



Bullying and cyberbullying: Convergent and divergent predictor variables



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ABSTRACT

There is certain controversy on whether cyber-bullying is a category of bullying as it appears in a very different scenario away from the schools. The objective of this research has been to know if the variables that predict the involvement of youngsters in traditional bullying are also predictor of the appearance of cyber-bullying. Accordingly, we have looked for the similarities and the differences existing in the involvement on these phenomena. The sample is composed by secondary school pupils ($n = 893$, 45.9% girls; age $\bar{x} = 13.80$, $SD = 1.47$). The results show that there are multiple relations between the predictor variables of school bullying and the specific variables of virtual environments that predict cyber-bullying. It has been obtained a new model that explains both phenomena which could be a strong evidence to base future interventions to prevent and reduce these problems.

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1. Introduction

Although bullying was only described for the first time in the late 1970s (Heinemann, 1972), there now exists a solid corpus of scientific research into the phenomenon (Rigby & Smith, 2011). Taking Olweus' definition of bullying (Olweus, 1999) as a point of departure, and bearing in mind later modifications to that description incorporating moral and practical considerations (Ortega, 2010; Smith & Sharp, 1994), bullying can be described as an essentially psychosocial problem involving the intentional, repetitive harming of another person and the creation of a power imbalance between the victim and the aggressor, with negative consequences for both parties. The consequences for the victim differ from those for the aggressor (Nansel et al., 2001) because the effects of the power imbalance established between the two are of a moral nature (Ortega, 2010). The effects of bullying are also felt in the social circles of those involved: research has shown how the quality of peer network relationships deteriorates when bullying takes place (Ortega & Mora-Merchán, 2008). Indeed, bullying is a complex phenomenon encompassing both the personality and background of those involved and also contextual factors (Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012) school climate has been described as a factor of risk or protection, depending on its quality (Bear, Gaskins, Blank, & Chen, 2011). In fact prevention

and intervention programs against bullying (Baldry & Farrington, 2004; Gregory et al., 2010) are based on the improvement of the school climate (Haynes, Emmons, & Ben-Avie, 1997), particularly in the configuration of rules, values and expectations of support to deal with this kind of problems (Cohen, McCabe, Michelli, & Pickeral, 2009). In fact evaluation of such bullying prevention and reduction programs has shown significant decreases in levels of both victimization and, albeit to a lesser extent, bullying (Tfofi & Farrington, 2011; Williams & Guerra, 2007).

At the individual level, empathy is considered one of the personality traits which most influence the prevention of involvement in bullying in the aggressor role (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a). Likewise, the ability to perceive the moods of others, to acquire both a cognitive and affective awareness of others (Garaigordobil, 2009), to understand the victim's feelings and to realize the potential impact an unjustified attack may have on the victim (Ortega, 2010) are equally important elements in anti-bullying programs insofar that they seem to contribute to reducing problems of unjustified harassment and abuse (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoè, 2007; Merrell, Gueldner, Ross, & Isava, 2008).

It should be pointed out that the most interesting research into bullying has been undertaken in the psycho-educational field, and that many of the studies carried out have sought to establish preventive and palliative measures to combat the problem. However, as research into bullying has made gradual progress in identifying the key elements of successful action, the nature of the phenomenon itself has changed – thanks above all to the impact of Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) on interpersonal relationships (Mishna, Cook, Gadalla, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010).

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Consequently, researchers are also now focusing their attention on bullying perpetrated in the context of social interaction via digital devices (Tokunaga, 2010), resulting in a completely new construct: cyberbullying. Considered an extension of traditional bullying, cyberbullying is defined as aggressive, intentional acts carried out using ICTs and resulting in power imbalance (Beran & Li, 2005; Slonje & Smith, 2008). It seems to be emerging as a form of aggression among school children and young people (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009).

But cyberbullying does have its own identifying characteristics. These include the possible anonymity of the bully, the larger potential audience for the abuse being carried out, the difficulty of disconnecting oneself from the cyber environment (Juvonen & Gross, 2008) and certain emotional considerations stemming from the absence of the direct face to face contact which is present in many types of traditional bullying (Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012; Ortega et al., 2012).

