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An Investigation into Bullying and Cyberbullying: The Effects of Anonymity and Form of Bullying on Severity and Victim Impact

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Background

- Bullying: Behaviors such as teasing, taunting, threatening, hitting, and stealing that are initiated by one or more perpetrators against the victim (Beatty & Alexyev, 2008).
- Cyberbullying: a form of bullying that uses electronic means such as email, mobile phone calls, text messages, instant messenger contact, photos, social networking sites, and personal web pages, with the intention of causing harm to another person through repeated hostile conduct (Ortega, et al., 2012).
- Cyberbullying is thought to be worse for the victims than traditional bullying (Sticca & Perren, 2013).

Variables

  - Anonymity: is not knowing the identity of the perpetrator (whether it is actual or perceived).
  - Perceived Control is one’s perceived ability to respond effectively or stop the situation from continuing to occur.
- Sample items include, “Some students spread rumors about me in person,” and “Some swear at me online.”
- Victim impact: Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (Löwe, et al., 2008) and Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression Scale (Herge, Landoll, & La Grea, 2013).
  - Sample items for the GAD-7 include, “Trouble relaxing,” and “Becoming easily annoyed or irritable.”
  - Sample items for the CES-D include, “Felt depressed,” and “Hard restless sleep.”

Hypotheses

1. Relative to traditional bullying, cyberbullying will be associated with greater anonymity, reduced perceived control, greater incident frequency, and an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression.
2. Perceived anonymity will be associated with reduced perceived control, greater incident frequency, and an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression.
3. Reduced perceived control and greater incident frequency will be associated with an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression.
4. Anonymity will mediate the consequences of cyberbullying on reduced perceived control and greater incident frequency; reduced perceived control and greater incident frequency will mediate the consequences of anonymity leading to an increase in symptoms of anxiety and depression.

Data

- 90 participants (57 females) were recruited on Sonata at a Midwestern Catholic University and received course credit for their participation.
- Participants were separated into 3 groups: (1) those who experience both bullying and cyberbullying more than once a month (n = 25), (2) those who experienced traditional bullying more than once a month (n = 20), and (3) those who experience both traditional bullying and cyberbullying more than once a month (n = 45).

Preliminary Analyses

- Mediation analyses were conducted in Mplus using bootstrap resampling for testing indirect effects (Preacher & Hayes, 2008).
  - The method applies resampling of the data in order to produce percentile-based confidence intervals.

Results

- Cyberbullying was significantly associated with reduced perceived control and greater incident frequency (b = - .62, p = .015 and b = .38, p < .001 respectively).
- Anonymity was significantly associated with reduced perceived control (b = -.58, p = .001).
- Reduced perceived control was significantly associated with depression (b = -.15, p = .044) but not with anxiety (b = -.11, p = .27).
- Mediation analyses showed that reduced perceived control significantly mediated the association (b = .08, 95% CI [.01, .20]) between the symptoms of depression and anxiety and significantly mediated the association (b = .09, 95% CI [.01, .25]) between cyberbullying and symptoms of depression.
- Analyses were conducted again after controlling for gender (b = -.39, p < .001) with incident frequency.

Discussion

- Why are there inconsistencies?
  - The age group being studied. Many of the studies investigated bullying in adolescence, not college-aged participants.
  - It is also possible that the difference is attributable to the groups being compared in the present study.
  - Incident frequency: the relative lack of research on the frequency of bullying and cyberbullying.

- What does this mean?
  - If students feel more perceived control over the bullying situation, they may report less symptoms of depression.
  - Colleges could offer educational classes which teach students to be aware of their own situations, but also teach students the signs of cyberbullying so that they could intervene.

Limitations and Future Directions

- Limitations include: Cross-sectional, correlational design, self-report measures, comparisons between groups, and generalizability.
- Future directions: longitudinal study including different types of measurement, looking at how bullying and cyberbullying develop, longer range for age groups, multiple schools for diversity.

References