Cyberbullying from the perspective of choice theory

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Received 21 February, 2014; Accepted 18 August, 2014

This study aims to propose a theoretical explanation for the cyberbullying problem, which is the use of cyber communication tools to endanger other people. In recent years, the cyberbullying problem, which is widespread especially among the young, has been the subject of scientific studies. These studies have mostly focused on the issues of causes and results of cyberbullying, and variables related to it. The research has shown that the ones showing cyberbullying behaviors or the ones trying to prevent these behaviors are in need of studies aiming to minimize these kinds of behaviors. It has been observed that theoretical explanations directed towards the minimization of this behavior and towards making contributions to the studies aiming to prevent cyberbullying are required. In this study, cyberbullying is discussed within the framework of William Glasser’s choice theory. In the study, first, information about cyberbullying is presented, and then, general views of choice theory related to the nature of humans are clarified. Lastly, assessments about cyberbullying are stated with regard to the concepts in choice theory, such as basic needs, Quality World, successful and unsuccessful identity, choice and responsibility.

Key words: cyberbullying, choice theory, reality therapy.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying

According to Arıçak (2011), cyberbullying “is all of the behaviors which aim against an individual or a group, a specific individual or legal personality and endanger them technically or in a relational way.” Cyberbullying is described, in other terms, as “the intentional and repetitious behaviors which include the use of information and communication technologies, such as e-mail, cell phone, beeper, short message service and web sites, by a group or an individual to endanger others and which support hostile attitudes (Agatston et al., 2007; Ang and Goh, 2010; Patchin and Hinduja, 2006; Totan, 2007; Wright et al., 2009). It covers aims, such as soliciting, humiliating or insulting and trying to embarrass, and it can be caused by an individual as well as by a group (Anderson, 2010).

Its difference from traditional bullying

Cyberbullying is similar to traditional bullying in terms of being unbalanced force, including aggressiveness (Dooley et al., 2009; Grigg, 2010) and supporting each other (Jose et al., 2011). However, cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying with regard to use of communication technologies, cyberbullying agents’ possibility of hiding their identities, the possibility of a situation stemming from cyberbullying being heard by a
broad range of people because of virtual opportunities, and the use of sexual bullying more easily and more often. Moreover, while the victim in traditional bullying has the opportunity to escape the effects of bullying by leaving the place, for the victims of cyberbullying, it is difficult to find a place to escape because the contents are known by many people and kept in a place open to be seen (Ayas and Horzum, 2010).

**Its effects on victims**

According to different studies, at least 20% of adolescents are victims of cyberbullying in USA (Li, 2007; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2009). Depression, social isolation and self-harming behaviors are the most common problems which the victims of cyberbullying experience (Mason, 2008; Wong-Lo et al., 2011). Other consequences, such as inability to perceive, emotional or friendship problems, insomnia, headaches, repetitive stomach aches, feeling insecure in school, etc., can also occur (Sourander et al., 2010). Moreover, the studies have shown that the victims have low self-confidence and self-respect (Didden et al., 2009; Mason, 2008; Patchin and Hinduja, 2010a). In the study by Navarro et al. (2011) on 10-12 year-old students, it was observed that the victims of cyberbullying have social anxiety and especially fear of being negatively assessed. Female victims of cyberbullying are more likely to have emotional symptoms than male victims. However, females tend to ask for help more than males (Dooley et al., Cross and Spiel, 2010).

In literature review on cyber-bullying, it can be seen that most of the studies are on causes, results and related variables of cyber-bullying (Gradinger et al., 2010; Kirakidis and Kavoura, 2010; Menesini and Nocentini, 2009; Vandebosch and Van Cleemput, 2008). However, considering the prevalence of the problem of cyber-bullying, it can be understood that there is a need of studies aimed at not only preventing cyberbullying in those with the behavior but also reducing this behavior. The studies aimed at preventing cyber-bullying are important in terms of prevention of new victims exposed to bullying. The theoretical explanations on this problem are needed for intervention studies. Theoretical approaches explaining the cyber bullying behaviors will contribute to solutions on subjects such as; the reasons behind such behaviors and the points to focus on for intervention programs. Studies conducted in order to explain cyber-bullying under the theoretical framework can be said to be beneficial for the intervention models and programs to be developed. From this perspective, which also constitutes the purpose of this study, cyber-bullying is going to be analyzed within the framework of the choice theory. In this respect, first of all, the general framework of choice theory will be explained and then there will be analyses in order to explain the cyber bullying behaviors.

**Choice Theory**

Glasser, the father of choice theory, explained his theory in rebuttal to the view that people cannot be responsible for their behaviors, including psychological problems (Kaner, 1993). Glasser, objecting to the view that the reasons behind psychological problems are some mental disorders, stated in his theory that the real source of problems is individuals' own choice (Glasser, 2000; Haight and Shaughnessy, 2003) and that our behaviors are directed by internal factors, which he called a "Quality World", not by external factors. His view is different from other counseling theories, particularly behaviorist theories (Cameron, 2009).

