Perspectives on Cyberbullying and Traditional Bullying

Same or Different?

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Introduction

“Someone told me to kill myself. Someone told me to hang myself”. These words, spoken by a 13-year-old boy, describe how he had been cyberbullied. When asked his reaction, the boy said he was “getting extremely depressed” (Toth, Kowalski, & Webb, 2016). Whether it is communication with classmates, unknown social media users, or online gaming partners, cyberbullying is a part of life for young internet users today, and an important area for research and intervention. This chapter examines both the conceptualisations of and prevalence rates for traditional bullying and cyberbullying with a view to identifying the specific features of cyberbullying. It then discusses the extent to which cyberbullying is distinct from traditional bullying or merely an extension of it. Importantly, although traditional bullying and cyberbullying can occur at any age, this chapter focusses on adolescent-aged youth. However, to understand the context in which cyberbullying occurs, it is important to first examine the pervasive use of digital media among youth today.

Digital Media Use Among Youth

Near current information indicates that, among teens 13 to 17 years of age in the Global North, 95% report having a smartphone, with 45% indicating that they are online almost constantly (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). Social media use predominates among teens with YouTube (85%), Instagram (72%), Snapchat (69%), and Facebook (51%) being used most often (Anderson & Jiang, 2018). As beneficial as digital media can be, however, it is often the means by which maladaptive behaviours, such as cyberbullying, occur. Indeed, research has indicated a relationship between time spent online and involvement in cyberbullying (e.g., Çelik, Atak, & Erguzen, 2012). In addition, the most common venue by which cyberbullying occurs for a particular age group reflects the most common form of digital media in use by that same age group (Katz, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014). For example, whereas online gaming is prevalent among elementary-school-aged youth, social media dominates among middle- and high-school-aged teens (Kowalski, Giumetti, & Cox, 2019; Kowalski, Limber, & McCord, 2019).
Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying Defined

The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2018) defines traditional bullying as any unwanted aggressive behaviour(s) by another youth or group of youths who are not siblings or current dating partners that involves an observed or perceived power imbalance and is repeated multiple times or is highly likely to be repeated. Bullying may inflict harm or distress on the targeted youth including physical, psychological, social, or educational harm.

This definition is generally supported in the literature (Olweus, 1993, 2013), and highlights the three important characteristics of bullying as (1) harmful or unwanted behaviours, (2) involving a power imbalance, and (3) repeatedly occurring over time. For example, a 14-year-old, describing how he was traditionally bullied said, “names, verbal from peers when I was young. Fatty, stuff like that. Followed me and almost led me to my death” (Toth et al., 2016).

Building on this definition of traditional bullying, cyberbullying is defined as “an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself” (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). Cyberbullying includes the three primary characteristics of traditional bullying with the addition of the contextual features of technology or online communication. These contextual features (i.e., [some] anonymity, 24/7 access, etc.) ultimately have a significant impact on the behaviours and outcomes for victims and perpetrators. A 14-year-old, reflecting on his cyberbullying victimisation stated, “I felt like I wasn’t supposed to be on Earth” (Toth et al., 2016).

Prevalence Rates of Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying

In examining the prevalence of both traditional bullying and cyberbullying, one question that frequently arises is whether such rates are on the rise. An examination of prevalence suggests that, while rates may not be changing markedly over time, awareness of the behaviours is growing (Pontes, Ayres, Lewandowski, & Pontes, 2018). In addition, some scholars suggest that trends in bullying prevalence depend on the particular type of bullying being examined, with rates of traditional bullying showing a steady decrease in recent years, whereas rates of cyberbullying have shown a rather sharp increase (Finkelhor, 2013). This latter finding hints at differences between traditional bullying and cyberbullying, although it may also indicate some substitution in the early days of teen use of mobile digital media.

Traditional Bullying

Traditional bullying and peer victimisation appear to be most frequent during middle school and then to slightly decrease as students move into high school (Olweus, 1993). Though intervention is more frequent and accepted in the school setting, the prevalence of bullying does not appear to be decreasing over time among this age group within educational contexts (Olweus, 2013). A comprehensive report on traditional bullying in the United States in 2011 showed that about 28% of students aged 12 to 18 years reported being bullied at school during the academic year (Robers, Kemp, Rathbun, & Morgan, 2014). Fourteen per cent of youth in the United States in grades 3 through 12 reported being bullied with a high degree of frequency (two to three times a month or more; Luxenberg, Limber, & Olweus 2015, cited in Limber, Olweus, Wang, Masiello, & Breivik, 2018). The most common forms of traditional bullying included being
insulted or called names (17.6%) and being the subject of rumours (18.3%). Further, among those who reported being bullied at school, the majority of bullying events happened in the hallway at school (45.6%) or inside the classroom (32.6%; Robers et al., 2014). Perpetration rates of traditional bullying are also high. In a sample of 7,182 youth in grades 6 through 10 in the United States, Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) found that 13.3% had perpetrated physical bullying at least once in the previous two months, 37.4% verbal bullying, and 27.2% social bullying.

