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Cyberbullying in Rural Communities: Origin and Processing through the Lens of Older Adolescents

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Abstract

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Keywords

School Counselors, Adolescents, Bullying, Cyberbullying, Rural Schools, Support and Prevention, Qualitative, Phenomenology

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Cyberbullying in Rural Communities: Origin and Processing through the Lens of Older Adolescents

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The experiences of older adolescent cyberbullying victims from a rural community were explored in this qualitative study. Findings revealed that cyberbullying originates primarily as the result of jealousy over romantic relationships and cultural, religious, or sexual orientation intolerance. Participants also indicated that cyberbullies tend to be more brazen and cruel as the result of perceived anonymity. In addition, participants reported feelings of helplessness and rage in response to the attacks. Finally, participants suggested that the lack of knowledge and understanding of cyberspace resulted in a lack of emotional support and protection against cyberbullying. Keywords: School Counselors, Adolescents, Bullying, Cyberbullying, Rural Schools, Support and Prevention, Qualitative, Phenomenology

The increased use of technology has led to rising concerns about adolescent cyberbullying (Gladden, Vivolo-Kantor, Hamburger, & Lumpkin, 2014; Lenhart et al., 2011; Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Estimates have shown that approximately 15% of individuals experience cyberbullying at some point during adolescence (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014), and 13.8% of adolescents have reported at least one experience with cyberbullying (Wang, Nansel, & Iannotti, 2011). There has been evidence that cyberbullying is becoming more prevalent. For example, in a poll of students in Grades 5 to 8, Strom, Strom, Wingate, Kraska, and Beckert (2012) found that 58% of students in Grades 5 and 6 identified cyberbullying as a problem at their school. That number jumped to 68% among students in Grades 7 and 8. In addition, 63% of the students in Grades 5 and 6 believed that cyberbullying was equally serious or worse than traditional bullying. That number rose to 69% among students in Grades 7 and 8. In another study of students in Grades 9 to 12, Schneider, O'Donnell, Stueve, and Coulter (2012) found that 15.8% reported being cyberbullied at least once in the past year.

Although past studies have generated information that have provided insight into this phenomenon, additional research is warranted to identify specific factors that might lead to cyberbullying attacks and explore the consequences of cyberbullying. In addition, because the larger body of research has concentrated on examining cyberbullying in urban and middle-grade environments (Farmer, Hamm, Leung, Lambert, & Gravelle, 2011), information has been limited to an examination of traditional bullying from the perspectives of the perpetrators in rural settings (Klein & Cornell, 2010; Ma, 2001). Past research has suggested that school officials place very little emphasis on addressing issues in cyberbullying in their schools because they see it as beyond their scope of responsibility (Li, 2010). As such, they are institutionally unprepared to address the harassment of students related to cyberbullying (Li, 2010). A cyberbullying attack can be launched without any consideration of time and space. As a result, even though cyberbullying does not necessarily occur during the school day, the act itself can have a profound effect on how students interact at school (Hinduja & Patchin, 2012).

Likewise, research has suggested that the victims of cyberbullying do not believe that authority figures can or will do anything to stop such attacks (Smith et al., 2008). In fact, they believe that telling an individual in authority will only worsen the problem (Li, 2010). Research has also suggested that bullying is more prevalent in small schools in rural settings than in large schools (Klein & Cornell, 2010). Therefore, by understanding how cyberbullying originates and is processed by students in a low-socioeconomic status (SES) rural setting, school counselors are uniquely positioned to play an influential role in assisting school officials, teachers, parents, and community members in diverse settings to address cyberbullying in order to enhance the safety of students and minimize distractions that inhibit students' academic progress, and further exacerbate psychosocial stressors (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013).

Literature Review

Traditional bullying has been defined in the literature as repeated, deliberate, and aggressive behaviors or actions carried out over a period of time on victims who are helpless in defending themselves against the groups or individuals instigating the attacks (Olweus & Limber, 2010). Cyberbullying extends that definition to include the means (i.e., electronic) by which attacks occur. Therefore, cyberbullying entails repeated and purposeful aggressive behaviors or actions carried out over a period of time through electronic means (e.g., texting, social networking sites, etc.) against individuals who struggle to defend themselves against such attacks (Carpenter & Hubbard, 2014). In fact, both types of bullying, traditional and cyber, have been shown to generate equally high levels of psychological distress for those individuals being harassed. Furthermore, self-reported victims of bullying, regardless of how they have been bullied, also have indicated that they have experienced symptoms of severe depression; many have reported suicide attempts that have required medical treatment (Schneider et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2011).

Several characteristics distinguish cyberbullying from traditional bullying behaviors. For example, through electronic message transmission, cyberbullies can communicate messages about their victims to a much wider audience (Gladden et al., 2014; Kowalski, & Limber, 2007). Research has suggested that bullies do not feel as responsible or accountable for their actions in online formats as they do in face-to-face settings (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mishna, Saini, & Solomon, 2009). In addition, individuals who are not the likely targets of traditional bullying might very well be targeted online through concealed tactics (Juvonen & Gross, 2008). One notable distinguishing difference between traditional bullying and cyberbullying is that the individuals who are being bullied via the Internet might not know the perpetrators (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007).

