



Relevant dimensions of cyberbullying – Results from two experimental studies

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying is a prevalent problem of adolescents. However, several conceptual and measurement questions, regarding its defining characteristics and relevant dimensions in comparison to conventional bullying, remain unanswered. To this end we conducted two studies with experimental methods. Study I shows that power imbalance in terms of perceived popularity is relevant for the affective, cognitive, and behavioral experience of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying by a popular bully is more distressing than cyberbullying by an unpopular bully. Study II shows that factors unique to cyberbullying are also relevant for the experience of cyberbullying, namely the media and the type of cyberbullying. For example, different types of cyberbullying are related to different patterns of relevant coping strategies. Therefore, cyberbullying seems both a unique phenomenon and closely related to conventional bullying.

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Numerous studies have demonstrated that cyberbullying has become an important cross-national phenomenon with an estimated prevalence between 20 and 40% among adolescents (Tokunaga, 2010). In Germany, empirical studies have found cyber-victim prevalence to be between 3 and 36% and cyber-perpetrator prevalence between 5 and 42% (Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009a,b; Pieschl & Porsch, 2012; Riebel, Jäger, & Fischer, 2009; Schultze-Krumholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Staude-Müller, Bliesener, & Nowak, 2009; Wachs & Wolf, 2011). A similar variance can be found internationally. Part of this variance between the findings can be attributed to methodology (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009): Self-reported prevalence is generally lower if adolescents have to report their experience regarding a short period of time (vs. their lifetime) and if it is measured with a single item directly referring to cyberbullying (vs. multiple behavioral items).

However, we argue that this apparent methodological problem is confounded with and based on a deeper conceptual problem. The adequate conceptualization and definition of cyberbullying are still highly discussed because the exact composition of the construct of

cyberbullying is still an uncharted territory. One way to approach this problem is to explore which defining characteristics and additional dimensions are relevant for the experience of cyberbullying. In this paper we propose that experimental research could contribute valuable insights into these questions. We think that a definition of cyberbullying has to be based on empirical results as well as on a theoretical foundation. Therefore, we are reporting two exemplary studies – to our knowledge the first experimental studies to be published about cyberbullying – that explore the following conceptual issues: Are mandatory defining characteristics of conventional bullying also relevant for the experience of cyberbullying, specifically power imbalance in terms of perceived popularity (Study I)? Are further cyber-specific dimensions relevant for the experience of cyberbullying, specifically different types and media of cyberbullying (Study II)?

Defining characteristics of bullying – The example of power imbalance

Conventional bullying is defined as an intentional aggressive act carried out by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself (Olweus, 1996). Therefore, the three defining characteristics intention to harm, repetition, and power imbalance are central to conventional bullying because they set bullying apart from, for example, rough-and-tumble play, fights between friends, or singular acts of peer aggression. If this definition is transferred into cyberspace, we have to define cyberbullying as “bullying via electronic communication tools” (Li, 2006, p. 158) – including the defining characteristics of intention to harm, repetition, and power imbalance (cf. traditional definitions of cyberbullying, for example Smith et al., 2008).

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One consideration in favor of this equalization is one of the most replicated findings in cyberbullying research, which suggests that the same adolescents are frequently involved in both conventional bullying and cyberbullying (Dempsey, Sulkowski, Dempsey, & Storch, 2011; Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2007; Riebel et al., 2009; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Wachs & Wolf, 2011). In Germany, Katzer and colleagues found a correlation of .55 between victims of conventional bullying and victims of cyberbullying (Katzer et al., 2009b) and a correlation of .59 between perpetrators of conventional bullying and perpetrators of cyberbullying (Katzer et al., 2009b), indicating a significant overlap between conventional and cyberbullying.

Another consideration in favor of equating conventional bullying and cyberbullying is that some risk factors are the same for both kinds of bullying. Most of these risk factors are unspecific; an existent risk factor does not necessarily predict the specific behavior of cyberbullying. For example, cyber-victims report more personal problems, more peer relationship problems, more family-related problems, and more depressive and somatic symptoms than non-cyber-victims (Gradinger et al., 2009; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Sourander et al., 2010; Utsumi, 2010; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). Furthermore, cyber-perpetrators show more aggression, a positive attitude towards aggression, less empathy, a less positive parent-child relationship, less perceived peer support, more delinquency, more smoking and drinking than non-cyber-perpetrators (Ang & Goh, 2010; Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Katzer et al., 2009a; Schultze-Krumbholz & Scheithauer, 2009; Sourander et al., 2010; Utsumi, 2010).

