To Intervene or Not to Intervene?: Adolescent Bystanders Confront the Multifaceted Nature of Bullying

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Last year, a friend of mine from camp was harassed over the Internet. Her "friends" tormented her online by sending a steady stream of emails and instant messages that threatened or insulted her. This occurred for months, and it became so extreme that she was too distressed even to go to school. As a result, she has fallen a year behind in school and was forced to repeat her junior year at boarding school this past year. Soon after I heard her story, I read about Megan Meier, a thirteen-year-old girl who committed suicide after receiving hurtful messages online. It was a similar situation, with more devastating results.

Such stories piqued my interest in bullying, and as I started my preliminary research, I decided to research more about various instances of bullying. During my research, I discovered that these two girls were not alone in their victimization, and there have been several extreme bullying situations that have had detrimental consequences. Four years before Meier committed suicide, Ryan Halligan hanged himself because his peers bullied him relentlessly, both online and in school. In 2006, Kylie Kenney was forced to switch schools due to humiliating rumors that were spread about her online. In each of these instances, there were people other than the victim who knew about the bullying. I realized that each of those bystanders could have prevented the devastating outcome that altered the lives of Megan, Ryan, Kylie, and their families.

This knowledge prompted me to create a study that examined the variables that influenced an adolescent bystander's decision to interfere in instances of bullying. I

wanted to examine how demographic characteristics, in addition to other social variables, influenced adolescents in their decision to intervene.

In my high school, social science research is an independent research course in which I meet with my advisor Dr. Patricia Nardi, who supervises projects. Dr. Nardi prepared the official paperwork needed to conduct my study and after the approval of the institutional review board, she helped me coordinate the distribution of my survey to students in both the high school and middle school.

The sample consisted of 8th, 10th, and 12th grade students. To ensure that the sample would be representative of all students in those grades, the survey was distributed to both honors and average level classes. The resulting sample consisted of 183 responses, which included fifty-seven 12th grade participants; fifty-seven 10th grade participants, and sixty-nine 8th grade participants.

Each participant was briefly informed of the nature of the study (this study will examine an aspect of bullying), and the researcher reminded the students to answer each question as honestly as possible. The participants received assurance of the confidentiality and anonymity of their responses. The students took approximately 10 to 15 minutes to complete a questionnaire packet that contained several demographic questions, as well as a scale measuring the extent to which the participant would intervene in situations of both traditional bullying (verbal, indirect, physical) and cyber-bullying.

Since no scale existed that measured the degree to which adolescents will intervene in situations of bullying, I developed an instrument, called the *Level of Adolescent Intervention Scale (LAIS)*. My instrument reflected research-based definitions

of the four types of bullying: verbal, indirect, physical (Espelage and Swearer, 2003) and

cyber (Patchin and Hinduja, 2006). In order to assess the level of intervention of the

bystander, I developed 34 scenarios of bullying, which included a balanced

representation of each form of bullying. My final instrument consisted of 8 instances of

verbal bullying; 8 instances of indirect bullying; 7 instances of physical bullying; and 11

instances of cyber-bullying. An example of a scenario is as follows:

1. Heather is nice to Katie, but gives her strange looks and spreads rumors about her
   when Katie is not looking. One day, Heather is telling you a rumor about Katie, *you*:
   a. Go along with Heather, and continue spreading the rumor, because you do
      not want to be different.
   b. Remain silent
   c. Tell her you are not interested in hearing what she has to say.
   d. Tell her you are not interested in hearing what she has to say, and go tell a
      teacher that Heather is spreading rumors.

After each scenario, I asked the participant how he or she would respond to each

bullying situation. Students chose answers that ranged from siding with the bully (coded

as 0) to intervening in the situation and reporting the situation to an adult (coded as 3).

Higher scores reflected higher levels of intervention. The instrument also contained

pertinent social demographic variables, which included grade, gender, and grade point

average. In addition, I included a question asking the participant if he or she was ever a

victim of bullying. Participants were also asked to indicate how close they were with

each parent.

In order to compute my data, I used SPSS to organize my data and run statistical

tests. Dr. Nardi taught me how to record my results in the SPSS program, and afterwards,

she showed me how to select and run appropriate tests.

Researchers identify three types of bullying as traditional bullying: verbal, indirect, and physical bullying. The *Brown University Child and Adolescent Behavior Letter* (2005) defines traditional bullying as aggressive or intended harm by one person or a group, generally carried out repeatedly and over time, involving a power imbalance. In the past, there had to be physical interaction for victimization to occur, but with modern technology, bullies can extend their power of aggression onto the Internet. This new form of bullying has been called cyber-bullying. Patchin and Hinduja (2006) define cyber-bullying as a repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text.

