Computers in Human Behavior 45 (2015) 144–150

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Computers in Human Behavior

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/comphumbeh

Unresponsive or un-noticed?: Cyberbystander intervention in an experimental cyberbullying context

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Available online 23 December 2014

Keywords:
Cyberbullying
Cyberbystander
Bystander intervention
Deindividuation
Direct
Indirect

ABSTRACT

With increasing reliance on computer-mediated communication, emergencies and negative communication will also increase. Nearly one-fifth of adolescents report being cyberbullied, and over 25% of those report multiple occurrences. Though important gains have been made to understand the adverse effects and possible risk factors of cyberbullying for victims and cyberbullies, most individuals (70%; Pew Research Center, 2014) online fall into a third group—cyberbystanders. This experiment tests the first step (i.e., cyberbystanders notice the cyberbullying incident) of the five-step Bystander Intervention Model in a virtual environment. Data were analyzed from 221 cyberbystanders who witnessed in real time multiple episodes of cyberbullying. Results confirm that noticing cyberbullying significantly predicts intervention, indirect or direct. Nearly 68% of participants noticed the cyberbullying, but only 10% directly intervened by engaging with the bully. Most participants (68%) intervened indirectly after the incident and threat were removed. Further research is necessary to understand other boundary conditions, and to test the remaining steps of the Bystander Intervention Model in a virtual environment. This model has been very effective in understanding and increasing bystander intervention in the real world. We hope that the model will have similar effects on understanding and increasing cyberbystander intervention in the virtual world.

1. Introduction

Over 90% of 12–17 year olds access the Internet daily, and 80% use this access specifically for socializing and communicating with their peers (Pew Research Center, 2011). Access to the Internet, endless technological opportunities to record or forward any media, and an increasing reliance on social networking for communication have created a perfect environment for cyberbullies. The Centers for Disease Control have labeled cyber-aggression as an important public health issue, affecting millions of people daily (David-Ferdon & Hertz, 2009). Nearly 20% of American adolescents report being cyberbullied, and over 25% of those report that it happens repeatedly (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). The childhood chant of 'sticks and stones' breaking bones but words never hurting rings hollow to the cyberbullying victim. In traditional bullying, victims are safe within the confines of their own home. In the 21st century, no adolescent or adult can avoid being caught in any cyber-corner.

The effects of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration are as numerous as they are negative (Tokunaga, 2010). However with the sheer number of individuals online, most at some point would fall into a third group—cyberbystanders. Bystanders are individuals who "stand by" in emergency situations without intervening and giving aid. Cyberbystanders do this in the virtual world. The wider the audience or networks the cyberbullying images or text are distributed, the larger the population of possible cyberbystanders who can intervene.

1.1. Cyberbystander behavior

Cyberbystanders play crucial roles in cyberbullying and other acts of cyberagression, such as hostile communication, called flaming (Derks, Fischer, & Bos, 2008); destructive deception called trolling (Buckels, Trapnell, & Paulhus, 2014); excluding people online, called cyberostracism (Wolf et al., 2014), and making online threats, called cyberthreats (Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011). However, most people remain passive and silent, at least directly (Huang & Chou, 2010). In field studies, diffusion of responsibility is repeatedly observed (Lynn Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001), which can be especially difficult given the nearly infinite number of expected, observed, or assumed individuals "present" online. A reduction in the bystander effect was found when cyberbystanders were directly approached for help when experimenters used the

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2014.12.009
0747-5632/

cyberbystander's name (Markey, 2000). These participants, however, are no longer bystanders when directly approached, and become active participants in the emergency. In another study (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013) harassing photographs of a schoolmate were sent to a few adolescent peers. Participants (the recipients of these photographs) had options to report the harassment, forward the photographs, or tell the individual what wasn't right about their actions. The researchers found that when given the opportunity to engage as an active participant in forwarding harassment, cyberbystanders are more likely to do so online than offline. These participants could be considered more passive recipients than traditional bystanders.

2. Research framework

2.1. Bystander Intervention Model

For nearly four decades, the Bystander Intervention Model (BIM; Latané & Darley, 1970), depicted in Fig. 1, has helped explain the conditions under which individuals choose, or choose not to, help others in emergency situations. The model includes five key steps that must occur in order for a bystander to intervene: (1) notice that something is happening, (2) interpret the event as an emergency, (3) take personal responsibility for providing assistance, (4) determine actions necessary, and (5) provide help. This model has been replicated in field and laboratory studies in a myriad of situations involving (presumably) thousands of experimental and unwitting participants. The model proves useful, regardless of whether the situation is seemingly benign or extremely serious, and regardless of victim characteristics. It helps explain why most people do not intervene in an emergency.