When people experience a problem with someone else, they want to change the other by controlling the other's behaviors rather than changing and controlling their own. This leads to communication being damaged. However, according to the choice theory, an individual has the competence to control only his own behaviors (Glasser, 1997; Özmen, 2006).

According to Glasser, there are five basic motives originating from humans' genetic endowment (Glasser, 1985). These are (1) surviving and reproducing, (2) belonging (to love, to be loved and to be of value), (3) acquiring power, (4) being free and (5) having fun.

Quality World and picture album are other important concepts in choice theory. Though the needs of all humans are similar, their wills as to how to meet these needs are different because their lives are not the same. The solutions that we find to meet our requirements form the personal Quality World. One's Quality World consists of perceptions and pictures related to subjects, phenomena and persons that one wants to exist in the real world. We build our whole life to reach the images in this world. Therefore, our Quality World is the most important part of our whole life (Glasser, 1998a).

According to choice theory, a behavior includes elements of doing, thinking, feeling and physiology. Glasser calls this total behavior (Glasser, 1998b; Zeeman, 2006). The element of doing in our total behavior is always under our control. Therefore, when this element changes, other elements, namely thinking, feeling and physiology will be under our control (Glasser, 1998b).

Choice theory focuses on the concept of successful and unsuccessful identity. Glasser (1998b) claims that the degree of satisfying the requirements of belonging, loving and feeling secure has an important role in the formation of successful identity. A feeling of responsibility is the most important indicator of having a successful identity. Successful identity brings responsibility with it. If a person has a successful identity, he can acknowledge the consequences of his behaviors, accept realities as they are and behave accordingly. People who have a successful identity can satisfy their needs of being of value, belonging, loving and being loved (Palancı, 2004).

Choice theory highlights responsibility. Responsible
people are aware of what they want and what they can achieve and they are independent people who are active in achieving these. From this perspective, responsible people are the people who can control their lives and behave accordingly (Palanci, 2004).

Cyberbullying behaviors are discussed within the framework of choice theory in this article. There are undoubtedly great many theories explaining the behaviors and needs of human beings. For example, while self-determination theory approaches the human needs as competence, autonomy and relationality (Deci and Ryan, 2000), according to Maslow the human needs are ordered as a hierarchy from physiological needs to the self-realization need. These theories provide significant information to explain the needs and behaviors of human. The reason why cyber-bullying is analyzed within the perspective of choice theory in this analysis is that reality therapy (Corey, 2009) developed out of choice theory enables the analyses about cyber-bullying behaviors be used for intervention program.

Another reason why cyber-bullying behaviors are analyzed within the framework of choice theory in this article is that cyber-bullying behaviors are the ones widely observed in schools and mostly during adolescence (NCES, 2011). William Glasser, who generated choice theory and reality therapy, is also a school psychologist who has studied problems encountered in schools. The theory and therapy put forward by Glasser were used as a model in order to deal with the problems encountered in schools (Walter et al., 2008). In this regard, the choice theory and reality therapy approach can be used in the studies carried out by school counselors in order to prevent cyber bullying behaviors. This analysis discussing cyber-bullying from the perspective of choice theory is thought to be useful for such studies.

Cyberbullying and choice theory

In this part, cyber bullying behaviors will be associated with basic premises of choice theory. In this sense, cyberbullying behaviors will be evaluated with regard to concepts, which choice theory used to explain human behaviors (Glasser, 1998b), such as basic needs, quality world, total behavior and successful-unsuccessful identity.

Basic needs and cyberbullying

According to choice theory, all people’s behaviors aim to meet five basic needs. In this sense, cyberbullying aims to satisfy one or some of these basic needs. In a study by Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007), students doing cyberbullying displayed this behavior for these aims with the following percentages: 38% to have fun, 25% to take revenge, and 6% because of their bad mood due to the situation they were in. The rest could not answer why they behaved in this way.

Moreover, other studies have shown that behaviors of anger, aggressiveness, etc. are related to cyberbullying (Schultze-Krumholz and Scheithauer, 2009). People displaying behaviors of anger and aggressiveness display cyberbullying behaviors, too (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010). Vandebosch and Cleemput (2008) state that victims of traditional bullying try to balance their situation by means of the power they acquire from their knowledge on the internet, computer and other cyber communication tools. In the same way, it is stated that the ones regarding themselves as inadequate in terms of physical power and age try to balance the situation with cyberbullying behaviors. In this sense, when the argument is discussed from the point of the five basic needs in choice theory, it is possible to state that cyberbullying behaviors aim to satisfy the needs of recreation and power.

