Cyberbullying: A Sociological Approach

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ABSTRACT

Cyberbullying has become a major social concern because it raises questions about technoethics. It has been the subject of research, information and prevention activities for different groups to protect against the misuse of technology, and because of that, this paper is based on an exploratory study about the sociological phenomenon of cyberbullying among Portuguese university students. The paper stresses the connection between the concepts of bullying and cyberbullying while promoting a flexible epistemological model that highlights the emerging nature of these phenomena based on the theoretical contribution of Gregory Bateson. In the end, the authors present the main conclusions of the empirical study.

Keywords: Additivity, Bullying, Cyber, Cyberbullying, Gregory Bateson, Internet

CYBERBULLYING: A SOCIOLOGICAL APPROACH

The cyberbullying has become a major social concern because raises questions about the ethical use of technology. In recent years, has been the subject of research and information and prevention activities for different groups such as governmental and non-governmental organizations, schools and parents’ associations to protect against the misuse of technology. This issue has become so important that the media also understood the importance of encouraging debate about it. Based on its magnitude, in the present work, our goal is to describe the phenomenon and present some results of an empirical study (Pinheiro, 2009).

On the Definition of Bullying

Before characterizing the phenomenon of cyberbullying, we will make a short description on bullying, distinguishing it from other situations of violence. Then we will draw attention to some characteristic features of cyberbullying.

Although bullying exists long ago as a social phenomenon, it only started to be investigated in the 70s by Dan Olweus, a professor at University of Bergen in Norway (Abrapia, 2006). He found that bullying was not natural or typical in the development of a child but something that could cause suicide (quoted in Pereira, 1997). However, the institutions were not interested in that subject until when, in the 80’s, three young boys aged between 10 and 14 committed suicide in Norway (Abrapia, 2006). Then, the first anti-bullying campaign was conducted in Norway in 1993: the Na-
tional Campaign Anti-Bullying. Simplifying, school bullying is a term that refers to all acts of violence and aggressive behaviour that are intentional and repetitive. This means that all acts of violence deliberated and systematic, with the purpose to tarnishing the image of others, are considered bullying (Abrapia, 2006; McCarthy, Sheehan, Wilkie, & Wilkie, 1996, p. 50). Although this phenomenon is more expressive in public schools it also happens in the particular ones. The physical space where it happens more often is the playground (Cortellazzo, 2006). According to Dan Olweus, bullying has three key features (DeVoe, Kaffenberger, & Chandler, 2005):

- It is an aggressive and harmful behaviour;
- A behaviour carried out repeatedly;
- A behaviour that occurs in a relationship where there is a discrepancy of power between peers.

This somewhat simple definition does not include the various dimensions of the phenomenon. In truth, “the investigation of bullying is further complicated by the complex dynamics of bullying scenarios and the developmental context for social development in which bullying plays a role” (DeVoe, Kaffenberger, & Chandler, 2005). For example, the conceptual separation between the social relations of violence and aggression that arise in human interactions spontaneously and the type associated with bullying are not yet very clear. “Further, aggression among youth often serves varied purposes for children at different stages of development” (DeVoe, Kaffenberger and Chandler, 2005). Therefore, it is necessary to make some clarifications, based on the existing literature. For the first feature we should know what is the type and degree of negativity and aggression. The definition of bullying, according to some authors, is a complex task, which goes beyond the mere physical and verbal aggression: it also covers psychological focused behaviours, for example manipulation. In a way, there will be an interaction that approaches the social aspects of the relation (Ericson, 2001).

According to most authors, there are two types of direct bullying: physical bullying associated to physical aggression and verbal bullying based on insults and humiliation. However, according to some authors, another type of bullying is appearing in school: the social bullying by denying integration in groups and activities (Wikipedia, 2009). In Figure 1 we can perceive what kinds of aggression are associated with the three forms of bullying practice (See figure 1):

**Repetitive.** In the first place, as argued by Adams (quoted in Cortellazzo, 2006, p. 1), European Commissioner for Combating Bullying, this problem is not just an accidental conflict, but a repeated situation. It should present, therefore, a characteristic that differentiates bullying from a traditional dispute between peers, more or less serious. Therefore we know that this is a case of bullying while the disagreement among peers is in fact continuous (Carvalho, Lima, & Matos, 2001). The continued disagreement is easily visible as we will see over days, weeks, months and years, the same peers in consecutive disagreements (Abrapia, 2006). Throughout this time, we found that one of the peer’s attacks and the other takes the role of victim, and can at some point try to defend himself against the aggressor, but never managing to talk him out of it for a long time (Abrapia, 2006).

**Between peers.** Hawkins, Pepler, and Craig (2001) found that peers were present in 88 percent of bullying episodes. Thus, bullying frequently involves the support of peers within the school community and is often not an isolated event between two individuals. Thus, bullying frequently involves the support of peers within the school community and is often not an isolated event between two individuals. To be more precise, when the bullying happens, we usually have a victim and some peers around her.

**Reversal roles.** Thirdly, this continuity supported for the peer gives its author
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