CYBERBULLYING

Emotional and Psychological Consequences

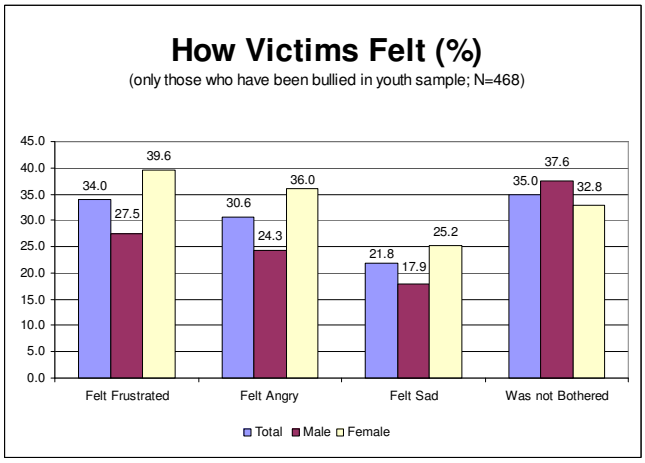
By Sameer Hinduja, Ph.D. and Justin W. Patchin, Ph.D.

We broadly define *cyberbullying* as *willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of electronic text*. Most often, cyberbullying is carried out by using a personal computer or cellular phone to express malicious or mean sentiments to another individual. Another common method involves posting humiliating or embarrassing information about someone in a public online forum (e.g., an online bulletin board, chat room, or web page). Cyberbullying therefore involves harassment or mistreatment carried out by an offender against a victim who is physically distant. Nonetheless, though cyberbullying does not involve personal contact between an offender and victim, it remains psychologically and emotionally damaging to youth.

14 year-old girl from Illinois:
It makes me depressed a lot. It affected me for about 3-4 years. I hated being [cyber]bullied. I would come home and just cry. It really hurt.

Cyberbullying has shot to the forefront of agendas in schools and local communities due to the intangible harm that victims suffer. While many students deny the seriousness of name-calling, teasing, and other arguably harmless activities, research suggests otherwise. Indeed, as many as 8% of participants in one study acknowledged that traditionally bullying has affected them to the point where they have attempted suicide, run away, refused to go to school, or been chronically ill.[1] More specifically, in a study of over 3,000 students, one researcher found that 38% of bully victims felt vengeful, 37% were angry, and 24% felt helpless.[2]

These findings are not out of the ordinary. Rather, a significant body of research has detailed the undesirable effects of traditional bullying victimization. For example, male victims tend to feel vengeful and angry while female victims experienced self-pity and depression. According to a 2001 fact sheet on juvenile bullying produced by the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, victims of schoolyard bullying fear going to school and experience dysphoric feelings of loneliness, humiliation, and insecurity. Moreover, they tend to struggle with poor relationships and have difficulty making emotional and social adjustments. It is reasonable to expect that cyberbullying can similarly lead to such negative outcomes, considering the pain that hateful words can inflict.



In our most recent research project, we found that a significantly greater proportion of females felt frustrated or angry as compared to males. This finding is contrary to expectations as we would expect males to experience such emotions more often than females, while females experience sadness much more often than males. Even so, the emotional responses to cyberbullying are problematic in the sense that they could precipitate other, more serious behavioral outcomes.

GENERAL STRAIN THEORY (GST)

Sociologist Robert Agnew[3] proposed that strain or stress experienced by an individual can manifest itself in problematic emotions that lead to deviant behavior. Specifically, three types of strain were proposed:[4]

1) Strain as the actual or anticipated failure to achieve positively valued goals

2) Strain as the actual or anticipated removal of positively valued stimuli

3) Strain as the actual or anticipated presentation of negatively valued stimuli.

