Pastoral Care to Regulate School Bullying: Shame Management among Bystanders

ELIZA AHMED, Regulatory Institutions Network, The Australian National University, Canberra, Australia

Bystanders can reveal valuable information about bullying to school personnel to take action on it. If they remain reluctant, of course, they frustrate our efforts to stop bullying. But then, why would they get involved if doing so might make them victims of aggression too?

This paper investigates the importance of adaptive shame management in encouraging bystanders to prevent bullying. Data were collected through the Cross-national School Behaviour Research Project from 1452 secondary school students (49% girls) in grades 7–10 (mean = 8.42) in Bangladesh. As predicted, students who scored higher on shame acknowledgement (admitting shame, accepting responsibility, making amends) were more likely to intervene to prevent bullying. Those with low shame displacement (blaming or hitting out at others) were also likely to intervene to stop bullying. Implications of these findings pertaining to pastoral staff, counsellors and school teachers working with students to encourage coming forward against bullying are discussed.

Keywords: bullying; shame management; behaviour in school; Bangladesh.

Introduction

Bystanders can reveal valuable information about bullying to school personnel who can then use this information to justify further action. If bystanders remain reluctant to reveal such information, of course, they frustrate our efforts to stop bullying. But then, why would they get involved if doing so might make them victims of aggression too? The purpose of this paper is to explore different components of shame management skills that might be related to getting involved in bystander intervention.

Understanding Bystander Intervention

In any bullying episode, at least two actors are involved: the bully and the victim. But there may be more actors present, either active or passive, who are members of the school community – bystanders. Bystanders or witnesses are present in 85 per cent of cases of bullying (Craig and Pepler, 1995). They can encourage the bully or even take part in the bullying; they can remain silent and refuse to take sides; or they can try to stop the bullying. There is evidence that bystanders’ active or passive involvement can substantially influence the occurrence of bullying (Pepler and Craig, 1995; O’Connell, Pepler and Craig, 1999; Hawkins, Pepler, Craig and Wendy, 2001).

In a study of the factors responsible for bystander intervention, it was found that active bystanders have adaptive emotional skills and a sense of belongingness to their school community (Ahmed, submitted). Children who feel part of their school and enjoy being at school are more involved in combating bullying. O’Connell, Pepler and Craig (1999) found that bystanders defend the victims of bullying in 25 per cent of cases, and so their involvement in anti-bullying programs can be extremely valuable (Salmivalli, 1999; Cowie, 2000; Menesini, Codecasa and Benelli, 2003; Rigby and Johnson, 2004). Studies of bullying have thus begun to employ paradigms in which students are questioned about their witnessing bullying and their involvement in combating bullying.

Bystanders who get involved in tackling bullying have to know what to do when witnessing a bullying episode and also be able to do it (see Ahmed, submitted). They are acting responsibly mainly because they want to protect the victims and to restore a safe and respectful school environment. Just feeling sympathy for the victim is not enough. Bystanders who want to stop bullying need a certain emotional competence, including being able to adapt their behaviour to the particular circumstances. However, we still know little about bystanders who try to prevent bullying because so few studies of bullying have been undertaken from the bystander’s perspective.

Psychologists have studied the role of bystanders in establishing human rights regimes but also cases
where they fail to get involved. Staub (2000) finds that bystanders who remain passive feel no moral responsibility for the welfare of the victims. This account of the importance of moral engagement and feelings of shame/guilt in relation to wrongdoings has been echoed in the psychology and criminology literature. A brief review of the literature follows:

The Relevance of Shame/Guilt to Wrongdoing

In the psychology literature, the relationships between shame, anger and aggressive behaviour have been well documented. A number of researchers have emphasized the importance of acknowledged and unacknowledged shame in maintaining adaptive and maladaptive interpersonal relationships. Acknowledged shame has been regarded as central to the process of establishing a moral direction for human behaviour (Scheff, 1990; Retzinger, 1996). Empirical studies and psychotherapeutic observations have also demonstrated a clear relationship between unacknowledged shame and anger, including violent behaviour (Lewis, 1971; Scheff and Retzinger, 1991; Nathanson, 1992) and domestic violence (Scheff, 1990; Scheff, 1987; Katz, 1988; Lansky, 1995).

