Cyberbullying and subjective health
A large-scale study of students in Stockholm, Sweden

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1. Introduction

The sharp increase in the use of mobile phones and the Internet has given rise to new opportunities for people to meet and communicate. However, there are also dark sides to these new forms of communication. One of these is cyberbullying, i.e. bullying via mobile phone and the Internet. Given that cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon, empirical knowledge is still limited and particularly so in Sweden, which in international comparison has reported low rates of bullying in general. The aim of the study is to investigate: 1) the prevalence of cyberbullying among students in Stockholm, Sweden; 2) the overlap between cyberbullying and traditional forms of school bullying, and 3) the association between the experience of cyberbullying and subjective health. The study uses the Stockholm School Survey of 2008 which is a total population survey of students in grade 9 of compulsory school (i.e. aged 15–16) and in the second year of upper secondary school (i.e. aged 17–18) in Stockholm and eighteen of its surrounding municipalities (N=22,544). About 5% of the students are victims of cyberbullying, 4% are perpetrators, and 2% are both victims and perpetrators. There is some overlap between cyberbullying and traditional bullying: those who are victims of traditional bullying are at increased risk of also being victims of cyberbullying; while being a traditional bully is strongly associated with the likelihood of also being a cyberbully. However, many students who are involved in cyberbullying are not involved in traditional bullying. OLS regression analyses show that being a victim of cyberbullying remains associated with worse subjective health when being the victim of traditional bullying and socioeconomic factors are taken into account. In addition, perpetrators of cyberbullying as well as students who are both victims and bullies, have worse subjective health than those who are not involved in cyberbullying.

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includes physical actions, threats and verbal harassments, and the latter involves ostracism and ignoring. Bullying can take place in “face-to-face” interactions but also via mobile phones and the Internet. In the present paper, “face-to-face” forms of bullying, which may include both direct and indirect bullying, are called traditional bullying, while bullying via mobile phones and the Internet is defined as cyberbullying.

Bullying is linked to reduced well-being among both victims and bullies and has been demonstrated to have short- and long-term effects (see review by Stassen Berger, 2007). Bullying at school also has consequences for other individuals than those directly involved. The incidence of bullying has been shown to be associated with an increased risk of ill-health for all students in the class and not just for the victims and the bullies (Modin & Östberg, 2009). However, while there is an immense international body of literature on bullying, still relatively little is known about cyberbullying.

It is important to learn more about cyberbullying since it differs from traditional forms of bullying in several respects. Slonje and Smith (2008) list a number of issues specific to cyberbullying. First, those who are exposed to cyberbullying are never and nowhere free from the risk of being bullied. A participant in the focus group study on cyberbullying conducted by Mishna, Saini, and Solomon (2009, p. 1224) described this as “non-stop bullying”, in other words, bullying that occurs even in one’s own bedroom where one expects to feel safe. Second, cyberbullying quickly reaches a larger “audience” than traditional school bullying. Third, unlike traditional bullying the perpetrators can remain anonymous. One effect of this may be that the negative consequences for the victim may be less obvious to the bully (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Anonymity or perceived anonymity also emerged as important in the focus group study by Mishna et al. (2009), where participants claimed that anonymity makes people behave in ways which would not otherwise be accepted. Nevertheless, in many cases the perpetrators seem to be known by the victims, something that is also acknowledged by the focus group participants (ibid.). From their U.S. web-based survey of 12–17-year-olds, Juvonen and Gross (2008) conclude that 73% of the cyberbullying victims knew who the perpetrators were. In a U.S. study of nearly 4000 middle school students, about half of the cyberbullying victims knew the identity of the perpetrators (although 48% did not know who had cyberbullied them) (Kowalski & Limber, 2007). Another feature of cyberbullying is that it tends to be invisible to adults (although this is often the case with traditional bullying too). It is common that young people do not tell adults that they are being cyberbullied (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Li, 2007; Mishna et al., 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Smith et al., 2008). One reason for not telling adults is the fear that one’s computer privileges will be restricted (Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Mishna et al., 2009). A participant in the focus group study by Mishna et al. (2009) stated that “parents and other adults don’t get how it is nowadays” (p. 1225), and, as argued by Juvonen and Gross (2008), the generation gap in the understanding and use of new communication technologies does indeed make it difficult for young people to ask adults for help and support when cyberbullying occurs.

As reviewed by Mishna et al. (2009), in earlier studies the prevalence rates of involvement in cyberbullying, either as victim or perpetrator, typically range between about 10 and 35%, though some studies report substantially higher rates. One reason for the differing rates is probably the different operationalizations of cyberbullying. Previous results are also inconclusive as to whether the prevalence of cyberbullying differs between the sexes: some studies report few or no gender differences (e.g. Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Slonje & Smith, 2008), whereas others report that girls are more likely to be cybervictims (e.g. Schneider, O’Donnell, Stueve, & Coulter, 2012; Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011; Sourander et al., 2010) and cyberbully-victims (Kowalski & Limber, 2007; Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, & Daciuk, 2012), while it is more likely for boys than girls to be cyberbullies (Li, 2006; Sourander et al., 2010).
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