Self-debasing cognitive distortions as predictor of emotional disturbance among school bullying bystanders

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to ascertain how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortions, namely personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction could predict or inform bullying bystanders' emotional disturbance in reactions to witnessing bullying. A descriptive case study research design was adopted. Ten school bullying bystanders were purposefully selected to participate in the study. Interviews were recorded on a voice recorder and then transcribed. Qualitative data were analysed through inductive thematic analysis. The findings of this study revealed that personalisation evoked bystanders' self-blame and feelings of guilt, catastrophising amplified bystanders' anxiety and fear over generalisation-induced and exacerbated bystanders' negative perceptions of school safety, and selective abstraction led to indirect co-victimisation. It is recommended that school psychologist, councilors and behavioural healthcare service providers should teach victims of bullying, especially bystanders, how to recognise, challenge and reappraise negative and unhelpful thoughts and feelings related to their experiences.

Keywords: Cognitive distortions; school bullying; bystanders; emotional reactions; emotional disturbance

Introduction

Bullying is regarded as one of the most serious problems confronting learners in schools (Menard & Grotpeter 2014). Bystanders of school bullying were reported to be at an increased risk of experiencing negative emotional responses to witnessing bullying (Boyes, et al., 2014). Greeff and Grobler (2008) reported that 70% of learners in Grade 4 to 7 who experienced or witnessed bullying in school, exhibit symptoms of secondary trauma such as intrusive thoughts, sadness, emotional exhaustion, shame, anger, fear, anxiety, disbelief, numbing, being upset, mood fluctuations, shock, outburst, worry and withdrawal. Hutchinson (2012) also noted that bystanders might experience increased levels of stress and guilt for not standing up to the bully on behalf of the victim. Shore (2009) reported that bystanders might react to witnessing bullying with fears and worry, which could cause them to feel intimidated; hence, contributing to difficulties in focusing attention in class.

One explanation for the negative responses associated with witnessing bullying is that bullying bystanders may encounter cognitive dissonance in a situation whereby the bystanders believe and intend to intervene on behalf of the victim, but are unable to defend the victim as a result of fear of becoming the next victim (Midgett & Doumas 2019). Salmivalli (2014), as well as Twemlow and Sacco (2013), argued that bystanders of bullying may be conscious of the fact that bullying is wrong, and they may even wish to intervene on behalf of the victim. At the same time, bystanders are also conscious of their own safety and vulnerability and thus may become fearful to intervene. As a result, bystanders can experience feelings of guilt and self-blame for not intervening for the victims, or not knowing what to do in such instances (Salmivalli, 2010; Twemlow & Sacco 2013).

Rivers et al., (2009), alongside Glew et al., (2005) concurred with the viewpoint that witnessing bullying has the potential to cause emotional and psychological implications for

bystanders. In addition, they asserted that it is the anxiety caused by the patterns of thoughts and fear of subsequent, direct victimisation that contributes to bystanders' emotional insecurity and uncertainty, and not mere witnessing of the bullying, per se. For instance, research findings of Juvonen et al., (2011) contrast sharply with most research reports on bystanders' reactions to witnessing bullying. They found that sixth-grade bystanders did not experience common negative emotions such as anxiety and loneliness to the same degree as the direct victims. Also, Glew et al, (2005) reported from their study that bystanders were less likely to feel unsafe in their school and less likely to frequently feel sad, unlike findings from other studies.

The commonalities and discrepancies in bystanders' emotional reactions to witnessing bullying could be connected to the thinking patterns that bystander demonstrated after the bullying incident was over (Werth et al., 2015). It could also be that bystanders sometimes take on different roles, such as being a direct victim or perpetrator (bully- victims) in other situations, which can impact on their mental health (Rivers et al., 2009). This could also account for the discrepancy in the findings between Rivers et al., (2009); Glew et al., (2005) and Juvonen et al., (2011).

Bystanders, therefore, appear to process their responses at both a cognitive and emotional level. Cognition may be deemed to be a determinant factor in individual emotional reactions to events. Cognitive theory, therefore, could usefully be employed as a lens to understand bystanders' responses in situations such as outlined herein.