Such consistent links between unacknowledged shame and aggressive behaviour underscore the role of shame management in the emergence of bullying at school. A working framework based on the shame literature was established for measuring both the adaptive and the non-adaptive components of shame management. The next section describes shame and its management in detail.

What is Shame Management? Why Does it Matter?

Shame is an emotion that we feel when we breach a social and/or moral standard (see Ahmed, Harris, Braithwaite and Braithwaite, 2001). It accompanies an assault on the individual’s ethical identity (Harris, 2001). According to shame management theory (Ahmed et al., 2001), different people handle their shame feelings in different ways in different contexts. People can handle shame feelings adaptively if they are able to acknowledge them and work out a way of ‘making their peace’ with those who harm people. Shame can also be managed in a less adaptive way. People may deflect and/or avoid those feelings so as to escape any negative consequences, thus generating more conflict.

This idea has been developed through empirical studies (e.g., Ahmed, 2001a; Braithwaite, Ahmed, Morrison and Reinhart, 2003) which have delineated two different ways to manage shame: shame acknowledgement and shame displacement. Shame acknowledgement is admitting that what one did is wrong and shameful, and feeling and showing remorse. Shame displacement is blaming others for the wrong that was done and expressing anger towards them. According to the shame management approach, individuals who acknowledge shame and accept personal responsibility will refrain from further wrongdoing because they have considered the harmful consequences and resolved to avoid them in the future. In contrast, dismissing shame feelings through blaming others will intensify wrongdoing because it disconnects the wrongdoing from its consequences. Studies have shown that people who acknowledge shame rather than displacing it on to others are less likely to break the rules (Ahmed, 2001a; Ahmed and Braithwaite, 2004; Bessant and Watts, 1993; Braithwaite et al., 2003).

Being able to manage shame adaptively is, therefore, a valuable skill that helps people sustain constructive interpersonal relationships. Such ability is likely to provide an emotional intelligence through which people can decide with whom they should associate, and from whom they should protect themselves. The power of adaptive shame management is that its associated skills are concerned with the welfare of others, being responsible and responsive to those in need. In contrast, maladaptive skills are likely to spur responsibility, finding all kinds of justifications to avoid defending against injustice.

The theoretical perspective just outlined seems to have received some empirical support. Studies have found that people who can manage shame well are likely to feel empathy for victims, to exercise self-control, and to help others (e.g., Batson, Early and Salvare, 1997; Harris, 2001). A more recent study (Ahmed, submitted) has used the theoretical paradigm to understand bystanders’ involvement in combating bullying. A consistent theme has emerged, demonstrating that adaptive shame management skills are significant predictors of bystander intervention. Students who feel shame/guilt, take responsibility for their own actions, and are ready to make amends for their actions if needed, are more likely to combat bullying. In contrast, those who blame others, make others a scapegoat for their own wrongdoings, and hit out at others are less likely to fight against bullying.

What is absent from this study is the delineation of a more fine-grained understanding of how shame is managed by those who witness bullying and come forward to tackle it. Therefore, we need to expand on this earlier work in order to better understand individual shame management skills in relation to bystander intervention. Aggregated results on shame acknowledgement and shame displacement demonstrated the relevance of these overarching components, but it is also practically helpful to consider the importance of the cognitive or feeling components (i.e., feeling shame, taking responsibility).

Shame acknowledgement comprises three components: (1) admission of feelings of shame; (2)
acceptance of responsibility for causing hurt to others and (3) desire to make amends. These three components representing shame acknowledgement were derived primarily from Lewis’s (1971) notion of shame acknowledgement. Such a perspective on shame acknowledgement seems to be congruent with the operation of ‘conscience’ (Braithwaite, 1989). These components are popular concepts in the restorative justice literature (see Ahmed et al., 2001) and are considered as key components in restoring a sense of justice to victims, offenders and communities.