As I learned in my research, bullying can have devastating results. What people don't realize, however, is that in many instances of bullying, there are people other than the perpetrator who know about the bullying. And, although these bystanders are not aware of it, each of them can prevent the devastating outcomes of bullying.

Bystanders can play a pivotal role when bullying occurs. Research (Lodge and Frydenberg, 2005) confirms that bystanders who do nothing but passively watch the confrontation, inadvertently reinforce the bullying, and send a positive message to the bullies. Conversely, an adolescent who decides to intervene in bullying can stop the bullying in most instances (Pepler and Craig, 2007; Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston, 2008; Naylor, Cowie, and del Rey, 2001). In fact, further research by Pepler and Craig (2007) reveals that when a bystander intervenes in a situation where someone is being bullied, the bullying will stop 57% of the time.

While multiple studies (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Pellegrini, 2002; Lenhart, 2007; Patchin and Hinduja, 2008; Bauman, 2007; Smokowski and Kopasz, 2005) discuss the role of both the victim and the bully, little research has studied the crucial role of the

bystander in bullying. The audience is an ubiquitous figure in instances of bullying, and it is necessary to acknowledge the effect of the audience's responses in instances of bullying on both the bully and the victim. According to a study by Pepler and Craig (2007), peer bystanders witnessed an overwhelming 85% of bullying episodes. Moreover, they observed that adolescents spent only 25% of their time helping the individual being victimized, and an astounding 75% of their time watching the teen who was doing the bullying. Bullies obtain power from their audiences, which not only emboldens them, but also validates their antagonistic behavior. The role of the bystander, therefore, demonstrates the critical importance of studying how teens respond to aggressive behavior.

Although research (Naylor, Cowie, and del Rey, 2001; Pepler, 2006; Kowalski and Limber, 2008; Pepler and Craig, 2007; Entenman, Murnen, and Hendricks, 2005) has studied possible effects that bystander intervention can have on bullying, there are no studies which examine the variables that will influence an adolescent's decision to intervene in bullying. Furthermore, no study has examined the different forms of bullying (verbal, indirect, cyber, and physical) in relation to the decision of an adolescent to intervene.

A correlation analysis was first used to test a variety of variables. The most significant tests investigated whether adolescents would intervene more in cyber-bullying than they would in traditional forms of bullying (verbal, physical, indirect). In a study discussing the recent explosion of new technology, Corinne and Hertz (2007) conclude that although this new technology gives adolescents the opportunity to remain

anonymous, it is anonymity that is conducive for online harassment, consequently providing teens with the prospect to bully others without fear of the consequences.

It is important to examine adolescent perception of anonymity on the Internet. Anonymity emboldens potential online harassers, and increases vulnerability for online victims. Various studies (McKenna and Bargh, 2000; Bauman, 2007; Strom and Strom, 2005) discuss this idea in relation to cyber-bullying. Unlike traditional bullying, bullies on the Internet cannot see their victim's emotional reactions; consequently, they tend to behave in ways that they would never behave in person. Cyber-bullying also heightens the target's vulnerability. A majority of the time, aggressors know who they are targeting, and have a purpose. However, the victims do not always know their harasser. Because the victim does not know who his or her bully is, virtually each of his or her peers is a potential aggressor. Although this anonymous aspect is conducive for online harassment, it is also conducive for adolescent intervention.

Correlation analysis concluded that adolescents did intervene more often in cyber-bullying than in traditional forms of bullying. The test also showed that there was significance in this relationship, with the p-value equal to .000. This is one of the most significant findings of the study, because it highlights the differences in intervention between traditional bullying and cyber-bullying. The results confirm that adolescents were significantly more willing to intervene in cases of cyber-bullying compared to instances of traditional bullying (verbal, indirect, or physical). The differences in the decision of the bystander to intervene to a greater extent in cases of cyber-bullying can be attributed to the anonymous nature of the Internet. Anonymity allows bystanders to intervene without repercussions. Consequently, none of the bystander's peers know he or

she had intervened, and as a result, the bystander will not risk jeopardizing his or her social status, or becoming the next target. This finding supports the discussion of Pellegrini (2002) and Bauman (2007), who concluded that adolescents do not become involved in bullying scenarios as bystanders because of the prospective negative repercussions.

