Psicología Educativa

Cyberbullying in youth: A pattern of disruptive behaviour

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ABSTRACT

Despite the growing diffusion of cyberbullying among students and the numerous studies in the literature, to date relatively little is known about its relationship with school bullying. This article seeks to understand if there is an overlap between the roles of bullies and victims in traditional and electronic bullying. In order to investigate this, 5,058 Italian middle and high school students were surveyed about their experiences of cyberbullying and cybervictimisation, looking also at their involvement in school bullying. The results highlighted a significant overlap between school bullying and cyberbullying, with 12.1% of all students who bullied others at least sometimes being also cyberbullies. Similarly, there was a significant overlap between school victimisation and cybervictimisation, with 7.4% of all students who were victimised at school at least sometimes being also cybervictimised. Our findings confirm the existence of an overlap between school bullying and cyberbullying. We discuss useful intervention programs to reduce or prevent cyberbullying.

El ciberacoso en la juventud: Un patrón de comportamiento disruptivo

RESUMEN

A pesar de que aumenta la extensión del ciberacoso en estudiantes y de los muchos estudios al respecto, se sabe relativamente poco hasta el momento acerca de su relación con el acoso escolar. El artículo trata de entender si hay solapamiento entre los roles de agresor y víctima en el acoso tradicional y electrónico. Con el objeto de investigarlo se encuestó a 5,058 estudiantes italianos de secundaria y bachillerato sobre su experiencia de ciberacoso y cibervictimización, analizando igualmente la implicación en el acoso escolar. Los resultados ponen de manifiesto un solapamiento importante entre el acoso escolar y el ciberacoso: un 12.1% de todos los estudiantes que habían acosado a los demás al menos algunas veces habían sido también ciberacosadores. También había un solapamiento importante entre la victimización escolar y la cibervictimización: 7.4% de los estudiantes victimizados en la escuela al menos algunas veces habían sido también cibervictimizados. Los resultados confirman la existencia de solapamiento entre acoso escolar y ciberacoso. Se comentan programas de intervención útiles para disminuir o evitar el ciberacoso.

In the last decade, publications and public discourses on bullying online, also called cyberbullying, have increased in number (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Still, however, a scientific debate is going on with regard to the relationship between school bullying and cyberbullying and whether or not cyberbullying is an alarming problem (Olweus, 2012). Some of the questions addressed in the literature refer to whether cyberbullying is affecting the same students as traditional school bullying, whether cyberbullying is affecting boys and girls in the same way as traditional school bullying, and what types of online antisocial behaviours mainly take place.

The aim of the present study is to provide prevalence data on cyberbullying in its different forms in a representative sample of

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Italian students to study gender differences and to investigate the overlap between school bullying and cyberbullying and school victimisation and cybervictimisation in a large sample of adolescents and preadolescents in Italy.

Cyberbullying can be defined as 'an aggressive act or behaviour that is carried out using electronic means by a group or an individual repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself' (Smith et al., 2008, p. 376). Other definitions subsequently better defined cyberbullying as including the intention of harming (Slonje & Smith, 2008) and imbalance of power (Tokunaga, 2010). Patchin and Hinduja (2006, 2015) included also repetition in time and extended the means a cyberbully can use: computers, mobile phones, and other electronic devices. With regard to repetition in time, there is a debate in the literature as to whether cyberbullying, given its potential of *going viral* and reaching an infinite potential number of people even with only one single act, needs to be repeated in time by the cyberbully or not to be defined as such. Traditionally, the definition of school bullying requires repeated acts.

Even if most researchers agree that cyberbullying can be considered as a new type of aggression, made possible by the increasing diffusion of the internet and the new information and communication technologies (ICTs) among young people (Slonje, Smith, & Frisén, 2013), assessing the prevalence and nature of cyberbullying could be complex, since there is still a lack of consensus regarding how cyberbullying should be defined and measured (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Olweus, 2013; Smith, del Barrio, & Tokunaga, 2013; Tokunaga, 2010; Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012). Patchin and Hinduja (2015) outline how different measures of cyberbullying do not take into account all components of the definition: intention of harm, imbalance of power, and repetition in time. Also, when reporting results, different authors use different criteria to classify students as belonging to one or another category. Some use a 4-level category (only cyberbullies, only cybervictims, both cyberbully and cybervictim, and not involved), while others use a dichotomous criterion (yes/no bully or victim) regardless of the other category. Therefore, classifying a student as a cyberbully (or cybervictim) or not is not easy.

