Does the term *bullying* in cyberbullying hinder prevention of cyber aggression?

The answer seems to be Yes

Cyber aggression occurs when a perpetrator initiates cyber communication or cyber action intended to harm a target. One prevalent form of cyber aggression has been called *cyberbullying*. But the *bullying* component of that concept may actually hinder efforts to prevent cyber aggression. There are two problematic issues.

One issue is that the term *bullying* may be confusing. For example, researchers examined the prevalence of text-message bullying in 6-17 year-olds during the past year. When the abuse was called *bullying* and was defined, 11% of respondents reported being targets of it. When the abuse was not called *bullying* but was simply defined, 33% of the respondents reported being targets of it. Calling the abuse *bullying* decreased the ability of its targets to recognize that it had happened. Although there is no universally accepted definition of cyberbullying, that study and others have described it as cyber aggression occurring on more than one day, happening repeatedly, and coming from a stronger or more powerful person than the target.

But other researchers have noted that in cyberspace, once abusive material is posted, it can be repeatedly viewed or communicated and anyone in cyberspace has enough power to cause significant harm. Consequently, the only commonly agreed upon feature of cyberbullying that distinguishes it from briefer cyber abuse is that it happens on more than one day.

A second problematic issue with the term *bullying* in cyberbullying is whether there actually are any meaningful prevention-related differences between
perpetrators of brief cyber aggression occurring on just one day and perpetrators of extended cyber aggression occurring on more than one day. But that issue had not been investigated.

At Shippensburg University, researchers from three different disciplines teamed up to explore that second issue. Kenneth France (Psychology), Azim Danesh (Management Information Systems), and Stephanie Jirard (Criminal Justice) had their study published this year in *Computers in Human Behavior*. “Informing Aggression-Prevention Efforts by Comparing Perpetrators of Brief vs. Extended Cyber Aggression” compared 72 perpetrators of brief cyber aggression to 128 perpetrators of extended cyber aggression. There were more similarities than differences between the two groups. For example in both groups, (1) the most common modalities were cell phone images or text, social media, and instant messaging; (2) 76% or more disagreed with the assertion that there should be no offline consequences for online behavior and 55% or more agreed that if it had been a violation of rules or against the law they wouldn’t have done it; (3) if there had been a news story about the perpetrator doing it, 63% or more said they would have felt ashamed. The most pronounced difference between the two groups was that 60% of the extended perpetrators agreed they had been hurt by something happening in cyberspace, compared to 35% of the brief perpetrators.

With publication of the new research, there are now two well-documented reasons for removing the term *bullying* from cyber aggression prevention efforts. First, using the term *bullying* decreases the ability of individuals to recognize behaviors as being cyberbullying. Second, with regard to prevention-related issues there appear to be no meaningful differences between perpetrators cyberbullying and perpetrators of briefer forms of cyber abuse.

The Shippensburg researchers noted that their findings support cyber aggression prevention efforts having the following goals: encouraging respect and empathy, facilitating adaptive decision-making and communication skills, promoting socially appropriate ways of coping with conflict and anger, and increasing knowledge and application of relevant laws and rules. Such endeavors are likely to have a greater impact if prevention efforts use terms such as aggression or cyber aggression, rather than the confusing and flawed concept of cyberbullying.
Are people with antisocial tendencies ruthless or clueless?

They might be both

Individuals with “antisocial” tendencies (as in antisocial personality disorder) fail to comply with social norms. It is believed the person knows what qualifies as noncompliance. It is assumed the individual developed a good understanding of social norms and now chooses to violate those norms and to treat others unfairly.

Persons with “narcissistic” tendencies (as in narcissistic personality disorder) perceive themselves to be deserving of exceptions to social norms in the form of special privileges and recognition. It is believed the individual knows what qualifies as special exceptions. It is assumed the person developed a good understanding of social norms and now expects to receive unfair privileges.

Individuals with “borderline” tendencies (as in borderline personality disorder) create chaos in social situations in order to test the strength of relationships. It is believed the person knows what qualifies as chaos. It is assumed the individual developed a good understanding of social norms and now chooses to violate those norms and to treat others unfairly.

