Exploring cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying in working life — Prevalence, targets and expressions

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A B S T R A C T

While cyberbullying among children and adolescents is a well-investigated phenomenon, few studies have centred on adults' exposure to cyberbullying in working life. Drawing on a large sample of 3371 respondents, this study investigates the prevalence of cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying in Swedish working life and its relation to gender and organisational position. Using a cyberbullying behaviour questionnaire (CBQ), the result shows that 9.7% of the respondents can be labelled as cyberbullied in accordance with Leymann's cut-off criterion. Fewer respondents, .7%, labelled themselves as cyberbullied and 3.5% labelled themselves as bullied face-to-face. While no significant relationships with gender or organisational position was found for individuals exposed to face-to-face bullying, this study showed that men to a higher degree than women were exposed to cyberbullying. Moreover, individuals with a supervisory position were more exposed to cyberbullying than individuals with no managerial responsibility.

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1. Introduction

More and more of today's communication at workplaces is conducted via electronic devices. Information is mediated via email and text messages, or on social network sites such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and LinkedIn. With Facebook being used by more than half of the Swedish population, social network sites have become a part of everyday life and are primarily used for private purposes (Findahl, 2013). Nonetheless, 18% of the Swedish employees who are members of Facebook include work relations in their social network (Findahl, 2012). By sharing photos, videos and texts on digital platforms, a new way of distributing insights into the private realm among individuals belonging to the professional sphere arises. While social network sites illustrate the blurred boundaries between work and private life, the predominant online communication tool of today is email, which two of three Swedish employees use on a daily basis (Findahl, 2012). With the use of digital communication technologies, previous assumptions about time and space are challenged as information can be received and shared from other places than the workplace and at other times than during working hours.

With increasing online communication it is reasonable to assume that dysfunctional behaviour such as workplace bullying also is expressed via digital channels. Cyberbullying, i.e. bullying via electronic devices, has attracted considerable media attention during the last decade (Brack & Caltabiano, 2014). As an emerging field, research on cyberbullying has centred on children and adolescents' exposure to that type of negative behaviour. Yet few studies have focused on cyberbullying among adults in working life (Brack & Caltabiano, 2014). Research on cyberbullying among children and adolescents has enriched the understanding of the phenomenon on a general level. Knowledge of cyberbullying that is produced in these empirical contexts, however, might not be fully informative regarding cyberbullying in working life, where other types of power structures and social relations have to be taken into account.

1.1. Research on cyberbullying

Smith et al. (2008 p. 376) define cyberbullying as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual using electronic forms of contact, repeatedly, and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself". Based on Olweus' (1993) theorisation on bullying between school children, the definition involves three fundamental components. Bullying is defined as behaviours that are (1) aggressive, (2) involving an imbalance of power between the target and the perpetrator, and (3) conducted

repeatedly and over time. As cyberbullying is a relatively new phenomenon conceptual issues exist. On the one hand, cyberbullying can be understood as merely an extension of face-to-face bullying. Studies on cyberbullying among school children have shown that cyberbullying often coincides with face-to-face bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008; Li, 2007; Privitera & Campbell, 2009). In other words, face-to-face bullies tend also to bully on-line and cyberbullying victims tend to be victims also of face-to-face bullying. Hence, some researchers argue that cyberbullying merely adds an extra element to face-to-face bullying (Li, 2007). On the other hand, the overlap is not so large (Ybarra, Diener-West, & Leaf, 2007). Moreover, cyberbullying has characteristics distinctively different from face-to-face bullying (Greene, 2006; Kowalski, Limber, Limber, & Agatston, 2012; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010).

First, the use of digital devices in cyberbullying gives the perpetrator several advantages. By using pseudonyms or creating temporary accounts perpetrators can deliberately hide their true identity. Anonymous interaction online has been suggested to have a disinhibiting effect on the perpetrator, involving behaviour s/he would not practise in real life (Kowalski et al., 2012). Furthermore, the geographic distance and the inability to see the responses of the target make the perpetrator less aware of the consequences of his or her negative behaviour. Not seeing facial and bodily responses may result in decreased feelings of empathy for the targeted individual (Slonje & Smith, 2008). Second, lack of supervision in electronic media makes cyberbullying conceptually distinct from face-to-face bullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). Since Web 2.0 is user-generated, the content of the platforms is not published or created by certain individuals. Instead the content is continuously produced and modified by all users in a participatory manner (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Hence, there are no clear individuals or groups who regulate deviant behaviours on the Internet (Tokunaga, 2010). Apart from anonymity and lack of supervision, a third feature of cyberbullying is that increased accessibility makes it more difficult for the targeted individual to escape the negative behaviour (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008; Tokunaga, 2010). When bullying behaviour is conducted via digital devices the target can be reached at other places than the workplace, such as the home, traditionally seen as a "safe haven" by targets of bullying. Moreover, by communicating via digital devices the target can be reached at other times than during work hours. Since work-related cyberbullying can take place outside traditional work related spaces, the negative acts can become visible for a large audience. Hence, cyberbullying becomes a public form of bullying.