There are also differences in how to allocate a student in one or another category (cyberbullying once or twice, at least three times) and what reference period should be used (in a 2 or 6 month-period prior to data collection, ever in the life course, in the last thirty days, or in the last term). This makes it difficult to make comparisons between studies and to have a shared agreement on how often cyberbullying takes place (Del Rey et al., 2015; Patchin & Hinduja, 2015). However, by bearing these limitations in mind, we can look at what the studies have shown so far and present our study by providing prevalence data that try to explain the nature and prevalence of cyberbullying in a large Italian student sample.

Whatever the definition and methods used to study cyberbullying, it is clear that cyberbullying is a problem among young people. Year after year, due to the increasing access to technology, cheap internet contract or free wireless and the almost worldwide presence of internet, the risk of cyberbullying increases and the assessment of such risks is more and more needed (Baldry, Farrington, & Sorrentino, 2015).

Wolak, Mitchell, and Finkelhor (2007) found that, between 2000 and 2005, rates of internet harassment increased by about 50%; this might imply that the more these means are available to young people, and at a younger age, the more the rates go up (Willard, 2007). This increase has been documented also in the review by Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, and Del Rey (2015), which showed how studies on bullying are underrepresented and undercited with regard to poorer countries and minority samples.

Looking at studies conducted on prevalence rates, it emerges that cyberbullying is a widespread problem involving a significant number of children and adolescents both as cyberbullies and cybervictims (see Table 1 for a summary of main results). However, as shown in Table 1, prevalence rates vary, and direct comparisons are not always possible due to the different methods used and procedures.

What emerges from this review is that whereas studies on cyberbullying report prevalence rates for involvement in cyberbullying and cybervictimisation, few report the overlap category of cyberbully and cybervictim. We will here focus on this overlap category to identify gaps in the literature and therefore conduct a study to address them so to provide outcomes of use for dedicated intervention programs. What is worth mentioning in a first look at all studies reported in Table 1 is that prevalence rates vary from 4% up to 34% indicating a variance not so much in absolute incidence or prevalence rates, but in inconsistency of methodologies, definitions, sampling, and methods.

An early and extensive study carried out by Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) between 1999 and 2000 showed that 19% of internet users ($N = 1,501$) were involved in cyberbullying either as cyberbullies, cybervictims, or both. Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel (2009) collected data from 7,182 American students during 2005 and 2006. The study highlighted that of students involved in cyberbullying 32.6% were both cyberbullies and cybervictims. Kowalski and Limber (2007) found that 7% had been involved in cyberbullying both as a bully and a victim. In the same year, Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) found higher cyberbullying prevalence rates. In fact 49% of the students that they surveyed ($N = 84$) reported that they were cybervictims and 21% stated that they were cyberbullies. The sample, however, was rather small and not representative.

Slonje and Smith (2008) surveyed 360 Swedish adolescents to investigate the extent and nature of cyberbullying. The results highlighted that 11.7% of the whole sample reported being a victim of cyberbullying and 10.3% reported being a cyberbully.

Smith et al. (2008) surveyed 533 secondary school students aged 11-16 years in England to investigate the relationship between school and cyberbullying. The authors found a substantial continuity of the roles of bullies and victims. Cybervictims were more often also involved as school victims, while cyberbullies were also school bullies.

Also, Beran and Li (2008), in Canada, found that 58% of the students they surveyed had experienced cybervictimisation while 26% were cyberbullies in their life course. In the same year, Hinduja and Patchin (2008), in line with Ybarra, Diener-West, and Leaf (2007), found that about 35% of the adolescents participating in their research had experienced at least one cyberbullying incident as a victim.

Ortega, Ellipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, and Vega (2009), in Spain, reported that 25% of participants were victims of some kind of bullying, 5% were cybervictims only, and 5% reported "multivictimisation" (they were both traditional victims and cybervictims).

McGuckin, Cummins, and Lewis (2010) surveyed 3,699 primary school students in Northern Ireland about their life experiences of school bullying and cyberbullying. Data were collected between 2008 and 2009 and showed that about one student in ten (10.3%) was a victim of cyberbullying and 3.4% of all respondents reported they had cyberbullied others.

Mishna, Khoury-Kassabri, Gadalla, and Daciuk (2012) in Canada examined the frequency of cyberbullying in the previous three months, among 2,186 middle and high school students. Looking at the overlap category, one in four students (25.7%) reported overlapping categories. Kowalski and Limber (2013) with their US sample had a 5.3% cyberbullies/cybervictims overlap.