Glasser (1998a) states that students having difficulty in meeting their needs are generally the ones who experience relationship problems in puberty. When the gap between what a person wants and what he has is high, he feels anger and rage. These feelings lead the adolescent to display rebellion and problematic behaviors. According to Glasser (1998b), another reason for the problems in relationships is being restrained and the inability to present individual potential. If their abilities are not believed in and they are not given the chance to cope with the obstacles they encounter, adolescents experience discipline problems. In this sense, it can be stated that cyberbullying, which can be regarded as a discipline problem in schools, is related to a person’s being unsuccessful and a feeling of being restrained in satisfying their basic needs.

Choice theory claims that most people have similar underlying problems. This problem is generally their inability to have a successful and satisfying relationship with one of the people important in their life or to attach themselves to other people (Glasser, 2000). People who are alone and have a low level of acceptability by society have a high rate of cyberbullying behaviors (Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011). It has been seen that the ability to establish social relationships and the competence to struggle with the problems experienced in social relations predict cyberbullying negatively (Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011; Sourander et al., 2010). Poor parent relations also predict cyberbullying (Mason, 2008). In this sense, from the point of choice theory, cyberbullying behaviors can be explained by a person’s inability to develop healthy and satisfying relationships. When the findings of this study are discussed from the point of choice theory, it can be stated that one of the reasons behind cyberbullying behaviors is the fact that the needs of belonging and establishing relationships are not met adequately and properly.

Quality World and Cyberbullying

According to Glasser, the things that a person wants to
do or reach to meet his needs form the picture album. When the picture album/Quality World and real world are different from each other, this means that there is a problem for that person and this difference takes us to behavior. According to this, behavior is the effort to remove the difference between what he lives in (real world) and what he wants to live (picture album). Abnormal behaviors stem from this difference, too (Corey, 2008). In this sense, cyberbullying behaviors can be regarded as abnormal behaviors which stem from a person’s inability to realistically satisfy his needs for power and entertainment.

Picture album starts to take shape after birth and is rearranged throughout life. Beginning from our birth, our experiences teach us solutions as to how to satisfy our needs and present solutions to satisfy our needs when we want. Therefore, parent relationships and experiences beginning from childhood are important in the formation of picture album (Glasser, 1998b).

In studies discussing the relationship between cyberbullying behaviors and parent attitudes, it has been observed that authoritative and oppressive attitudes of parents predict cyberbullying behaviors at maximum level (Dilmac and Aydogan, 2010). When we consider that the ones growing up in an authoritative and suppressive atmosphere will have experiences of violence and oppression, the pictures in their picture album, especially the ones of satisfying the need for power are expected to include solutions involving aggressiveness. It has been found by some researchers that behaviors such as anger and aggressiveness are related to cyberbullying (Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer, 2009). Individuals displaying behaviors of anger and aggressiveness display cyberbullying behaviors, too (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010b). In this sense, it can be said that pictures aiming to satisfy the need for power in the albums of the ones causing cyberbullying consist of pictures which involve cyberbullying behaviors.

Total Behavior and Cyberbullying

According to choice theory, a behavior is total. A behavior, in addition to activity of doing, consists of thinking, feeling and physiology, which makes it total (Glasser, 1998b; Zeeman 2006). In this sense, cyberbullying behaviors are total behaviors, too. The doing element of this behavior is the person’s actions that he does to another person using cyber communication technology in order to do harm. Within the scope of choice theory, elements of thinking, feeling and physiology in a cyberbullying behavior can be explained as follows.

It has been found that people displaying cyberbullying behaviors do not feel safe (Sourander et al., 2010); they feel alone (Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011), have feelings of revenge (König et al., 2010; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007) and are hostile (Aricak, 2009) feelings. Besides, these people stated that a reason behind their cyberbullying behaviors is to get rid of boredom (Yaman and Peker, 2012). When these factors related to cyberbullying are taken as a total behavior they can be regarded as feeling element of the total behavior.

In a study in which the relationship between cyberbullying and cognitive distortions was investigated (Çetin et al., 2011), it was found that cyberbullying behaviors were predicted by unrealistic expectations, mind reading and approach avoidance, which are types of cognitive distortion. A relationship between cyberbullying and perceptual problems (Dilmac and Aydogan, 2010) was found. Besides, positive relationship between cyberbullying and invisibility delusion (Mason, 2008) and low perception of self-esteem (Eroglu, 2011) was found. When cyberbullying is considered as a total behavior, these factors, which are related to cyberbullying, can be regarded as thinking element of the total behavior.

It was found that people who cyberbully have health problems (Kowalski and Limber, 2013) and there is a positive relationship between cyberbullying and somaticization (Aricak, 2009). When cyberbullying is considered as a total behavior, these factors related to cyberbullying can be regarded as physiology element of the total behavior.