The effects of cyberbullying can be psychologically damaging to victims. In addition to perpetuating high levels of psychological distress (Schneider et al., 2012), cyberbullying also results in the victims experiencing immense fear (Boulton, Trueman, & Murray, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008); anger (Dehue, 2008); and chronic depression (Bauman, 2010; Wang et al., 2011). Furthermore, research has found links between cyberbullying victimization and lower academic engagement and achievement levels (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Roopa, Kochenderfer-Ladd, Eisenberg, & Thomsson, 2010).

It is important to note that much of the research around cyberbullying has concentrated on larger schools and that researchers who have examined rural populations have looked at bullying from quantitative perspectives, identifying the prevalence of traditional forms of bullying and general perspectives on the topic (Farmer, Hamm et al., 2011; Farmer, Petrin et al., 2012). In addition, the majority of studies have examined cyberbullying from the lens of middle-grade adolescence because that time period is when adolescents experience the most transition (Farmer, Hamm et al., 2011).

To gain a full perspective of the orientation and experiences of victims of cyberbullying, it is important to examine the experiences of individuals from various regions and age groups in order to determine the degree to which prevention and treatment can be differentiated to help the victims. Therefore, exploring the underlying causes of cyberbullying behaviors and the implications of such harassment on older adolescent victims in rural communities is important because both the causes and the implications have been understudied. The findings from such an inquiry might help school counselors to develop systems and strategies to help students who are being cyberbullied to deal with, and perhaps quell, the behaviors of their perpetrators (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2008).

Purpose of the Study and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to explore the underlying causes and experiences of cyberbullying from the perspectives of older adolescent victims from rural communities. The study was guided by two overarching research questions:

1. How do former rural high school students who have identified themselves as victims of cyberbullying describe their experiences regarding the origination of their victimization?
2. How do former rural high school students who have identified themselves as victims of cyberbullying describe their experiences regarding the actions they took and the emotions they experienced during and after the experience?

Research Design

The researchers elected to employ a qualitative, phenomenological design to examine the lived experiences of former rural high school students who had reported being victims of cyberbullying. Phenomenological designs support the data collection of first-hand experience and create structure for researchers to gather as much information as necessary to address the research inquiry. Phenomenological designs also support researchers in making meaning of the data that they collect from participants about their lived experiences (Patton, 2002). In fact, phenomenology supports researchers in their quest to explore the rich experiences of the participants by providing them with a good deal of flexibility in expressing their feelings and perceptions about the experiences explored within a given study (Sherrod, 2006).

An integral part of a qualitative initiative is the role of the researchers in collecting, analyzing, and presenting the data. Inductive analysis was employed to compare and contrast participant data in an effort to identify emerging themes and patterns and to identify constructs of the experiences relayed to make sense of them in a contextual manner (Patton, 2002). In verifying data collection and analysis fidelity, an interpretivist approach was used, wherein data were viewed in regard to how patterns were formed in an effort to make sense of relationships among the data derived from the participants (Patton, 2002). Data also were reviewed from a scholarly lens as well as a practitioner lens: One author serves as a high school teacher, and the other two authors are graduate-level professors who teach and chair dissertations in the areas of counseling, educational leadership, administration, and advanced teaching and curricular design methods.

Method

Participants

Purposive sampling was employed to recruit eight students 3 months after graduation from a small high school in rural Georgia to participate in this study. Use of a rural high school addressed two gaps in the research, namely, that most studies have been conducted in large urban school areas and primarily with students in the middle grades. The school has been designated as a Title I school because of low-SES status among 60% of the student population, as compared with a 50% state average in Georgia.

Although the population of the school continues to fluctuate slightly, the 2011 statistics counted 422 students in Grades 9 to 12. At the time of the study, the selected site had a student population of 46% European American, 48% African American, 5% Hispanic American, and 1% Asian American. The participants were 18 years of age, and racial identification of the sample comprised one Native American, one African American, and six European American students. Four male students and four female students agreed to participate in the study.

The site was chosen because one of the researchers is a teacher at the selected school site and was the original recipient of information about cyberbullying attacks from a number of students in his class. Having reported the information to the school counselor, the researcher was able to pull the documented records of 20 former students who were 18 years of age, and had reported being the victims of cyberbullying. Prior to obtaining access to student records, the researchers obtained IRB approval from Liberty University to conduct the study. In addition, written permission was granted from district school officials to obtain former student records, and to contact them. The researchers used the records to contact students until they obtained consent from four male students and four female students to participate in the study. Ideally, current students would have been the participants in the study because their memories would have been even more accurate; however, to avoid concerns about recruiting participants from a vulnerable population (i.e., children), the researchers decided to include only participants over 18 years of age. This decision also was made because school districts are intensely protective of minors under their charge, especially in delicate emotional situations. However, in order to limit the time differential between victims and their victimization, only recent graduates from the prior year at the chosen site participated in the study.

