

Getting off the Virtual Fence:

Bystanders to cyberbullying - exploring the psychological factors affecting their actions

Presented by: Terri Lacroix October 2013

Overview ...

2

- Introduction & focus of research
- Cyberbullying environment
 - ▣ Based upon literary review in the realm of cyberbullying
- How do bystanders perceive the situation and decide upon their actions?
 - ▣ Based upon research in the realms of social and evolutionary psychology, social categorization and pro-social/rescuing behaviours
- Characteristics of those who rescue and those who watch passively
 - ▣ Based upon research in pro-social and rescuing behaviours
- Conclusions

Introduction and focus of research

3

- Why this research was of interest
- Cyberbullying research continuing to evolve – less research /analysis specifically on bystanders in the context of cyberbullying
- Wealth of literature on bystanders in other contexts (genocides and emergency situations)
- Research question: What are the psychological factors that could influence the actions of bystanders and what insights gained could be applied to bystanders in the context of cyberbullying ?
 - Focus specifically on psychological factors that influence behaviour rather than looking at how the problem can be addressed or critiquing current efforts to solve this issue
 - Focus on individual, groups and inter-group relations rather than explore at the societal level
 - Did not look at this by gender or culture nor did I look at the ethics of bystander action / inaction
- Why is this type of research important ?

Cyberbullying environment

4

- Over 75% of American teens use social networking sites (SNS)- and this is on the rise (Pew Research)
- Canadian study highlights that children/youth use electronic technology more than any other means by which to communicate and socialize (Mishna 2009)
- Use of technology impacts upon the interaction
- Several studies suggest that cyberbullying behaviour may not be perceived as cyberbullying by students (Grigg 2012, McGill University study 2013) or indeed a good percentage view it as a 'normal part of the on-line world' (Cassidy 2009)
- 88% of American teen SNS users have seen others being mean or cruel (Pew 2012)
- Bullies, bystanders and victims can often change roles in this environment (NS Task Force 2012)

Cyberbullying environment – why students don't help

5

- ❑ Belief that adults in schools would not help if they were informed (Li 2007, Agatston 2007)
- ❑ Reporting incidents to parents may result in losing on-line privileges (Agatston 2007)
- ❑ Lack of strategies for dealing with the situation (Li 2007)
- ❑ Reluctance to report as so many other people can also see this same act (Pew2011)
- ❑ Reaction of audience critical component in determining whether bystanders support the bully or the victim (NS Task Force 2012)
- ❑ Bystanders don't view the act to be as damaging as the victim sees it to be (Slonje 2008)

Cyberbullying environment – are SNS users a ‘community’ ?

6

- Typical teen SNS users display a sense of ‘networked individualism’ rather than on-line communities’ (Reich 2010)
- No evidence that teens had a specific sense of an SNS identity, nor sense of empathy / unity with other SNS users simply by virtue of being on-line (Reich 2010)
- Offline networks rebuilt on-line (Binder 2012)
- With SNS, there are “relationships from very different spheres in close proximity” - in the ‘real world’ there are boundaries between them (Binder 2012)
- This research suggests that when analyzing bystanders and the influence of group affiliations, it would be appropriate to revert to ‘real world’ groupings (which may be mirrored on –line)

Differences between 'traditional' and cyber bullying (as they pertain to bystanders)

7

- Bystanders well beyond one's social circle can watch events unfold (Chi 2013)
- Many interactions visible to people across quite different social spheres (Binder 2012) – bystanders may not even know the victim
- Bystanders can easily post their own comments and reactions to events (Pew 2012)
- Diffusion of responsibility – bystanders may feel less personal responsibility for redistributing content due to large number of people doing the same thing (Chi 2013) ... may be easier for bystanders to move towards becoming perpetrators
- Bystanders can't see the results of their action / inaction (NS Task Force 2012, Slonje 2008)
- Bystanders can watch anonymously
- With use of technology perhaps people can more easily forget that it is a real person being victimized and not just a profile picture on a FB page

How do bystanders perceive the situation and decide their actions?

8

□ 'Just World' phenomenon (Melvin Lerner)

- Tendency of people to believe that the world is a just and fair place – makes one feel safer
- Push aside recognition that horrible things can happen to good people - causes the victim to be blamed (Waller 2007)
- Socialized in our early childhood -good is rewarded and evil punished (Waller 2007)
- *Question: by shielding our children from ugly truths about how the world works are we inadvertently positioning them to view situations through the lens of a 'just world'?*

□ Bystander Effect (Latané and Darley)

- In ambiguous settings, people need others to help them define and understand the situation (Latané and Darley)
- Bystanders less likely to assist when they are in a group - others could help (Zimbardo 2004)
- Diffusion of responsibility (Latané and Darley)
- Tendency to inhibit expression of true feelings in public (Latané and Darley) – vicious circle
- Evaluation apprehension: others are aware of help that may be offered and may judge the person offering such aid (Fischer 2006)
- Group membership influences (Levin & Cassidy 2010)
- Application to cyberbullying

How do bystanders perceive the situation and decide their actions?

