. One of the explanatory mechanisms defined in their study is relationship quality. Relationship quality is said to have an effect on willingness to intervene, Brody and Vangelisti (2016) write “when people reported feeling close to a victim, they were more likely to exhibit helping behavior” (p. 5). This relates to our study because the relationship quality between our participants and the person being cyberbullied would be very low. Although the participants were instructed to image they were friends with this person, it still would not create the same response as it would if an actual friend of theirs was being attacked online. The participants for our study had a lower average for the online questionnaire, meaning they were less likely to intervene. This result was probably affected primarily by their relationship quality with the victim.

There are a few limitations to our study including sample size, who participated, and the way the study was executed. The sample size of our study was relatively small with only 22 participants, and of those participants all were ASU students in a psychology class. Since the
participants were all ASU students our results cannot be generalized to the public. ASU students do not represent the majority of the population of San Angelo let alone America. With a bigger sample size including all age ranges we would have been able to generalize our findings, if there was still a difference, to the public. Only having students of ASU limits us to say our study relates strictly to this population instead of being able to say it relates to people in general.

Another limitation of our study that could have impacted the results was the way we presented our scenarios. The study was limited by only using words on a paper and a single image to try and provoke an emotional response from our participants. We could have possibly made short videos, less than 5 minutes each, which would have been a visual representation of the scenarios that we wrote. I think that if the participants had watched a video over the situation instead of merely reading about it, there would be a greater response from them. By watching a video the participant can visualize what is happening and it would elicit more of an emotional response, making the situation come to life in a sense. If the participants were more emotionally stimulated then their responses would be based more on the emotional impact of the situation. It is easier to not be emotionally stimulated when you are not physically seeing an event happen compared to when you actually do witness the event. A future study could be done with videos instead of paper scenarios, which could possibly change the results significantly.

For future research on bullying, researchers should go more in depth with the age group that bullying affects most. Children in elementary, middle and high school seem to be bullied more so than college students and that is where future research should be focused. Chen, et al., (2016) targeted this age group, and schools can greatly benefit from knowing who, why, how, and what is going on with kids today and how they perceive bullying. Using videos to provoke responses in these children could help to not only see how students’ feel about bullying and if
their feelings have an effect on their likelihood to intervene, but it could also serve as an eye opener for them as well. Using monitoring equipment like ECGs, as Hubbard and Hyde (2016) did, could help to show the physiological response participants experience to bullying situations. From this type of research the next step could be to teach students how to control and overcome these responses and still be able to help in the bullying situation. The overall goal for bullying research should be taking what has been observed in the laboratory and/or the classroom and use these findings to teach children, teenagers, and even adults how to handle or stop bullying situations.

I think that this type of research can greatly benefit our society and the way bullying is affecting our younger generation. If there is more in depth research done on intervention, prevention, and how to handle bullying, we can implement these findings into our school systems. Past research as well as future is important to understand the reasoning behind bullying, but possibly more importantly is understanding intervention. The key to stopping bullying may be found in the bystanders and their willingness to intervene. Being able to reduce or stop bullying will make life a little easier and better for children throughout the world.
References

