Defining and Conceptualizing Cyberbullying

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INTRODUCTION

The word 'bully' dates back to the 16th century and the original meaning is somewhat different to that of today. Originally a term of endearment implying friendly admiration but over time the meaning of bullying has darkened to "a person who uses strength or influence to harm or intimidate those who are weaker" (Oxford English Dictionary, 1989). Until recently face-to-face bullying was seen by some as a normal and acceptable part of youth (Koo, 2007). The practice, tolerated within England's public school system for decades, appears in both fiction and real life. In *Tom Brown's School Days*, the character Flashman is seen bullying the younger Tom Brown; the line ''very well then, let's roast him' […]. One or two boys hesitate, but the rest join in" (Hughs, 1857, p. 188), being the most famous. At a similar time, the death of a 12 year old boy attending the King's School in Cambridge, was made public. The boy's death, in 1885, was attributed to experiences of bullying. Afterwards, a former student wrote to the editor of *The Times* newspaper saying "bullying, of the kind mentioned, constantly occurred during the seven years I was at the school" (Anon, 1885).

The turning point, in recognizing face-to-face bullying as a problem, came in the 1970s. At that time, a general concern regarding violent behavior emerged and the pioneering work of Olewus (1978) began to address young people's experiences of bullying. Since then numerous studies have examined various forms of face-to-face bullying (e.g., Hawker & Boulton, 2000). However, in the wake of societal and technological changes bullying has evolved (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Recent statistics report that 99% of all 12- to 14-year-olds in the UK are frequent internet users with young people spending increasing amounts of time using technology (Office for National Statistics, 2013). With the many benefits of this connectivity, such as enhanced educational attainment (Jackson, 2011) and social networks (Valkenburg & Peter, 2007), there are also risks. Cyberbullying has been identified as one of the greatest risks (Cross, Monks, Campbell, Spears, & Slee, 2011). Cyberbullying is "the intentional act of online/digital intimidation, embarrassment, or harassment." (Mark & Ratliffe, 2011, p. 92).

BACKGROUND

Although cyberbullying is undoubtedly a by-product of the union of adolescent aggression and electronic communication; it is it's propensity for growth which gives cause for concern for researchers and educational practitioners (Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013). Further, empirical evidence reports that the impacts of cyberbullying include: distress (Li, 2010), loneliness (Sahin, 2012), depression (Tynes, Rose, & Williams, 2010), increased psychosomatic symptoms (Sourander et al., 2010), suicidal ideation (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010), and reduced academic performance (Smith et al., 2008).

Despite this attention, many questions remain unanswered with regard to the conceptual and theoretical similarities between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. It is widely accepted that definitions of face-to-face bullying include aspects of repetition, power imbalance, and intention (Olweus, 2013). There are three forms of face-to-face bullying: physical, verbal, and social (Rigby, 1997). Physical bullying is a 'direct' form of aggression that involves hitting, punching, kicking, or any other action that can inflict physical pain or harm. The power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target in physical bullying makes it difficult for the target to defend themselves and prevent the actions being repeated (Rigby, 2002).

Verbal bullying which includes making rude remarks, telling hurtful jokes about an individual, calling an individual hurtful names, and threatening an individual with the intent to intimidate or humiliate the target, or to provide 'humor' at the expense of the target (Crick et al., 2001) can be direct or indirect. The perpetrator can 'directly' bully by teasing, taunting, or mocking the target to their face, or 'indirectly' bully by doing the same thing behind the target's back (Cole, Cornell, & Sheras, 2006).

Social bullying is aggressive behavior in the form of rumor spreading, backbiting, and social exclusion that results in harming an individuals' psychological state of mind and/or social connections. Often delivered in a covert manner social bullying allows the perpetrator to remain anonymous (Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1992).

Issues, Controversies, Problems

The reported prevalence rates of cyberbullying vary from 6.5% (Jones, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2012) to 72% (Juvoven & Gross, 2008) with frequencies converging between 20 to 40% (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008). Typically, cyberbullying experiences peak around the age of 14 (Ortega et al., 2009), although those most at risk of being involved in cyberbullying are adolescents and young adults (Ševčíková & Šmahel, 2009). Tokunaga (2010) proposed that a holistic view of cyberbullying should be adopted to include: aggression, hostile, and harmful acts via an electronic device. Clearly, not all acts encountered online may be intended or interpreted as cyberbullying; young people make the distinction between cyberbullying behaviors and banter (Spenser & Betts, 2014). Banter is an "interactional bonding game" (Dynel, 2008, p. 246) that is interpreted as playful by participating individuals rather than having sinister undertones.

Willard (2007) suggested eight forms of cyberbullying: Flaming (angry and vulgar online messages); harassment (repeated sending of nasty and insulting messages to the victim); denigration (spreading of rumors and gossiping about a person online to damage his/her reputation or friendship); impersonation (causing someone to get into trouble or damaging someone's reputation by pretending to be that person); outing (sharing secrets or humiliating information); trickery (convincing someone to share humiliating information, then making it available); exclusion (intentionally excluding someone from an online group in order to cause hurt); and cyber stalking (repeatedly harassing someone such that the person feels threatened or afraid). There are a number of high profile cases where the types of cyberbullying identified by Willard have been attributed as a contributing factor to young people's suicide. For example, Ryan Halligan committed suicide after being duped by an individual who befriended him, humiliated him, and then sent threats via instant messenger which were subsequently circulated to the wider peer group (Moreno, 2011). Clearly parallels exist between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying; however, cyberbullying has some unique characteristics. The chapter will now discuss seven facets of cyberbullying that are particularly pertinent to the definition and conceptualization of cyberbullying: anonymity, access, repetition, permanency, publicity, power, and identity and motivation.

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