



The nature of cyberbullying, and strategies for prevention

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has been identified as an important problem amongst youth in the last decade. This paper reviews some recent findings and discusses general concepts within the area. The review covers definitional issues such as repetition and power imbalance, types of cyberbullying, age and gender differences, overlap with traditional bullying and sequence of events, differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying, motives for and impact of cyber victimization, coping strategies, and prevention/intervention possibilities. These issues will be illustrated by reference to recent and current literature, and also by in-depth interviews with nine Swedish students aged 13–15 years, who had some first-hand experience of one or more cyberbullying episodes. We conclude by discussing the evidence for different coping, intervention and prevention strategies.

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1. Introduction

Some reviews of cyberbullying already exist (e.g., Mora-Merchán & Jäger, 2010; Smith, 2012; Smith & Slonje, 2010; Tokunaga, 2010), but the area is developing very rapidly, in part as new technologies develop and new fashions (such as particular social network sites) appear. In this review we will highlight many important aspects, covering definitional criteria such as repetition and power imbalance; types of cyberbullying; age and gender differences; sequence of events; overlap with traditional bullying; differences between cyberbullying and traditional bullying; impact of cyber victimization; and coping strategies and prevention/intervention possibilities. We also highlight victims' knowledge of the perpetrators and the reluctance of victims to tell adults about their experiences.

In addition we illustrate these aspects with data from semi-structured in-depth interviews with nine students (five girls, four boys) aged 13–15 years; all had been recruited in a previous study by the authors (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2012). They came from five different schools in Sweden, and all had some knowledge about cyberbullying, as victims (7) and/or perpetrators (3) or only as a bystander (1). The interviews were carried out individually in 2008, and lasted 30–45 min. The questions used in the interviews focused on the same issues mentioned above.

2. Definitional issues

Over the last decade awareness of cyberbullying, followed by research activity and publications, has increased very rapidly. Much

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of the literature (though not all) is on cyberbullying in young people. Also, much of the literature (though not all) stems from a psychological perspective, and has built on a 30-year tradition of research on what is often called traditional bullying, or offline bullying. This carry-on includes both early definitions of cyberbullying, as well as the kinds of topics pursued (such as characteristics of cyber-bullies and cyber-victims). Nevertheless, other disciplinary perspectives are also present, and the area presents some new challenges as well as opportunities for researchers (Smith, 2010).

Bullying is generally seen as intentional behavior to harm another, repeatedly, where it is difficult for the victim to defend himself or herself (Olweus, 1999); it is based on an imbalance of power; and can be defined as a systematic abuse of power (Rigby, 2002; Smith & Sharp, 1994). By extending the definition from traditional bullying, cyberbullying has been defined as 'an aggressive act or behavior that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al., 2008). From this perspective, cyberbullying is a systematic abuse of power which occurs through the use of information and communication technologies (ICTs).

Although the definition mentioned above (or similar ones) is quite common within the cyberbullying context, some of these definitional aspects are under debate. Two criteria particularly separate bullying, from more general aggression (i.e. intent to cause harm). These are the aspects of repetition, and power imbalance. Both can be seen as relatively clear for traditional bullying, but having more difficulties in application to cyberbullying.

First, the idea of repetition within cyberbullying is not as straightforward; one cyberbullying act may readily 'snowball' out of the initial control of the bully, due to the technology used. An

example is a picture that is sent (or uploaded onto the Internet), that at a later stage is distributed by other people (not the initial perpetrator). Thus a single act by one perpetrator may be repeated many times by others, and experienced many times by the victim. If the repetition is not carried out by the perpetrator, is this still cyberbullying? Slonje et al. (2012) asked what ‘actively targeted bystanders’ (pupils who had been sent or shown information intended to cyberbully someone else) do with the information they had seen. Although the majority (72%) of these did nothing further to distribute the material, others did (9% forwarded the material to other friends, whilst 6% showed or forwarded it to the victim to bully him/her further). On a positive note, 13% showed/forwarded the material to the original victim in order to help him/her.

The second definitional issue is that of power imbalance. Olweus (1993) referred to this in traditional bullying by describing the victim as ‘weak’, which could be not only physical weakness but also psychological. In addition, a power imbalance might be by virtue of numbers, or popularity/rejection in a peer group context. Such forms of power imbalance within the cyberbullying context are not so clear. Physical strength is not necessary for perpetration of cyberbullying, nor is strength of numbers. However two other possibilities of power imbalance in cyberbullying are technical ability with ICTs, and anonymity.

Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) argued that a greater knowledge of ICT’s may contribute to a power imbalance; they found that pupils with more advanced Internet skills were more likely to have experience with deviant Internet and mobile phone activities. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) found that cyberbullies do rate themselves as Internet experts to a higher degree compared to those who do not cyberbully others. While some cyberbullying such as sending a nasty text message is easy, other types (such as impersonating someone else on a website) does require some more technological expertise. However, it does not take too much expertise for one to take a picture of someone else in order to use it in an abusive manner, be it uploading it onto Internet for others to see or showing around amongst friends. Perhaps in certain environments (e.g., ‘second life’ – a virtual world, see Coyne, Chesney, Logan, & Madden, 2009), greater expertise may enable someone to become more powerful than others and so intentionally do them harm. However, in much of the text message and website bullying experienced by pupils of school age, technological skill is arguably a minor factor.

Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2008) also argued that anonymity can contribute to a power imbalance. A number of studies (Raskauskas, 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008) have shown that often the victim does not know who the person bullying him/her is. It is more difficult to respond effectively if you do not know the identity of the perpetrator. In our interviews, the notion of anonymity was clearly indicated by one student when asked to say the first three words that came to mind when hearing the word cyberbullying: ‘Cyberbullying is probably the not knowing and the anonymity about those that bully. . . Well that you don’t really know what is happening. . . And you only know that it is someone that is out to get you’ (girl, 13). In fact, the students that had been cyberbullied usually did not know initially who it was that cyberbullied them.

Conversely, if a victim does know the perpetrator, then the more conventional criteria of physical/psychological strength and peer group popularity may come back into play (i.e., a victim may be fearful of retaliating against a popular and stronger pupil who may take further revenge offline). When a victim does know the identity of the perpetrator, it is often someone from the same school or someone from their vicinity (Smith et al., 2008). All the pupils we interviewed, when knowing eventually who targeted them, stated it was someone from their school or local area. One student talking about being text message bullied by someone at their school illustrated this link: ‘like worried if one for example

becomes threatened. One is worried. Hardly dares to go to school’ (girl, 13).

A different aspect of power imbalance in cyberbullying has been suggested by Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross (2009); that since the material exists in cyberspace it is harder to remove or to avoid it, and that this in itself can make the victim feel more powerless.

Although it is possible to mount a defense of the criteria of repetition and imbalance of power in the cyberbullying domain, there are clearly difficulties. In practice some studies actually measure cyber-aggression or cyber-abuse since they do not clearly include these two aspects. For example, Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, and Waterhouse (2011, Study 2) do not invoke either repetition or imbalance of power as criteria to demarcate cyberbullying, which they also refer to as ‘internet victimization’. This broader approach is sometimes clearly stated: for example, Law, Shapka, and Olson (2010) explicitly used an “online aggression” scale. Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) compared different types of bullying, including cyber, and did include imbalance of power in their definition of cyberbullying; but they explicitly examined only *once or twice or more* because “it is not uncommon in the literature of cyber bullying to count a single incident as an experience of cyber bullying” (p. 370).

In summary, defining cyberbullying may not be as clear cut as defining traditional bullying, due to difficulties in the criteria of repetition and power imbalance. These issues, and the extent to which cyberbullying can usefully be distinguished from a broader concept of cyber aggression or cyber victimization, are being debated.

3. Types of cyberbullying

Some studies just look at cyberbullying as a single construct (e.g., Study 1 in Law et al., 2011). While suitable for some purposes, many aspects of cyberbullying (such as gender differences, or impact) do seem to vary by the specific type of cyberbullying experienced.

Some studies have divided cyberbullying into the two main media of Internet and mobile phone bullying (e.g., Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchan, Calmaestra, & Vega, 2009). However in recent years the advent of smart phones makes it possible to send and receive emails via a mobile phone as well as use these phones to access the Internet more broadly; this makes the earlier distinction between mobile phone and Internet bullying, problematic.

Some studies have investigated cyberbullying via a range of more specific media. Smith et al. (2008) used seven main media described by secondary school pupils: mobile phone calls, text messages, picture/video clip bullying, e-mails, chatroom, instant messaging, and websites. Hinduja and Patchin (2010) used a 9-item cyber victimization scale, covering similar media. Wachs and Wolf (2011) used a 5-item scale, again covering similar media but grouping some of those together (e.g., text message/mobile phone calls). In South Korea, cyberbullying in Internet game contexts has been found to be a very common form (Tippett & Kwak, 2012). These lists of types of cyberbullying and aggression are not exhaustive, and as technology develops, new forms of cyberbullying emerge.

An alternative to looking at the medium used, is to look at the type of action, or its content. Willard (2006) described seven categories: flaming, online harassment; cyberstalking, denigration (put-downs), masquerade, outing, and exclusion, which are to some extent independent of the media used. Rivers and Noret (2010) described the content of abusive text messages and e-mails, in an English sample. Their 10 main categories were: threat of physical violence, abusive or hate-related, name calling (including homophobia), death threats, ending of platonic relationship(s),

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