Shame displacement also consists of three components: (1) externalizing blame; (2) retaliatory anger and (3) displaced anger. The first component, externalizing blame, is again based on Lewis’s (1971) notion that blaming someone else, regardless of whether or not that person has any connection with the event, successfully serves to by-pass painful feelings of shame. Both the second and the third components are related to unresolved shame (Harris, 2001), that is, believed to generate some sort of anger in a bid to sedate the distress caused by the event. The most common response of unresolved shame is outward anger, which can be directed at either an individual (again, regardless of his/her connection with the event) or an object (e.g., hitting the wall, slamming a door). Considerable research effort has supported the link of destructive and retaliatory anger to unacknowledged shame (Lewis, 1971; Retzinger, 1991). Expressions of anger directed at oneself or others are inconsistent with the notion of adaptive shame management.

The Present Study

The present study is designed to investigate the extent to which different components of shame management capacity relate to bystanders’ willingness to prevent bullying. Depending on children’s self-reports of their own intervening intentions, it is hypothesized that bystanders who intervene to combat bullying will show higher scores on the shame acknowledgement components but lower scores on the shame displacement components.

This study is part of an international project ‘Cross-National School Behaviour Project’ (see Rigby, this issue) initiated at the University of South Australia. Data in this paper came from Bangladesh where there have been reports of several extreme cases of violence in Bangladeshi schools. This has resulted in extensive media coverage in Bangladesh (e.g., http://www.isiswomen.org/pub/we/archive/msg00138.html#bully). Although bullying has become a serious problem in Bangladeshi schools, it remains an understudied subject. Only basic prevalence data on bullying among Bangladeshi school children have been made available (Ahmed, 2001b), and school intervention programs to deal with the problem are non-existent. About one-third (30%) of the students admitted bullying someone in the past year once, twice or more often (Ahmed, 2001b). These data are comparable to Australian data (33%). The problem of school bullying is a truly global phenomenon, with Bangladesh being no exception to the rule.

Method

Sample

A total of 1452 students (49% girls) from grades 7 to 10 (mean grade = 8.42) participated in this study. Participants had been recruited from six co-educational schools, both public and private, located in Dhaka, the capital of Bangladesh. A convenience sampling strategy was chosen because it was well suited to the cultural settings, where there was limited time for recruitment, and data collection procedures were challenging.

Procedure

The Bengali version of the Bystander questionnaire (Version 1; Rigby, 2002) was administered at the six schools. Some additional items were included to extend the project’s scope. All students from grades 7 to 10 were invited to participate voluntarily in the study. The participation rate was 92 per cent.

It is noteworthy that schools in Bangladesh usually take responsibility for making decisions for children during school hours. Permission to survey the children was obtained from both principals and class teachers, and then information about the project was sent to all parents at home. Students were told that the purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that make bystanders more or less willing to try to prevent bullying. The voluntary and confidential nature of the study was also emphasized. The survey took 30–40 min to complete during class hours.

Students were presented with a video depicting different kinds of bullying behaviour in the presence of bystanders. They were then asked to rate their responses on a questionnaire in relation to their participation to stop bullying, their own experiences of bullying and victimization, and their shame management strategies if they were the bully in the video. In addition, information was collected about their feelings of being connected to the school and about their gender as well as school grade.

Measures

Intervening in Bullying. Intervening in bullying was measured by two question items (Rigby, 2002) posed after two bullying scenarios. The first scenario described an episode involving verbal bullying whereas
the second scenario described an episode involving physical bullying. An episode involving sexual bullying was dropped because of the cultural inappropriateness.

