Stuck in the Middle: Cyberbystanders' Beliefs About Helpfulness

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INTRODUCTION

Students' academic success and peer-to-peer treatment are among two of the most pressing concerns for school administrators (Yeager and Dweck, 2012). The latter issue, in fact, has been shown to impact students' academic achievement (Juvonen et al., 2011). Peer mistreatment becomes even more problematic when it migrates from the physical domain of the schoolyard to the cyber domain (Ockerman et al., 2014). Unlike traditional bullying, cyber-victims cannot easily escape their bully because online aggression can strike in any physical location such as home or school. Furthermore, the "potential for widespread public distribution" (Biegel et al., 2016, p. 248), as well as the anonymity of the cyberbully, further exacerbate the power dynamic of online bullying, harassment and intimidation (Biegel et al., 2016; Smith et al., 2013). Students on the receiving end of cyberbullying report "feelings of sadness, anxiety, and fear, and an inability to concentrate which affect[s] their grades" (Mishna et al., 2010; p. 363) and which may cause them to skip school or bring weapons for self-protection.

Among American youth, researchers typically find that 20%-25% of secondary students experience cyberbullying in their lifetime (Holfeld & Grabe, 2012; Mishna et al., 2010; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015), including a recent study of LAUSD students in grades 6-8 (Rice et al., 2014). Some schools address peer mistreatment through traditional anti-bullying programs that incorporate the cyber component of bullying. However an important target group – cyber bystanders – is often under-utilized in intervention efforts (Salmivalli, 2014).

Understanding why and how cyberbystanders choose to intervene is critical to the development of programs that reduce peer mistreatment online (Cross and Walker, 2013; Dillon and Bushman, 2014). In order to understand why some students intervene while others do not, bystanders must be given the opportunity to discuss what they believe are helpful ways of intervening on behalf of a mistreated peer and what specific factors they consider when deciding to be helpful or not. This research should add to the existing literature on cyberbullying, which could help create more effective antibullying interventions, especially at the middle school level, a time when the effectiveness of well-researched programs begins to decline.

BYSTANDERS' BACKGROUND

There were three types of cyberbullying that half or more students reported seeing: flaming (10/20), denigration (12/20), and exclusion (15/20). In terms of exclusion, 11 students reported that exclusion was the one type of cyberbullying that they saw most often.

		6th		7th		8th		TOTAL (all grades)
		F (n=3)	M (n=1)	F (n=3)	M (n=4)	F (n=2)	M (n=5)	
Types of Bullying	Flaming	3	1	2	0	1	3	10
	Online Harassment	1	0	2	0	2	1	6
	Cyberstalking	0	1	1	2	0	1	5
	Denigration	3	0	2	3	2	3	13
	Masquerade	0	0	1	1	1	0	3
	Outing	1	1	2	1	2	1	8
	Exclusion	3	1	0	3	2	5	16

Nineteen of the 20 students in this study had a smartphone, and eighteen of those students reported daily use of their phones to communicate with their peers. While close to half of students engaged in social media apps like Snapchat and Instagram, the other half of students discussed parental restrictions that limited their access to just group chats, or "group texts" as some students called them.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. According to middle school bystanders, what are helpful behaviors in online peer mistreatment situations, like bullying?
2. What factors do middle school bystanders consider when making the decision to use helpful online behaviors?

METHODS

This qualitative research design included the following:
- Small, private school in Los Angeles
- 20 middle school participants, grades 6-8 randomly selected
- Semi-structured, pilot-tested interview protocol
- 1, 30- to 45-minute interview per participant

6th Grade (n=5)		7th Grade (n=7)		8th Grade (n=8)	
F (n=3)	M (n=2)	F (n=3)	M (n=4)	F (n=3)	M (n=5)

CATEGORIES AND CODES

Factors Considered	Challenges to Action	Beliefs About Helpfulness
Code: Closeness • Defend • Support	**Code: Missing Information** • Non-Friend • Online/Offline Entanglement	**Code: Defend Victim** Positive • Care / Not Alone • Right Thing Negative • Involvement • Take Away V's Voice
Code: Crossing the Line • Friendship • Personal • Frequency	**Code: Evaluation Apprehension** • Target • Associated with Victim	**Code: Support Victim** Positive • Care / Not Alone Negative • Involvement
Code: Popularity • Defend • Support		**Code: Tell Adult** Positive • Power to Stop Bully • Trusted Negative • Overreact
		Code: Distract Bully No Positive Findings Negative • Uncertainty in How to Distract • Delay Inevitable

RESULTS

With only four students having seen any what they considered helpfulness online, the contents of this section rely heavily on their reactions to four ways to help, based on the work of Davis and Nixon's (2014) Youth Voice Project, which includes defending the victim, distracting the bully, providing support to the victim, and seeking help from an adult.