Chester and colleagues (2015) found that almost one third of children aged 11 to 15 years reported at least occasional victimisation from bullying in North America and Europe. This varied from country to country, however, with Italy (4.8% of boys and 2.9% of girls) having the lowest prevalence, while Lithuania (28.5% of girls and 23.4% of boys) reported the highest prevalence rates of bullying. This suggests that, although bullying is common among adolescents, it may vary geographically and there could potentially be a cultural influence on prevalence rates. Additionally, individual factors may increase the frequency of bullying such as the presence of disabilities (Rose et al., 2015) or physical factors such as obesity (DeSmet et al., 2014).

**Cyberbullying**

As with traditional bullying, one of the vexing issues about cyberbullying has been resolving disparate prevalence rates across studies (Kowalski et al., 2014; Olweus & Limber, 2018). Different researchers have adopted slightly different conceptualisations, leading to slightly different behaviours being measured and, hence, varying prevalence rates (Kofoed & Staksrud, 2018; Selkie, Fales, & Moreno, 2016). Additionally, prevalence rates vary with the time frame within which the cyberbullying must have occurred (e.g., previous month, past six months, within the year, over a lifetime) (Olweus, 2016); as well as with the criteria used to determine frequency (the behaviour occurred at least once, versus the behaviour must have occurred two to three times or more during the time frame). In a scoping review of 159 prevalence studies on adolescent cyberbullying across countries, Brochado, Soares, and Fraga (2017) observed wide variability in cyberbullying prevalence rates. Examined just in terms of the time frame involved, and depending on the study, between 4.9% and 65.0% of respondents indicated they had been cyberbullied in their lifetime; between 1.0% and 61.1% had been cyberbullied within the past year; between 1.6% and 56.9% reported being victimised within the preceding six months; and between 5.3% and 31.3% were victimised within the previous month.

Cyberbullying perpetration rates show similar variability across studies: between 1.2% and 44.1% had cyberbullied others in their lifetime; between 3.0% and 39.9% had done so in the prior year; between 1.9% and 79.3% during the past six months; and between 4.9% and 31.5% during the past month (Brochado et al., 2017). A recent survey by the Pew Center (Anderson, 2018) of teens aged 13 to 17 years in the United States found that 59% reported having experienced at least one of six forms of cyberbullying. The most common form of victimisation was name-calling (42%), followed by spreading of false rumours (32%), receiving unwanted explicit images (25%), cyberstalking (21%), physical threats (16%), and the dissemination of explicit images without consent (7%).

Prevalence rates of cyberbullying also vary with the age of the participants in a particular study and the venue by which the cyberbullying occurs. Cyberbullying modality is correlated with the technology and platform most commonly used by individuals of a particular age group. Thus, among middle- and high-school students, social media is currently the most common digital media used and the most common venue by which cyberbullying occurs (Kowalski et al., 2019). A decade ago among the same age group, instant messaging prevailed, reflecting the speed with which technology changes.
Narrative accounts of adolescent cyberbullying victimisation illustrate some of the various methods of online communication, as well as conveying the effects that cyberbullying can have on the victim. Three examples are illustrated below:

We were in middle school and two of my best friends decided to stab me in the back for no apparent reason. Using instant messenger they talked bad about me and spread mean things about me. Once I received an insult directly from the leader of the two. I kept all of this inside until I got so overwhelmed I could not do anything but stay in the house with my family. My parents called theirs and they claimed to have apologised but they never did. It was never really resolved. I went to the same school as them for the next six years though it was difficult. I stopped playing sports with them and other after-school activities. I went to a psychologist and still do from this time forward as well as take medicine for clinical depression and anxiety. It all started with this emotional trauma and although I am over that mostly, I cannot get rid of the depression and anxiety I now feel stuck with.

(Isgett, Kowalski, Lattanner, Schroeder, & Senn, 2012)

The worst time I was cyber bullied was when a girl from my classroom pretended to be a popular boy on AIM. She had acted rude to me on AIM and when I responded defensively, she made a fake AIM screenname for a boy from my classroom. She then “asked me out” on AIM acting as this boy. I responded with a hesitant yes and went to school the next day extremely nervous. She went up to me at school and asked me if we were dating and I responded yes. I was then confronted by the boy and asked why I was telling people we were dating. I realised what had happened and responded that I had no idea what he was talking about and tried to forget the whole incident.