The fundamental principle of cognitive theory is that individual cognitive processes such as perception, interpretation, appraisal and assessment of an event play a determining role in the emanation and sustenance of emotional responses to events (Dozois & Beck 2008; Beck, 2011; Dobson & Dobson 2016). The principle also applies to exacerbating maladaptive

emotional responses (Clark & Beck 2010; Dobson & Dozois 2010). Barriga and Morrison (2010) argue that the latter are 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, also known as self-debasing cognitive distortions (Clark & Beck 2010).

A self-debasing cognitive distortion can lead to preoccupation with negative thoughts and tension that do not necessarily conform to reality, and can create a maladaptive belief system that serves as a framework for interpreting and understanding events (Barriga & Morrison 2010; Esbensen & Benson 2007). Negative thinking patterns and negative appraisal of events could induce psychological disturbances and negative emotional reactions to events (Clark, 2014).

Negative thoughts that could induce bystanders' negative emotional reactions to witnessing bullying stem from processing cognitive patterns, including personalisation, catastrophising, over-generalisation and selective abstraction (Beck, 2011; Fenel et al., 2004). Personalisation is a form of emotional reasoning that involves taking excessive responsibility and self-blame for the occurrence of an unpleasant event, which leads to feelings of guilt and depression (Beck, 2011). Personalisation is a manifestation of self-blame (Wendland, 2004), and victims with self-blaming tendencies have been reported to be vulnerable to emotional problems (Graham, 2014). Bystanders who are prone to personalisation may ascribe responsibility to themselves for the consequences of bullying on victims as a result of their inability to intervene or stop the bullying.

Another self-debasing cognitive distortion which may manifest in persons who experience negative emotional responses to events is catastrophising (Beck, 2011). Catastrophising is a form of cognitive distortion that amplifies anxiety, thereby intensifying

the severity of negative emotional responses a victim experienced. An individual who engages in catastrophising always expects the worst to happen regardless of the situation. Witnessing bullying can cause bystanders to fear that they might become the next victim, thus leading to anticipating being bullied themselves (Rivers et al., 2009).

Over-generalisation is another type of self-debasing cognitive distortion which might contribute to problematic emotional responses to witnessing a traumatic event (Dozois, 2007; Iacoviello et al., 2006). Overgeneralisation is described as making up a general rule based on a negative interpretation of one or a few incidents or events (Beck, 2011; Wenzel et al., 2016). Bystanders may perceive their inability to stop or intervene in bullying as incompetence, and they may then begin to believe that their efforts to affect the outcomes of other situations will be futile as well (Roth et al., 2012). Feelings of incompetence may affect the self-esteem of bystanders negatively and lead to a greater likelihood of anxiety (Smokowski & Kopasz 2005).

Selective abstraction is another self-debasing distorted thought that can feed on negative emotions. Selective abstraction is the tendency to focus on the negative details of an event while making an evaluation of that event (Donely, 2014). Bystanders who are prone to selective abstraction may be more likely to view the bullying they witness as a serious threat to their well-being and, as a consequence, respond with negative emotions. Selective abstraction can, therefore, contribute to psychological re-victimisation and indirect co-victimisation for bystanders (Rivers et al., 2009).

In view of the substantial agreement on the impact of cognition in emotional responses to occurrences, it appears that developing negative emotional responses to situations also result from the way an individual perceives, interprets, and appraises an event (Beck, 2011; Dobson & Dobson 2016). In such a case, individuals may witness or experience the same traumatic

incident such as bullying, but their emotional reactions may differ based on thinking patterns that precede the interpretation of the event (Barriga & Morrison 2010). Although researchers have studied a few moderators, including gender and help seeking (Kochenderfer-Ladd 2004), a greater understanding of the predicting factors in explaining the heterogeneity of emotional reactions of bystanders might be a worthwhile avenue of investigation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to ascertain how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortions namely personalisation, catastrophising, overgeneralisation and selective abstraction could predict or inform bullying bystanders' emotional disturbance in reaction to witnessing bullying.

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

- How can self-debasing cognitive distortions inform bystanders' emotional disturbance in reaction to witnessing bullying?

