



The Witnesses of Darkness: A Review on Factors Associated with Bystanders' Behaviors in School Bullying

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Abstract: School Bullying has become a widespread problem with ill consequences for all those involved in it thereby challenging the healthy development of children and adolescents across globe. Bystanders are often present in bullying situations, form the biggest group of all involved parties and have the power to affect the outcome of bullying. They unlike the poor victim have a choice to stand up for victims and put the aggression to an end by restricting / eliminating the rewarding crowd experience for the bullies. In order to use bystanders as a tool for intervention in bullying its essential however to first understand the factors associated with the Roles they opt for while witnessing the episodes of bullying. This review paper attempts to highlight important research work done to give a clear view of what is known about the underlying factors associated with different bystander behaviors (Assistants, Reinforcers, Defenders and Outsiders) in school settings.

Keywords- School Bullying, Bystanders, School Connectedness

Introduction

Bullying is defined as an “aggressive, intentional act carried out by an individual or a group repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him/herself” (Olweus, 1973). School bullying is a serious threat to safety (Beran et al., 2008; Hawker and Boulton, 2000) well-being and educational success of students all over the globe whether they experience it as victims (Stapinski et al., 2014; Totura et al., 2014; Bikos and Gregordias, 2012) or they indulge in the process as bullies (Ginni, 2008, Srabstein et al., 2006) or they remain as silent witnesses- bystanders (Beckford, 2015; Janosz et al., 2003; Juvonen and Schuster, 2003) for this form of violence in or around schools.

Bullying can be manifested in either direct or indirect forms. Direct forms of bullying include physical aggression, verbal bullying, teasing and cyber bullying, while indirect forms include alienation, social isolation, social ostracism, and denial of friendship (Larsen, 2014). In recent years Cyberbullying has also spread afar (Espelage and Hong, 2016; Hinduja and Patchin, 2008; Kowalski et al., 2012). Using internet as a new tool for this violence is easy due to anonymity of bullies (Tokunaga, 2010; Zalaquett and Chatters, 2014; Kowalski et al., 2012) and can be more pervasive

and harmful than offline bullying (Zalaquett and Chatters, 2014; Holfeld, 2014; Pfetsch, 2016) due to a large number of audience (Holfeld, 2014).

Bullying is different from teasing in that bullying is characterized by “repeated, frequent and intentional hurt or abuse to someone over whom a person has power whereas teasing has its boundaries and doesn’t involve, passing intentional and hurtful remarks about the person and often happens between peers of equal status, intended just for fun. Bullying is of particular concern due to its damaging psychosocial consequences (Molina, 2014). Bullying has been consistently associated with increases in both internalizing problems (e.g., depressive symptoms, social anxiety, lower self-worth, and increased risk of suicide) and externalizing problems (e.g., aggression, truancy, and delinquency (Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Salmivalli and Isaacs, 2005).

Bullies have a tendency to show off their power to peers (Juvonen et al., 2003) by targeting defenseless victims in presence of an audience. It was not until some time ago that researchers shifted their attention from much focused victim and bully dichotomy to include the third important element in this equation, the Bystanders whose ultimate presence and power to shape these situations is now an acknowledged fact (Totura et al., 2014). Bystanders refer to all “others” except the victims and bullies, in cases of school bullying students act as primary bystanders and play pivotal roles in deciding whether the bullying process and dynamics will be mild or adversarial in their effects and apart from the concerned subject teachers, all teaching and non-teaching staff also forms a part of bystanders group in school settings. It’s especially important to understand what makes of a resilient bystander population in schools because the witnesses to any violence not only have a strong power to influence the destiny of any conflict but in turn are often themselves affected on many levels of personal and academic domains (Olweus, 1993; Hawker and Boulton, 2000; Rivers, 2009).

Bystanders can assume a range of roles when witnessing bullying in any setting. Studies to determine different participant roles bystanders have in bullying were first initiated by Salmivalli and colleagues (1996). They used peer nomination procedure to identify four major types / roles of bystanders in any type of bullying namely: Assistants, Reinforcers, Outsiders and Defenders.

