Correlates of traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration among Australian students

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the associations of gender, age, trait anger, moral disengagement, witnessing of interparental conflict, school connectedness and the religious makeup of the school setting in the involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration. Five hundred Australian students completed an anonymous self-report, paper-based questionnaire. According to the results, 25.2% of the participants reported having engaged in traditional or cyberbullying perpetration. While trait anger and moral disengagement were associated with being a traditional bully, trait anger, interparental conflicts, moral disengagement and school connectedness were associated with being a traditional bully-victim. Additionally, trait anger and moral disengagement were associated with being a traditional-and-cyberbully. Our findings indicated that besides individual variables, the family and school environment have an impact on traditional and cyberbullying perpetration behavior. Results imply that any prevention attempts to reduce traditional and cyberbullying should consider students' experiences both at home and at school.

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1. Introduction

Bullying is a social relationship problem which can be defined as an imbalance of power characterized by an intention to hurt others which is repeated (Olweus, 1993). With the advent of technology such as the Internet and mobile phones widely available to young people, cyberbullying, or bullying using technology has emerged (Campbell, 2005). Although there has been some controversy over whether the three criteria of an imbalance of power, intentionality and repetition of traditional bullying apply to cyberbullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013), many researchers are in agreement that they are applicable, although with some differences in appearance depending on the different mediums (Menesini et al., 2013; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012). Hence, cyberbullying can be defined as aggressive, deliberate and repeated behaviors of an individual or group of individuals by using information and communication technologies to inflict harm on others (Smith et al., 2008).

The prevalence rates for traditional and cyberbullying in Australia seem to be similar to other developed countries with about 20–30%

of students being traditionally victimized, 15% being cyberbullied and 7–8% being bullied in both modes (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Kift, & Butler, 2011; Hemphill et al., 2012). These prevalence rates are despite Australia's adoption of a National Safe Schools Framework (Cross, Epstein, & Hearn, 2011) where every school is required to develop an anti-bullying policy and evidenced-based programs to reduce bullying are available (Cross et al., 2012).

Victims of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying suffer many negative consequences according to the existing research evidence. Victims have reported experiencing psychological, social, physical and school related problems. Anxiety, depressive symptoms, anger, sadness, guilt, shame and frustration have been reported among the psychological problems (Chin, 2011; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010; Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011). Negative social impacts have been shown to be withdrawal from friends, loneliness and peer rejection (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Kroon, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Physically, victims have been shown to self-harm, sustain physical injuries and abuse drugs (Hinduja & Patchin, 2007; Shariff, 2008; Wang, Iannotti, Luk, & Nansel, 2010; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Additionally, victims have attendance problems and low grades at school (Cross, Lester, & Barnes, 2015; Johnson, 2011).

Students who bully others in physical or cyber space appear to be at risk as well. Compared to the victims, traditional bullies were reported having low levels of school attendance, school satisfaction and higher levels of irritability (Arslan, Hallett, Akkas, & Akkas, 2012); and in comparison with the non-involved students, cyberbullies were found

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to have social problems, higher levels of stress, depression and anxiety (Campbell, Slee, Spears, Butler, & Kift, 2013). When compared with the non-involved students, perpetrators of traditional bullying and cyberbullying were also at highest risk in terms of substance usage and weapon carrying (Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012). Therefore, understanding the risk factors for students who bully their peers is important to inform prevention and intervention programs to reduce all forms of bullying, including cyberbullying.

Studies have shown that both traditional bullying and cyberbullying have harmful consequences on victims, such as increased social problems, anxiety and depression (Campbell, Spears, Slee, Butler, & Kift, 2012). And most research has focused on the risk factors for a student becoming a victim of traditional bullying (Champion & Clay, 2007; O'Brennan & Furlong, 2010). While some studies have explored only the antecedents for perpetrators of traditional bullying (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010; Espelage & De La Rue, 2013), others have examined the risk factors for traditional bullying perpetration along with cyberbullying perpetration (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Hemphill et al., 2012). However, to build a profile of students who bully their peers, there is still a need to examine the correlates of all forms of bullying perpetration in an integrated model to determine the interplay between correlates, such as age, gender, trait anger, moral disengagement, interparental conflict, school connectedness and the religious makeup of the school setting. With these in mind, we set out to examine the correlates of traditional and cyberbullying perpetration in a sample of Australian youth.

