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Cultivating youth resilience to prevent bullying and cyberbullying victimization

Sameer Hinduja^{a,*}, Justin W. Patchin^b^a Florida Atlantic University, 5353 Parkside Drive, Jupiter, FL 33458-2906, USA^b University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, 105 Garfield Avenue, Eau Claire, WI 54702-4004, USA

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to better prevent and respond to bullying and cyberbullying, schools are recognizing a need to focus on positive youth development. One often-neglected developmental construct in this rubric is *resilience*, which can help students successfully respond to the variety of challenges they face. Enhancing this *internal* competency can complement the ever-present efforts of schools as they work to create a safe and supportive learning environment by shaping the *external* environment around the child. Based on a national sample of 1204 American youth between the ages of 12 and 17, we explore the relationship between resilience and experience with bullying and cyberbullying. We also examine whether resilient youth who were bullied (at school and online) were less likely to be significantly impacted at school. Results show resilience is a potent protective factor, both in preventing experience with bullying and mitigating its effect. Implications for school and community-based interventions are offered.

1. Introduction

The well-worn adage “sticks and stones may break your bones but words can never hurt you” has long been offered to console bullied youth. The reality, however, is that words *can* hurt, and sometimes very deeply. But they don’t have to. For some who are targeted with hurtful epithets, what is said can be devastating. For others, the words mean nothing at all. For still others, the impact lies somewhere along a continuum between these two extremes. This begs the question: is there a personal characteristic or trait that buffers against external stressors, such as bullying? That is, are some youth who are targeted for certain types of harm better able than others to brush it off? And if so, can the protective factor be identified, cultivated and strengthened? Despite modest progress over the last decade, schools have not been able to drastically reduce the frequency of adolescent peer aggression (Boulton & Boulton, 2012; Finkelhor, Vanderminde, Turner, Shattuck, & Hamby, 2014; Kendrick, 2015; Yeager, Fong, Lee, & Espelage, 2015). As such, is there utility in training students to be “overcomers” instead of invoking the narrative that they are “victims” who must rely on adults to always come to their aid?

The current paper explores the role of resilience in protecting youth from the deleterious consequences of interpersonal harm. Resilient kids are those who, for a variety of reasons, are better able to withstand external pressures and setbacks. We theorize that they are also positioned and equipped to handle and rebuff peer aggression in many of its various forms. We begin with a brief review of existing bullying and cyberbullying scholarship to provide a framework upon which an argument can be built for developing resilience in youth as a strong protective factor.

* Corresponding author.

E-mail addresses: hinduja@fau.edu (S. Hinduja), patchinj@uwec.edu (J.W. Patchin).

2. Adolescent bullying

In January of 2014, the United States Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, the Department of Education, and the Health Resources and Services Administration worked with a number of bullying experts across various fields to develop a uniform definition of bullying:

Bullying is any unwanted aggressive behavior(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm. (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014:7)

In recent years, a couple of noteworthy studies in the United States have elucidated the proportion of youth who have experienced bullying at school. The National Crime Victimization Survey has been tracking bullying through its nationally representative School Crime Supplement since 1989 (National Center for Educational Statistics, 2011). In the 2014-15 school year, 20.8% (over 5 million youth ages 12–18) reported that they had been bullied at school (Lessne & Yanez, 2016). In addition, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's 2015 Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance (YRBS) found that 20.2% of students in grades 9–12 reported that they were bullied at school over the last year (Kann, 2016).