Assistants: Assistants or Sidekicks (Sutton and Smith, 1999) are children who don’t initiate the bullying but join ringleader bullies. This “follower behavior” of Assistants is either due to fear of victimization (Bierman, 2004) or due to a desperate need to fit in (Garandeau et al., 2006).

Reinforcers: Assistant and Reinforcers are also labeled as *Probullies* by researchers (Jungert et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2017). Reinforcers aid the process of bullying (Salmivalli et al., 1996) by providing positive feedback to bullies e.g., by laughing, cheering or just by providing an audience.

Defenders: Defenders take sides with the victims they aid victims by supporting and/or comforting them either directly or indirectly. Bystanders can neutralize the bullying effects or even interrupt by refusing to allow the victim to be isolated or defamed or by confronting the bully regarding their behavior or can offer to relay the incident to an adult in school or at home.

Outsiders: Outsiders or Passive Bystanders steer clear of taking sides and often flee from bullying scenarios. They are considered supporters in bullying process by acting unconcerned (Gini, 2008) are low in aggression and better in avoiding harassment (Camodeca and Gossens, 2005).

Bystanders own abilities and characteristics along with a multitude of other factors at school and classroom level influence how they respond to victims and bullies when witnessing bullying e.g., Empathetic responsiveness and Self Efficacy levels are recorded higher in Defenders than in Reinforcers (Pozzoli and Gini, 2010; Gini, 2008; Thornberg and Jungert, 2013; Oh and Hazler, 2009; Nickerson et al., 2007), Contentious relationships with teachers led students to act as Probullies (Longobardi et al., 2018) etc.,

Factors at Individual level

Bullying is a subtype of aggression (Smith et al., 2002), characterized by regular occurrence and an asymmetric allocation of power (Olweus, 1993). Many a times adults view bullying as a fun exchange between students and think this is no big deal to create a fuss about. Children themselves often confuse bullying with general aggression, well into primary years (Monks and Smith, 2009) while not realizing the torment in the classroom many victims must have experienced because of this kind of violence. In its any form or type, Bullying has a detrimental consequence on those involved as “others” in school bullying. Series of studies (Lambe et al., 2017, Rivers et al., 2009, Rivers et al., 2013) indicated that severe negative emotions are associated with witnessing interpersonal trauma in the form of school bullying. When someone is bullied - in school or on the internet there are often witnesses who can help the victim, participate in the bullying or remain passive. This diverse Bystander reaction to bullying situations in academic settings is attributed to a number of individual factors like empathy (Barchia and Bussey, 2011; Siegel, 2009), gender (Balakrishnan, 2018; Thornberg, 2013), parental mental health (Jenkins, 2014).

Bullying peaks among children and adolescents in age of 11 to 14 years (Elsa and Rees, 2001), while as cyber bullying occurs as a common phenomenon in later years (Tokunaga, 2010) perhaps when children and adolescents get a control over virtual networks and develop a strong sense of belongingness to a group and develop reputation. In a study by Balakrishnan (2018) on a sample of 1158 young adults (university students) in Malaysia, bystanders reported of often feeling pity for the victim and angry at the bullies. Among them a majority (61.5%) claimed to have defended the victims while as 40% reported of behaving indifferently out of fear retaliation. In a cross-sectional study by Trach et al., (2010) done on a sample of 9397 students from grade 4 to 11 significant differences across sex and grade were found. Younger students and girls were more likely to report taking positive action than were older students and boys. These actions included direct intervention, helping the victim, or talking to an adult. Generally, boys and girls were equally likely to report that they ignored or avoided the person who bullied and evidence of not intervening increased with grade level.

In a series of studies by (Gini, 2008; Espelage et al., 2011; Coelho and Sousa, 2018; Burlison and Gilstrap, 2002; Pozzoli et al., 2012) it was found that boys are more engaged to Reinforcer behaviors than girls, whereas girls show more defender behaviors, due to differences in personality orientations. A study by Camodeca and Goossens (2005) shows that girls adopt for constructive resolution by choosing assertive and prosocial strategies than boys. On the other hand, small almost non-existent gender differences were found in student's role as defenders or outsiders (Nickerson et al., 2007) in bullying and relational aggression (a form of indirect bullying) which by default is often attributed to female kind (Napolitano, 2008).

