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Exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander: An investigation of desensitization effects among early adolescents



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ABSTRACT

The purpose of the present study was to examine whether (repeated) exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander has an impact on early adolescents' moral evaluations in terms of a decrease in empathy and a shift towards a more tolerant attitude towards cyberbullying. A two-wave panel study with a 6-month time interval was conducted among a sample of 1412 adolescents aged 10–13. Cross-lagged panel analysis was used to investigate relationships over time between being a bystander of cyberbullying, empathic responsiveness towards distressed others, and the attitude towards cyberbullying, while taking into account involvement in cyberbullying as a victim or a perpetrator. The results indicate a negative relationship between standing by at Time 1 and empathic responsiveness at Time 2. In other words, exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander at Time 1 predicted subsequent lower levels of empathic responsiveness at Time 2. The attitude towards cyberbullying at Time 2 was not influenced by seeing more cyberbullying acts at Time 1. Further implications of the results for prevention and intervention, and for future research are discussed.

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1. Introduction

A meaningful proportion of adolescents have been recently or in the past confronted with acts of cyberbullying, or bullying through mobile phone and Internet applications, taking place between other adolescents. Cyberbullying has been described, in accordance with definitions of traditional bullying, as harmful behavior that is intentional, carried out “repeatedly and over time”, and takes place in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power (Olweus, 1993). Recent figures indicate that about one out of three adolescents has witnessed these acts at least once in the past six months to a year (Jones, Mitchell, & Turner, 2015; Van Cleemput, Vandebosch, & Pabian, 2014). Previous research on bystanders of cyberbullying has mainly focused on bystanders' reactions and factors that influenced their reactions (e.g., Bastiaensens et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2015; Patterson, Allan, & Cross, 2015; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). For instance, research has shown that

bystanders are more likely to join in when they believe that other peers also approve and perform cyberbullying (Bastiaensens et al., 2015), and when they have lower empathic concerns (Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Until now, no research has focused on the possible consequences of being (frequently) exposed to cyberbullying acts as a bystander. Adolescents who have witnessed multiple cyberbullying acts might react differently when they are a bystander of cyberbullying compared to adolescents who have not witnessed these kinds of acts before. The goal of the present study was to investigate whether exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander leads to desensitization, as reflected in less empathic responsiveness and more positive attitudes towards cyberbullying. Both characteristics have already been associated with bystander behavior, but until now it is not clear whether these are influenced by previous exposure to cyberbullying. Investigating these relationships could advance the understanding of negative bystander behavior and cyberbullying perpetration.

1.1. Desensitizing effects of exposure to aggressive behavior

Desensitization is a key mechanism that is proposed to explain the effects of exposure to violence and refers to the perception that repeated exposure to a certain stimulus can lead to reduced

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physiological, emotional, cognitive, and/or behavioral responsiveness to it (Rule & Ferguson, 1986; Strasburger & Wilson, 2014). Researchers have shown that desensitization processes also operate in the context of exposure to aggressive behavior, either in real-life or via the media (Carnagey, Anderson, & Bushman, 2007; Funk, Baldacci, Pasold, & Baumgardner, 2004; Strasburger & Wilson, 2014). These processes may include desensitization effects after (frequent) exposure to this kind of behavior, such as changes in determinants of behavior. Examples are a reduction in physiological arousal, a flattening of emotional reactions, and a (cognitive) switch towards a more favorable attitude towards aggression (e.g., Bushman & Huesmann, 2006; Carnagey et al., 2007; Fanti, Vanman, Henrich, & Avraamides, 2009; Fraser, Padilla-Walker, Coyne, Nelson, & Stockdale, 2012; Funk et al., 2004; Guo et al., 2013; Mrug, Madan, Cook, & Wright, 2015; Scharrer, 2008).

Previous research has described desensitization effects of mere exposure to aggression, such as seeing an aggressive act in real-life, movies, television series, and television news, or reading about it in newspapers or books (e.g., Fanti et al., 2009; Guo et al., 2013; Mrug et al., 2015; Scharrer, 2008). Research on new media, such as social network sites (SNS) and video games, has demonstrated that desensitization effects can also occur when individuals make use of interactive media (e.g., Fraser et al., 2012; Konrath, O'Brien, & Hsing, 2011; Lin, 2013). For instance, Lin (2013) showed in her study on playing violent video games that media interactivity can exacerbate the effects of media violence, such as a greater increase in aggressive affect, aggressive cognition, and physiological arousal. With regard to the use of SNS, Konrath et al. (2011) note that repeated exposure to a wide range of negative events and emotions in other people's lives via SNS can lead to desensitization effects such as a decrease in empathy. In their cross-temporal meta-analysis, the authors found a general decline in empathic concern among American undergraduate college students (mean age of 20.27). This decline was most pronounced in samples from after 2000. The authors explain this by the content of modern, post-2000 (social) media.