RQ 1 FINDINGS: BYSTANDERS' BELIEFS

Adults: A Double-Edged Sword of Helpfulness
The greatest benefit that participants' parents brought with them was the perceived power to stop the bullying (13/20). According to four students, one mechanism that adults could use to stop the bullying was punishment. For example, sixth-grade Saphira believes that "adults can make it better because I can't go up to a kid and say, 'Give me your laptop,' or something like that. I can't punish a kid because obviously I'm not their parent, but a parent can."
On the other side of the sword, adults can complicate the situation and make it into a "bigger deal" for the students and families involved. For the ten students who mentioned the negative side of getting adults involved, "bigger deal" translates into more people knowing. The expressed concerns included "getting friends in trouble" (3/20), exaggerating the problem (2/20), and asking too many questions (2/20), and parent-to-parent interactions (4/20).

The Positives of Peer Support
In general, bystanders discussed a heavy reliance on peers for help or guidance when problems arose in their online communities, with the belief, as Saphira put it, "friends help friends."
In terms of what peer support looks like between the bystander and victim, there are three main paths: dismissing the bullies attacks (5/20), reassuring the victim (4/20), reinforcing the self-worth of the victim (3/20).
According to bystanders, the two most important ways that peer support helped the victim were that the victim would not feeling alone (9/20) and the victim would be able to "process" what happened (5/20). Bystanders felt strongly that victims should be helped because it would give them some protection from feeling vulnerable and alone. As Bryn described it, bystanders are their friends' "safety pillows" because by listening and supporting the victim, he or she knows that someone is "going to be there for them, and that if anything else happens they can tell them."

The Challenges of Defending
Defending was the most challenging and complex topic of helpfulness that bystanders discussed in their interviews. When bystanders spoke about defending a victim, they acknowledged many benefits, including letting the victim know someone cares, which was the most recognized positive effect for defending (11/20). Defending could also model for victims and other bystanders on how to defend, as well as let the bully know they had crossed the line. As Karen argued, "it's more of a sign that you did something wrong. When you're cyberbullying, you don't realize it. At least that's how it is in my grade."
Only two bystanders claimed that defending could stop the bully, and one of those bystanders, Thomas, was fairly noncommittal: "If I step up, then it sort of stops it."
Lisa believes that saying "stop" online really isn't enough to "make [the bully] stop" because, as Nomi argues, "they might not even listen to me if I try [to intervene]." Defending against a bully who is also popular makes it even more challenging, as Aaron notes: "If they're popular, they have a lot of friends, then they would not like me, they might not like me after for standing up for what's right."

RESULTS (cont.)

This study revealed three key findings related to what bystanders considered when deciding to intervene. The most important consideration was how close the bystander was to the victim with the stronger the tie to the victim, the more likely the bystander would help the victim.

RQ 2 FINDINGS: FACTORS BYSTANDERS CONSIDER

The Importance of Closeness in Bystander Decision-Making
Bystanders in this study spoke often about the role of friendship. Every participant noted the role of friendship or closeness with the vast majority (18/20) stating that it played a significant role in the dynamics of their online communities. Friends were consistently mentioned as the first people bystanders would turn to for guidance or support in their online communities, more often than they would turn to their parents or other adults. The single largest determining factor in bystander helpfulness for the students who participated in this study was, in fact, friendship.
By cultivating strong connections within their friend groups, bystanders have a much lower desire to help "non-friends," as well as strangers. These "non-friends" represent the unknown to bystanders, and bystanders in this study (16/20) expressed a strong aversion to getting involved with less familiar peers in online mistreatment situations.

Information Processing: The Who, What and Why of Bystanding
The biggest hindrance to helpfulness is the "who." If the victim is not the bystander's close friend, then there is a really low chance that the bystanders in this study would defend or support the victim, although there is still a chance that they may alert an adult to help.
One of the complications in bystander interventions is knowing what is happening. As Holly described, there are parts of conversations that happen in group chats, private messages, and in person, leading bystanders to feel that they have a disjointed or incomplete narrative of the situation.
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The Fear of Peer Backlash
The most negative factor for bystander helpfulness was a fear of peer backlash. Peer backlash included the potential for peers to disapprove of a bystander's actions and the increased chance of the bystander becoming a bullied victim. Every single participant (20/20) indicated that they were concerned about backlash, especially the possible impact on their in-group friendships and general perception in the school community.

Why Bystanders Do Nothing

Of the 15 Participants who were asked whether they believed bystanding was positive, negative, or neutral, four believed it to be negative or "mostly negative," while 11 asserted that it was neutral. This neutrality was viewed as bad for the victim, but good for the bystander, and in the minds of these bystanders, that canceled everything out.

Individual Reasons		Group Pressures
Lack of Confidence (10/20)	Lack of Investment (8/20)	Peer Backlash (15/20)
• Not able to "change very much" • "Too shy" • "Too scared" • "He's not hearing you" • No one "to back you up" • "Can't find enough power in themselves" • "Hard to know what to say"	• "Just don't care" • "None of my business" • "Don't want to get involved" • "Don't know the bully" • "Don't know the victim" • "Don't want to deal with all of that stuff"	• "Don't want their friends to be mad at them" • Others can "get really mad at you" • "Don't want to be attacked" • "Don't want blame turned on them"