Data Collection Procedures

Initial insights into the participants' experiences were obtained from preliminary interviews. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) asserted that interviews are a solid method for gathering preliminary data. A standardized, open-ended interview process was used to gather initial data. The researchers created a list of interview questions and took each participant through the same series of questions, using fundamentally the same words for each question for each participant. Deviation from the scripted interview questions was avoided to ensure greater consistency in the interview protocol and to make the data easier to identify and compare during analysis (Patton, 2002). Each participant was asked 30 questions. Interview questions included: "What caused your cyberbullying victimization to start?" "Were there online causes?" "Were there offline causes?" "Explain how the victimization made you feel?" "Explain how you coped with the emotions related to cyberbullying?" "Do you believe school leaders understand cyberbullying?" "Can they do anything about it [cyberbullying]?" "Is it worth reporting [cyberbullying]?"

Two focus groups were conducted with all participants to gather additional data and insight into the participants' experiences and allow the participants to hear other responses and

provide comments that extended or expounded upon their original interview responses. The focus group was set up as a platform to allow the participants to provide additional data to inform the inquiry; it was not set up as a means to debate or reach consensus (Patton, 2002). The researchers also encouraged the participants to record their thoughts or reflections in journals through a Twitter microblog before, during, and after the interviews and two focus groups in an effort to add information and record any feelings that they might have experienced, but not communicated, during the interview or focus group process. Focus group participants were asked 17 questions. Questions included: “Did you find any activities or pastimes that helped you cope with cyberbullying victimization? Who did you tell about your cyberbullying victimization?” “Why did you choose to tell these people?” “Were you satisfied with their response, and explain why or why not?”

The interviews took place in a free, virtual reality website called Second Life (Secondlife.com), wherein the users can interact in a virtual reality setting. Second Life offered the participants in this study the opportunity to use pseudonyms and digital persona to disguise their identities. Although the interview questions focused on the maintenance of disinhibition, the reason for conducting the interviews online was to ensure the anonymity of the participants. All interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes and were audiotaped. At the end of each interview session, the participants were asked to engage in two focus group sessions. Also during this time period, the researchers encouraged the participants to keep journals through a Twitter microblog to record any reflections or feelings that transpired before, during, or after their participation in each focus group session.

After the researchers collected the interview data, they invited all participants to participate in two focus group sessions. These sessions were held on 2 weekday evenings in order to accommodate the busy schedules of the participants and to maximize participation. Participants were asked to adopt anonymous screen names when engaging in the focus group to protect their anonymity. The private Achila Skyland section of the Second Life platform facilitated the free exchange of thoughts and feelings among the participants and researchers. Identities were verbally revealed to the researchers in confidence prior to the focus group sessions only for the purpose of recording on paper who was in attendance. Facilitation of focus group discussions through a private online chat room gave the participants a greater sense of anonymity and the freedom to express their thoughts and experiences throughout the process. Both focus group sessions were conducted using a combination of a standardized, open-ended approach and an interview guide. The focus group interview questions were transcribed and analyzed against the interview data. Each focus group session lasted approximately 60 minutes.

Participants also were asked to create anonymous Twitter accounts using pseudonyms and follow a Twitter blog of prompts and posts. Participants were encouraged to tweet their feelings and reflections of the posts at any given moment upon viewing the Twitter prompt. In an authentic representation of cyberspace, the time and length of the tweets were entirely dependent on the participants and their interest in relaying their feelings and reflections. The asynchronous dialogue allowed the participants to view each other’s anonymous tweets, thereby generating a deeper and more authentic cyber-dialogue. Participant tweets were recorded, and certain tweets received a responding prompt asking for elaboration on the post.

Trustworthiness, Balance, and Authenticity of Data

The interview questions were constructed based upon previous findings from quantitative studies conducted on this topic. This protocol also served to secure the trustworthiness, balance, and authenticity of the data. Field testing of the interview questions was conducted in three phases to achieve this end. In Phase 1 of field testing, five individuals who possessed doctoral degrees in education and/or counseling provided feedback on the

interview questions. Phase 2 involved asking five individuals who were practitioners in the field to provide feedback on the questions. In Phase 3, one high school graduate who qualified for the study, but chose not to participate, was asked to review and provide feedback on the questions to ensure that they were clear and accurate.

Reliability was tested through cognitive interviews (Garcia, 2011; Willis, 2005) wherein two individuals who qualified to be the study, but were not actual participants, were interviewed to determine whether the questions were an accurate way to gather the targeted data. Conducting cognitive interviews enabled the researchers to establish appropriate pacing measures to ensure that the participants were given adequate time to reflect on the questions asked of them and provide thorough answers.

Triangulation of the qualitative data sources (Patton, 2002) was used to compare and integrate data collected from the Second Life Interview transcriptions, Twitter microblog writings, and reflexivity logs. As such, all three data sources data were examined for consistency among data collection modalities. In addition, referential adequacy was bolstered through member checks, wherein the participants were asked to review the transcriptions to ensure that what was recorded was what they meant to convey. Furthermore, referential adequacy was enhanced through low-inference descriptors after member checking in order to capture the true essence of the participants' feelings as they communicated their cyberbullying experiences. Using low-inference descriptors enabled the researchers to convey a more accurate depiction of the participants' experiences for the reader during member checking (Ary, Jacobs, Razavieh, & Sorensen, 2013).

