

Some problems with cyberbullying research

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Research on cyberbullying is plagued by inconsistent findings and exaggerated claims about prevalence, development over time, and effects. To build a useful and coherent body of knowledge, it is essential to achieve some degree of consensus on the definition of the phenomenon as a scientific concept and that efforts to measure cyberbullying are made in a ‘bullying context.’ This will help to ensure that findings on cyberbullying are not confounded with findings on general cyberaggression or cyberharassment. We tentatively recommend that cyberbullying should be regarded as a subcategory or specific form of bullying, in line with other forms such as verbal, physical, and indirect/relational.

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Current Opinion in Psychology 2017, 19:139–143

This review comes from a themed issue on **Aggression and violence**

Edited by **Brad J Bushman**

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.copsyc.2017.04.012>

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“In the abstract, it need hardly be said that before one proceeds to explain or to interpret a phenomenon, it is advisable to establish that the phenomenon actually exists, that it is enough of regularity to require and allow explanation.”

—Robert K. Merton

As suggested in the well-known citation of Merton [1], to understand and change a phenomenon, it is very important that the phenomenon is well identified. A first step in identifying a new concept or construct is to provide a preliminary definition of the phenomenon to roughly indicate the concept’s domain and its boundaries—a kind of concept mapping. This step concerns the content validity of the concept [2]. But to make it a useful scientific concept, its construct validity, including analyses of convergent and discriminant validity, must also be gradually established [3,4].

In the present article, we take a closer look at some aspects of the concepts of bullying and cyberbullying. On the basis of a selection of research findings, we focus in particular on the following issue: Can cyberbullying be conceptualized as a subcategory or form of traditional bullying, or should it be best regarded as a distinct phenomenon with special characteristics that make it partly different from traditional bullying? [5,6*]. In doing so, bullying defined as a scientific concept – based on but not identical to the everyday use of the term – will serve as a starting point for our examination.

In scanning the vast numbers of research publications about cyberbullying in the past 5–10 years, we have been struck and concerned by the many disparate and partly conflicting findings reported. Such heterogeneity suggests that researchers have used different definitions and operationalizations of the concept. It also indicates considerable lack of replicability, which will likely create problems of understanding, intervention, and prevention.

Definitions of bullying and cyberbullying

A common definition of (traditional) bullying is the following: “A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” [7]. In order to use the term bullying, there should also be an imbalance of power, an asymmetric power relationship [8*]. There are three components to this definition: (1) It concerns purposeful unwanted negative (aggressive) behavior that (2) typically implies a pattern of behavior that is repeated, and (3) occurs in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power or strength, favoring the perpetrator(s). This definition makes it clear that bullying often may be considered a form of peer abuse.

Although the specified criteria of this definition have sometimes been questioned and even rejected [9,10], they have been widely used in the research literature and seem by and large to be well accepted by the research community [11*,12*]. This is our basic point of departure in this article. And when the U.S. Centers for Disease Control was given the task of developing a ‘universal definition of bullying’, they landed on a definition that is basically the same as the one reported above [13*].

However, with the advent of cyberbullying, that is, bullying via electronic forms of contact or communication – such as emails, mobile, chat room, instant messaging, websites – concerns have been raised about whether and possibly how both the repetitiveness and the power

imbalance criteria in the general definition can be applied to bullying with electronic means [4]. We generally agree with the tentative conclusion reached by Smith *et al.* [12^{*}] that the key criteria defining traditional bullying are largely applicable to cyberbullying as well. They suggest, for example, that the imbalance of power can be assessed “in terms of differences in technological know-how between perpetrator and victim, relative anonymity, social status, number of friends, or marginalized group position” [12^{*}, p. 36]. Moreover, the criterion of repetition may have to be understood in a somewhat different way with a focus on how many individuals can be reached with a negative message or image, or the length of time that a message or image can remain in cyber space, rather than on the perpetrator’s cyber behavior which is often a single act [4,12^{*}].

Heterogeneity of prevalence estimates

Although there is a considerable degree of consensus, in principle at least, about how cyberbullying should be defined, it is obvious that empirical studies published and often meta-analyzed as cyberbullying studies have used very different ways of measuring the phenomenon [14,15]. One consequence is a bewildering array of prevalence estimates of cyberbullying, varying between 3–4% and 40%, with some studies producing estimates at 50% or even beyond [16,17^{*}].

As detailed in a recent paper [18], a good deal of this heterogeneity is clearly a function of different lengths of the reference or recall period used. Other differences

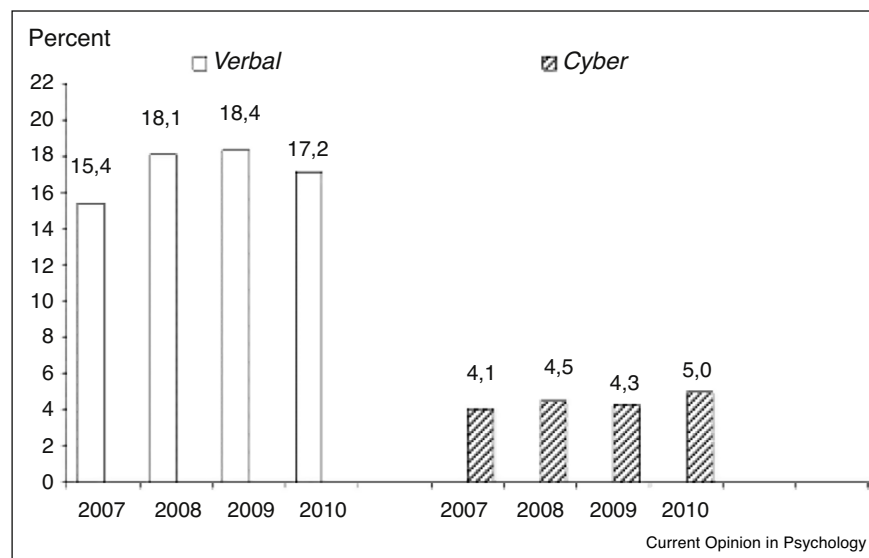
come from use of different cut-off points or threshold values for classifying a respondent as being cyberbullied.

A likely even more important reason for this heterogeneity is that cyberbullying has been studied ‘in isolation,’ that is, outside the general context of (traditional) bullying. To put cyberbullying in proper perspective, it is in our view necessary to study it in the context of (traditional) bullying more generally. One cannot talk about a phenomenon as bullying unless a reasonably precise definition has been provided to the respondents or the formulation of the questions or other measures used make it quite clear that the contents conform to what is implied in (the scientific) concept of bullying [19]. It is, of course, important not to use cyberbullying/victimization as a blanket term for any form of negative or aggressive act [4,20^{*},21,22].

Some empirical prevalence estimates

In a large-scale study of a total of 440 000 U.S. students in grades 3–12, we compared the prevalence rates of cyberbullying measured in the context of traditional bullying with the prevalence rates for traditional verbal bullying (the most frequent form of traditional bullying). The participants belonged to four different cohorts providing time series data for four different years, from 2007 to 2010, as shown in Figure 1. The average across-time prevalence for being verbally bullied ‘2 or 3 times a month or more often’ was 17.3%, whereas the corresponding figure for being cyberbullied was 4.5%. A very similar pattern of results, but at a lower level, was obtained in a study of

Figure 1



Time series data for 2007–2010 for verbal bullying (being bullied) and cyber bullying (bullied electronically). Data from all over the USA. Total $n = 447\ 000$.

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