

Evaluation of Bystander Apathy in School Bullying and Its Psychological Impact

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Abstract:

School bullying is a multifaceted social problem involving the roles of bullies, victims, and bystanders. The bystanders make up over 80% of the total members but seldom come to the aid of the victims. This paper investigates the phenomenon of bystander apathy in the context of school bullying, examining its causes and impacts, along with the psychological burdens on both bullies and victims. Based on the bystander effect and diffusion of responsibility theories, the study uses a mixed-method analysis to explore modes of bystander involvement while discussing the role of empathy in intervention. The conclusion emphasizes that combating bystander apathy requires a school-wide network of support. The research indicates that bystander indifference increases bullying perpetrators' impunity and escalates victimization. Moreover, bystanders themselves face long-term psychological sequelae from passively witnessing harm. High-risk groups (e.g., socially anxious students) show distinct bystander behaviors across bullying types. Implications for intervention point to social-emotional learning and network-based peer support to break the cycle of apathy.

Keywords: school bullying; bystander apathy; diffusion of responsibility

1. Introduction

Bullying in schools is a severe social problem, which exerts severe adverse effects on both bullies and victims and ultimately affects the entire campus environment to such a level that massive public interventions are put in place to prevent bullying at schools, namely in the legislative, educational policy, and mental health levels [1]. Bystander is one of the three main roles in bullying situations (the others being perpetrators and victims). According to research,

more than 80% of students have observed school bullying [2]. This paper will study why bystanders often fail to take action to intervene in bullying incidents. Is it a diffusion of responsibility, the influence of the group atmosphere, or the lack of empathy towards the victims?

Significant to mention is that, irrespective of numbers, a major proportion of bystanders are usually bystanders rather than active helpers. Based on the bystander effect theory, the more bystanders there are, the less likely each individual is to offer help, re-

sulting in a diffusion of responsibility [3]. This is because when multiple bystanders are present, each may assume that others will take responsibility for helping, thus reducing their own sense of personal accountability. Research increasingly shows that bystander apathy is not just a passive absence of action; it is a dynamic process shaped by social identity, group norms, and perceived costs of intervention [4]. Students who strongly identify with the perpetrator's group may be more likely to justify inaction or even endorse bullying. How do these social-cognitive factors interact to influence bystanders' responses to bullies and victims?

2. Theoretical Framework

The term "bystander effect" was first proposed by psychologists Bibb Latané and John Darley. It hypothesizes that the greater the number of observers or witnesses of an event, the less likely it is that individuals will volunteer to offer assistance [3]. Closely related to the bystander effect is the phenomenon known as diffusion of responsibility, which was also proposed by Latané and Darley [3]. It explains why, in many cases of group aggression, no one feels fully responsible, leading to passivity when bullying is occurring. Social identity is an interdisciplinary concept, which is derived from social-level and team-level psychology. Having a psychological sense of belonging is a critical process. It refers to the consolidation of self-identity in the emotional-cognitive mechanism, which people use in the long term. This happens to exert a certain constraining effect, creating a state in the absence of feelings and decreasing the capacity of empathy [5]. This is a defense mechanism of society.

3. Evolution

The initial inaction in bullying situations causes moral self-condemnation, coupled with a sense of concern and dread, the idea of intervening arises, but, incidentally, when interventions are ongoing or have subsided, bystander discomfort reduces significantly; the observers tend to perceive emotionally the perspective of the part as the central salient subject, sensing tolerance towards bullying [6]. This new awareness is in part not only a subconscious coping but also an adaptive signal to the norms of the social group. In the majority of cases, the activity is rationalized by assigning blame to the victim, collectively, the participation is a social obligation. Together, a process of tension among community members is initiated.

Bystanders gradually develop different ways to define their inaction by using things like "That is not my problem.", "Someone else will take care of it." or "It's a per-

sonal matter between them." Group bystanders, according to the research, are at a number of severe risk factors for suffering mental health problems, such as anxiety or depression, than the general population [7].

4. Impact

While bullies may be encouraged by the absence of interference, bystanders who do nothing for bullies may feel unappreciated or condemned [8]. The absence of social disapproval or peer accountability reinforces the belief that bullying is acceptable, which may distort their conception of what is morally and socially justifiable. For the bully, bystander apathy is the enhancement of their bullying behavior while at the same time making them feel safe because they will not experience any consequences [9].

For the victims, it becomes excruciating and traumatizing when they face not only bullying from bullies but also a lack of support from their peers [10]. Over time, they may develop feelings of being ignored, excluded, or being in a terrible social predicament; consequently, their self-esteem is severely damaged. This creates a negative impact that includes feelings of depression, anxiety, trust issues, and in extreme cases, suicidal ideation [11].

5. Intervention and Prevention

Through school-based programs that encourage active intervention, such as bystander training, and mental health education among students, and with the help of bystander actions that can control the continuation of bullying, we will be able to change the state of apathy that occurs in schools [12]. Prevention measures include campus lectures, volunteer projects, and social media campaigns addressing bullying before it happens [13].

6. Conclusion

Bystander apathy does not emerge abruptly but evolves through repeated exposure. As bystanders become emotionally desensitized, bullies are emboldened, and victims are left with negative mental and behavioral consequences, which proves to be the critical reason why appropriate intervention is needed to break the cycle [14].

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