



Perceived barriers that prevent high school students seeking help from teachers for bullying and their effects on disclosure intentions



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ABSTRACT

Many adolescents choose not to tell teachers when they have been bullied. Three studies with 12–16 year-old English adolescents addressed possible reasons. In study 1, students ($N = 411$, 208 females/203 males) identified reasons with no prompting. Three perceived negative outcomes were common; peers would disapprove, disclosers would feel weak/undermined, and disclosers desired autonomy. In study 2, students ($N = 297$, 153 females/134 males/10 unspecified) indicated how much they believed that the perceived negative outcomes would happen to them, and a substantial proportion did so. Perceived negative outcomes significantly predicted intentions to disclose being bullied. Study 3 ($N = 231$, 100 females/131 males) tested if the perceived negative outcomes would be strong enough to stop participants from telling a teacher even though the teacher would stop the bullying. This was the case for many of them. Participants did *not* report disliking peers who disclosed bullying. Theoretical and practical implications are discussed.

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Bullying involves repeated assaults of a less powerful individual by a more powerful individual or group with the intention of causing distress/harm (Olweus, 1993). It is widespread in schools (Nansel et al., 2001; Rose, Espelage, & Monda-Amaya, 2009) and is associated with many indices of maladjustment (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Reijntjes, Kamphuis, Prinzie, & Telch, 2010), including compromised classroom concentration (Boulton, Trueman, & Murray, 2008). Hence, those on the receiving end (victims henceforward) are encouraged to disclose when they have been bullied so that support can be initiated. However, many students choose not to tell anyone, and teachers in particular, and end up ‘suffering in silence’ (Boulton, 2005; Cowie, 2000; Hunter, Boyle, & Warden, 2004; Smith & Shu, 2000; Smith, Talamelli, Cowie, Naylor, & Chauhan, 2004). Clearly, barriers to seeking help from teachers for bullying must exist and efforts to identify them are important, not least because teachers are potentially important sources of support for victims (Beckman & Svensson, 2015; Boulton et al., 2013). Here, we report three linked studies that extend current knowledge about those barriers. The general purpose of

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these studies is to identify if adolescents perceive that telling a teacher they have been bullied will lead to negative outcomes, what those perceived negative outcomes are, and their role in predicting intentions to disclose bullying to teachers.

Our work is largely based upon Newman's (2008) theory of adaptive and non-adaptive help-seeking for peer harassment ('Newman's theory' henceforward). This is a complex theory that is itself built upon, and integrates, two rich theoretical perspectives, coping and self-regulation. Central to Newman's theory are the notions that (i) victims engage in a complex decision-making process about how to cope with this form of social stress and whether or not it is in their *overall* best interest to seek help, and (ii) these psychological processes influence actual behaviour via intentions to act. Newman (2008) was clear that his theory needed to be tested more directly, but given its complexity and scope, it would be difficult to do this for the theory as a whole. While some subsequent studies have attempted to test some specific predictions, it remains the case that some key aspects of the theory are supported only indirectly and others remain plausible speculations. These include the notions that (i) help-seeking for bullying and the social support it may engender may have perceived potential costs that act as barriers to actual help-seeking behaviour, and (ii) that there may exist developmental changes in help-seeking for bullying processes over the adolescent years. We now consider these issues in more detail.

Other theory (Murphy, 1988) and considerable evidence suggests social support for diverse types of distress, and involving various receivers/providers, can have unintended adverse effects (Akey & Rintamaki, 2014; Barbee, Derlega, Sherburne, & Grimshaw, 1998; Garwick, Patterson, Bennett, & Blum, 1998; Masters, Stillman, & Spielmanns, 2007; Roth & Assor, 2012; Warner et al., 2011). Some of these authors have suggested that seeking/receiving help can leave people believing that they are weak because they can't cope on their own, and undermine their sense of personal agency and being in control. While several authors have alluded to the possibility that social support specifically for bullying may have such negative effects (Graham & Juvonen, 2001; Kochenderfer & Ladd, 1997; Perry, Williard, & Perry, 1990), few studies have actually tested this notion. Researchers have considered how *perceptions* of potential negative effects of social support may act as barriers to disclosure (Newman & Murray, 2005; Newman, 2008; Newman, Murray, & Lussier, 2001). In the latter study, perceptions of potential costs, lack of potential benefit, and a desire to resolve the conflict independently were identified by participants as factors that would stop them from seeking help from teachers. We refer to these kinds of perceptions as perceived negative outcomes that attenuate help-seeking for bullying, and it is these that we focus on in the three studies reported here.