So it is assumed that individuals with any of these tendencies actually have a good understanding of both social norms and the concept of fairness. Researchers at Shippensburg University tested those assumptions by comparing high- and low-rated individuals on each of those three personality dimensions.

Undergraduate Psychology majors Steven Yurkonis and Michael Smith, along with Psychology Professor and Department Chair Bob Hale, presented “Social Exchange and Personality” at the 2013 meeting of the Eastern Psychological Association in New York City. The researchers used the Wason Selection Test to examine the ability of participants to discern fairness and social expectations. The Wason Selection Test involves knowing what information you need to decide whether a rule is actually relevant (enforced) in a situation. The test presents the person with a variety of scenarios; some are entirely abstract, such as having only letters and numbers, and others relate to social situations, such as filling up the gas tank of a borrowed car before returning it. Although the abstract and social items pose logic problems that are essentially equivalent in their reasoning
difficulty, most people do better on the social items than on the abstract items. Performance tends to be better on the social items because people typically are familiar with being in social situations and figuring out what is expected and fair, such as knowing your friend will appreciate you returning her car with a full tank of gas.

Both high- and low-scorers on the Narcissistic Personality Inventory did significantly better on the Wason social items than on the abstract items, and the same was true for high- and low-scorers on the Zanarini Rating Scale for Borderline Personality Disorder. Those results support the hypotheses that persons with narcissistic tendencies and those with borderline tendencies understand what is expected and fair in social situations. But a similar hypothesis was not supported for those with antisocial tendencies.

On the Subtypes of Antisocial Behavior Questionnaire low-scorers did significantly better on the test’s social items than on its abstract items, but high-scorers failed to perform significantly better on the social items than on the abstract items. The lack of a significant difference for the high-scorers suggests the participants with antisocial tendencies were less able to identify behaviors typically seen as being fair and in compliance with social expectations. Although their lack of conformity to social norms might be related to being ruthless, it could also be associated with being clueless.

**Which is most important – an optimistic disposition or social support?**

**One is more strongly linked to good mental health**

Effective coping can be related to both internal and external factors. For instance, from the internal perspective, one’s overarching view of life might play a role in how a person deals with challenges, and, from the external perspective, connecting with others could facilitate successful coping.

Shippensburg University Psychology undergraduate Rachel Haupt and Psychology Professor Scott Madey investigated the relationships among amount of psychological distress, the internal factor of an optimistic disposition, and the external factor of social support. The researchers presented “Optimism, Support
Systems and Academic Stress on College Students” at the 2013 meeting of the Association for Psychological Science in Washington, DC.

In a group of 194 students there were significant negative correlations of scores on the Life Orientation Test – Revised (measuring optimism) and the Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support with scores on the Symptom Checklist-90. When variation associated with support was removed, the negative relationship between optimism and distress remained statistically significant, but when the variation associated with optimism was removed, the negative relationship of support with distress was no longer statistically significant.

The research indicates that if students are optimistic and have appropriate support they are likely to effectively cope with challenges. The findings also suggest that if such a student were to lose the support and retain the optimism the person would still be likely to experience less distress than students who are not as optimistic.

Where can you read other newsletters?

You can access all posted issues at the following URL.

http://www.ship.edu/Psychology/PSI_High_Newsletter/

If you are a high school psychology teacher and you want to be notified when the next Psi High Newsletter has been posted on the web, just contact us. Compose an email message saying you want to subscribe to the newsletter, and include your name and school. Send the email to the following address.

okfran@ship.edu

Psi High Newsletter
Editor: Kenneth France, Ph.D.

The Psi High Newsletter is published for teachers of high school psychology by Shippensburg University. Contributions are encouraged and welcomed. Please submit material to the editor.

Department of Psychology
Shippensburg University
1871 Old Main Drive
Shippensburg, PA
17257-2299
Shippensburg University of Pennsylvania, in compliance with federal and state laws and university policy, is committed to human understanding and provides equal educational, employment, and economic opportunities for all persons without regard to race, color, sex, age, creed, national origin, religion, veteran status, or disability.

Direct requests for disability accommodations and other inquiries to the Office of Disability Services
Horton Hall 120
Shippensburg University
1871 Old Main Drive
Shippensburg, PA
17257-2299
ods@ship.edu