1.2. The relationship between empathy, attitude and (being a bystander of) cyberbullying

Of the several person factors that have been linked to cyberbullying involvement, empathy and the attitude towards cyberbullying consistently emerge as important predictors. Previous research shows medium to large negative correlations between (general) empathic concern and the attitude towards (cyber) bullying (Barkoukis, Lazuras, Ourda, & Tsorbatzoudis, 2015; Espelage, Green, & Polanin, 2012).

Empathy refers to sharing the emotional state of another person through taking the perspective of that person and understanding his or her emotions (Eisenberg, 2000; Eisenberg & Strayer, 1987). It is a multidimensional concept that refers to both cognitive and affective aspects (Davis, 1994; Olweus & Endresen, 2001). Olweus and Endresen (2001, p.371) describe three aspects of empathy: perspective taking (which involves the cognitive processes for understanding the internal state of others), empathic concern (which involves feelings of sympathy, compassion, and concern), and empathic distress or personal distress (which involves feelings of discomfort, uneasiness, and distress). Empathic concern has been identified as an important predictor of cyberbullying perpetration (Ang & Goh, 2010; Renati, Berrone, & Zanetti, 2012; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2013; Steffgen, König, Pfetsch, & Melzer, 2011), victimization (Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009) and bystander behavior that reinforces cyberbullying (Barlińska, Szuster, & Winiewski, 2013; Van Cleemput et al., 2014). Positive associations with bystander behavior that

supports the victim have also been identified (Kowalski, Schroeder, & Smith, 2013; Van Cleemput et al., 2014).

With regard to attitudes, previous research has shown that the attitude, which is a person's global affective evaluation of a behavior, is an important predictor of cyberbullying perpetration (Heirman & Walrave, 2012; Pabian & Vandebosch, 2014) and cyberbullying bystander behavior (Holfeld, 2014; Nickerson, Aloe, Livingston, & Feeley, 2014). With regard to bystanders' reactions, research has shown that a negative attitude towards cyberbullying is associated with more positive bystander behavior (Nickerson et al., 2014). Until now no longitudinal study has investigated relationships between being a bystander of cyberbullying and empathy or attitude and how these associations evolve over time.

Research on traditional bullying might provide interesting insights with regard to these longitudinal relationships. Cross-sectional research showed that being a passive bystander of traditional bullying repeatedly is associated with having less empathy for peers who are bullied (Cowie, 2000; O'Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999; Rigby & Slee, 1991) and a less favorable attitude towards victims of bullying (Gini, Pozzoli, Borghi, & Franzoni, 2008). The longitudinal study of Doramajian and Bukowski (2015) revealed bidirectional relationships between passively standing by and moral disengagement (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015). Passively standing by can lead to increased moral disengagement at a later point in time, but at the same time higher levels of moral disengagement may predict more passive bystander behavior when witnessing traditional bullying (Doramajian & Bukowski, 2015).

In sum, research on cyberbullying has shown first evidence for associations between bystander behavior, empathy, and attitudes. Until now, no studies have been reported that investigate longitudinal associations between being a bystander of cyberbullying and empathy or attitude. Research on traditional bullying has demonstrated some evidence of a decrease in empathy and a shift towards less negative attitudes towards bullying after repeated exposure to bullying incidents as a bystander.

1.3. Objectives and hypotheses

The present study aims to contribute to the existing knowledge about desensitization effects of exposure to aggressive content via new media. More in particular, the present study focuses on possible effects of exposure to a specific form of aggressive behavior, namely cyberbullying or bullying via the Internet or mobile phone. In contrast to some of the previous studies on exposure to mediated aggression, the present study will use a longitudinal cross-lagged panel design to investigate the effects of exposure to "real-life" aggression (and not fictional aggression).

Based on previous research, it is expected that exposure to cyberbullying acts can affect the moral evaluation of an individual, which may result in actions that are taken without (or with little) consideration of their moral implications (Funk et al., 2004). Empathy and the attitude towards aggression are key determinants of an individual's moral evaluation of aggressive behavior (Eisenberg, 2000; Funk et al., 2004). Two hypotheses can be formulated: (a) Exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander leads subsequently to lower levels of empathic responsiveness towards others; and (b) Exposure to cyberbullying as a bystander leads subsequently to a more positive attitude towards cyberbullying. Studying these relationships are important as they could advance the understanding of cyberbullying perpetration. Due to a desensitization effect in terms of lower empathic responsiveness and/or a more positive attitude towards cyberbullying, adolescents might engage in cyberbullying as a perpetrator.

The hypotheses will be tested among early adolescents between

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