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Cyberspace as a generator of changes in the aggressive-victim role

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ABSTRACT

The interaction of adolescents' presential and cyberspace contexts accentuates the emergence of the aggressive-victim role. This profile takes on new dimensions as a result of the many combinations involved in the co-existence of bullying and cyberbullying. The twofold object of the present work was to: (i) determine the prevalence of victim-aggressive in the various forms that this role might be found in the context of bullying and cyberbullying; and (ii) explore the synergistic relationship established between the type and frequency of the abuse suffered and the type and frequency of the aggression perpetrated. The sample consisted of 1648 adolescents of from 12 to 16 years in age. The instrument used to acquire the data was a questionnaire. The results revealed the existence of four categories of aggressive victims: traditional aggressive-victims, aggressivecybervictims, cyberaggresive-victims, and cyberaggresive-cybervictims. The types of bullying suffered and perpetrated were found to be directly related and the frequencies of these two classes of attack were positively correlated. This allows one to predict the cyberspace and presential behaviour that will be displayed by adolescents who are being subjected to certain types of bullying and cyberbullying.

1. Introduction

Many recent studies on school co-existence have addressed the detection and analysis of situations involving both bullying and cyberbullying (Burton, Florell, & Wygant, 2013; Casas, Del Rey, & Ortega, 2013; Del Rey, Elipe, & Ortega-Ruiz, 2012; Law, Shapka, Hymel, Olson, & Waterhouse, 2012b; Menesini, Nocentini, & Camodeca, 2013; Monks, Robinson, & Worlidge, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Sticca & Perren, 2013). Their results have revealed that the two phenomena are closely linked, and that the existence of one largely predicts the emergence of the other. Campbell (2005), Juvonen and Gross (2008) and Riebel, Jäger, and Fischer (2009) report frequencies of between 60% and 80% for the cases of co-existence of cyberbullying and bullying in adolescents. Other researchers, however, question these data, and indicate that the co-occurrence of the two phenomena is reduced to special cases (Calvete, Orue, Estévez, Villardón, & Padilla, 2010; Hemphill et al., 2012; Kowalski, Morgan, & Limber, 2012). This disparity in the results may in part be explained by differences in the conceptualization of these two types of bullying and in the measurement instruments used.

1.1. Co-existence of the bullying and cyberbullying phenomena in aggressive-victims

From the reasoning of Subrahmanyam, Smahel, and Greenfield (2006) about the high level of consistency between adolescent behaviours manifest in their off-line and on-line lives, it would appear that those who have been victims or bullies in presential contexts will also be so in the cyber-environment. This deduction has indeed been confirmed in the work of Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007), Hinduja and Patchin (2008) and Kowalski et al. (2012). Vandebosch and Van Cleemput (2009), Erdur-Baker (2010), and Monks et al. (2012) extend the age range for this role correlation, finding it to hold not only in adolescents but also in children aged 7–11 years.

In the same vein, Juvonen and Gross (2008) or Sourander, Helstela, Helenius, & Piha, 2000 point out that bullying and the suffering of the victims start at school and continue later in cyberspace. They therefore understand cyberbullying to be an extension of bullying. However, there is a practically null possibility of the reverse situation occurring, i.e., that a child who is a part of episodes of cyberbullying later plays the same or another role in classroom contexts (Del Rey et al., 2012; Hemphill et al., 2012).

The study of the co-existence of bullying and cyberbullying has not been limited to the analysis of the coincidence of the dual roles, such as would be the case with a traditional bully becoming a

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cyberbully (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2012; Katzer, Fetchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009; Pornari & Wood, 2010), or with the victim of traditional bullying becoming the victim of cyberbullying (Gradinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007; Sontag, Clemans, Graber, & Lyndon, 2011; Wang, Iannotti, Luk, & Nansel, 2010). There is less empirical evidence about the other more complex situations which can arise and which pose new questions. Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) for instance, examine some of these situations, and suggest that victims of bullying can take on a different role in the virtual environment – specifically, that of cyberbullies. Those authors understand that since these children cannot retaliate presentially in the classroom, they use technological means by way of compensation. Smith et al. (2008) and Hemphill et al. (2012) confirm this relationship between being victimized and cyberaggression, but add a nuance in that they consider both aggressors and victims of bullying to have the potential of becoming cyberbullies.

This co-existence of roles has also been studied by Li (2007), but in a different direction. That author analyses the likelihood that those playing the different roles in traditional bullying situations can become cybervictims. Among her conclusions is that there is a high probability that both victims and aggressors of bullying will become cybervictims. Del Rey et al. (2012), however, insist that a traditional bully will only experiment with the role of victim or cybervictim in exceptional situations. Smith et al. (2008) suggest a correlation between the role of traditional aggressive-victim and the subsequent bullying role in cyberspace.