9

□ Social identity theory (Tajfel and Turner)

- Deals with how people categorize themselves, how they identify themselves with groups and how they compare their groups to others (Staub 2011)
- The value a person associates with him/her self is linked directly to the value of the group (Sales-Wuillemin 2006)
- Tendency to favour their own group (Tajfel 1971)
- Actions can be based upon the norms and values of these social identities (Levin & Cassidy 2010)
- Application to cyberbullying

□ Cognitive Consistency (Fritz Heider's Balance Theory)

- When a person's attitudes are not aligned, he/she will be motivated to put them into balance (Staub)
- "We devalue those we harm and value those we help" (Staub 1989)
- Application to cyberbullying

- *Key message: the way that bystanders perceive a given situation is a moving target – with lots of variables that can impact upon their views*

How do bystanders perceive the situation and decide their actions?

10

□ Evolutionary perspective: stigmatization

- Fear of members of our own group who are different (Suedfeld and Schaller 2002)
- Spontaneous stigma aversion appears to be instinctual and universal (Pryor 2010)
- Simply being in contact with a stigmatized person can cause fear
- A number of studies suggest that stigmatization can be 'transmitted' to others closeby (Pryor 2010)
- Can see people as 'different' for very superficial reasons
- Asking for help can be stigmatizing
- Application to cyberbullying

□ Evolutionary perspective: helping our 'kin'

- Suggests that helping behaviour corresponds to degree of relatedness (Waller 2007)
- 'Relatedness' may be determined by degree of physical or behavioural characteristics (Johnson in Waller 2007, Krebs in Sturmer & Snyder 2010) or by frequent association (Waller 2007)
- Dissimilarities may be seen as a cue for non-relatedness- helping would then be caused by other principles (such as belief the other may reciprocate (Waller 2007, Sturmer & Snyder 2010)
- Application to cyberbullying

How do bystanders perceive the situation and decide their actions?

11

□ Peer Pressure

- Conformity is a human universal (Waller 2007)
- Normative social influence - we conform to be liked /accepted and so we are not ridiculed or rejected (Waller 2007)
- Informal social influence - we use others to help us define and understand a situation (Waller 2007)
- “More than any other trait, the desire to fit in and conform to external forces is what motivates the bystander” (Baum 2008)
- Application to cyberbullying

What are the characteristics of rescuers and passive bystanders ? (Based on research in other realms)

12

- Attributes of rescuers:
 - Tended to be marginal /separate from mainstream society (Staub 1989)
 - *Are those who help victims to cyberbullying 'outside' in some way of the dominant social spheres ?*
 - Grew up in families where the parents placed emphasis on helping behaviour (Baum 2008)
 - *In instances of cyberbullying adults often do nothing – could it be the children are watching this and learning ?*
 - Importance of a 'helping atmosphere' (Baum 2008) – bystanders learn to become rescuers
 - Viewed people in an inclusive way and felt connected to other human beings (Staub 1989)
 - Often assistance characterized by a sense of obligation and that they were expected to act in this manner (Newman and Erber 2002)
 - *Highlights the importance of group leaders and the norms of groups*
 - Higher tolerance to risk (London 1970, Oliner & Oliner 1988, Staub 1993)

What are the characteristics of rescuers and passive bystanders ?

13

- Attributes of passive bystanders
 - Adaptive function to make them feel more safe in their world (Baum 2008)
 - Intolerant of ambiguity (Baum 2008)
 - Need for order and structure (Baum 2008)
 - Lower self-esteem, empathy, and satisfaction with their lives (Baum 2008)
 - Less inclined to do volunteer work (Baum 2008)
- Suggests avenues of research to confirm if such findings can be generalized into the context of cyberbullying
- Suggests avenues that may help to augment overall helping behaviour including ways to increase self-esteem, risk tolerance, inclusiveness and empathy

Conclusions

14

- While useful, current research which explores the reasons provided by students for why they do not assist does not necessarily provide a complete picture
- Useful to draw on the breadth of existing psychological theory and research on bystanders in the context of atrocities and emergencies – that said, no one theory provides all of the answers
- Useful to study bystanding not only at the individual level, but also at the group level
- Society also has an important role to play – adding an additional layer of influence
- Combining all of these factors can serve as a stronger foundation upon which to develop strategies to address cyberbullying
- Avenues for further research include exploring the degree to which results from atrocity and emergency settings can be generalized into the cyberbullying context

For more information....

15

- terri.lacroix@gmail.com