Another measure to ensure the trustworthiness, balance, and authenticity of data was done by keeping a reflexivity log throughout the data collection process. Reflexivity log entries were made by the researchers whenever they reflected upon elements of data collection, particularly after the interviews. No matter how minimal the thoughts might have been, they were chronicled in the reflexivity log as they occurred. Through the use of the reflexivity log, the researchers were able to acknowledge and avoid potential pitfalls that could have compromised the integrity of the study.

Data Analysis Procedures

Interviews, focus groups, and Twitter blogs were held open until data saturation was achieved (Guess, Bunce, & Johnson, 2009). All data from the interviews, focus groups, and Twitter blog were transcribed into a printable format; reflective notes were generated. From these notes, coding ideas were identified through the familiarization process. Data were organized according to the pseudonyms adopted by the participants and were then placed into a file that contained all responses from all participants. Focus group data were organized and analyzed in regard to the direction of the conversations and thematic dialogues generated during the endeavors. Member checking was conducted to ensure that the participants' comments had been transcribed accurately.

The researchers conducted several readings of the data before starting the open-coding process to sort the data and identify major themes. The researchers conducted several readings of the data to start the process (Patton, 2002). The researchers then used Van Manen's (1990) selective (i.e., highlighting) method to analyze categorical data, key phrases, and partial sentences to identify overarching categories. Categories were then analyzed, and key terms were highlighted while the researchers employed the constant comparative method. As new categories emerged during the coding process, they were organized and sorted to identify tiers within the codes. Categories and groups were compared and organized into themes. After coding the themes, the researchers began the process of interpreting the data. Connections that extended beyond categorical lines were made following the initial open coding, and themes

based upon previous information were organized into categories. Axial coding gave the researchers a more thorough understanding of themes that delved into many facets of victimization through the relationship of codes that extended beyond the categorical lines determined during open coding (Ary et al., 2013).

Findings

The purpose of this study was to investigate the experiences of cyberbullying victims and explore the ways in which they processed these experiences during and after victimization. Eight recent graduates from an underprivileged rural school environment participated in the study. The sample comprised four male and four female adolescents. Pseudonyms were assigned as follows for the four female participants: Carly, Lita, Haley, and Sandy. Pseudonyms for the four male participants were Dan, Evan, Jack, and Walt. Within the scope of the findings, the researchers identified several themes to inform the inquiry.

It should be noted that all eight participants reported multiple instances of cyberbullying attacks by different perpetrators and reported that each attack originated as the result of a different circumstance. Lita and Carly reported being attacked by two cyberbullies; Sandy said she was cyberbullied five times; and Evan reported that he was cyberbullied three times. Jack indicated that he experienced cyberbullying “3 good times, but there were a lot of little things as well.” Haley said that she had been the victim of “maybe 20 or so” instances of cyberbullying; and Dan revealed that he had been victimized “A lot. 50 or 60 different times maybe”.

Cyberbullying Victimization Origination

The first research question was designed to explore how individuals who have self-identified as victims of cyberbullying describe their experiences regarding the origination of their victimization. Two themes were identified from the data, namely, jealousy over broken romantic relationships and intolerance of culture, religious, or sexual orientation, as the genesis of cyberbullying attacks.

Theme 1: Romantic relationship jealousy. Six of the eight participants believed that at least one of their cyberbullying victimizations was the direct result of jealousy over a romantic relationship breakup or a friendship that was severed as the result of some link to a romantic relationship. In five cases, jealousy resulting from a romantic relationship breakup was reported as the genesis of the cyberbullying attack. For example, Carly, Dan, Evan, Haley, and Walt identified the end of personal involvement in a romantic relationship as the direct cause of at least one of their cyberbullying victimizations. In addition, Walt said that the genesis of cyberbullying was the result of a jealous ex-girlfriend. He said that she “got mad and posted things, her friends that were also my friends wouldn’t have anything to do with me for a while. I’d try to talk to them and they’d act like they didn’t want me to be there.”

Carly and Lita also reported that jealousy of a friend over a romantic relationship was the genesis of a cyberattack. Specifically, Carly said that she was cyberbullied by two different girls, “One because I defriended her on Facebook, the other was because she was having a difficult time in her life and she seemed jealous of my relationship.”

According to six participants, as the result of these broken relationships, rumors and gossip spread through public cyberforums in a direct attempt to embarrass, harass, and humiliate the cyberbullies’ targets.

Theme 2: Intolerance of culture, religious, or sexual orientation. Four participants indicated that at least one instance of cyberbullying was the result of intolerance of sexual orientation or culture. According to Dan, Evan, Jack, and Sandy, differences of opinion about

religious beliefs, sexual orientation, and gender, along with negative beliefs about an individual's ethnicity, perpetuated cyberbullying attacks.

Sandy shared the following story:

I remember one that was saying anti-Semitic things online. Intolerance is the biggest problem, and one was a Neo-Nazi. Some were things about my friends who are gay. They knew it offline and took it online to say things about them and their lifestyle.