Successful-unsucessful identity and cyberbullying

The ones displaying cyberbullying behaviors state that they display these kinds of behaviors with their friends in order to maintain friendship relations (Yaman and Peker 2012). The ones who cannot be independent in their relationships and have a high sense of ego display cyberbullying behaviors more (Çetin et al., 2012). A study by Eroglu (2011) showed that there is a negative relationship between cyberbullying and internal values. In addition, people with low self-respect display cyberbullying behaviors more (Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011). These features related to cyberbullying behaviors involve unsuccessful identity, an important concept of choice theory. Unsuccessful identity involves a person’s feeling of worthlessness and low self-confidence. This characteristic is the reason behind the problems in his social relations (Palanci, 2004).

Choice theory focuses on the concept of successful and unsuccessful identity (Glasser, 1998b). In the case of unsuccessful identity, the person tends to perceive the reality as he wants to, distorts or rejects it (Palanci, 2004). People who cyberbully have also been observed to have perceptual problems (Dilmac and Aydogan, 2010) and cognitive distortions (Çetin et al., 2011).

Unsuccessful identity is the person who cannot take on the responsibilities of his behaviors, and so, who fails to satisfy his needs of self-worth, belonging, loving and being loved. Therefore, people who have unsuccessful identity use ineffective methods to meet their needs (Corey, 2008). People who cyberbully have been observed to avoid taking responsibility (Çelik et al., 2012;
Dilmaç and Aydoğan (2010), to have low self-esteem (Patchin and Hinduja, 2010a) and to experience problems making friends and being accepted (Aoyama et al., 2011; Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011). It is stated that there is a negative relation between responsibility and cyberbullying (Çelik et al., 2012) According to Glasser, behavioral problems are used in order not to accept realities and responsibilities that do not satisfy needs. When a person accepts realities and his responsibilities, he starts to display adequate and proper behaviors to satisfy his needs (Kaner, 1993). In this sense, one of the reasons for cyberbullying is the individual’s inadequacy to take responsibilities. In this sense, it can be stated that characteristics of unsuccessful identity can be observed in people who cyberbully.

Forcing the person to withdraw from social contexts and weakening his initiative power for change are other characteristics of unsuccessful identity (Palancı, 2014). People who are alone and who have low levels of self-esteem, peer optimism, social acceptance and the ability to make friends have been observed to have high levels of cyberbullying behaviors (Schoffstall and Cohen, 2011). Besides, a relationship between being open to change and cyberbullying was found, too (Çelik et al., 2012). Findings of this study, which are related to unsuccessful identity, indicate that people who cyberbully have characteristics of unsuccessful identity.

According to Glasser, psychological problems can be explained by characteristics of unsuccessful identity (Kaner, 1993). Findings of this study also present us similar information showing that cyberbullying behaviors can be explained by having unsuccessful identity.

Conclusion

The relationship between cyberbullying behaviors and basic needs shows that cyberbullying behaviors aim to satisfy the needs of entertainment and power, two of the five basic needs in choice theory. Cyberbullying, in this sense, can be regarded as an abnormal behavior stemming from a person’s inability to realistically satisfy the needs of power and entertainment. Therefore, it can be stated that pictures in the picture album of people displaying cyberbullying behaviors consist of images of cyberbullying. From the point of successful and unsuccessful identity, people displaying cyberbullying behaviors have characteristics of unsuccessful identity, such as feeling worthless and having low self-confidence. From the point of choice theory, cyberbullying behaviors can also be explained by a person’s inability to develop healthy and satisfying commitments. Another reason is a person’s deficiency in taking responsibilities.

In this study, along with cyber-bullying behaviors analyzed from the perspective of choice theory, some limitations of the theory should be taken into consideration as well. In choice theory, William Glasser does not accept psychiatric classifications of misbehaviors and rejects psychopathological explanations as well (Cameron, 2009). Moreover, cyber-bullying behaviors were stated to be predicted by some psychiatric symptoms (Ancak, 2009). Another limitation of choice theory and reality therapy on cyber-bullying behaviors is about not giving importance to the effects of past and focusing on present in relation to the source of behaviors (Corey, 2009). Studies show that those with cyber-bullying behaviors were exposed to cyber or traditional bullying in their past (König et al., 2010). In addition, another finding of studies is that cyber-bullying and parental attitudes during childhood are related (Dilmaç and Aydoğan, 2010). Another limitation of the theory used in this analysis is related to its rejection of unconscious processes (Corey, 2009). In this case, the possible unconscious causes of the behavior cannot be explained with those who have healthy relationships, whose basic needs are met adequately and who do not have any observable reason leading to cyberbullying behaviors.

Conflict of Interests

The author have not declared any conflict of interests.

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