Methods

Research approach, paradigmatic perspective and design

A qualitative research approach was adopted for this research study (Creswell, 2014). Basit (2010) stated that a qualitative approach to research studies is suitable for a research study that intends to draw its findings from participants' perspectives and points of view. A qualitative method was adopted for this research study, as the aim was to uncover multiple perspectives of beliefs, thoughts and meanings that bystanders ascribed to their experiences of school bullying as bystanders.

The philosophical assumption underpinning our study emanated from an interpretivism paradigm, which is a paradigm with the aim of understanding the world from the perspective of people's experiences thereof (Morgan & Pretorious 2013; Sefotho, 2015). The choice of

the interpretivism paradigm was guided by the aim of our research study, which was to qualitatively gain an in-depth understanding and description of the interpretation bystanders attach to the bullying incident that they witnessed.

For this study, a descriptive case study research design was adopted. In line with the intent of our study, which is to listen, understand and interpret the meaning bystanders ascribed to their experiences of witnessing school bullying, we concur with Creswell (2014) that a descriptive case study design is appropriate when exploring a phenomenon as narrated by the participants.

Procedure

We did an initial visit to the school identified as a convenience site. The principal expressed his willingness to allow us to conduct the research study at the school. After obtaining ethical clearance from the required authorities and written approval from the participants and their parents, we arranged for a pre-meeting with the prospective participants to explain the research study's objectives and the potential benefits of participating in the research study. We strove to build a good rapport with the participants to make them feel relieved and relaxed to share their experiences, with no fear of intimidation. Prior to the commencement of the interviews, participants were provided with a detailed document informing them about the nature of the interview, the type of questions to expect, and the purpose of the study. By doing this, we created a good rapport with the participants. The interviews were conducted after school hours to avoid disrupting school activities.

Research participants and sampling strategies

Convenience and purposive sampling were used to select the research participants. A convenience sampling technique was used to select the school where the study was conducted. This particular school was conveniently selected to minimise possible disruption

for the participants. The research site is located within the locality of participants. As such, the proximity of the school to participants' homes further motivated participants to attend the interviews. The research participants for this study were 10 school bullying bystanders who indicated interest in participating in the study, and who were purposefully selected. All participants were in Grade 6 between the ages of 11 and 13 years old. Of the 10 participants, 8 were girls and 2 were boys. Interviews were conducted in the classroom so that participants could respond in a genuine and honest manner.

Learners who have not experienced bullying as a direct victim but only witnessed bullying in school were identified by means of a request to participate in a research study through an invitation letter. Another inclusion criterion was learners who were in primary school located within the research site. Lastly, bystanders who were early adolescents (within the age range of 11 to 13 years), and who were in Grades 6 or 7 were also included. Participants who could not understand or communicate in the English language were exempted from participating in the study.

All Grade 6 learners that met the inclusion and exclusion criteria above were involved in the first phase of the sampling process. During the first phase of sampling participants, 60 Grade 6 learners were approached to describe the bullying incidents they witnessed at their school in written form. The participants were asked to reflect on the cognitive interpretation and the meaning they attached to the bullying incidents they witnessed at school. During the second phase, we selected the final 10 participants to be interviewed based on the level of details and self-reflection evidenced in the stories they shared in writing about the bullying incidents they had witnessed.

Instruments

Interviews are a primary source of data collection in a qualitative phenomenological study (Yin, 2016). Hence, face-to-face interviews were conducted with individual research participants, by asking semi-structured questions to guide the discussions, and for purposes of investigating and describing the participants' experiences of school bullying as bystanders. We recorded the individual, semi-structured interviews on a voice recorder with the permission of the participants. We also made written notes as a backup. During the interviews, we made use of field notes and a reflective research journal to document our observations while interacting with the participants. An interview session lasted for about 45 minutes. We prepared questions based on the information from the review of the literature, the research questions for the study and the purpose and objectives of this study (Burton et al., 2008).

Ethical consideration

We ensured that ethical procedures were strictly adhered to in conducting this research. Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee at a higher education institution's Faculty of Education and permission from a required authority, to work and undertake the research study at the school, was obtained. Informed assent in written form from the participants, and a consent letter of permission from parents or legal guardians of the learners who participated in the research were obtained. The letter covered aspects such as confidentiality, voluntary participation, research location, and purpose of the study. In addition to adhering to the above ethical principles, we involved an independent registered Educational Psychologist to facilitate the debriefing session at the end of the data collection session, as some participants might have been traumatised by the memory and narration of the bullying events they have witnessed.