Dan, Evan, Jack, and Sandy also indicated that the perpetrators start attacking because they perceived the victims' beliefs or behaviors to be incorrect and warrant punishment.

Jack said:

Some are just intolerant of others and I am different and proud of it. One was because he did not respect my religious beliefs because I am not a Christian that believes every word of the Bible to be true. The others were just about rumors and gossip online.

Another participant, Evan, indicated that his classmates started calling him names such as "gay" or "faggot" simply because of what they assumed by the way that he acted. Specifically, Evan said, "It was basically intolerance that started it all with me.... It was all rumors and people not liking people who are different than they are."

Cyberbullying Victimization Experiences

The second research question explored the ways in which the victims described the actions that they took and the emotions that they experienced during and after each of their cyberbullying experiences. Four themes were identified from the data. The participants indicated feeling an extreme sense of helplessness in escaping cyberbullying because of the proliferation of technology. They also felt rage as the result of the attacks. In addition, the participants said that cyberbullies tend to be bolder because of the anonymity characterizing the medium. Finally, the participants indicated that they did not believe that adults who do not use technology or who use technology on a limited basis would understand their individual situations. They did not believe that they could go to adults for help because of this inability of adults to understand their plights.

Theme 1: Feelings of helplessness in escaping cyberbullying. The participants unanimously reported experiencing intense feelings of helplessness in escaping cyberbullying victimization experiences. In particular, all of the participants felt there was no real escaping the harassment because of the proliferation of mobile technology. Jack said he felt helpless because "Things were being said about me that I couldn't do anything about." Carly also indicated that she felt helpless to do anything "about it until they get tired of messing with you, or they find someone else to move on to." In addition, Evan indicated that "It [cyberbullying] was just annoying because you feel like you are helpless, and there is nothing you can do, or anyone to turn to, to make it stop."

Haley said that an embarrassing video had been taken of her and the perpetrators said that they had aired it on YouTube. She indicated that she could not control or escape the repercussions of the actions that the perpetrators had taken to embarrass her. Haley said, "I never saw it. I didn't want to. People asked me about it, so I guess they did or at least showed it to people. I still don't know what happened to it and really don't want to."

Theme 2: Feelings of rage. All eight participants reported experiencing rage as the result of the public humiliation and embarrassment that they suffered during the cyberbullying attacks. Two participants admitted engaging in some attempt at retaliation. For example, Sandy indicated that she got “into a fight at a bar once over anti-Semitic comments made to me online.”

Six participants stated that they had vented their rage to friends and had suppressed their rage, taking it out on inanimate objects. For example, Walt said, “I would go in my room and lock the doors. I sometimes hit and kicked the walls. I am going to have to use some of my money from the Marines to fix some of it.”

All of the participants attempted to suppress their rage and fix the situations. Jack indicated that he was...

Extremely mad. It really makes you feel alone when you are fighting to get a word in with people who don't like you on their page.... You are going to lose, and there is nothing you can do about it. It just wants to make you put your fist through a wall since you can't hit them.

Three participants had attempted to confront their attackers to quell their rage, but all three participants indicated that their attackers would not meet with them in face-to-face settings. For example, Carly indicated that she wanted to “break her face” in response to one cyberbullying attack. She said that she attempted to resolve the problem by giving “her [the bully] my address and begged her to come over,” but her cyberbully refused the offer to talk with her in a face-to-face setting. Consequently, Carly said that the cyberbullying continued and her anger continued to build.

Five of the eight participants indicated that as the result of their anger, they had attempted to withdraw from the conflicts but had found themselves many times being isolated from the world around them. For example, Dan indicated that even though there were times when he wanted to fight his attacker, he feared the consequences of doing so and sought other ways to escape the victimization.

Theme 3: Bullies in the cyberworld are more bold and brazen as the result of a sense of anonymity. The results indicated that the participants unanimously believed that online bullies tend to exhibit a greater propensity to be bold and cruel because they see the Internet as a way to hide their identities.

Evan remarked:

People can be who they want to be. I have seen people on Facebook that don't hardly talk in person and seem real shy say “F” this and “F” that on Facebook and really speak out in good and bad ways. You would never think they would be that way, but online, it is like they are a different person.

Lita commented that because the interaction is not direct, she believed that cyberbullies feel that they are safe to say whatever they want and get away with it:

There is no way to prove it, so they can say whatever they want, and you don't even know who it is attacking you. I just wish they could look at me when they say it so that they could see the emotion and the hurt they cause. They would never say those things face to face.

Dan said that some cyberbullies will create fake names and pages with fake pictures to perpetrate the bullying and hide behind the mask of anonymity. Dan illustrated this experience with the following explanation:

They lie. Some hide behind fake names and make fake pages. One claimed to be someone she wasn't. She even put fake pictures online and all. It is easy to be brave when nobody knows who you are, but they are cowards in person.

Jack believed that cyberbullies feel a sense of empowerment resulting from their perceptions of having hidden identities. He characterized this sense of perception of anonymity as

Their shield. It is like they can make their profile their mask, and they feel like it protects them to do or say whatever. They feel like since nobody knows who they are, that they could say pretty much anything because nobody will correct them.