The question asked in relation to each scenario was: would you (as a bystander) object to what was happening by saying ‘Stop, this is enough’ (1 = I certainly would, 5 = I certainly would not). To compute the scale score, responses to this item for two scenarios were reverse scored and then averaged ($M = 4.34; SD = 0.99; \alpha = 0.75$).

Shame Management

Shame management was measured by the Management Of Shame State – Shame Acknowledgement and Shame Displacement (MOSS-SASD; see Ahmed, Braithwaite and Braithwaite, 1996) (for details on MOSS-SASD itself and its psychometric properties, see Ahmed, 2001a; Ahmed and Braithwaite, forthcoming).

Briefly, MOSS-SASD is a scenario-based self-report measure. It aims to capture the shame reactions of children who encounter social or moral wrongdoing. Following the two scenarios (verbal and physical) describing a bullying incident at school, the students were given shame-related questions, asking them to indicate how they would feel if they were the one doing the bullying.

**Shame Acknowledgement Scale.** For shame acknowledgement scale, there were three components: (1) feeling shame, (2) taking responsibility and (3) making amends. The feeling shame component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.66; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel shame?’ across the two scenarios. The taking responsibility component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.58; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel like taking responsibility?’ across the two scenarios. The making amends component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.55; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel like making amends?’ across the two scenarios. Because these three components were positively and significantly correlated (ranged from 0.50 to 0.64; $p < 0.001$), they were averaged to make the shame acknowledgement scale ($M = 3.17; SD = 0.79; \alpha = 0.84$), a higher score indicating greater shame acknowledgement.

**Shame Displacement Scale.** For the shame displacement scale, there were three components: (1) externalizing blame; (2) retaliatory anger and (3) displaced anger. The externalizing blame component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.48; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel like blaming the victim?’ across the two scenarios. The retaliatory anger component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.59; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel like getting back at the victim?’ across the two scenarios. The displaced anger component was computed by averaging the responses ($r = 0.65; p < 0.001$) to the question ‘Would you feel like hitting/kicking at something?’ across the two scenarios. Because these components were positively and significantly correlated (ranged from 0.48 to 0.62; $p < 0.001$), they were averaged to make the shame displacement scale ($M = 1.36; SD = 0.60; \alpha = 0.84$), a higher score indicating greater shame displacement.

**Socio-Demographic Variables**

Sex and Grade. Respondents’ sex was scored 0 for males and 1 for females ($M = 0.49; SD = 0.50$). Their school grade was measured in years by asking ‘Which grade are you in at your school?’ There were four response categories: grade 7, grade 8, grade 9 and grade 10 ($M = 8.42; SD = 1.11$).

**Results**

**Preliminary Analyses**

Frequencies and associated percentages of students’ responses to bystander intervention are estimated. Because a similar pattern of frequencies was obtained for both verbal and physical scenarios, results are now reported regarding the aggregated scale as described above. Eight hundred and thirty-three students (58%) reported that they would definitely intervene upon witnessing a bullying incident and 388 students (27%) reported ‘probably would’. Among others, 119 students (9%) reported ‘not sure’, 45 students (3%) said ‘probably would not’ and 47 students (3%) reported ‘never’.

**Main Analyses**

Main data analyses were performed in two steps. The first step was a set of analyses to inquire about gender and grade differences in bystander intervention. The second step involved correlational analyses between the shame management components and bystander intervention.

**Mean Differences in Bystander Intervention**

As can be seen from Table 1, females ($M = 4.41$) are more likely to intervene to stop bullying than males ($M = 4.26$). Females may have felt more sympathetic toward the victim and considered coming forward
Table 1. Mean Differences in Relation to Respondents’ Gender, Grade and Bystander Intervention (n = 1432)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variables</th>
<th>Mean (SD)</th>
<th>t-value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male (n = 736)</td>
<td>4.26 (1.04)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female (n = 696)</td>
<td>4.41 (.92)</td>
<td>– 2.87**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Grade</td>
<td></td>
<td>F-value</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7th grade (n = 380)</td>
<td>4.26 (1.20)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8th grade (n = 400)</td>
<td>4.36 (.90)</td>
<td>1.10 (NS)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9th grade (n = 319)</td>
<td>4.35 (.93)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10th grade (n = 333)</td>
<td>4.38 (.85)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: t-values are − 4.21 (p < 0.001) and − 2.28 (p < 0.05) for physical and verbal scenarios, respectively. **p < 0.01. 
NS, not significant.