(Isgett, Kowalski, Lattanner, Schroeder, & Senn, 2012)

There was an anonymous joke facebook account going around and all of our friends friended it (on facebook) including myself. I was unfriended/blocke for no reason whatsoever, even though the account grew up to having about 2,000 facebook friends. Before so, the anonymous user was rude to me without any prompt as well. I felt extremely excluded considering it was the talk of the town at the time.

(Isgett, Kowalski, Lattanner, Schroeder, & Senn, 2012)

**Perspectives on the Relationship Between Traditional Bullying and Cyberbullying**

For over a decade, researchers have debated the nature of this relationship between traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Two perspectives have been advanced to conceptualise the relationship between the two types of bullying (Olweus & Limber, 2018). The ‘differences perspective’ suggests that cyberbullying and traditional bullying, while sharing certain features in common, are different phenomena, with each contributing unique variance to the negative outcomes associated with bullying victimisation. The ‘extension perspective’, on the other hand, suggests that cyberbullying is a new form of bullying but not one that is qualitatively different. Researchers who endorse this perspective suggest that individuals who are involved in one type of bullying tend to be the same individuals who are involved in another type of bullying. Olweus (2013; see also Olweus & Limber, 2018), for example, suggests that only 10% of individuals are involved in cyberbullying independently of also being involved in traditional bullying. Mehari, Farrell, and Le (2014) suggest that traditional
bullying and cyberbullying merely reflect two ways of classifying aggressive behaviour. Which perspective is adopted becomes important because it determines perspectives on, for example, outcomes of cyberbullying. People who adopt the differences perspective suggest that cyberbullying accounts for unique variance in negative outcomes over and above those accounted for by traditional bullying (e.g., Cole et al., 2016; Menesini, Calusi, & Nocentini, 2012; see, however, Machmutow, Perren, Sticca, & Alsaker, 2012; Salmivalli, Sainio, & Hodges, 2013). Those who endorse the extension perspective argue that it is often difficult to discern outcomes that are uniquely associated with cyberbullying compared with traditional bullying.

Each of these perspectives will be examined in turn. Across the two perspectives, researchers agree that involvement in the two types of bullying is related (e.g., Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012; Menesini et al., 2012). However, simply obtaining positive correlations between traditional bullying and cyberbullying does not support one perspective over another.

**Differences Perspective**

Using the Olweus (1993, 2013) definition of traditional bullying as a foundation, cyberbullying and traditional bullying share key features in common (Smith, del Barrio, & Tokunaga, 2013). As outlined earlier in this chapter, both are acts of aggression that are intended to cause harm or distress; they are typically repeated over time, although the form of the repetition varies depending on the type of bullying; and they occur among individuals whose relationship is characterised by a power imbalance. Repetition in cyberbullying could mean a single electronic communication being read multiple times by a single victim or a single digital communication being disseminated to hundreds or thousands of individuals (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). Similarly, the power imbalance endemic to traditional bullying is often reflected in differences in physical stature or social status. With cyberbullying, on the other hand, power imbalances may be created by differences in technological expertise or by the perpetrator’s anonymity.

In spite of the features that cyberbullying and traditional bullying share in common, they differ in critical ways. First, whereas most traditional bullying occurs at school during the school day, cyberbullying can occur anywhere that technology is available, and at any time. In addition, whereas the perpetrator of traditional bullying is most often known to the victim, perpetrators of cyberbullying can hide behind screen names. Among young people, the punitive fears attached to reporting bullying victimisation also vary with traditional bullying and cyberbullying. Victims of traditional bullying often do not report their victimisation because they fear the perpetrator getting wind of the disclosure and retaliating. Cyberbullying victims, on the other hand, fear that adults will remove their technology upon learning of the victimisation.

Support for the differences perspective has been found across several studies. As noted earlier in the chapter, studies showing decreases in prevalence rates of traditional bullying over time and increases in rates of cyberbullying in recent years (e.g., Finkelhor, 2013) would suggest that the behaviours are distinct from one another. In addition, Giumetti and Kowalski (2016) found that cyberbullying victimisation contributed between 1% and 4% of unique variance in negative outcomes above and beyond that accounted for by traditional bullying. Similarly, Menesini and colleagues (2012) found that traditional bullying and cyberbullying additively accounted for variance in internalising and externalising problems (see also, Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Kim, Colwell, Kata, Boyle, & Georgiades, 2017; Wigderson & Lynch, 2013). Fredstrom, Adams, and Gilman (2011) found unique contributions of cyber
victimisation to self-esteem, stress, anxiety, and depression after controlling for traditional bullying. It is important to note, however, that, among the growing list of studies providing support for the differences perspective, additional percentages of variance in outcomes accounted for by cyberbullying above and beyond traditional bullying tend to be small in magnitude and dependent on the particular outcome being assessed.