This model has yet to be comprehensively tested in a mediated environment, especially in an environment where aggression and harassment takes place. It is necessary to test each step of the Bystander Intervention Model online to ascertain how similarly cyberbystanders act online in comparison to offline. Confirmation of the ecological validity of the offline model in an online context can lend utility in other offline findings for eventual cyberbystander intervention. The main goal of the present study is to test the first step of this model in an online context.

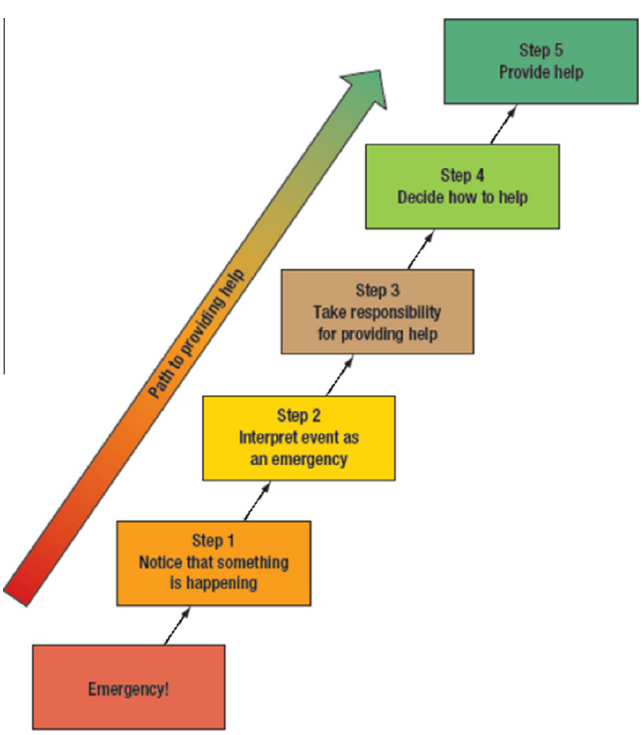

Fig. 1. Image illustrating steps of the Bystander Intervention Model (Latané & Darley, 1970).

To date, the thresholds of cyberbystanders have not been experimentally tested with certain variables important to the model constrained. Cyberbystander attributions (Holfeld, 2014) and behavior in cyberbullying has been examined, but not tested, through self-report surveys (Li, 2007; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009), behavioral intentions measured from scenarios (Bauman & Newman, 2013), or field experiments examining the bystander effect (Markey, 2000). Each of these studies assumed all cyberbystanders completed Step 1 of the Bystander Intervention Model, and had noticed the event. However, cyberbystanders who do not intervene may not do so because they did not actually notice the emergency, or not complete the very first step of the established Bystander Intervention Model. The present study aims to test the importance of noticing the online event, regardless of the distractions that can supply the cyberbystander with opportunities to avoid cyberintervention.

2.2. Direct and indirect interventions

Bystanders to emergencies and violence, be it on or offline, have four choices in actions: (1) direct intervention, (2) indirect intervention, (3) joining in, or (4) inaction. For a victim, as long as the emergency stops and assistance is granted, it is unimportant if the means of supplying help is direct or indirect. However, the difference in intervention can affect the aggressor as well as any other bystanders. Direct intervention occurs when the bystander successfully moves through the five steps of the Bystander Intervention Model and provides assistance. This assistance can be given promptly to the person in need (e.g., using a fire extinguisher in a fire), diffuses the situation (e.g., breaks up the fight), or removes a victim from the environment (e.g., evacuating from danger).

Indirect interventions, or detour interventions, "consist of reporting the emergency to the relevant authority rather than attempting to cope with it directly" (Latané & Darley, 1970, p. 35). Indirect interventions tend to be less straightforward and may involve more micro-decisions. Though once a bystander decides to intervene indirectly, "it usually does not require a great deal of skill, strength, or courage to carry it out" (p. 35). These circuitous actions are steps that lead to eventual steps that finally intervene on behalf of the victim, such as telling a teacher or reporting to administrators abusive language or threats. Direct interventions take more time, resources, and opportunities for the bystander than do indirect interventions.

2.3. Mediated interventions

Online, direct intervention is public communication addressing the emergency. Even in a deindividuated environment, interlocutors rely on typical interpersonal communication strategies in disclosure (Joinson, 2001; Tidwell & Walther, 2002), argumentation (Ainsworth et al., 2011; Lea & Spears, 1991), and relationship maintenance (DeAndrea, Ellison, LaRose, Steinfield, & Fiore, 2012; Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Jordan Parks, & Siegel, 2011). The textual persistence of computer-mediated communication (CMC) affords any slur, joke, or embarrassing video permanence (Slonje & Smith, 2007). By intervening, the cyberbystander becomes part of the narrative that can also go viral. No longer is the intervention in the moment, at that instant. The intervention can become timeless, happening over and over again whenever a new person views the communication. The social risk of intervening could be