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The Effect of Self-debasing Cognitive Distortion Restructuring Intervention on Modification of Bystanders' Reactions to Witnessing Bullying

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Introduction

- Bullying is regarded as one of the most serious challenges confronting learners in schools (Menard & Grotmeter, 2014).
- Bullying can be characterised as a group process that comprises not only the bullies and the victims, but also a group of observers or onlookers who are classified as bystanders (Salmivalli 2014).

Bystanders reactions

- Intrusive thoughts, sadness, emotional exhaustion, shame, anger, fear, anxiety, disbelief, numbing, upset, mood fluctuations, shock, outburst, worry and withdrawal (Batsche & Porter, 2006; Ortega et al.,2009).

Aftermath of witnessing bullying

- After the bullying incident is over, intrusive thoughts and images in the minds of the bystanders may cause bystanders to identify with the pain and suffering of the victim which could lead to co-victimisation or re-victimisation for bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009).

Cognitive dissonance

- One explanation for the negative responses associated with witnessing bullying is that bystanders may experience cognitive dissonance in a bullying situation. They may intend to intervene on behalf of the victim but are unable to defend the latter for fear of becoming the next victim (Midgett & Doumas, 2019).

Point of departure

- Rivers et al. (2009) alongside Glew et al. (2005) concur with the viewpoint that witnessing bullying has the potential to cause emotional and psychological consequences for bystanders. In addition, they assert that it is not the witnessing of the bullying per se, but the anxiety caused by the fear of subsequent direct victimisation that contributes to bystanders' emotional insecurity and uncertainty.

Empirical evidence

- For instance, research findings by Juvonem et al., (2011) contrast sharply with most research reports on bystanders' reactions when they witness bullying. The authors found that sixth-grade bystanders did not experience common negative emotions such as anxiety and loneliness to the same degree as the direct victims. Glew et al. (2005) also found that bystanders were less likely to feel unsafe in their school and less likely to frequently feel sad.

Rationale

- The commonalities and discrepancies in bystanders' emotional reactions to witnessing bullying could be connected to the thinking patterns that they demonstrated after the bullying incident (Rivers et al., 2009; Werth et al., 2015).
- Since bystanders apparently processed their responses on a cognitive as well as emotional level, cognition may be deemed a determinant factor in their individual emotional reactions to events. Thus, cognitive theory could be employed usefully as a lens to understand bystanders' responses in situations as outlined here.

Theoretical framework

- The fundamental assumption of cognitive theory is that human beings are directly responsible for generating their own emotions. The meaning one ascribes to an event after cognitive appraisal of the event, and not the event itself, determines one's emotional and behavioural responses (Beck, 2011, Dobson & Dobson, 2016).

Theoretical framework continued

- Barriga and Morrison (2010) argue that the emotional and behavioural reactions to an event is influenced by thinking patterns that precede the interpretation of the event
- Negative emotional reactions might be produced and maintained by irrational beliefs and deleterious thinking patterns that are also known as self-debasing cognitive distortion (Clark & Beck, 2010).

Self debasing cognitive distortion (SDCD)

- A self-debasing cognitive distortion can lead to negative thoughts and tension that does not necessarily conform to reality and that can create a maladaptive belief system that serves as a framework to interpret and understand events (Barriga & Morrison, 2010).

Typology of SDCCD

- Negative thoughts that could induce bystanders' negative emotional reactions when witnessing bullying stem from clear errors in their cognitive patterns, including personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction (Beck, 2011; Fenell et al., 2004).

Typology of SDCD explained

- Personalisation. self-blame and feelings of guilt
- Catastrophising. Amplifying fear and anxiety.
- Overgeneralisation is described as making up a general rule based on a negative interpretation of one or a few incidents or events
- Selective abstraction is the tendency to focus on the negative details of an event while making an evaluation of that event (Donely, 2014).

