Cyberbullying among adults with intellectual disabilities: Some preliminary data

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Background: Recent studies show that youth with disabilities are at risk of experiencing cyberbullying. Nevertheless, the nature of this phenomenon among adults with intellectual disabilities has not been investigated. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to analyze the frequency and characteristics of cyberbullying and its correlates in individuals with intellectual disabilities attending training centers for adults with intellectual disabilities.
Methods and procedures: A convenience sample of 269 participants (54.3% men and 35.7% women), aged 18–40 years was recruited from Chile (14.1%), Mexico (32%), and Spain (53.9%).
Results: The findings showed that 15.2% have been cyberbullied 9.7% are currently being cyberbullied. Being different was the main reason (97.7%) for being cyberbullied. The behaviors happen in educational settings (46.67%), leisure/free time activities (31.11%), and associations for people with disabilities (15.56%). Verbal aggressions (74.53%) were the most common cyberbullying behaviors. Those who were cyberbullied reported more inadequate use of mobile phone and Internet, as well as more unhealthy behaviors and depressive mood.
Conclusions and implications: These findings support the need for further studies on adults with intellectual disabilities, as well as the need for implementing primary, secondary, and tertiary prevention programs.

What this paper adds

This paper provides data on cyberbullying in adults with intellectual disabilities, a subject that has not been studied before. Findings suggest that people with intellectual disabilities are at higher risk for cyber-victimization due to a combination of personal and social variables. Thus, personal variables, such as overusing Internet and cell-phones, carrying out unhealthy behaviors, together with being socially rejected for being different, are factors that help understand this issue. Additional findings on those who have been or are being cyberbullied, as well as the profile of the victims, support the need for primary, secondary, and tertiary interventions.

1. Introduction

Although the Internet has transformed the way people communicate, it has also given rise to phenomena such as cyberbullying (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). Cyberbullying, or online bullying, is a type of relational aggression that seeks to injure the relationships and social situation of others using electronic means (Ang, 2016; Postorino, 2015). Mocking, degrading or harassing another less powerful (Beauchere, 2014; Smith et al., 2013), it is carried out by an individual or group who, using information and communication technologies (ICT) (mobile phones, e-mail, social networks, blogs, websites, etc.), deliberately and repeatedly attacks someone who cannot easily defend him/herself (Lucas, Pérez, & Giménez, 2016; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Smith et al., 2008). Cyberbullying is characterized by sending insults, threats, spreading false rumors, manipulating photographs and violating privacy by stealing passwords to allow access to personal information, emails, messages, etc. (Lanzillotti & Korman, 2014). From these definitions we can extract the key components of cyberbullying: it (1) is a relational aggression; (2) is intentional; (3) occurs in asymmetrical situations; (4) is repeated over time and is not a single event; (5) is carried out via ICTs so that authorship is not always obvious. This last characteristic distinguishes this modality of bullying via technology means, whose negative consequences are equally relevant (Avilés, Irurtia, García-Lopez, & Caballo, 2011; Caballo, Arias Martínez, Calderero, & Irurtia Muñiz, 2011; Caballo et al., 2012; Hernandez Rodriguez, Gregus, Craig, Pastrana, & Cavell, 2014).

As mentioned, anonymity is one of the key elements that distinguish traditional bullying from cyberbullying and it is an important risk factor. Anonymity eliminates inhibitions that would otherwise prevent people from harming others (Ang, 2016; Barlett et al., 2014; Postorino, 2015). The age of social media and Smartphones has added new forms and expanded the reach of this risk to adolescent health (Davis, Randall, Ambrose, & Orand, 2015). As Smith and Steffgen (2013) state, cyberbullying is one of the most problematic and obscure aspects related to the increasing access to new technologies (Smith & Steffgen, 2013). In addition, changes in how young people use the Internet, especially the disproportionate increase in online communication with friends, offers more opportunities for conflict (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2013). These behaviors appear to be stable over time, underlining the importance of psychoeducational interventions to prevent or eliminate peer violence through technology (Garaigordobil, 2015; Garaigordobil & Martinez-Valderrey, 2015).