Theme 4: Adults who do not fully understand how to use technology are not equipped to help victims of cyberbullying. The participants unanimously expressed the perception of a blurred line of reality that is different for adults who understand technology versus those who do not, and for adults who use technology in a limited capacity. Furthermore, each participant suggested that adults who never or rarely use technology cannot sympathize with their plight or help them to cope with the issue at hand.

When considering adults who do not understand how to use technology or who are limited in their understanding of how to use technology in regard to their ability to understand the plight of those who are experiencing cyberbullying, Carly offered this statement:

I don't think that they relate to the experience online because it is not where they live their lives. If you aren't there enough to know about it, you can't understand what it is like...If they don't understand, how can they [help]?

The participants believed that even though adults with a limited understanding of technology want to help, they don't know how to help because of their inability to understand cyberspace realities. Lita described what she believed was true about adults who do not understand the technological realities of cyberspace in relationship to bullying behaviors by stating, "I think they want to and are realizing that it is a problem, but they don't know what it is like. It is not real to them. Until you're there, you just don't know what it is like."

In addition, the participants unanimously believed school administrators would not do anything about the attacks unless they occurred physically on school property. They contended that teachers, administrators and parents, because of their limited exposure to technology, do not acknowledge that cyberspace is real and will not offer assistance unless the attacks become physical.

Jack offered this description:

They don't see it as a real place and they don't understand how it carries over back and forth online and in real life. They think they do because they read the news, but they can't until they have been through it. Since they aren't participants, they are outsiders. Outsiders can never fully understand until they really learn to listen to people who have been there without judging them.

All of the participants also believed that because educators are focused on resolving tangible problems, they categorize virtual reality problems as untouchable and unreal. When the participants were turned away for reporting their problems, their trust in turning to adults for help waned. Evan told the following story, "I went to them with a similar problem, and they didn't do anything to help. I didn't trust them after that, especially something online that they wouldn't think was a big deal."

Clearly, the participants indicated a reluctance to turn to adults for help and would almost always turn to trusted friends for guidance and support, instead.

Discussion

The objective of this study was to explore the lived experiences of older adolescents who reported bullying victimization through cyberspace in rural communities. The study was designed specifically to investigate how the victims of cyberbullying described the origination of the attacks and how they dealt with and processed the attacks. Although previous studies primarily have focused on quantitative examinations of urban and middle-grade adolescent cyberbullying, this inquiry centered on examining the experiences of a low-SES rural demographic of older adolescents from a qualitative perspective. Results revealed that the victims of cyberbullying in this study who were from low-SES rural communities reported similar reasons for cyberbullying and similar victimization experiences as their urban and suburban peers from similar or higher SES backgrounds.

The findings corroborate previous findings that broken relationships are typically the reason for cyberbullying victimization (Kowalski et al., 2008). However, in this study, severed relationships resulting from perceived jealousy over romantic links were specifically identified as the basis of cyberbullying attacks. The findings directly align with the previous findings of Hoff and Mitchell (2009) as well as Kellerman, Margolin, Borofsky, Baucom, and Iturrale (2013) suggesting that jealousy resulting from a romantic relationship is the most common reason for cyberbullying. The notion that sexual orientation intolerance can be the basis of cyberbullying victimization was supported by Schneider et al. (2012), who concluded that the victims of cyberbullying are highly likely to be youth identified as nonheterosexual. Cultural and religious biases as another reason for cyberbullying victimization were supported by Li's (2007) findings that culture and religion are predictors of a propensity to become the victims of cyberbullying.

The results also revealed that the cyberbullying victims in the current study experienced extreme anger and feelings of isolation and helplessness to stop the cyberattacks because of the perpetrators' access to tools that allowed them to spread embarrassing information in quick and far-reaching manners. These findings are supported by the research of Hoff and Mitchell (2009), who found that the victims of cyberbullying experience strong negative emotions that generally affect their overall social health.

All participants in the current study indicated that cyberbullying victimization was aimed at exposing the victims to degradation and embarrassment. In addition, all of the victims reported an inability to find a safe escape from the realities of the harassment because of the proliferation of technology communication tools such as social networking sites, texting, e-mail, and so on. The victims indicated that social networking sites were the primary harassment tool. Sites such as MySpace and Facebook offered a venue for the perpetrators to expose the victims to public embarrassment and provided a perfect forum for concealing the identities of the perpetrators. As such, the results identified the guise of anonymity as having a major role in more aggressive moves by the perpetrators to embarrass or humiliate the victims. These findings are supported by Kowalski and Limber (2007), who asserted that the Internet gives

cyberbullies the opportunity to reach a wide audience through posted messages and hide behind the shroud of anonymity.

The participants in the study also indicated that their attackers' belief that they could not be identified facilitated more bold and brazen attacks against their victims. This finding is supported by Barlett (2013), who found a positive correlation between cyberbullying frequency and high levels of perceived anonymity. In addition, the participants unanimously indicated that a sense of morality is altered online because of feelings of anonymity, making the attacks even more brutal. This finding connects with Menesini, Nocentini, and Camodeca's (2011) finding that individuals who display immoral and disengaged behaviors are more likely to engage in acts of traditional bullying and cyberbullying.