**Extension Perspective**

On the other hand, many researchers argue that cyberbullying is not itself an independent or significantly different construct from traditional bullying, but rather an extension of traditional or school bullying. Proponents of the extension approach often begin their argument in much the same way as proponents of the differences approach – by detailing features that cyberbullying and traditional bullying share in common. They are quick to point out that few researchers define cyberbullying without using the terminology of traditional bullying (National Institute of Justice, 2016). Olweus (2013) specifically cites that the power imbalance that characterises traditional bullying can be applied to cyberbullying by including traditional social power imbalance as well as technological know-how differences between the perpetrator and the victim. Mehari et al. (2014) conceptualised cyberbullying “as a new dimension on which aggression can be classified, rather than cyberbullying as a distinct counterpart to existing forms of aggression” (p. 1). In support of their position, they cited the fact that cyberbullying has in common many of the same antecedents as other forms of aggression (e.g., previous victimisation, somatic symptoms, social anxiety). Similarly, Olweus (2013) stated that to be cyber bullied or to cyber bully other students seems to a large extent to be part of a general pattern of bullying, where use of the electronic media is only one possible form and, in addition, is a form with a quite low prevalence.

(p. 767)

Indeed, in their recent article, Olweus and Limber (2018) suggest that studies showing that cyberbullying accounts for small percentages of variance in outcome measures above and beyond that accounted for by traditional bullying do not provide evidence for the differences perspective. Additionally, Olweus (2013) showed that there is a high degree of overlap between victims of cyberbullying and victims of traditional bullying (88% of those cyberbullied had also been bullied traditionally in the United States). This suggests that cyberbullying does not create a great number of new victims, supporting the assertion that cyberbullying is but an extension of traditional bullying.

The meta-analysis by Kowalski et al. (2014) supports the extension approach but not to the extent proposed by Olweus (2013). Rather, Kowalski et al. found a correlation of 0.40 between traditional and cyberbullying victimisation and a correlation of 0.45 between traditional and cyberbullying perpetration (2014). These correlations are significant and suggest there is great similarity between the two concepts and challenges those who argue the differences perspective. Additionally, Olweus (2013) argues that cyberbullying and traditional bullying have similar effects on potential outcomes. For example, those who report being cyberbullied have self-esteem outcomes that are indistinguishable from those who report being traditionally bullied (Olweus, 2013). Ultimately, if schools and parents are concerned with both traditional and cyberbullying, and if the outcomes and experiences are indistinguishable, it can be argued that there is enough similarity to constitute the extension perspective. In resolving these two perspectives, research by Moreno found that “cyberbullying is best understood in the broader context of bullying, but that stakeholder perceptions about the uniqueness of cyberbullying are strong” (National Institute of Justice, 2016).
Conclusion

Ultimately, asking whether cyberbullying is an extension of traditional bullying or a phenomenon distinct from it is, perhaps, focusing on the wrong issue. While conceptually it is important to be able to distinguish the two types of behaviour with their concomitant risk and protective factors and outcomes, in an applied sense, both types of bullying warrant attention. As noted by Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, and Runions (2014), “findings suggest that cyber and traditional measures may reflect different methods of enacting a similar behaviour (being mean to others) and the form (online vs. offline) of bullying may be less important than the conduct” (p. 607). The fact that youth involved in one type of bullying may also be involved in the other type of bullying, as so many studies have suggested (e.g., Kowalski et al., 2012; Smith, 2015), while supporting the extension perspective, may, more importantly, be supporting the fact that certain individuals are at particular risk for victimisation. The form of the victimisation matters less than the intervention strategies implemented on behalf of those involved in the bullying situation, including bystanders.

In addition, the voices of those involved (as reflected in the narratives included within this chapter) are important to consider when implementing prevention and intervention strategies for any type of bullying. Focus groups conducted with adolescents who had been both victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying, as well as with some who had never been involved with cyberbullying, yielded some interesting perspectives on dealing with youth online activities. Among the comments offered in the focus groups were that parents should: set age-appropriate guidelines; teach their children how to deal with conflict (including online conflict): monitor adolescent use of the internet: and exercise “supervision not snooping supervision” (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2011). In other words, adolescents were satisfied with parents searching their local online histories but not with installing key-stroke software on their computers. They also wanted their parents to watch for warning signs of possible cyberbullying victimisation, such as anxiety, depression, and a drop in school grades. Finally, they asked that their parents not blame them should they be a victim of cyberbullying activity. These suggestions are not only reasonable but also reflect an understanding on the part of the adolescents in the focus groups of the potential for cyberbullying to occur and the need for at least some adult supervision and support.

References


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