Cyberbullying has the same risk factors found in traditional bullying, but, perhaps thanks to its specific nature, also involves other factors which should not be overlooked. One such factor is the little control exerted over personal information, which may result from ignorance about the risks involved in sharing personal information on Internet (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011; Valcke, De Wever, Van Keer, & Schellens, 2011), sharing passwords, communicating with strangers, openly displaying very personal information such as addresses and telephone numbers (Hinduja & Patchin, 2009). This lack of control, with the associated vulnerability of the victim, can be considered a characteristic feature of cyberbullying. Relationships have also been discovered between cyberbullying and Internet addiction (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004), the latter being understood as a continuous urge to connect to Internet which restricts forms of entertainment and social relationships, seriously affects an individual's moods and irritability, induces violent, aggressive behavior that makes it impossible to disconnect (Beard & Wolf, 2001) and increases the user's own social isolation and the destruction of their own closest relationships (Del Rey, Casas, & Ortega, 2012; Tsai & Lin, 2001). Excessive use of some technologies predicted cyberbullying beforehand. For instance, variables influencing cyberbullying victimization in a considerably large sample were listed as gender; marital and socioeconomic status; purpose; frequency; location; time and nature of Internet use and language proficiency (Akbulut, Sahin, & Eristi, 2010). Even, psychiatric symptomatology was addressed as a predictor of cyberbullying among university students in another recent study by Aricak (2009). Again, this type of situation shows no behavioral correlation with victims or aggressors in traditional bullying.

As mentioned earlier, however, cyberbullying is still considered a form of bullying despite these differences (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Studies have revealed that individuals involved in traditional forms of harassment also tend to become involved in cyber-harassment (Hemphill et al., 2012): in some cases the rate of overlap has been as high as 80% (Campbell, 2005; Juvonen & Gross, 2008; Riebel, Jäger, & Fischer, 2009). In addition, being a victim in the cyberspace predicted the degree of bullying in a recent study, which further addressed the reasons of cyberbullying among undergraduate students (Akbulut & Eristi, 2011). A high degree of correlation has also been found between cyberbullying and other forms of school violence (Álvarez García et al., 2011).

Such close similarities have led researchers to consider the possibility that the predictor variables identified for traditional bullying may also be used to predict cyberbullying (Pearce, Cross, Monks, Waters, & Falconer, 2011). If this were the case, existing scientific and practical knowledge about the key elements in successful programs for reducing and preventing traditional bullying could be transferred to the field of cyberbullying. To this end, the main predictor variables for traditional bullying, such as school cli-

mate and empathy (Ttofi & Farrington, 2011), and even the relationship between variables in the physical school environment and cyberbullying and the variables associated with ICT usage should be taken into account when developing cyberbullying reduction programs and policies (Stauffer, Heath, Coyne, & Ferrin, 2012), so that prevention programs could be implemented based on evidence collected in the actual physical school environment.

2. Research questions

This study poses three questions the answers to which would, in our opinion, help us to further our knowledge of bullying and cyberbullying. The first deals with whether individual aspects like empathy or contextual aspects like the school climate surrounding those involved are still variables capable of predicting traditional bullying.

The second refers to whether cyberbullying has any specific, idiosyncratic predictors not previously analyzed by researchers into traditional bullying, like, for example, control/lack of control over personal information in digital devices used by adolescents or the excessive use of Internet (addiction).

The third question is: are bullying predictor factors also cyberbullying predictor factors?

3. Hypothesis

3.1. Hypothesis 1

Empathy and perceived school climate are still predictors for bullying. The school climate (Bear et al., 2011; Cohen et al., 2009) and the empathy shown among peers (Jolliffe & Farrington, 2006a) have been considered as two of the main focus of the intervention programs against traditional bullying. Despite of the introduction of the ITCs in the schools, the above-mentioned items can still be connected with existence and prevention of cyberbullying.

3.2. Hypothesis 2

Little control over personal information on Internet and Internet addiction are both predictor factors for cyberbullying. Several studies (Sengupta & Chaudhuri, 2011; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004) have linked, when using ITCs, these phenomena with the implication in cyberbullying and, particularly, in both victimization and aggression.

3.3. Hypothesis 3

Bullying and its predictor variables can, in part, explain cyberbullying. The common characteristics of both phenomena (Slonje & Smith, 2008) may also imply that their predictors present similarities and also some differences.

4. Materials and methods

The study was carried out using a transversal, prospective, single-group ex post facto design (Montero & León, 2007).

4.1. The sample group

The group comprised 893 students from three secondary schools in the city of Cordoba, Spain. 45.9% were girls between the ages of 11 and 19 ($M = 13.80$; $DT = 1.47$) attending classes in years 1–4 of E.S.O. (Compulsory Secondary Education) (7th to 10th grades).

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