For males though a wide literature from past decade has indicated how endorsing beliefs or behaviors associated with traditional masculine norms is associated with lower likelihood of being an active bystander (Carlson, 2008; Leone et al., 2016; Ingram et al., 2019). Students who find bullying funny or see it as a mere game tend to get entertainment from the misery of others are less likely to view bullying as a serious threat and even less likely to intervene in any form of bullying scenarios (Pozzoli et al., 2012). Another study on participant roles and the big five personality traits (Tani et al., 2003) found that among bystanders the “Outsiders:” score low on extraversion trait than other groups and the “Defenders” score high on agreeableness than rest. Studies also show most children in fact have a negative attitude towards bullying, see it as wrong and have the intention to support victims (Oberman, 2011), but that only very few actually become defenders (Salmivalli and Isaacs, 2005). Empirical support exists for the idea that defending behavior in bullying situations is related to self-efficacy and is generally associated with pro-social behaviors (Thornberg, 2015; Tsang et al., 2011). Thornberg and Jungert (2013) also confirmed from his studies that basic moral sensitivity in children and adolescents is also negatively associated with pro-bully behavior among students.

In 1970 Latane and Darley identified a pattern of “diffusion of responsibility” among bystanders, which indicates that increased number of bystanders in any situation results in a decreased sense of personal responsibility and an increased sense of collective responsibility thereby prolonging the time

to intervene. Thornberg (2007) identified seven major behaviors associated with a passive, non-intervening or non-helpful bystander population namely: trivialization, dissociation, embarrassment association, busy working priority, compliance norm, audience modeling and responsibility transfer by carefully observing real-life classroom scenarios. In case of young bystanders, a driving force behind their behavior towards bullying is the kind of family environment they grow up in and also the quality of their parental mental health (Jenkins, 2014).

Factors at School

Bullying behavior is driven by quests for power and an innate need of exerting dominance over others and since a group assigns status to its members, acts of bullying needs an audience. In order to understand how bystanders influence bullying attitude in classrooms a study was conducted by Salmivalli et al., (2011) on a sample of 6397 and 6764 primary school students from grade 3 to 5 (9 - 11 years), the results indicated that bystanders influence the frequency of bullying, providing support for the view as a group phenomenon and it depends on empathy of bystanders about the feelings and anxiety of victim e.g., Defending was associated with the expectation that the victim will feel better and less isolated while Reinforcement of bullying was associated with bystanders not caring for any relief to the victim.

The intervention as well as non-intervention of peer bystanders in school bullying seems to be influenced by a number of socio-emotional and situational factors. The bystanders often feel guilty about the bully's despicable attitude but tend to avoid intervening due to lack of knowing what to do or simply due to fear for their safety (Coloroso, 2005; Balakrishnan, 2018). Research done on helping behavior have shown that bystanders are more likely to avoid or take more time to help a victim in an emergency situation due to the presence of other bystanders – known as the *Bystanders effect*. It means the presence of other bystanders inhibits the impulse of helping in various situations (Latane and Nida, 1981). Bystanders feeling guilty also experience cognitive dissonance (Polanin et al., 2012; Rivers, 2009) which would eventually affect their ability to work as capable beings inside and outside schools.

In a school setting one bullying behavior may quickly give way to another e.g., Espelage and her colleagues in 2014 published the result for a 5-year study which began in 2009 on a sample of 1391 students across grades 5th to 8th from five middle schools in Midwestern State which indicated a link between bullying perpetration in schools and subsequent sexual harassment in later school years. The same study also found that bystanders didn't seem to understand how serious things were and didn't step in as teachers didn't get involved.

Exposure to high levels of classroom aggression for long periods is a strong predictor of future aggressive behavior among children and adolescents as they reinforce and model one another's behavior as a group (Thomas and Bierman, 2006; Frey et al., 2009; Salmivalli et al., 1996). In cases where students in high schools or college (Pelligrini and Long, 2002; Sentse et al., 2017) students may observe that classmates, who bully are rewarded for the bullying behaviors despite the dominant anti-bullying, attitudes in class, in such cases the students are likely to restrain acting in defiance of bullying and even accept it as a norm (Ojala and Nesdale, 2004).