Newman's (2008) call for research to identify help-seeking's *subjective costs* can be well-served with the participatory action research paradigm (PAR, MacEvoy & Leff, 2012) because it allows participants to identify their own personal costs with no prompting. However, PAR runs the risk of *underestimating* the incidence of perceived negative outcomes simply *because* it requires participants to put them into their own words. Hence, our research to extend current knowledge about subjective costs employed two different approaches. First, we *directly asked a group of adolescents* what they regard to be the key barriers to disclosing being bullied to teachers using PAR. Second, we adopted MacEvoy and Leff's (2012) approach of incorporating the categories identified using PAR into a more structured questionnaire that investigated how widespread they are in a way that did not have those 'self-report burdens'.

In terms of developmental changes, there are reasons to believe that *general* help-seeking will reduce in frequency once adolescence is reached. Adolescence brings increasing social-cognitive capacities (Flavell, 1979; Paris & Newman, 1990) and experiences that foster self-generated solutions (Altshuler & Ruble, 1989; Putallaz & Sheppard, 1992). However, the developmental change towards less help-seeking may also be due to other reasons. One such reason may be the *perceived costs of not solving the problem on one's own*. Adolescents become increasingly aware that it is not 'normative' to seek help, especially from teachers, and may experience or anticipate negative peer reactions and self-feelings for doing so (Schneider, 2000). Indeed, teachers increasingly expect adolescents to become independent 'social problem-solvers' (Newman, 2003), and there is evidence that peers become less sympathetic towards victims across the adolescent years (Rigby & Slee, 1991). Moreover, students increasingly believe that teachers are unable or unwilling to help them (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Newman (2008, p.11) speculated that, "Children may decide the costs of help-seeking are too great ... perhaps around the transition from lower to upper elementary grades." While Hunter et al. (2004) did not find a reduction in help-seeking in 10- versus 8-year olds, the 'pressures' to solve social problems like bullying alone may not yet have materialised by this age. So far as we can tell, the notion that perceived negative outcomes arising out of help-seeking for bullying may exist among *adolescents* remains untested outside of Newman's program of research, as do comparisons among adolescents of different ages. The latter is especially important for understanding developmental changes. For instance, researchers have identified a growing concern among adolescents to avoid actions that could result in negative peer labels (Brown, Mory, & Kinney, 1994; Eccles & Barber, 1999). Collectively, this work is suggestive of a possible trend towards less disclosure of bullying to teachers across early adolescence because of the development and increased salience of beliefs about potential negative peer/self-consequences.

Prior evidence of gender differences also exists, with girls tending to be more likely than boys to seek help for bullying (Boulton, 2005; Hunter et al., 2004; Naylor, Cowie, & del Rey, 2001; Smith & Shu, 2000). Girls cite the potential costs less than boys (Newman et al., 2001) and were found to be more willing than boys to work with teachers to resolve bullying (Rigby & Bagshaw, 2003). Newman's (2008) theoretical framework conceptualises decisions about help-seeking for bullying as coping and self-regulatory strategies that may themselves be moderated by other variables, such as gender. Hence, it is important to test for gender differences in perceived negative outcomes of telling teachers.

The same is true for victim status, not least because extant research has been inconsistent. Hunter et al. (2004) found that frequency and duration of victimisation were poor predictors of help-seeking. Smith et al. (2004) found significantly more "continuing victims" (i.e., identified as being bullied on two occasions separated by two years) told no-one than "escaped victims". In contrast, Boulton (2014a) found that secondary school students reported a greater willingness to seek help (from

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