In addition to the three features of cyberbullying often referred to in the cyberbullying literature, questions have been raised as to whether definitions derived from traditional perspectives are suitable for understanding cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Slonje & Smith, 2008). For instance, what is repetition when one uploaded clip or web-post can be clicked on and shared several time by its audience? Similarly, new dimensions are brought into the conceptualisation of power imbalance as technical skills and anonymity can create new power advantages (Campbell, 2005; DeHue, Bolman, & Völlink, 2008; Li, 2007; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Schenk & Fremouw, 2012; Ybarra, Mitchell, Wolak, & Finkelhor, 2006).

1.2. Power imbalance, gender structures and organisational position

Power is a central element in the conceptualisation of workplace bullying (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Vartia, 1996). Power imbalance derives from formal position and

informal status in the work organisation (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2001) as well as in the number of individuals involved in the bullying behaviour (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2011). Hence, bullying is most often a downward process (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Rayner, 1997; Zapf & Einarsen, 2011). Those in low-power positions, such as subordinates, entry-level employees and women, are more likely to become victims of bullying (Keashly & Jagatic, 2011). In contrast, those in high-power positions are hypothesised as more likely to engage in hostile workplace behaviour. The Scandinavian countries and Finland deviate from this pattern. Studies from these countries show colleagues as often as supervisors being reported as perpetrators (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996).

As women often have lower organisational positions than men (Barreto, Ryan, & Schmitt, 2009; SCB, 2014; SOU, 2014:80) it is reasonable to assume that women to a higher extent than men are victims of bullying. While large-scale studies have shown no significant difference between gender and victimisation (Hoel & Cooper, 2000), some studies have identified higher prevalence rates for women's exposure to bullying (Björkqvist, Österman, & Lagerspetz, 1994a; O'Connell, Calvert, & Watson, 2007; Salin, 2003; Simpson & Cohen, 2004). Comparing gender with hierarchical position, a large-scale nationwide survey in Great Britain found that women in middle management or senior management positions were more often bullied than their male counterparts (Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001).

1.3. Prevalence of work-life bullying

If cyberbullying exists also in working life, how large can the phenomenon be expected to be? Previous research shows extensive variation in the prevalence of workplace bullying both between and within countries (Agervold, 2007; Nielsen et al., 2009). While Scandinavian countries show a prevalence rate for workplace bullying between 3.5% and 16% (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996; Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2001) a Turkish study reported the prevalence of bullying among white-collar workers as 51% (Bilgel, Aytac, & Bayram, 2006). These protruding variations have been explained with references to cultural differences within countries such as power distance, egalitarianism and masculine/female values (Agervold, 2007; Hofstede, 2001) as well as methodological differences (Nielsen et al., 2009). Variations in measuring bullying contribute to an inconsistency in prevalence rates between studies (Ybarra, Boyd, Korchmaros, & Oppenheim, 2012). Conservative methods of measuring exposure to workplace bullying include asking the respondent directly if he or she has been exposed to bullying and/or measuring perceived exposure to specific bullying behaviour listed by the researcher (Nielsen, Matthiesen, & Einarsen, 2010).

The first approach, often referred to as self-labelling, is occasionally supplemented with a definition. Presenting a definition and including the word bullying tends to impact the prevalence rate negatively (Ybarra et al., 2012). Bullying victimisation is often associated with feelings of shame, creating a resistance to recognising the label (Felblinger, 2008; Lewis, 2004). The label bullied may threaten self-esteem as it can show signs of weakness (Van Beest & Williams, 2006). Hence, women are more likely than men to label their negative experience as bullying (Salin, 2003; Salin & Hoel, 2013). Workplace bullying is emotional and psychological in nature (Keashly, 2001) rather than physical or explicit. While workplace bullying is connected to risk taking, most bullying acts in the workplace are verbal, indirect and passive (Baron & Neuman, 1996; Björkqvist, Österman, & Hjelt-Bäck, 1994b; Keashly & Jagatic, 2011). This means that the harm is most often caused indirectly, by words rather than physical violence, and by