Aggression and Violent Behavior 23 (2015) 109–117

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Aggression and Violent Behavior

A social–ecological framework for understanding and reducing cyberbullying behaviours

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 9 April 2015
Accepted 13 May 2015
Available online 22 May 2015

Keywords:
Cyberbullying perpetration
Socio-ecological approach
Risk and protective factors
Adolescent
Intervention

ABSTRACT

This paper uses a social–ecological conceptual framework to integrate theoretically and empirically derived risk and protective factors that potentially mediate adolescents' cyberbullying perpetration, such as involvement in offline bullying perpetration, empathic responsiveness and moral disengagement. This conceptual framework considers the mutual interaction of these factors at the levels of the individual, family, peers, and the community, and particularly via the online context. It also considers how young people's use of the Internet such as their contacts and where they spend time, also interrelates with these levels of influence. These mediators were targeted together via a whole-school intervention called Cyber Friendly Schools (CFS) and tested in a large, three-year randomised group intervention trial. While the CFS findings suggest the combined whole-school response to the mediators was somewhat effective, the study wasn't able to determine the relative contribution of the levels of influence to reducing cyberbullying. While acknowledging the preliminary nature of this framework, it is a starting point for an empirical and theoretical discussion related to the inclusion of online contexts in social ecological models, and how the perpetration of cyberbullying is a behaviour where this context has a dynamic influence.
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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.avb.2015.05.016
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1. Introduction

More than any previous generation, today's children live in a world of sophisticated information and communication technologies (ICT) embedded in domestic life, education, entertainment and socialisation. More than 96% of Australian children aged 9–14 years and 98% of those aged 12–14 years have accessed the Internet, and most own or have access to mobile wireless and broadband internet connection (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2012). The presence of computers is nearly ubiquitous in Australian children's homes (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2011), and laptops or iPads are increasingly distributed to students even in their early years of schooling to aid their learning. Australian children are typically aged seven when they first access the Internet, and three quarters of those aged 9–16 years access the Internet daily or almost daily, spending approximately 100 min online each day (Green, Brady, Olafsson, Hartley, & Lumby, 2011).

Despite the numerous benefits of this access to information and opportunities to socialise (Holloway, Green, & Livingstone, 2013), children and young people are also at risk of negative experiences and harmful behaviours when navigating cyberspace. In particular, cyberbullying occurs when ICT is used repeatedly and intentionally to harm someone, who finds themselves unable to prevent or stop this behaviour (Smith et al., 2008). Around 24% of young people experience cyberbullying and 17% report cyberbullying others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2012). Cyberbullying tends to peak in early adolescence, around the time of school transition, with approximately 25% of Australian school students aged 13–14 years reporting that they are cyberbullied, and 10% reporting they cyberbully others (Cross et al., 2009). The academic, social and emotional harms associated with cyberbullying can be significant and long-lasting (Kowalski & Limber, 2013; Landstedt & Persson, 2014; Ortega et al., 2012; Sinclair, Bauman, Poteat, Koenig, & Russell, 2012), making it necessary to support and encourage the development of prosocial online behaviours, to prevent the emergence of harmful patterns of online interaction and to teach young people ways of responding appropriately to cyberbullying both online and offline.

Despite efforts among educators and health professionals to develop strategies to address cyberbullying among children and adolescents, pre-emptive exploration of the theoretical bases for this complex behaviour has been minimal (Espelage, Rao, & Craven, 2012). A theoretical understanding is needed to link the nascent and most relevant theoretical and/or casual factors within a social–ecological conceptual framework, to explain why some young people perpetrate cyberbullying behaviours. A more thorough understanding of the *context*, *content*, *conduct*, *contact*, and *confidentiality* issues that enable cyberbullying to occur would inform the development of comprehensive evidence-based intervention strategies for young people and those who care for them. Essential to this multi-level approach is the recognition that these factors interact with great complexity and may change in terms of their function and relative importance over time (Susser, 1973).

This paper aims to 1) encourage researchers to consider the interactive influence of online contexts in social ecological models, and 2) explore the social contexts in which cyberbullying behaviours emerge, and the associated mediators. It will also describe a resource, called Cyber Friendly Schools (CFS), which has used a socio-ecologically embedded approach to address the mediators associated with cyberbullying among young people. Unlike most Australian resources developed to date to reduce cyberbullying, the Cyber Friendly Schools intervention has been tested empirically.

2. Social ecological framework

Social ecological theory has been particularly useful in conceptualisations of traditional (face-to-face, verbal and relational) forms of bullying (e.g. Espelage, 2014). This approach acknowledges that health risks are not straightforward or direct outcomes of individual behaviours. Rather, they emerge as a result of complex interactions between an individual and the contexts in which they live (Espelage et al., 2012). Hence, to realistically address cyberbullying behaviour an ecological framework would need to target the ecological, cognitive and psychosocial risk and protective factors that can be regulated or mediated at the individual, family, peer, online and community levels, as well as recognise the seamless online/offline social context of young people's lives and the means by which they engage with others in online contexts.

The most well-known model, Bronfenbrenner's ecological theory of development (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979) posits a series of overlapping systems to illustrate the potential impact of both immediate and indirect factors on human behaviour. At the most immediate level (the *microsystem*), children have direct interactions with their immediate environments including the home and family, school, and peer groups, which influence and reinforce particular attitudes and behaviours. These environments also affect children's development by influencing each other at the level known as the *mesosytem*. For example, the home and family interact with the school and class teachers, and these two settings can have a joint impact on the child. More distant systems also affect the child. The *exosystem* includes the contexts with which the child does not have immediate contact but which still affect their lives, such as a parents' workplace, school administrators and institutional infrastructures; and the *macrosystem* comprises the broader societal, cultural, political and economic ideologies that shape the institutions and social trends which ultimately affect the child's environment (Bronfenbrenner, 1977, 1979). Research has demonstrated that risk and protective factors at each of these levels have an impact on the likelihood of bullying involvement (for review, see Espelage, 2014).

In contrast to traditional (non-cyber) bullying research, limited quality evidence is available to understand the social contexts and to identify the temporal sequence of factors and consequences associated with cyberbullying behaviours (Smith et al., 2008). A social–ecological approach to preventing cyberbullying requires theoretical or empirical evidence to specify which ecologies can potentially provide the best outcomes. Given the significant co-occurrence of traditional and cyberbullying behaviours (e.g. Beran & Li, 2007; Cross et al., 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009) some of the mediation relationships described below involve factors known longitudinally to affect traditional bullying perpetration, and as such may help to explain the perpetration of cyberbullying until this behaviour is more comprehensively understood. Social ecological approaches have been used in

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