School Climate and School Connectedness: School Climate refers to the vibes shared by staff, management and the students in a school and the amount of ease, with which children and adults can reciprocate to each other's needs every day. From a student perspective, the school climate refers to the extent to which students feel that teachers will help them that school rules are fairly enforced (Morton and Crump, 2003) and that teachers are supportive (Spriggs et al., 2007). Thornberg conducted a study on a group of 1540 5th grade students in Sweden which confirmed that an authoritative classroom climate functions as a protective classroom-level factor against bullying as it reduces the risk of bullying victimization and enhances the chances of active bystander responses in school bullying (Thornberg et al., 2018).

School connectedness is the belief held by students that adults and peers in the school care about their learning as well as about them as individuals (APA, 2009). Students are more likely to engage in healthy behaviors and succeed academically when they feel connected to school. School and Classroom ecologies set conditions for bullying behaviors (Doll et al., 2004; Kasen et al., 2004).

In contrast to a positive setting, a negative school climate has been shown to create resistance in students and elicit difficulties for student interaction besides Authoritarian or strict School Climates are found to be more brooding for bullying and other Anti-social behaviors than Authoritative (Thornberg et al., 2018). Jungert and Perrin (2019), conducted a study on a sample of 202 students with mean age of 16 years selected from public Swedish high schools and it was found that bystanders tend to aid with an intrinsic motivation when victims belong to the “in-group” whereas if they were perceived as from “outside the group”, extrinsic motivation for helping them was required. These results stressed on the importance of making students feel like a single, solid and undivided part of the school so that they would consider other classmates as one of their own and thus won't have to rely on extrinsic motivation to help others as bystanders. Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) in their study found though many children and adolescents hold fairly negative attitude towards bullying, they are directly or indirectly involved in bullying.

Studies on Group dynamics and behaviors have also confirmed that groups with high concentration of aggressive members often create a social milieu that normalizes aggressive behaviors, making them socially acceptable and decreasing social pressures to inhibit aggression (Tsang et al., 2011; Thornberg et al., 2013; Polanin et al., 2012; Salmivalli and Voeten, 2004).

In another study by Johnson et al., (2013) to understand how different aspects of school climate like perceptions of teacher and student intervention as well as perceptions school safety and connectedness affect bystanders' responses and their chances of responding aggressively (i.e., retaliating) or seeking support from an adult. The data was collected by administering school climate survey to a total of 25,308 students from 58 high schools, out of which a total of 6,493 students were selected who identified themselves as past victims of bullying. Results suggest that bystander perceptions and school climate play a role in influencing student's responses to bullying, the victims showed decreased chances of using aggressive responses while it increased their likelihood of seeking support from adults like school staff members inferred that Interventions focusing more holistically on changing school climate may better interrupt the cycle of violence.

Conclusion: Schools are meant to be safe places for students to study and to foster social relationships in the form of friends. Bullying is a group process that requires the presence of an audience to thrive, in absence of an audience it could be reduced to a mere confrontation between two people. It is often the presence of these “others” that shape the situation as winning and losing for those involved in it. Victims of bullying need someone to listen, uncritically and empathically to their stories of the bullying and the impact it has on them. Bystanders can neutralize the bullying effects or even interrupt by refusing to allow the victim to be isolated or defamed or by confronting the bully regarding their behavior or can offer to relay the incident to an adult in school or at home. Hence, in consideration with the importance of bystanders in bullying, it is particularly salient to involve peers in prevention and intervention efforts. The bystanders in bullying exist as an important entity and an educable probe is helpful to understand how various personal, social and other factors interplay to influence bystander behavior and the reasons for being a passive bystander and qualities of a daring upstander/defender. It should be noted that bullying though primarily intended to explain the form of violence occurring between students occurs in other contexts as well e.g., teachers being bullied by high school students, teachers bullying students, bullying occurring in workplace within different hierarchical levels and so on. Though numerous definitions and types of Bullying occur, at core it's a source of distress for victims and bystanders. It infuses a sense of helplessness and cognitive dissonance to bystanders. Lastly, it should be noted that no child or human being in his sane sense would ever propagate crimes, violence or abashment to other innocent live and thus any climate in school or at home that fosters bullying mindset ought to be treated accordingly.

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