Social goals and willingness to seek help for school violence

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

The relation between students' social goals and their willingness to seek help for school violence was examined. Four hundred and sixty-two students from sixth, eighth, and tenth grades responded to vignettes used to assess willingness to seek help from teachers and friends for dealing with relational and physical violence. Intimacy goals enhanced the willingness to seek help from friends and social status goals suppressed the willingness to seek help from teachers. Sex and grade differences were also found, and are discussed with reference to the negative psychological costs of seeking help in school.

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1. Introduction

One of the most important strategies for dealing with school violence is for students to seek help and report being attacked. Such help-seeking behavior is important for the individual victim, who can then receive immediate support. It is also important for schools and teachers, since they can then adequately respond to both the victim and the perpetrator and implement successful interventions based on accurate and useful information supplied by the victims. Unfortunately, many students are apparently reluctant to seek help for school violence (Black, Weinles, & Washington, 2010; Borg, 1998; Craig, Pepler, & Blais, 2007; Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Whitney & Smith, 1993). In fact, many students state that they will refuse to do so even though this may be the best solution for their suffering (e.g., Borg, 1998; MacDonald, 1997).

In this study we focused on the social goals that influence students' help-seeking behavior. Such a discussion has mostly pertained to the willingness to seek help for learning tasks in school. We wanted to move beyond learning processes and to study the contribution of social aspects to the willingness to seek help for school violence. We therefore focused on students' *social status goals* and *intimacy goals* and their contribution to students' willingness to seek help. In addition, in order to achieve a more theoretical understanding, we studied students' willingness to seek help from either teachers or friends for dealing with both relational and physical violence.

1.1. School violence

School violence is among the most serious social problems encountered by students in schools worldwide. Many students suffer from bullying and school violence, and perceive their school as an unsafe environment (Astor, Benbenishty, Vinokur, & Zeira, 2006; Smith & Brain, 2000; World Health Organization, 2008). The 2005/2006 Health Behavior in School-aged Children Study (World Health Organization, 2008), conducted in some 40 countries worldwide, revealed that on average more than 30% of all students are bullied on the school grounds. In Israel, where the present study was conducted, a national school

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survey revealed that most students suffered from violence (Benbenishty, Khoury-Kassabri, & Astor, 2005). Almost all students were victims of verbal violence, about 50% were victims of physical violence, and 20% suffered severe physical attacks. Whether they were victimized or not, almost half of all Israeli school students report a violent school climate and more than 25% feel unsafe within the school grounds. Around 30% of all Israeli students report that school violence is a serious problem in their schools.

It is important to mention that school violence is now widely considered to include various types of violence, such as instrumental and hostile, direct and indirect, reactive and proactive, overt and covert, and many others (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Underwood, Galen, & Paquette, 2001). In the present study we focused on students' willingness to seek help for physical and relational forms of violence. Relational violence, also known as social violence (Cairns, Cairns, Neckerman, Ferguson, & Gariepy, 1989), is defined as damage and manipulation of peer relationships that lead to social exclusion (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). It includes withdrawal of friendships, spreading malicious gossip and rumors, and excluding others from the group or ignoring them. Girls usually experience more relational than physical violence in schools, and are more relationally victimized than boys (Cullerton-Sen & Crick, 2005; Ostrov & Keating, 2004; Putallaz et al., 2007). Also, because of its covert nature, some teachers are unwilling to become involved in relational violence although teachers themselves believe that they should intervene (Casey-Cannon, Hayward, & Gowen, 2001).

1.2. Help-seeking in the event of violence

Studies of students' help-seeking behavior in schools point to students' general reluctance to seek help or report being bullied or attacked (Borg, 1998; Newman et al., 2001; Unnever & Cornell, 2004; Whitney & Smith, 1993). These findings are in line with many other studies that point to the general reluctance of both students and adults to seek help in various aspects of their social, academic and personal lives (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Ryan, Patrick, & Shim, 2005; Vogel, Wester, & Larson, 2007).

In schools, the reluctance to seek help may have negative implications for the individual, and may also affect the school administration's ability to provide students with a positive, secure and rich educational environment. This is due especially to the important role that victims of school violence may have in mobilizing school prevention efforts and the use that the school can make of the information obtained from them. For example, there are major differences between the reports of teachers and their students on the extent of violence in their schools (e.g., Benbenishty et al., 2005), and teachers are often not aware of the time and place where violence takes place (e.g., Stockdale, Hangaduambo, Duys, Larson, & Sarvela, 2002). Some, if not most, of the teachers' inaccurate information can be attributed to the fact that many students do not report or ask for help for many of the violent events that take place during the school day.

Furthermore, victims who are either submissive or aggressive are likely to suffer prolonged bullying while problem-solving strategies such as getting help are associated with the reduction of violence (Kochenderfer-Ladd, 2004; Mahady-Wilton, Craig, & Pepler, 2000). Most students, however, do not to seek help and a great majority report ignoring the bullying or fighting back as the most common strategies used against violence (Black et al., 2010; Craig et al., 2007). While most ignore, those who do act will usually do so as result of escalation of the violence (Craig et al., 2007) and seeking help is usually associated with increased recurrence of victimization (Unnever & Cornell, 2004). Although students sometimes regard help-seeking as an effective strategy for dealing with violence, they nonetheless do not use it (Black et al., 2010; Craig et al., 2007).

Raising the rate of students who seeking help from teachers for dealing with violence can directly lead to an improvement in the way schools react to violence at both the individual and the school level. From the individual perspective, school staff cannot intervene or provide treatment if they are unaware that a student was victimized. When students seek help from them, teachers can immediately provide useful emotional and instrumental support to the victimized student, and stop the violence against him or her. They can also share information among the school staff and thus provide the student with protection across locations and throughout the school day. Smith and Shu (2000), for example, found that in most cases when students approached their teachers for help they perceived it as having a positive impact on their situation. Furthermore, as mentioned, a whole school approach for dealing with violence can be better achieved based on accurate information from students about the measures, types and characteristics of violence. Successful interventions are those designed to react to the specific school characteristics and student needs (Rigby, Smith, & Pepler, 2004). Based on accurate information from students, schools can map needs, plan a school policy and adjust the interventions when necessary.

1.3. Willingness to seek help

Students' reluctance to seek help for school violence is not unique. In general, students as well as adults are reluctant to seek help for various problems in their social, academic, professional, and personal lives (e.g., Addis & Mahalik, 2003; Ryan et al., 2005; Vogel, Wade, & Hackler, 2007; Vogel, Wester, et al., 2007). The reluctance to seek help can be explained from a theoretical point of view by the high psychosocial costs that may be involved in seeking and receiving help. Most people regard the need for help as a sign of their own incompetence, which involves admission of failure (Fisher, Nadler, & Whitcher-Alagna, 1982). People are therefore ambivalent when they need help, and as a result of the possibly high psychosocial costs may avoid it even if this means prolonging their suffering (DePaulo, Nadler, & Fisher, 1983). Help is therefore neither all good nor all bad, and the relative degree of self-threat and measure of support will determine an individual's decision of whether and from whom to seek help.