An Analysis of Variance tested whether older teens or younger teens would be more likely to intervene in situations of cyber-bullying. Research (Bauman, 2007; Pellegrini, 2002; Espelage, Holt and Henkel, 2003) indicates that in early adolescence, issues associated with peer status motivate bullying. An experiment by Pellegrini (2002) has shown how peer-level factors contribute to bullying. He concluded that bullying tends to peak in middle school because bullying is often motivated by issues associated with peer status. Middle school tends to be a transition period for pre-adolescents, and bullying tends to occur when groups and their goals are disrupted, as in the case of changing schools (Pellegrini, 2002). Early adolescence is also a period when children begin to shift their focus from familial obligations to peer approval. Their need to establish friendships and receive peer approval is paramount. Teens, especially those in middle school, may believe that they can establish friendships by damaging the social status of their competitors. Furthermore, they do not want to risk their own social status by standing up for the victim of their desired group of peers (Bauman, 2007). Consequently, in middle school, adolescents would be least likely to intervene in situations of bullying because they would risk impairing their social status.

Contrary to the initial expectations of this study, younger teens were more likely to intervene in instances of bullying than older teens were (Table 1). An examination of

the mean scores of each grade indicated that younger teens were most likely to intervene in all forms of bullying.

Table 1

Summary of ANOVA for Intervention in All Forms of Bullying by Grade   (N = 183)

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Total Intervention for bullying in 8th, 10th, and 12th grades	698.03	2	349.02	2.74	.067

Grade	n	Mean	Standard Deviation
8th	69	56.77	11.60
10th	57	52.60	11.47
12th	57	52.89	10.70

Note: Students in 8th grade coded 1; Students in 10th grade coded 2; Students in 12th grade coded 3.

This discrepancy may be attributed to the prevalence of bullying prevention programs that target middle school students. Research (Pellegrini, 2002; Bauman, 2007; Espelage, Holt, and Henkel, 2003) reports that bullying peaks in middle school. To address this particular climate, middle schools actively support programs which address bullying prevention. Smokowski and Kopasz (2005) have detailed descriptions of several renowned bullying prevention programs that are geared to middle school students, such as the Olweus Bullying Prevention Program, the Bullying Project, and Bullybusters. Moreover, the particular middle school from which this data was obtained has a stringent anti-bullying policy and code of conduct, and also rewards students for reporting bullying to an adult. Upon entering high school, however, there is less emphasis on bullying prevention. Consequently, adolescents are no longer encouraged to intervene. In this particular study, older students exhibited the lowest levels of intervention as a bystander, indicating that high schools need to continue bully prevention programs.

This paper hypothesized that among the four forms of bullying in the eighth grade, teens will intervene most often in cases of cyber-bullying. Correlation analysis (p = .000) indicated that the youngest grade, eighth graders, were more likely to intervene in

situations of cyber-bullying compared to other forms of bullying. One reason why younger teens intervened more often in cyber-bullying might be traced to the anonymity of the Internet. Younger teens feel buffered by the security that anonymity provides, and might therefore intervene more often in instances of cyber-bullying.

Correlation analysis was also used to compare an adolescent's relationship with each of his or her parents with the adolescent's decision to intervene in bullying. The relationship between teens and their parents did not significantly indicate willingness to intervene in instances of bullying (see Table 2).
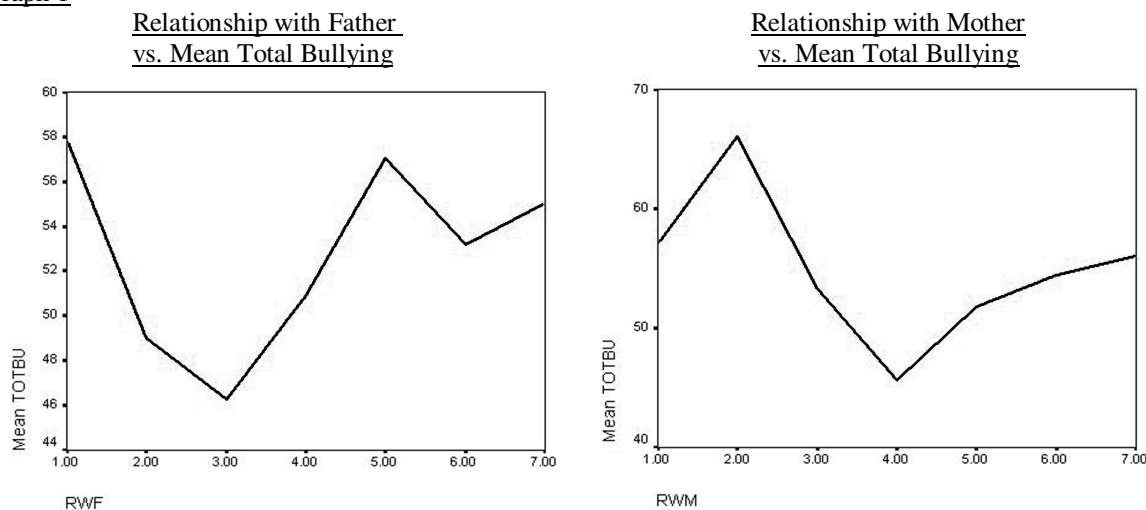
Table 2