These discrepancies in the various investigations reported in the literature, and the unexplored relationships concerning the co-existence of the phenomena of bullying and cyberbullying in other roles such as the aggressive-victim, point to the need for new studies aimed at achieving a more comprehensive view of the reality of teenagers' lives that will contribute to enhancing the effectiveness of prevention and intervention measures.

Other studies have not focused exclusively on the correlation between roles, and have also addressed the analysis of the variables that influence the role that a given profile will play in cyber-environments (Gradinger et al., 2009; Wang, Iannotti, & Luk, 2012; Wang et al., 2010). They find that the expression of different roles in cyberspace depends on the type of bullying in which the adolescent has been involved – whether as victim or as bully. They add that the correlation is stronger in the case of verbal bullying than in that of physical aggression for which the correlation is either null or even negative.

1.2. The influence of cyberspace on the reactive or proactive profile of the aggressive-victim

One of the issues addressed in the analysis and explanation of the co-existence of episodes of bullying and cyberbullying has been the reactive or proactive nature of aggression perpetrated using technological and cyberspace resources (Law, Shapka, Domene, & Gagné, 2012a; Runions, 2013; Shapka & Law, 2013; Wright & Li, 2013). These studies are particularly relevant in the case of the aggressive-victim role given the characteristics typical of that profile. Previous research into the behaviour of aggressive-victims and its causes note the primacy of proactive over reactive motivations (Cuadrado & Fernández, 2009; Schwartz, Proctor, & Chien, 2001). However, those results relate to traditional bullying behaviours. The modern diversification of the attacks and the multiplicity of the means, resources, and contexts, including cyberspace, in which bullying now occurs raises new questions about young people's motivations to commit attacks in cyber-environments.

With regard to reactive aggression, these cases are understood to refer to violent responses to perceived threats or provocations (Dodge & Coie, 1987). In contrast, the proactive cases respond to the sole desire to cause harm to others and thus achieve certain goals (Crick & Dodge, 1996). In virtual space, however, characterized by its absence of face-to-face interactions, the anonymity of the perpetrator, and the rapid dissemination and publicity of the attacks, the interpretation of signs of provocation, intentionality, or threats may be mistaken, thus leaving room for doubt about the reactivity or proactivity of those who feel victimized and bully others (Patchin & Hinduja, 2011; Pornari & Wood, 2010; Runions, Shapka, Dooley, & Modecki, 2013; Vannucci, Nocentini, Mazzoni, & Menesini, 2012).

The research literature on this issue is inconclusive. Some studies indicate that cyberbullying is generally motivated by a sense of revenge or frustration caused by having been the object of previous attacks (Smith et al., 2008; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2008), or by peer rejection in classroom contexts (de Castro, Verhulp, & Runions, 2012; London, Downey, Bonica, & Paltin, 2007). Others, however, include in proactivity profiles the quest for a means to achieve social recognition, among other objectives (Law et al., 2012a). These differences show that cyberbullying is a multidimensional construct that involves both reactive and proactive motivational factors (Shapka & Law, 2013).

1.3. Modes of cyberbullying

Unlike bullying studies, in which one finds unanimous agreement on classification, cyberbullying studies reflect an uncertainty among researchers with their application of different classification criteria. These have been of three types: in terms of the technological means used for bullying, of the action instigating the aggression, or of the direct (private) or indirect (public) nature of the bullying.

Regarding the *technological means* used to bully others in cyberspace, the advances in ICT (Information and Communications Technology) have contributed to a progressive diversification that requires continuous updating. Ortega, Elipe, Mora-Merchán, Calmaestra, and Vega (2009) and Brighi, Guarini, and Genta (2009) group the different means used into two categories: the Internet, and mobile telephony. The former include such actions as sending and receiving e-mails, on-line chats, sharing audiovisual material, being part of a virtual community, etc. The latter is more focused on making and receiving telephone calls and short messages. With the arrival and rapid spread of smartphones, these two categories can be combined into a single medium, so that the above classification requires some kind of reformulation to match current reality. Other studies set out a more specific classification, considering from seven (Smith et al., 2008) to nine (Hinduja & Patchin, 2010) means. These include telephone calls, short text messages, sending photos and videos, e-mails, on-line chats, instant messaging, and websites including social networking. Tippett and Kwak (2012) add on-line games as a new medium. Kowalski et al. (2012) follow this classification but add some subdivisions of the website block. They do not, however, consider that these constitute modes of cyberbullying, but rather simple communication channels that facilitate the perpetration of bullying.

When the classification criterion applied is the *type of bullying*, Willard (2007) gives seven modes of cyberbullying which were later extended to eight (Kowalski et al., 2010): electronic insults, harassment, denigration, impersonation (henceforth in this article, referred to by the more precise term 'supplanted identity'), blackmailing and deceitful cajoling, exclusion, and 'happy slapping' (in which one or more persons attack a victim for the purpose of recording the assault on a mobile phone and uploading the video to the Web). Taking the essence of this classification criterion as referent, Nocentini et al. (2010) put forward four categories of cyberbullying behaviour: verbal (spoken or written), visual,