The gap

- Despite the theoretical support for the significant influence that individual cognition has in the onset and maintenance of behavioural and emotional reactions to victimisation (Clark & Beck, 2010; Covin et al., 2011), little research has been done on such proactive cognitive strategy to mitigate or interrupt the continuity of negative emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying in schools (Janosz et al., 2008; Rivers et al., 2009).

Aim of the study

- Bystanders could, therefore, in my view, be taught how to recognise, challenge, and reappraise negative and unhelpful thoughts and feelings related to their experiences (Covin et al., 2011; De Oliveira, 2012).
- Cognitive behaviour therapy can be instrumental in restructuring bystanders' self-debasing cognitive distortion.

Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT)

- Cognitive behaviour therapy (CBT) is a therapeutic intervention that is known to be effective in reducing negative responses of victims that witness similar traumatic events (Bernal et al., 2009).
- The goal of CBT is to facilitate change in distorted cognition through a process of reappraisal also known as cognitive restructuring (Nebolsine, 2012).

Continued

- Although I acknowledge that stressors such as experiencing or witnessing bullying in school may signal a danger to the emotional safety of bystanders (Newman et al., 2005), I do, also, acknowledge that an important factor in explaining the heterogeneity of behavioural and emotional reactions of bystanders might be the ability to identify and correct distorted thoughts which precede negative reactions to events (Hofman et al., 2012).

Working assumptions

- To this end, it is my view that the ability to identify and restructure negative or faulty thinking patterns can help bystanders discard negative automatic thoughts, thereby leading to positive change in bystanders' emotional and behavioural expression to witnessing bullying (Covin et al., 2011).

Working assumption continued

- In line with this, a self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention (SDCDRI) could be designed to teach bystanders to apply the principles of cognitive restructuring which require learning to refute irrational thoughts while reacting to witnessing bullying.

The SDCDR Intervention

- The self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention was prepared according to the principles of cognitive behavioural therapy.
- In summary, it consists of certain cognitive restructuring techniques used to facilitate change in thought patterns namely, Socratic questioning, challenging automatic thoughts, guided discovery, coping cards, decatastrophising, homework assignment.

SDCDRI

- The intervention consists of 12 sessions, 45 minutes each, with two sessions a week. The first 10 minutes of each session was allocated to forming connections to the previous session and the discussion of homework. Later, the daily subject was discussed for 30–35 minutes.

Contents of the intervention

| | |
|------------------|--|
| Session 1 | General orientation to the intervention |
| Session 2 | Connecting thoughts, feelings and behaviour |
| Session 3 | Identifying positive and negative thought patterns |
| Session 4 | Common self-debasing cognitive distortions |
| Session 5 | Personalisation |
| Session 6 | Catasrophising |
| Session 7 | Overgeneralisation |
| Session 8 | Selective abstraction |
| Session 9 | Interpreting situations and events |
| Session 10 | Learning to make less thinking errors |
| Session 11 | Conclusion, reflection and feedbacks |

Research question

Specifically, this study sought to answer the following research question:

- How can self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring possibly modify bystanders' behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying?

Methodology

Participants

- I used purposive sampling to select the participants for the study.

Phase 1: Collecting Grade 6 learners' written narratives.

- During the first phase, 60 Grade 6 learners were approached to describe in written form the bullying incidents they witnessed at their school.

Methodology continued

Phase 2: Selecting participants for the interview.

- Altogether 35 of the 60 stories that were collected did not meet one of the inclusion criteria (e.g., narrating stories from the perspective of a bully or a direct victim). I selected the final 10 participants to be interviewed and participate in the study based on the level of details and self-reflection evidenced in the stories they wrote about the bullying incidents they had witnessed.