Summary of Correlation for Intervention in All Forms of Bullying (Verbal, Indirect, Cyber, Physical) and Relationship with Parent (N=183)

Variable	Pearson Correlation	Sig. (2-tailed)
Relationship with Father	.051	.494
Total bullying intervention		
Relationship with Mother	.134	.070
Total bullying intervention		

Note: Students in 8th grade coded 1; Students in 10th grade coded 2; Students in 12th grade coded 3.

The degree of closeness between a teen and his or her parent did not significantly impact the willingness to intervene in bullying (See Graph 1). The results, however, did show that a teen's relationship with his or her mother possessed a more significant relationship than with the father. Graph 1 indicates that adolescents who have a closer relationship with their mother will be more likely to report instances of bullying.

Graph 1

Relationship with Father
vs. Mean Total Bullying

Relationship with Mother
vs. Mean Total Bullying

The effect of parental relationships on adolescent intervention in bullying is certainly a social demographic that requires more scrutiny in the assessment of bystander intervention. Although there was no correlation between an adolescent's relationship with his or her parents and willingness to intervene in bullying, higher degrees of closeness in most cases led to higher levels of bystander intervention. In this study, the maternal influence displayed a stronger impact on the decision of the adolescent to intervene than did the paternal influence. One reason why there was not a significant relationship for this hypothesis might be that as teens get older, their peer interactions become more frequent, and their focus is no longer on their family. According to Bauman (2007), adolescence is a transition period; consequently, as teens shift their focus from family to peer approval, they also become more independent of their family. Yet, findings did show that a mother's relationship with her child showed a stronger correlation to his or her willingness to intervene in bullying compared to a father's relationship with his child. This can be accounted for by the distinct role mothers play in adolescence. According to Lei and Wu (2007), a mother's primary role is to provide care and tenderness, while fathers represent the more authoritative figure in adolescents' lives. A mother's care may

influence adolescent compassion towards his or her peers more than his or her father's discipline.

This study also examined if gender would influence an adolescent's decision to intervene in bullying. An independent T-Test was performed to support the hypothesis. In all cases, males were proven to intervene less often (Verbal M 12.41, S. D. 2.72; Indirect M 11.41, S. D. 3.45; Cyber M 16.80, S. D. 4.47; Physical M 12.02, S. D. 2.68) than females (Verbal M 13.02, S. D. 2.98; Indirect M 12.30, S. D. 3.04; Cyber M 17.93, S. D. 4.13, Physical M 12.96, S. D. 2.32). However, significance was only found for instances of physical bullying (p=.013). Also, the results confirmed the hypothesis that females would intervene most often in cases of cyber-bullying (M 17.93, S. D. 4.13).

The original hypothesis proposed that gender would influence an adolescent's decision to intervene in bullying. Research (Espelage, Holt, and Henkel, 2003; Li, 2006; Smith and Gross, 2006; Seals and Young, 2003) reports that males tend to be more aggressive than females. Consequently, they will be less likely to sympathize with the victim and will intervene less often in all forms of bullying. In this study, males did demonstrate that they would be less likely to intervene as a bystander in all forms of bullying. Gender was only significant for an adolescent's decision to intervene in physical bullying, and in this case, females intervened more than their male counterparts. This may be attributed to males' tendencies to participate in more overt forms of aggression compared to females (Scheithauer et al., 2006; Smith and Gross, 2006; Seals and Young, 2003). The results support early research (Scheithauer et al., 2006; Seals and Young, 2003), which suggests that males tend to be more aggressive and are less likely to identify with victims, and more likely to side with a bully in an instance of aggression.

Although not significant, data from the study supported the prediction that females would intervene most often in cases of cyber-bullying. This finding supports Lenhart (2007), who found that females were more likely to be victims of cyber-bullying. Consequently, females would be inclined to sympathize with a victim in an instance of online aggression.

Future research might also examine the impact of continuous bully prevention programs, as this study showed that decisions of older students to intervene as bystanders actually diminished in high school. In addition, a more in-depth analysis of parental involvement and the willingness of adolescents to intervene as bystanders might shed more light on the very real and dangerous incidence of both traditional forms of bullying and the more elusive nature of cyber-bullying.

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