The theory on which this study is based is Bronfenbrenner's *Ecological Systems Theory* which states that human beings cannot be accurately understood in terms of their development and behaviors unless the whole ecological system with which they interact is taken into consideration (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This includes, understanding the diverse relationships that students involved in bullying perpetration experience (Hong & Espelage, 2012). Considering the extant research on bullying, bullying-involved students were reported having problems at family, school, and neighborhood as well as with peers and peer groups (e.g., Swearer & Espelage, 2004). Therefore, conceptualizing bullying as a phenomenon which results from the complex and interconnected interactions in an ecological system has the potential to discover more about the nature of bullying perpetration behavior.

The first two of Bronfenbrenner's six subsystems are the focus for this study. Age, gender, trait anger and moral disengagement are categorized in the first of Bronfenbrenner's individual characteristics subsystem. Interparental conflicts, school connectedness and school setting are the variables drawn from the second microsystem level. These variables were chosen because we aimed to address the questions unanswered by the previous research results which are summarized below.

1.1. Gender and age

Inconsistent findings have been reported about gender and age as two possible factors affecting traditional and cyberbullying perpetration behavior. One group of researchers has found that boys engage in both traditional and cyberbullying perpetration more than girls (Erdur-Baker, 2010). Another group of studies, however, showed that girls engage in perpetration behaviors more than boys, however, using different forms such as indirect and relational forms of bullying like spreading rumors, social exclusion and peer rejection in addition to cyberbullying (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Holfeld & Grabe, 2012). Other studies, have reported no gender differences in terms of being a perpetrator in both traditional and cyberbullying (Mishna et al., 2010). Similarly, contradictory findings have been indicated for the age of perpetrators in both traditional and cyberbullying perpetration (Erdur-Baker, 2010). Middle school students, that is seventh to ninth grades, have been shown to report the highest rate of cyber victimization (Sakellariou, Carroll, & Houghton, 2012; Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel,

2009) similar to traditional bullying victims (e.g., Espelage & Horne, 2008). However, other studies have found that cyber victimization increased with age (Mesch, 2009; Vandenbosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) contrary to traditional bullying which decreases with age (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000). On the other hand, no differences in cyber victimization or perpetration have been shown in other research (Werner, Bumpus, & Rock, 2010). More evidence, therefore, is needed regarding the roles of gender and age as possible risk factors for bullying perpetration.

1.2. Trait anger

A further correlate of traditional bullying and cyberbullying perpetration has been shown to be trait anger. It is defined as a tendency to react with anger across time and situations, where individuals become angry often in various situations, as opposed to state anger which is momentary anger not dispositional in nature (Spielberger, Jacobs, Brunner, & Lunsford, 2002). Anger has been reported to link with school children's involvement as a perpetrator in traditional bullying (Camodeca & Goossens, 2005; Champion & Clay, 2007). The results of a recent study with 3114 middle school students in the United States indicated that angry students had a higher possibility of being categorized as a bully or bully/victim (Lovegrove, Henry, & Slater, 2012). Anger was also the main motivation in an Austrian study of young people who bullied both in a traditional way and also cyberbullied (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2012); however, whether this was because of an angry moment or more because the young person had high trait anger was not distinguished. By specifically focusing on trait anger, this study, therefore aims to fill this gap by examining the role of trait anger on traditional and cyberbullying perpetration.

1.3. Moral disengagement

Perpetrators of traditional bullying and cyberbullying may use moral disengagement mechanisms to ethically justify their behaviors against their peers. Bandura (2002) has described moral disengagement as a cognitive process to justify destructive behaviors which normally violate one's internal moral standards. A significant relationship between traditional bullying and moral disengagement has been shown with moral disengagement scores of perpetrators (both as pure bullies and bully-victims) being higher compared to non-involved students (Obermann, 2011). Similarly, higher levels of moral disengagement were reported for traditional bullying perpetrators compared to victims (Almeida, Correia, & Marinho, 2010). Moral disengagement could act as an antecedent in cyberbullying perpetration as well. Offenders' inability to see the victims during and after the cyberbullying incidents may increase the likelihood of cyberbullying perpetration and lower moral engagement (Bauman, 2010; Perren & Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger, 2012). That is, compared to traditional bullying offenders, perpetrators of cyberbullying may feel less guilt, shame or sympathy towards to the victims since there is no real time face-to face contact. Unable to witness negative experiences of the victims, perpetrators may become motivated to engage in more online harmful behaviors which can contradict their moral beliefs. Moreover, cyberbullies have been reported to lack remorse towards their victims (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2012), and this may be another reason why cyberbullying perpetrators may behave contrary to their moral values (Wachs, 2012). Moral disengagement has been reported as a significant correlate of cyberbullying perpetration (Pornari & Wood, 2010; Renati, Berrone, & Zanetti, 2012). However, this association has not yet been explored in combination with the other variables. Hence, this research will address this gap by its simultaneous inclusion of moral disengagement into an integrated model with multiple variables.