Inclusion and exclusion criteria

| Inclusion criteria | Exclusion criteria |
|--|--|
| Learners who were in primary school | Participants who could not understand or communicate in the English language were exempted from participating in the study |
| Bystanders who were early adolescents (within the age range of 11 to 13 years), and who were in Grades 6 or 7. | |
| Learners who have not experienced bullying as a direct victim but only witnessed bullying in school | |
| Learners who indicated that they have not previously been exposed to a similar intervention | |

Data collection and documentation analysis

- The data was collected and analysed in two stages. The first stage was the pre-intervention stage where data was collected to explore participants' thinking patterns and how it influenced their emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying.
- The second stage was the post-intervention stage where data was collected and also analysed to explore and describe participants' reactions to school bullying following participation based on the 11 session self-debasing cognitive distortion restructuring intervention.

Data analysis and interpretation

- Data was analysed through inductive thematic analysis which implies that analysis was done on the data derived from the participants and not from any superimposed or preconceived theoretical framework (Tjale & De Villiers, 2004). I followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) recommendation of the data analysis process

Findings

Theme 1: Reduced errors in bystanders' thinking patterns

- Participants understood that irrationality in their thinking patterns could exacerbate and fuel negative behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. As such, concerns about susceptibility to attacks were reduced as the participants learned to make fewer cognitive errors.

Findings continued

Theme 2: Appropriate interpretation of an event

- From the participants' responses to the post-intervention interview questions, I observed a significant decrease in the misappropriation of self-blame and feelings of guilt and this could be traceable to the replacement of personification thoughts with positive and more realistic thoughts following participation in the SDCDRI.

Theme 2 continued

When participants were asked to state if they still feel they were the cause of the bullying they witnessed because they could not intervene, the third participants replied by saying:

Participant 6 explained that:

- *“No, I don’t blame myself because when I went to them and shouted at them and threatened them that I am going to tell the principal, they just ignored me and continued bullying that victim.”*

Findings continued

Theme 3: Mitigated bystanders negative behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying

- Participants were able to draw a direct link between thoughts, feelings and behaviour and this effort contributed to the reduction of negative behavioural and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying

Theme 3 continued

- *“Now I feel ok going to school because I know the principal make the rule that whoever bully another kid will be suspended even the bully knows that rule and he is afraid of suspension. (P6).*

Discussion

- Following participation in the SDCDRI, participants were able to figure out bias in their thinking patterns. This led to a reduction of error in their thinking patterns.
- The participants used the cognitive restructuring techniques such as challenging automatic thoughts, decatastrophising and guided discovery to question the reality of their automatic thoughts and gather evidence to contradict irrationalities in their thinking patterns.

Discussion continued

- The SDCDRI equipped participants to exert control on their emotions and behaviours. This led to a reversal of the negative emotions and behaviours they earlier expressed in reaction to witnessing the bullying.
- The participants were able to replace thoughts that were not necessarily valid or accurate with realistic thinking, thereby leading to an observable reduction in negative emotions and behaviour associated with witnessing bullying in school.

Discussion continued

- The insights gained from the teaching learning principles derived from cognitive theory in relation to emotional and behavioural modification is that emotional and behavioural responses to events is a learning product and that whatever is learnt is an outcome of past conditioning and it can be unlearned through cognitive restructuring (James et al., 2007).

Implications

The study was further able to substantiate the efficacy of cognitive restructuring in facilitating re-appraisal of negative thoughts, which has not been tested before among bystanders of school bullying, as well as reducing negative behaviours and emotions associated with such thoughts.

Implications continued

- The rudiments of cognitive restructuring skills should be incorporated into the curriculum of teacher training programs. This will enable teachers to possess elementary knowledge of cognitive restructuring to support learners who are victims of bullying in their care. This is necessary as most primary schools do not have an educational psychologist readily available.

Conclusion

- As I reflect on the findings of this study, I refer to the words of Ellis (2003, p. 34): “*Emotions and behaviours significantly influence and affect thinking, just as thinking influences emotions and behaviours*”. These words made me conclude that individuals are directly responsible for generating their own emotions. Therefore, it is possible for one to change the emotional and behavioural responses to events by changing the appraisal and interpretation one attaches to that event.

Thank you

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