As to the "size of the problem", the research on the general population report important differences. For example, a recent study carried out in the US with a random sample found a 6.6% probability of being a cyberbullying victim and 5% probability of being a perpetrator, as well as a 4.3% possibility of being both perpetrator and victim (Rice et al., 2015). One European study reported a 5% prevalence of being involved in cyberbullying of which 4% were perpetrators and 2% were victims and perpetrators (Laftman, Modin, & Ostberg, 2013). However, in another study, data suggest that 37.8% of students experienced cyberbullying, and 56% were bystanders (Pilkey, 2012). In addition, a review found that 20%-40% of children and adolescents experienced cyberbullying, with girls and sexual minorities being more likely to have been victims (Aboujaoude, Savage, Starcevic, & Salame, 2015). These percentages are similar to those reported in the Tokunaga study (2010), where between 20% and 40% of adolescents experienced cyberbullying. Yet another recent review by Lucas et al. (2016) found prevalence rates at the international level that range from 9% (Ybarra, Mitchell, & Kosciw, 2015) to 72% (Juvonen & Gross, 2008).

There are also important differences in Spain. The study with the lowest rates suggests that from 2.5% to 7% of secondary school students have been victims and 2.5% to 3.5% have been perpetrators (Díaz-Aguado, Martínez-Arias, & Martín, 2013). At the other end, the study from Buelga, Cava, & Musitu, 2010 found that 24.6% of adolescents had been bullied by mobile phone and 29% via the Internet. The absence of a precise definition for what it means to be "repetitively attacked" helps explain the large differences in prevalence estimations. It also makes it difficult to distinguish between isolated vs. reiterative episodes of bullying through electronic means.

Access to technologies has increased rapidly which has also increased the chances of their misuse. Thus, the excessive use or dependency on such technologies has been found associated with physical, psychological and social issues (Canan et al., 2013; Canan et al., 2014; Jenaro, Flores, Gómez-Vela, González-Gil, & Caballo, 2007; King, Delfabbro, Zwaans, & Kaptsis, 2014; Koc & Gulyagci, 2013; Lepp, Barkley, & Karpinski, 2014; Li, Wang, & Wang, 2009; Rodgers, Melioli, Laconi, Bui, & Chabrol, 2013). Likewise its inadequate use, in this case cyberbullying, is associated to depression, suicide, among other negative emotional repercusions, as well as to physical and behavioral issues, such as sleep disorders, headaches, and conduct problems (Bailin, Milanaik, & Adesman, 2014; Farber, Shafron, Hamadani, Wald, & Nitzburg, 2012).

People with a disability are at greater risk of experiencing cyberbullying, as has been shown with middle and high school students with disabilities (Simpson, Rose, & Ellis, 2016), with young people with Tourette syndrome (Zinner, Conelea, Glew, Woods, & Budman, 2012) and physical disabilities (Wells & Mitchell, 2014). In addition, research on students with ADHD found that they are more likely to be victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying (Heiman, Olenik-Shemesh, & Eden, 2015; Yen et al., 2014), and that children with learning disabilities in special education are also more likely to be involved in both behaviors, with girls being more likely to be cybervictims, and boys being more likely to be cyberperpetrators (Heiman and Olenik-Shemesh, 2015). The situation of University students with disabilities has also been analyzed and they were found to be at greater risk, especially if the disability is more visible (Kowalski, Morgan, Drake-Lavelle, & Allison, 2016).

The cyberbullied are targeted because they are not like or do not behave like the majority or they have their own values (Davis et al., 2015). As Alhaboby, Al-Khateeb, Barnes, & Short, 2016 state, people with disabilities face hostility and harassment in their socio-cultural environment, and the use of electronic communications creates an online context that further reshapes this discrimination. As far as intellectual and developmental disabilities are concerned, a study of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities revealed that between 4 and 9% have experienced cyberbullying at least once a week. There were also significant associations between cyberbullying and IQ, frequency of computer use, self-esteem and depressive feelings, but no association was