As a result of the intense proliferation of harassment, all of the participants in this study reported experiencing rage and frustration because their victimization was publicized to a wide audience. Likewise, all participants indicated feeling extremely isolated and helpless in stopping or controlling the attacks. Two of the participants indicated a strong desire to fight or inflict harm on the cyberbullies during their victimization experiences. These findings are supported by Perren, Dooley, Shaw, and Cross (2010), who found that cyberbullying victims feel, among other emotions, anger, embarrassment, and helplessness as a result of the attacks. All of the participants expressed having difficulty finding ways to respond to the attacks in manners that would keep their dignity intact and ease their consistent pain.

Five of the participants attempted to fight back online in response to their cyberbullies, but those who did unanimously agreed that it either prolonged the duration of the attacks or increased their intensity. Five of the participants indicated, in hindsight, that they wished that they had taken another approach to deal with the attacks. The majority of participants indicted that the most effective response would have been to ignore the cyberbullying attacks. They indicated that if they had ignored the attacks, the perpetrators would likely have become bored from the lack of response or emotional reaction. In addition, two participants indicated that they had engaged in offline arguments, but only one participant reported experiencing physical violence. Three of the victims indicated that although they had attempted to avoid the cyberbullies, interactions with them often were inevitable because of school and friendship commonalities. When encounters did occur, the victims unanimously said that they experienced extreme feelings of anger and stress.

In addition, participant helplessness was intensified as the result of perceptions of a blurred line of online-offline contextual reality. The participants unanimously indicated that school officials and police officers who do not use technology, or those who use technology on a limited basis do not fully comprehend the implications of cyberbullying. They blamed the digital divide for this misunderstanding. The participants indicated that adults who do not use technology, or who do not use it very often, cannot understand the realities of cyberspace and were more likely to discard their complaints as unimportant and unreal. These findings are supported by the research of Naidoo and Raju (2012), and Volkom, Stapley, and Amaturu (2014) suggesting that a digital divide exists between individuals growing up in the technological age before 1980 and those introduced to technology during and after 1980. As a result, the participants expressed the belief that unless the attacks occur on school property, school officials are incapable of assisting them in their effort to combat the attacks.

When asked whether school officials or law enforcement officers could do anything to put an end to cyberbullying, the unanimous response from the participants was a resounding "no." This finding aligns directly with Li's (2010) finding that the victims of cyberbullies believe that authority figures are incapable of helping them to address the online attacks. Furthermore, four of the participants believed that telling school officials or law enforcement officers about the victimization would only exacerbate the problem. Therefore, rather than risk potential increases in the number or severity of the attacks, the participants indicated that they

would search for other avenues of support with groups, typically peer groups, that were more familiar with cyberspace. These findings are supported by previous findings indicating that the victims often turn to friends for assistance in coping with the victimization (Li, 2010; Topcu, Erdur-Baker, & Capa-Aydin, 2008).

Limitations

The study was limited in several ways. The site of the study was considered a limitation because of the nature of the topic and the method employed. Qualitative findings are not generalizable to the larger target population and like populations because of their small sample sizes. Although the location chosen for the study did represent a setting not previously examined by researchers, the sample was not representative of other settings of its kind.

Another limitation was that school districts are intensely protective of minors under their charge, especially in delicate emotional situations. To address the concern of finding participants, the researchers decided to include only participants over 18 years of age. Ideally, current students would have been the participants for the study. Even though this decision created some limitations in the eligibility of the participants, it did address some ethical concerns that are more disconcerting when studying minors. To limit the time differential between victims and their victimization, only recent graduates from the prior year at the chosen site participated in the study.

Implications

Students are not equipped to deal with cyberbullying and all of its effects. In addition, school officials have not been responsive enough to issues of cyberbullying (Hoff & Mitchell, 2009; Strom et al., 2012). Reports of the anguish caused by cyberbullying have prompted many victims to take drastic measures to stop the attacks, at times resulting in harm to themselves or others in the process (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010). In addition, school counselors are largely viewed by students as the go-to in difficult or trying times (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Zheng, & Drew, 2011). Therefore, the findings of this study are worthy of consideration by school counselors in order to develop strategies to raise awareness among students, administrators, teachers, parents, and community members in an effort to prevent, stop, and deal with instances of cyberbullying.

School counselors, like other educational leaders, need to modify their paradigms of reality in regard to cyberspace. The participants in this study unanimously supported the notion that adults do not conceptualize cyberspace as a real place and tend to focus more on the physical realm. As this study demonstrated, cyberspace is a very real social and intellectual arena in the lives of students and is worthy of being addressed in a manner consistent with any traditional setting. If it is not conceptualized as being as important as a traditional setting, students' faith in school counselors to help them to deal with cyberbullying will be lost (Burrow-Sanchez et al., 2011).