Consequences of bullying victimization identified in previous research include psychological and psychosomatic distress and numerous problematic emotional and social responses (Bauman, Toomey, & Walker, 2013; Klomek, Marracco, Kleinman, Schonfeld, & Gould, 2007; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Seals & Young, 2003; Takizawa, Maughan, & Arseneault, 2014). These include eating disorders, chronic illnesses, poor relationships, truancy, fear of going to school, and loneliness (Ericson, 2001; Kaltiala-Heino, Rimpelä, Marttunen, Rimpelä, & Rantanen, 1999; Striegel-Moore, Dohm, Pike, Wilfley, & Fairburn, 2002). Additionally, bullying victims also regularly experience feelings of vengefulness, anger, and self-pity (Borg, 1998; Camodeca & Goossens, 2004; Fekkes, Pijpers, & Verloove-VanHorick, 2004) as well as depression (Gámez-Guadix, Orue, Smith, & Calvete, 2013; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Olweus, 1994b) and suicidal ideation (Bauman et al., 2013; Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Klomek et al., 2007; Mills, Guerin, Lynch, Daly, & Fitzpatrick, 2004). Research has also linked bullying victimization to behaviors such as vandalism, shoplifting, dropping out of school, drug use, fighting, and school violence (Gámez-Guadix et al., 2013; Rigby, 2003; Townsend, Flisher, Chikobvu, Lombard, & King, 2008; Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007).

Cyberbullying has been conceptually defined as: “willful and repeated harm inflicted through computers, cell phones, and other electronic devices” (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015a:11). This was informed by longstanding definitions of traditional schoolyard bullying, focusing on behaviors that are deliberate, occur repeatedly over time, and result in harm (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015b; Olweus, 1993). Simply, cyberbullying involves incidents where adolescents use technology to harass, threaten, humiliate, or otherwise hassle their peers.

With regard to prevalence, the aforementioned YRBS found that 15.5% of students reported that they were bullied electronically in 2015 (Kann, 2016). As a point of comparison, in the fall of 2013 a study reviewed all of the published articles available at the time (N = 73) that included prevalence rates for cyberbullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2015a). Fifty-two of those included cyberbullying victimization rates. Rates across all of the studies ranged widely, from 2.3% to 72%, with an average of 21% of respondents cyberbullied at some point in their lifetimes.

Research has regularly linked cyberbullying to negative emotions such as sadness, anger, frustration, embarrassment, or fear (Brighi et al., 2012; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010c; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2010), and these emotions have been moderately correlated with delinquency and interpersonal violence among youth (Aseltine, Gore, & Gordon, 2000; Broidy & Agnew, 1997; Mazerolle, Burton, Cullen, Evans, & Payne, 2000; Mazerolle & Piquero, 1998). Furthermore, cyberbullying has been associated with low self-esteem, depression, suicidal ideation, academic difficulties, and experience with school bullying (Gini & Espelage, 2014; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007, 2008, 2009, 2010a; Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Ybarra et al., 2007; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). School delinquency and violent behaviors – such as assaultive conduct, carrying a weapon to school, and substance use – have also been connected to cyberbullying (Hay & Meldrum, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Nixon, 2014), although the comparatively few number of these studies underscores the need for more research in this area.

3. Resilience

Traditionally, approaches towards bullying (and health in general) are pathogenic, inducing professionals to focus on mitigating risk factors and identifying and ameliorating the deficiencies in the lives of an individual (Garbarino, 2001). While this method has borne some fruit in terms of prevention by reshaping and reconditioning the environment around students (Ttofi & Farrington, 2012), a different paradigm may be necessary to make further headway in addressing the problem. Instead of focusing on the pathogen of bullying and the risk factors that make someone susceptible to victimization, a salutogenic approach is equally valuable – focusing on a student's strengths and assets (Antonovsky, 1996). This perspective, stemming from the field of developmental psychopathology, positive psychology, and positive youth development, suggests that youth have the inherent ability to handle many stressors that come their way (Cicchetti & Curtis, 2006; Masten, 2007; Seligman, 2002; Theron, Liebenberg, & Ungar, 2015), and lays the groundwork for the current theoretical premise.

Based on the need to develop “whole” children with the social competencies they critically need for personal and professional success, resilience researchers argue kids can learn to overcome adversity or “bounce back” from it when they face it while growing

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