Data analysis and interpretation

The qualitative data were analysed through deductive thematic analysis. The data analysis included the transcription of our notes and the audio recordings of the interviews. Inductive thematic analysis is a common form of analysis in qualitative research. Its aim, according to Braun and Clarke (2013), is to pinpoint, examine, and record patterns in data. To establish and create meaningful patterns, we did a thematic analysis by means of a coding method which included a) familiarisation with the data, b) generation of initial codes, c) searching for themes, d) review the themes, e) defining and naming the themes and f) writing up the results.

During the first phase, we familiarised ourselves with the data by reading through the interview transcripts a few times. At the same time, we started developing codes. During the second phase, we generated initial codes from the data with reference to the research question. This systematic classification method and identification of meaningful data as it relates to primary and secondary research questions are referred to as coding (Braun & Clarke 2013). The third phase included the search for themes to identify what is relevant in the themes, and what is not. We included any reference to patterns of thinking that could be identified as contributing to bystanders' behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. We also excluded any reference to thinking patterns that could be identified as not contributing to bystanders' behavioural and emotional responses to witnessing bullying. This laid the foundation for us to begin the analysis of potential codes.

In the process of developing themes, we described the meaning of the different themes. During the fourth phase, we searched for data that support the answers to our research questions. This provided room for further development and review of the themes as they evolved. During this process, some themes that emerged earlier caved into each other, while

other themes were compressed into smaller units. During the fifth phase, we defined and named each theme as well as the data that were being captured.

Three different and independent coders were employed to cross-validate the emergent themes to increase the trustworthiness of the identified themes, and to reduce subjectivity. The first and second coders met to compare their findings after each interview. Discrepancies were resolved by a third coder who reviewed the responses and assigned an appropriate category without knowing the choices of the other two coders.

Trustworthiness of the study

We ensured the credibility of the study through the inclusion of member checking, which meant getting feedback on the data, the interpretation of the data, and the conclusions from the participants themselves. To establish the authenticity of the data collected, we verified our data interpretation with the participants (Onwuegbuzie & Leech 2007). We provided opportunities for the participants to clear their doubt about the research process by allowing them to ask questions. We also ensured that the participants had a proper understanding of their involvement in the research before consenting to participate in the research.

Findings

The findings were presented according to the themes generated from the data. These themes revealed how negative thinking patterns could trigger bystanders' negative emotional responses to witnessing bullying. They captured the contributions and roles of patterns of thought in the aetiology and maintenance of negative emotional responses to witnessing bullying.

Theme 1: Bystanders' self-blame and feelings of guilt

We observed that the majority of the bystanders who participated in this study indulged in taking excess responsibility for the bullying they witnessed, even when the evidence suggested that there was little, they could do to stop the bullying. Apportioning undue blame to themselves for not being able to defend the victims evoked the feelings of guilt. We supported our observation with verbatim extracts from the individual semi-structured interviews. For instance, participant 7 apportioned blame to herself for not being able to rescue the victim, despite declaring that she made attempts to do so by telling the bully to stop:

> *I don't feel good at all because if I couldn't help the victim and she get injured, to me is like I failed her.* Meanwhile, she earlier noted that: *I did intervene because I went there and told the bully that it is not good to fight, I came in between them and I told them that it is not good to fight.*

Another participant assumed responsibility for not standing up to the bully on behalf of the victim. Consequently, she apportioned self-blame to herself and felt anger. She said:

> *I feel angry at myself because I let the bully hit my friend (P1).* We also questioned her to obtain the reason she failed to defend the victim and she stated that:
>
> *I want to help the other children but I can't because I am afraid.*

The third participant revealed that she felt heartbroken for not being able to stand for her friend when she was bullied, and because of that, she felt guilty. She stated the following:

> *I feel heartbroken and I feel bad because I can't defend the victim*. When we asked why she did not intervene when she witnessed bullying, she responded by saying: *I wish I can do that but I am scared to defend the victim.*