In addition, it is important to note that past research has stressed the importance of counselors taking the initiative to connect with students, demonstrate a willingness to listen with earnest to their concerns, and take suitable actions when warranted in order to develop a sense of trust among those who are being bullied. More often than not, students who are the victims of cyberbullying turn to their peers because they do not trust that adults will come to their aid, and they believe that confiding in adults might result in further victimization (Mishna, McLuckie, & Saini, 2009; Strom et al., 2012).

To gain and maintain the confidence and trust of cyberbullying victims, school counselors must be willing to address cyberrelated issues actively and in a holistic sense.

Situations must be viewed in the sense of the lived experiences of the students, regardless of the arena of occurrence, because technology has blurred the line between the digital and physical realities in the lives of students. Students' emotional concerns stemming from online experiences are not simply distant cyberrealities, but integral parts of their lived experiences. School counselors should approach every situation as a psychological danger, regardless of whether it is visible in a physical sense. The willingness of school counselors to address students' concerns in a holistic manner provides a greater connection to the daily lived experiences of students with smart phones and digital technology that prevent them from forming discernible lines between online and offline experiences.

Outside of providing direct support to the victims, school counselors can provide far more assistance in combating cyberbullying. Because cyberbullying is still in the early stages of research (Tokunaga, 2010), school counselors need to stay abreast of the latest research in order address the issue effectively. In addition, counselors can provide crucial information to students, parents, teachers, and community members about online behaviors.

Based upon their experiences with students, counselors can contribute information that should be included in policy development and acceptable use agreements in their schools (Li, 2010). Courts in some states have ruled that schools have the jurisdiction to discipline students who bully other students or school personnel using cyberspace tools, even if the bullying does not take place on school property or through school equipment or resources (Hinduja & Patchin, 2011). As such, school counselors can recommend that policies be instituted that include procedures to discipline and intervene in cyberbullying behaviors. School counselors are in a key position to guide school administrators in the creation of such policies and procedures because of their role as a support service for the social and mental well-being of students.

Counselors also can help to reduce misconceptions about the Internet, such as visibility. The perception that cyberbullies operate under a cloak of invincibility and anonymity is not based in reality. Computer activity is traceable on most occasions, even though students fail to understand how that can be accomplished. Informing students of misconceptions, such as activity not being traceable, through media such as student handbooks and public announcements could lower the disinhibition effect school-wide and lead to fewer instances of cyberbullying in the future.

The purpose of demonstrating misconceptions to students has several potential advantages in addressing the findings of this study. School counselor demonstrations and explanations of cyberspace misconceptions through school and district-wide seminars with administrators, teachers, parents, and students, as well as smaller in-class discussions with students and teachers, could prove to enhance the faith of students in the ability of school leaders to address issues relevant to cyberspace. Improving the perceptions of students in connection with cyberspace is crucial because as the participants in this study unanimously found, school leaders with little or no knowledge of technology use cannot understand or address cyberbullying.

School counselors, seen as outsiders in cyberspace issues in this study, could shift students' perceptions in a positive manner by showing them something that they were confused about online. Rather than being seen as outsiders, school counselors could be seen as individuals having a thorough understanding of cyber concerns, enhancing the willingness of students to turn to the counselors in times of trouble online. When combined with a willingness to treat cyberbullying the same level as traditional bullying, students' perceptions of counselors as informed authorities on the intricacies of cyberspace would undoubtedly place the counselors in an enhanced position to gain the trust necessary for students to open up to them about cyberbullying. Likewise, training administrators, teachers, and parents about how to

detect, prevent, and stop cyberbullying would provide an added measure of protection and trust building for students in combating victimization (Bradshaw, Sawyer, & O'Brennan, 2007).

Furthermore, assessments should be developed to detect and better understand at-risk factors for victimization. Such assessments could assist school counselors in identifying victims and setting up protocols for contacting parents in order to build support for students in an effort to prevent and stop victimization. In addition, programs teaching children and adolescents ways to resolve conflict could be set up to empower them to avoid and/or stop cyberbullying victimization (Burrow-Sanchez et al., 2011).

School counselors can serve as a liaison between school and home in an effort to educate parents on Internet use regulation. Parents can effectively decrease the likelihood of their children being cyberbullied by taking such measures as talking about the benefits and dangers of the Internet, discussing ways to detect and avoid Internet predators, and spending more time with their children when searching on the Internet (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell, & Ybarra, 2008). School counselors can set up initiatives to teach Internet safety skills to students. Such training has been shown to decrease adolescents' propensity to cyberbully others or become the victims of cyberbullying themselves (Burrow-Sanchez et al., 2011).

Recommendations for Future Research

This study examined a small segment of the cyberbullying population. It did not serve as a vehicle for collecting data on those accused of cyberbullying. Therefore, additional research is warranted to examine how the cyberbullying victims process such experiences and how those accused of cyberbullying perceive their role in the attacks. Additional research in this area would assist school counselors in designing intervention protocols that might help to circumvent such attacks and assist victims in handling them in ways that prevent self-destructive outcomes. It also would be beneficial to investigate the perceptions of counselors and other school stakeholders about the notion of cyberbullying to inform the design and execution of professional development and training around systems to prevent and deal with instances of cyberbullying among adolescents.

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