Table 2. Correlation Coefficients between Bystander Intervention and Shame Management Components (Minimum n = 1311)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Shame management components</th>
<th>Correlation coefficients (r)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shame acknowledgement (Total scale)</td>
<td>0.38***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling shame</td>
<td>0.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taking responsibility</td>
<td>0.33***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making amends</td>
<td>0.30***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shame displacement (Total scale)</td>
<td>–0.41***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Externalizing blame</td>
<td>–0.34***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retaliatory anger</td>
<td>–0.36***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Displaced anger</td>
<td>–0.30***</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

***p < 0.001.

against the bullying to protect the victim. This became apparent when a separate analysis was done on both scenarios. Gender difference was stronger in the case of physical bullying (t = − 4.21; p < 0.001), which supports the notion that females perceived physical bullying as more of an emergency situation and felt more empathy than in the case of verbal bullying.

Table 1 also shows that students’ grades were not as significant as their gender. A One-way ANOVA was used for four grades (7th–10th), which reveals that bystander intervention appears to increase as students mature. The LSD post hoc test indicates that the mean score for 7th graders (M = 4.26) is significantly different from that of the 10th graders (M = 4.38). The overall F-value was not significant, however.

Correlational Analyses between Shame Management Variables and Bystander Intervention

As can be seen from Table 2, the aggregated shame acknowledgement scale was positively and significantly related to bystander intervention (r = 0.38; p < 0.001). As expected, bystanders who indicate willingness to intervene to stop bullying are more likely to feel shame if caught for wrongdoing (r = 0.36; p < 0.001). They are also more willing to take responsibility for the harm done when they are the offender (r = 0.33; p < 0.001) and inclined to make amends for their misconduct (r = 0.30; p < 0.001).

Findings in relation to shame displacement components were also as predicted. Bystanders who were willing to intervene to prevent further bullying were less inclined to blame the victim (r = − 0.34; p < 0.001), take revenge on the victim (r = − 0.36; p < 0.001) or hit out at something (r = − 0.30; p < 0.001) if they were caught hurting someone else. The aggregated measure of shame displacement was negatively and significantly related to bystander intervention (r = − 0.41; p < 0.001).

Qualitative Observation and Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to determine the extent to which different shame management responses can make bystanders more willing to try to prevent bullying at school. Much more fine-grained analyses extend prior studies and demonstrate that adaptive shame management skills promote bystander intervention: Children who are inclined to feel shame and accept responsibility for wrongdoing are more likely to assist victims by intervening in a bullying event. By contrast, children who are inclined to blame others for what went wrong are less likely to become involved in combating bullying.

These findings are congruent with personal narratives provided by the respondents of this study. The narratives supported the central tenet of the shame management theory that high shame acknowledgement and low shame displacement play important roles in maintaining constructive interpersonal relationships. The following comments, provided by two bystander students willing to intervene, illustrate the point of accepting shame/guilt and responsibility, and making amends:

‘I feel that maintaining discipline at my school is my responsibility. If I don’t stand up for the injustice that I see, eventually the bullies will become more encouraged to continue bullying others. I feel that I should act against these sorts of activities’.

‘It’s our responsibility to help victims. I can’t stand the domination over the weak – it’s an injustice. If I don’t fight for this injustice, I would feel guilty afterwards, and that I haven’t carried out my responsibility well. I think human beings ought to do many good deeds, and helping those in need is one of them’.