In similar vein, participant 5 stated that she still thinks she should receive the blame for not defending the learner she witnessed being bullied, despite her effort to intervene:

> *Yes I get carried away because I am always thinking that there was this learner who was being bullied and I couldn't do anything about it.*

We further sought clarity on what attempts she made to stop the bullying, and she confirmed that she sometimes challenged the bully to stop:

> *Yaa sometimes I feel scared but sometimes I go to tell the bully not to do that and he ends up insulting me.*

Participant 8 had a similar response:

> *I feel unhappy because I couldn't help the person that was bullied.*

Meanwhile, as good as her intention was to do something about the bullying, she equally admitted that she does not have the strength to stand up to the bullies:

> *I really want to defend my friend that was bullied but the boys that bully her were many and stronger than me. I can't fight them.*

It appeared that the bystanders in this study took responsibility for the bullying they witnessed without considering other factors which prevented them from intervening in the bullying situation. Bystanders who are prone to personalisation may ascribe excess responsibility to themselves for events over which they have little or no control, leading to self-blame and feelings of guilt. Engaging in personalisation while reacting to events can negatively influence one's emotions and behaviour (Beck, 2011).

Theme 2: Amplified anxiety and fear

This theme demonstrated how catastrophic amplified anxiety and instilled fear of subsequent direct victimisation in participants is. After witnessing bullying, many of the participants expressed a fear of being the next victim. As a result, they became nervous, worried, restless, scared and afraid of going to school. This is because most of the participants were imagining the worst-case scenario, causing them to anticipate being the next victim of bullying and becoming more fearful of going to school.

Distorted reality influences a person's interpretation of a given situation. Such an interpretation further feeds negative emotions which eventually culminate in full-blown anxiety, nervousness and restlessness. Catastrophic thoughts were expressed in the response of the second participant who said the following:

> *I feel a bit worried when I am supposed to come to school. I always think that what if the bullying that happened to the other learners also happens to me. I am always worried in the morning when it is time for school.*

Exaggerating the potential or real consequences of an event amplifies negative reactions to such an event, as was observed in the reaction of the ninth participant. Participant 9 noted that:

> *Yaa I do think that bullying can happen to me also, what if it happens to me and I get killed.*

Participant 4 stated clearly that she does not feel safe and secure at school, and that she keeps wondering when it will be her turn to be bullied. This, in turn, makes her scared, anxious and nervous:

It also makes me to be scared because that bully can come to me too anytime. When I am supposed to wake up I am thinking about that.

Participant 6 substantiated her fear of going to school as a result of a fear of attack or harm:

I feel like it can happen to me or they can do what they did to other victims to me also.

She further stated that:

My heart beat fast. I feel shaking and I freeze because I get scared of what they are going to do to me.

Participant 10 added that:

I get scared and feel like the same person can come and do the same thing to me. I feel bad because I am scared that he can come from nowhere and come and beat me too.

From all the experiences of participants, it seemed that anticipating subsequent direct victimisation amplifies various negative reactions such as fear, worry, sadness, frustration, restlessness, nervousness, and anger. Catastrophic thinking triggers unhelpful emotions, as most of the participants believed their negative thoughts regarding their safety in school after witnessing bullying, rather than having a balanced view of the situation. Participants anticipated similar victimisation as a result of negative exaggeration so much that they actually created fear and anxiety for themselves. Engaging in catastrophic thoughts narrows participants' thinking down, reducing their range of options to manage the situation.

Theme 3: Negative perception of school safety

Overgeneralised beliefs were evidenced in the description provided by participants regarding their experiences of school bullying during individual semi-structured interviews. Most of the participants made an unjustified generalisation on the basis of a few incidences of bullying they have witnessed. One participant stated:

> *I think a lot of things. Sometimes I can't even imagine how I am walking through; my mind just gets lost because I will be thinking that I am going to a place where bullying is happening* (P2).

Some of the participants assumed and anticipated that they would equally be a direct victim of bullying after witnessing a few of their peers being bullied, and this negatively informed their perception of school safety:

> *My heart tells me that I must stay at home because when I think of going to school, I think about what they are doing to other kids at school like taking their money or beating them. I don't feel like going to school* (P3).