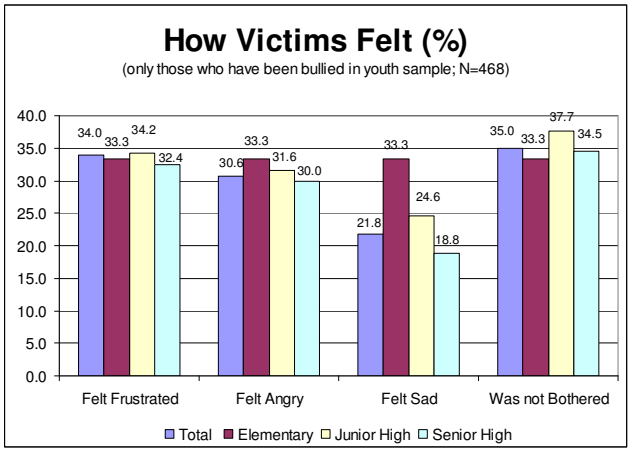
These forms of strain often elicit or produce feelings of anger, frustration, or depression - which then can surface as negative behavioral choices. Agnew maintains that individuals who experience strain are more at risk to engage in deviant or delinquent behaviors. Accordingly, we argue that cyber-bullying victimization can be a potent source of strain among adolescents that can in turn lead to deviant coping responses.

With cyberbullying, students may fear for their safety offline due to harassment and threats conveyed online. At some point, victims may become preoccupied with plotting ways to avoid certain peers while instant messaging or chatting with their friends on the Internet. Indeed, victims might be consumed with avoiding certain cyberbullies whom they actually know in person – either at school, at the bus stop, or in their neighborhood. Whichever the case, when youths are constantly surveilling the landscape of cyberspace or real space to guard against problematic interpersonal encounters, their ability to focus on academics, family matters and responsibilities, and prosocial choices is compromised to some extent. In sum, if students fail to achieve the positively valued goal of personal safety, strain may ensue.

Another positively-valued goal for school-aged youth is acceptance. Children and adolescents often desperately seek the affirmation and approval of their peers. Cyberbullying, however, stymies that goal through rejection and exclusion. Research has shown that when individuals perceive themselves to be rejected or otherwise socially excluded, a number of emotional, psychological, and behavioral ill effects can result.[5] Consequently, the failure to achieve peer acceptance may also produce strainful feelings. Further, if cyberbullying victimization leads to school, familial, or personal problems that warrant or earn some type of punishment from teachers, parents and guardians, or law enforcement, additional strain may ensue.

12 year-old girl from Massachusetts:
It lowers my self-esteem. It makes me feel really crappy. It makes me walk around the rest of the day feeling worthless, like no one cares. It makes me very, very depressed.

Finally, textual attacks by one person (or a group) upon another person through cyberbullying intuitively involves the presentation of negatively valued stimuli. The scope and intensity of negative emotions that may follow is easy to imagine. Agnew[6] argues that adolescents are "…pressured into delinquency by the negative affective states - most notably anger and related emotions…" This statement aptly describes the actions of a frustrated victim of continuous harassment who ultimately breaks down and either attempts to resolve the strain through some other general antisocial behavior, or seeks specific revenge against his or her aggressor.



Our work has found that many victims of cyberbullying felt depressed, sad, and frustrated. It is interesting to note that a relatively equal percentage of elementary, middle, and high school students felt frustrated and angry, while a notably larger proportion of elementary students felt sad as compared to the other groups.

It is clear from this analysis that the effects of cyberbullying are not limited to hurt feelings that can be easily disregarded. The consequences can be far-reaching, and can permanently damage the psyche of many adolescents. Moreover, General Strain Theory can help researchers, practitioners, and parents better understand the complex emotional and behavioral consequences of cyberbullying. It also can be used to inform policy and practice that seeks to temper the criminogenic effect that strainful emotions may have.

NOTES:

[1]Borg, M. G. (1998). The emotional reaction of school bullies and their victims. Educational Psychology, 18(4), 433-444.
[2]*Ibid.*
[3]Agnew, R. (1985). A revised strain theory of delinquency. Social Forces, 64, 151-167. Agnew, R. (1989). A longitudinal test of the revised strain theory. Journal of Quantitative Criminology, 5, 373-387. Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency. Criminology, 30(1), 47-87.
[4]Agnew, R. (1992). Foundation for a General Strain Theory of Crime and Delinquency. Criminology, 30(1), 47-87 (page 47).
[5]Leary, M. R., Schreindorfer, L. S., & Haupt, A. L. (1995). The role of self-esteem in emotional and behavioral problems: Why is low self-esteem dysfunctional? Journal of Social and Clinical Psychology, 14, 297-314.
[6]Agnew, R. (1992), p. 49.

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