In addition to shame acknowledgement skills, bystanders also stressed that fundamental to bystander
intervention is the belief that no one should be made a scapegoat:

‘I think some students are made a scapegoat by others when they experience distress from something in their own lives/when things go wrong/ when things are about to slip out of their hands. I just don’t think it’s fair to throw the anger of your troubles on somebody else. If you see someone is being made a scapegoat, I feel that you have the responsibility to help the victim.’

Taken as a whole, then, the quantitative and qualitative findings suggest that adaptive shame management strategies help explain bystander intervention. Personal narratives can be used in conjunction with quantitative findings to develop a richer and more comprehensive picture of why some bystanders come forward whereas others do not. From a long-term perspective, teaching adaptive shame management skills can be a promising approach to preventing school bullying (see Ahmed, 2005) on the one hand, and enhancing bystander intervention on the other. In formal education, we teach our children science, social sciences, and mathematics, so why not teach them shame management skills? Rarely in our schools is emotional management approached in a cross-curricular way. Such lessons could encourage school children to develop adaptive shame management skills so that they get along together and have constructive interpersonal relationships.

Because shame acknowledgement is the capacity for adaptive relationship management, bullying intervention plans in schools should endeavour to teach both students and teachers these adaptive emotional management skills. We all need to develop the CAPACITY to:

- feel shame/guilt for a wrongdoing;
- accept personal responsibility for the wrongdoing;
- make amends for the wrongdoing.

The findings of this study highlight the fact that shame displacement components are risk factors for not coming forward against bullying. Hence, intervention programs need to be designed to help students and teachers make right choices in relation to shame management. We all should learn NOT to:

- blame others for what goes wrong;
- direct a retaliatory anger towards others;
- displace anger onto something that is not related to the wrongdoing.

The need for effective bullying interventions is critical, yet practical success in intervening can be difficult to achieve. One participant revealed how (s)he has acquired a sense of responsibility which can maximize success in training skills in relation to citizenship and adaptive shame management:

‘During our everyday morning assembly, we pledge to a different theme each week. An example of a theme is: I have the right to be respected as a person. It is my responsibility not to tease, bother or hurt other people. I will show respect and consideration for others and their feelings, and I will expect the same from you as well.’

Adaptive shame management skills are significant aspects of addressing bullying in schools, but are certainly not only about encouraging bystanders to intervene to stop bullying. The question remains, however, as to the differences in shame management skills between those who avoid bullying situations (e.g., non-bully/non-victims) and those who witness bullying and come forward to help the victim. If they have comparable shame management skills, certain other personal/emotional factors (e.g., leadership skills, selfless motive) are likely to be responsible for bystanders’ behaviour. Future studies should pay attention to these factors as well as contextual factors for effective intervention (e.g., backup support, school norms).

In conclusion, bystanders are extremely important actors in deterring the demoralizing and damaging impacts of bullying. Bystanders who flee the scene of a bullying event unknowingly play a role in encouraging bullying, and allow bullies to enjoy disproportionate freedom at the expense of others, as well as breeding further conflict. Watching without intervening actually reinforces bullying behaviour. Bystanders who speak out and do not remain silent in the face of inappropriate behaviour are committed to resisting such injustice, and discourage bullying. From a regulatory perspective, bystanders can be considered the ‘soft targets’ because they have enormous preventive capabilities. Under a ‘whole-of-school’ approach, these ‘soft targets’ are more easily moved by a sense of shame and responsibility than the ‘hard targets’ (such as bullies) whose emotional shell that protects them from being ashamed/guilty is difficult to penetrate (Braithwaite, 2001). By empowering the ‘soft targets’ through teacher support, therefore, much of the bullying can be prevented at an early stage, and a healthy and safe school can be restored.

References


AHMED, E. (submitted) “‘Stop it, that’s enough’: Bystander intervention and its relationship to school connectedness and shame management’. Regulatory Institutions Network, Australian National University, Canberra, Australia.