The fifth participant draws a broad conclusion about his safety in school and the possibility of also being bullied based on a few incidences of bullying he has witnessed. When asked to describe how he felt about his safety in school after he witnessed bullying, he responded:

> *No, I feel like in school there are no more good people, there are only bad people at school. That is how I feel.*

Participant 1 had this to say:

No, I don't like going to school because I always think that this bully can come and take his stress out from me. No, I don't feel safe because someday it will happen to me.

It seemed participants made a general rule based on a negative interpretation of a few incidents of bullying they have witnessed, thereby drawing a broad conclusion about their safety and well-being in school, and the possibility of also being bullied.

Theme 4: Indirect co-victimisation

In the course of our discussions with the participants of this study, it was evident that they selectively filtered the available evidence, which led them to make a biased judgment while attaching a meaning to the bullying incident they have witnessed. Participants selectively filtered the available evidence, which led them to make interpretations that seemed not to be absolutely accurate, and which in turn contributed to their psychological re-victimisation and indirect co-victimisation.

Participant 5 recounted an incident where she witnessed a learner being bullied and thereafter becoming frustrated, shocked, and scared of going to school because of the thought of becoming the next victim:

I feel scared during the whole break. Sometimes during break, I can't even go out. My other friend will see me and ask me; why are you not going out with us? When I think about that bullying, sometimes I don't get out of class even in break time. I feel so scared. It is so frustrating.

In similar vein, participant 4 described an instance where she watched a learner being bullied and thereafter became scared, and suffered from nightmares:

> *It affects me so much because sometimes I dream about this boy bullying other kids. I can't sleep because I think it can happen to me.*

A parallel view was echoed by participant 3, who experienced difficulties in sleeping as a result of focusing on the experience of one or a few incidences of bullying witnessed:

> *I have bad dreams and I keep on thinking of how they beat other kids. Most times I don't sleep well at night. I also don't feel confident about myself because I think of who is going to be bullied next. It takes my confidence when I think about the things that happened to other kids.*

The responses of the participants revealed that focusing on the experience of one or a few negative events witnessed or experienced while making an appraisal of that event could contribute to indirect co-victimisation. It could be argued that conceptualising an entire experience of an event while making an appraisal of that event on the basis of a fragment could feed negative emotions.

Discussion

The findings of this study revealed how the four domains of self-debasing cognitive distortions namely personalisation, catastrophising, overgenaralising and selective abstraction served as the basis for generating and triggering varieties of emotional disturbances in reaction to witnessing bullying. In specific terms, the findings of this study revealed the contributory role of the train of thoughts that predisposes bystanders to react in a particular way.

Personalisation played a predictive role in apportioning undue self-blame. It turned out that bystanders in this study held themselves responsible and blamed themselves for their inability to defend the victim in the absence of objective evidence. In most cases, it was

apparent that there was no basis for the bystanders to apportion blame to themselves. Nevertheless, they assumed they were the sole cause of the bullying and victimisation. Hence, they reacted with feelings of guilt and self-blame. As bystanders live with the thoughts of disappointment, shame and guilt for not being able to defend the victim of bullying, their self-confidence erodes, which further triggers emotional problems such as withdrawal, avoidance, difficulties concentrating and feelings of inferiority. This finding resonates with the report of Szentagotai and Freeman (2007), as well as Szasz (2011), that personalisation as a maladaptive thinking pattern debases an individual and can lead to self-blame.

The bystanders in this study appraised their experiences of witnessing bullying and then automatically imagined and expected subsequent, direct victimisation, which triggered a greater likelihood of anxiety. It was evident that their emotional reactions were based on "what if", and not on reality. This finding is in positive connotation with the view of Muris and Field (2008), who asserted that catastrophic thinking plays a precise role in the aetiology and maintenance of childhood anxiety disorders.