Due to these similarities between conventional bullying and cyberbullying it might be warranted to transfer defining characteristics. Still, this transfer of definition has been discussed controversially and therefore alternative definitions have been suggested in the literature (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Gross, 2009; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010): First, the intention to harm cannot easily be applied to cyberbullying. (Computer-) mediated communication is impoverished in comparison with face-to-face communication (Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984). The communication partners do not see body language, gestures or facial expressions and they do not hear prosody which distinguishes, for example, between irony, friendly teasing, and harassment. Therefore, cyber-victims might misinterpret messages intended as fun and cyber-perpetrators on the other hand may not be aware of the consequences of their actions because of this lack of physical and social cues about a target's reactions (Dehue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007). Second, repetition is hard to define in cyberspace. For example, even the single act of uploading an embarrassing video might be considered cyberbullying if it is causing repeated humiliation (Dooley et al., 2009; Menesini & Nocentini, 2009). Third, power imbalance might be implied in the use of technology or take different shapes in cyberspace; it might be indicated by higher technological ability (Nocentini et al., 2010), by a higher rank in the virtual community (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009), or by anonymity (Dehue et al., 2008; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008). It has also been argued that power imbalance might not be as important in cyberbullying as in conventional bullying. Cyber-victims presumably have more (technical) options of preventing and suppressing cyberbullying or of retaliating than victims have in conventional bullying; therefore they might feel less helpless (Nocentini et al., 2010).

In the following, power imbalance will be discussed in further detail. Power imbalance has different facets in conventional bullying such as physical dominance, older age, higher social or verbal competence, higher intelligence, or higher social status of the bully (Scheithauer, Hayer, & Bull, 2007). Some of these aspects might also be relevant for cyberbullying, for example the social status of the bully. In conventional bullying, social status has been divided into two relatively independent constructs: Social preference and perceived popularity (Parkhurst &

Hopmeyer, 1998). Social preference (also known as peer acceptance, likability, or sociometric status) describes how much a person is liked by others. Perceived popularity, on the other hand, describes if a person is considered popular in terms of prestige, visibility, or dominance (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009; de Bruyn, Chillesen, & Wissink, 2010). Research indicates that conventional bullying is positively associated with perceived popularity (the “popular bully”) but negatively associated with social preference of the bully (Caravita et al., 2009; de Bruyn et al., 2010; Sijtsema, Veenstra, Lindenberg, & Salmivalli, 2009; Witvliet et al., 2010).

It can also be assumed that the perceived popularity of the bully impacts victims' experience of the bullying episode. Power imbalance in terms of perceived popularity is only given if a high status (popular) bully bullies a lower status (less popular) victim. In this scenario victims have fewer means of preventing or adequately coping with bullying and thus they might feel helpless. On the other hand, if bullies and victims have similar power, for example similar perceived popularity, the intended victims could probably prevent bullying or could adequately cope with it and thus not feel as helpless. We empirically investigate these assumptions for cyberbullying in Study I.

Unique aspects of cyberbullying – Media and type

Besides the compelling empirical evidence that conventional bullying and cyberbullying overlap to a significant degree, there are numerous conceptual differences between conventional bullying and cyberbullying that go beyond the controversies concerning the defining characteristics. Most of these unique features are based on the electronic nature of communication: The cyber-perpetrator can remain anonymous (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008) and not directly perceive the consequences of his/her actions (Slonje & Smith, 2008; Willard, 2007). These aspects can trigger disinhibition and might even facilitate cyber-perpetration. For the cyber-victim, escaping cyberbullying is almost impossible because of the omnipresence of electronic communication tools (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Additionally, cyber-bullying incidents can be spread to a large audience (Slonje & Smith, 2008) in a short amount of time and are hard to erase from the internet. Furthermore, there are some difficulties in detecting and reporting cyberbullying due to the lack of adult supervision.

There is also some empirical evidence to support the notion that cyberbullying is not merely bullying in cyberspace but a unique phenomenon. The correlations between conventional bullying and cyberbullying are generally only of moderate effect size (see above). This indicates that there are a significant number of adolescents who are only involved in cyberbullying, but not in conventional bullying. Factor analyses demonstrate that acts of cyber aggression load on a unique factor compared with other acts of adolescent aggression (Dempsey et al., 2011). Additionally, there are cyber-specific risk factors for cyberbullying that are not relevant for conventional bullying. For example, both cyber-victimization and cyber-perpetration are related to more computer proficiency, more frequent internet use, more frequent use of electronic communication tools, and more frequent internet risk behavior (Erdur-Baker, 2010; Huang & Chou, 2010; Katzer et al., 2009a,b; Smith et al., 2008; Utsumi, 2010). Despite these findings, research into cyber-specific aspects of cyberbullying is still at its beginning.

A unique aspect of cyberbullying that has been frequently discussed and researched is the involved media. For example, Smith et al. (2008) categorized cyberbullying according to seven different media or communication tools because “different media have different characteristics” (p. 377): Text messages, emails, phone calls, photo or video clips, instant messengers, websites, and chat rooms. Research showed that different media were indeed used with different frequencies for cyberbullying and had different effects on cyber-victims' experience of cyberbullying. However, the most frequently used tools for cyberbullying vary across studies. Whereas Smith et al. (2008)

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