Bystanders in this study reached a general and overarching conclusion about their vulnerability to being the next victim of bullying, based on their negative interpretation of one or a few incidences of bullying they witnessed. This overgeneralised belief induced and exacerbated the negative perception of their safety in school. Unjustified generalisations served as the basis for misguided actions of bystanders, and equally contributed to their negative perception of school safety. Bystanders in this study reached a broad conclusion that was characterised by ill-grounded beliefs and blanket judgement about their well-being and safety in school after witnessing bullying. This finding could probably be because the participants in this study have been trapped by a polarised way of appraising a situation, and they could only see this way of interpreting a situation or event. This finding coincides with

the report of other researchers such as Rehna et al., (2012) and Flouri and Panourgia (2011), whose studies also confirmed that self-debasing cognitive distortions such as over-generalisation could instigate individual perception of threat and dangers.

The findings of this study also indicated that bystanders pinpointed one or a few incidences of bullying they witnessed and gave a biased interpretation of that experience, which in turn contributed to psychological re-victimisation for them. Bystanders in this study erroneously magnified the threat posed by witnessing bullying, as their fear of becoming the next victims was unfounded. Many of the participants experienced sleep difficulties and nightmares due to constant thoughts and fear of being the next target of bullying in school, whereas it is possible that their thoughts could just be a guess and not reality.

This finding further provided evidence that attention bias could precipitate the development of co-victimisation and psychological victimisation. This theme also upheld the findings of other studies as reported in the literature with regards to the influence of selective abstraction in psychological re-victimisation for bystanders of bullying in school. For instance, Teo and Say (2012) found a strong correlation between the level of selective abstraction and the severity of psychological re-victimisation for bystanders who witnessed bullying in school.

Lastly, there was 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) though most available studies were based on international literature. Even if proven to be empirically true, the feasibility and adaptability of these findings being applicable within different environments and contexts need to be ascertained. Since the findings of this study provided an insight into how bystanders' thinking patterns could be a determinant factor in emotional and behavioural reactions to witnessing bullying,

this study, therefore, support the cognitive vulnerability hypothesis of Beck's cognitive theory, which asserted that individual cognition plays a significant and primary role in the development and maintenance of emotional linkage to events (Beck, 2011).

Conclusions

While empirical research suggested that bystanders express negative emotional reactions to witnessing bullying, a research study that shift attention to the cognitive process that has a significant impact on the onset and maintenance of bystanders' emotional reactions to witnessing bullying is particularly significant. This is because cognitive distortion outlines the mechanism that generates distorted thoughts as a result of bias in the information processing by the cognitive system, which in turn affects the cognitions and emotions displayed by an individual in reaction to events.

It was revealed from the findings of this study that self-debasing cognitive distortion predisposes bystanders to negative emotional reactions to witnessing bullying. Therefore, the findings of the study might be helpful to school psychologists and counsellors to fully comprehend the predictive tendencies of self-debasing cognitive distortion as a determinant of negative emotions. Furthermore, the findings of this study could provide school counsellors and educational psychologists with insight regarding possible cognitive strategies that could be applied in designing treatment and interventions for victims of school bullying, especially the bystanders. In addition, the findings of this study might bring bystanders to the awareness of the reciprocal relationship among their thoughts, feelings and emotional reactions to witnessing bullying in school. This awareness may reveal the link between irrationality in their thought patterns and their reactions to witnessing bullying.

Ellis (2003) noted that emotions significantly influence and affect thinking, just as thinking influences emotions. Individuals are directly responsible for generating their own

emotions. Therefore, it is possible for one to change the emotional response to events by changing the appraisal and interpretation one attaches to that event. Bystanders could, therefore, in our 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).

We therefore recommend that school counsellors and educational psychologists should provide adequate support to victims of bullying - especially bystanders - by equipping them with cognitive restructuring skills to root out the source of bias in their thought patterns. In line with this, school counsellors should be trained in the use of cognitive restructuring techniques such as challenging automatic thoughts, decatastrophising and guided discovery needed to refute distortions in negative thought patterns.

Lastly, anti-bullying programmes should be included in the school curriculum. Rigby and Johnson (2006) remarked that having effective anti-bullying rules and sanctions against bullying behaviour allay the fear of being victimized, and improve learners' perception of safety in school. Based on the findings of this study we recommend that future research studies should expand the scope of this study by increasing the sample size and geographical coverage.

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Conflict of interest

There is no conflict of interest.

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