

Chapter 10

Cyberbullying in Childhood and Adolescence: Assessment, Negative Consequences and Prevention Strategies



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Introduction

In December 2012 an event took place in Gothenburg, Sweden, which attracted great media attention. It was called the “Instagram riot”, and started with two girls encouraging other youths to post pictures and text on the Instagram account “gbg-orroz” (“gbg” stands for Gothenburg and the word “orroz” is another word for whore). In addition to common aspects of cyberbullying such as pictures of young people being posted on the Internet, with the purpose of degrading them, this particular case took an unexpected turn of events. Some other young people strongly reacted against the girls behind the Instagram account. A riot broke out with ensuing damage and unrest. The two girls in the “Instagram-case” were sentenced to community homes (special residential homes for young people) and community service for aggravated defamation. They were furthermore ordered to pay damages to the victims. It is noteworthy that, because of the girls’ young age, their parents were held responsible for the payment of the damages. The Instagram riot shows that cyberbullying can have serious effects: harm to the victims, serious retaliation processes, and legal consequences for the cyberbullies.

In this chapter, we are going to discuss what “cyberbullying” is. Despite the fact that cyberbullying, over the last few years, has been the object of various scientific studies, it is not always altogether clear what is meant by the concept cyberbullying, how commonly occurring it is or how it differs from bullying in school settings. This chapter also includes a section on student’s experiences of and negative consequences to cyberbullying. A question that is posed in the chapter is: What can be done to counteract cyberbullying? In order to answer this question suggestions given by Swedish youths are presented. Throughout the chapter we have, as much

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as possible, used Swedish examples. The motive for this choice is that since most of the research about cyberbullying is carried out in the Anglosphere it is important to bear in mind the difference between schools in for example US and UK and schools in the Nordic countries.

What Is Cyberbullying?

Cyberbullying is often described as bullying that takes place on the Internet, and through a variety of modern electronic devices/media (Smith 2009). In Sweden, the term bullying came into use in the late 1960s, and the introduction of the term is usually attributed to Dr. Peter-Paul Heinemann. After the introduction of the term, it began to be filled with content by researchers in medicine as well as in the social sciences. Much of the work on offline bullying has adopted the definition by Dan Olweus, a Swedish psychologist (1999), who categorizes bullying as a subset of aggressive behavior defined by three criteria:

1. Aggressive behavior or intentional infliction of harm,
2. carried out repeatedly and over time,
3. in an interpersonal relationship characterized by an imbalance of power.

In short, the three criteria are intentionality, repetition and imbalance of power. The term bullying and this definition have been widely accepted among international researchers, and are often used to investigate how common bullying is among students (Smith et al. 2002). However, the term cyberbullying and its definition have not been employed as consistently or universally as the more general term of bullying. In the critical review of research on cyberbullying, Tokunaga (2010) portrayed it as an umbrella term encompassing different adjacent constructs, for example internet harassment and electronic bullying. Various definitions of cyberbullying have been presented in publications and instruments, several of them using some or all of the criteria from Olweus's definition (Berne et al. 2013). Although the three criteria from Olweus's definition is a good starting point, they do need to be discussed and elaborated, in regard to bullying in general and even more so in regard to cyberbullying. The three criteria intentionality, repetition and imbalance of power are discussed below:

The first criterion, intentionality, implies that the perpetrator has the intention to harm (Olweus 1999). Thus, the behavior does not count as bullying when a person teases someone with the intention to joke. On the subject of intentionality in cyberbullying, Menesini and Nocentini (2009) have suggested that when you cannot observe the person behind the screen, it might be difficult to understand his/her intention. This suggestion has been confirmed in a cross-cultural focus group study (Menesini et al. 2013) in which Estonian, German, Italian, Spanish and Swedish students emphasized that it can be difficult to understand whether or not an act is meant maliciously if the person responsible cannot be observed. However, does it matter whether it is done with the intention to be vicious or for fun, if the

cyberbullying act itself is perceived by the victim as hurtful? Some qualitative research has found that students consider that the perpetrator must have the intention to harm in order for the behavior to be defined as cyberbullying; otherwise, it is not perceived as cyberbullying (Vandebosch and Cleemput 2008). Focus groups that have been conducted in Sweden have however found that the effect on the victim and his/her perception of the act can be more relevant than the intention of the aggressor (Menesini et al. 2013). An explanation that students in Sweden think differently about the criterion intentionality may be that according to the Swedish law it is always the perception of the victim that is most relevant (SFS 2008:567, 2010:800). It is possible that this contributes to a general view in the Swedish culture that it is the victim's perception that is significant. This also means that according to the Swedish law the victim's perception of whether the act is hurtful or not is significant.

A characteristic of the second criterion, repetition, is that the act is carried out repeatedly and over time (Olweus 1999). To highlight the importance of this criterion, researchers have argued that the impact on the victim is often worse when he/she is bullied several times (Solberg and Olweus 2003). Nevertheless, the cross-cultural study investigating student's' views on the importance of different criteria in defining cyberbullying found that they perceived repetition as less relevant in cyberbullying than other criteria (Menesini et al. 2012b). However, one must use caution in interpreting this as a sign that the repetition criterion is not valid in research on cyberbullying; instead, some researchers have argued that this criterion works differently in cyberbullying. The difference between cyberbullying and offline bullying can be illustrated with a particular type of cyberbullying: photo/video-clip harassment (Vandebosch and Cleemput 2008). For instance, an embarrassing photo/video clip could be uploaded to a webpage by the cyberbully, and each new visit to the webpage will be experienced by the cybervictim as a repetition of the attack. To conclude, repetition is different in cyberbullying as the repetitive act can be conducted by an infinite number of others besides the original cyberbully.

The third criterion, imbalance of power, entails victims' experiences of having a positions of inferiority or of having difficulties defending themselves (Olweus 2013). According to a study with Swedish students, the imbalance of power can take other forms in cyberbullying than in offline bullying (Menesini et al. 2013). As far as bullying in school settings is concerned, the imbalance of power is often founded on physical strength, higher status in the peer group and/or support from the other members of the group. This does not entirely apply to cyberbullying since, for example, physical strength does not make a difference on the Internet (Menesini et al. 2013).

A unique factor influencing the imbalance of power on the Internet is anonymity (Menesini et al. 2013). It is impossible to defend oneself when the perpetrator is anonymous, which creates experiences of exposure and powerlessness for the victim, i.e. an imbalance of power. In a Swedish study (Frisén and Berne 2016), a young person expressed it like this: "It is distressing not knowing who it is. You get scared."

Another central factor in regard to imbalance of power online is dissemination. For instance, when someone writes something hurtful or uploads an unfavorable picture, it can be disseminated as quickly as a flash. Not knowing how many people have seen the picture or the text can affect the victim of cyberbullying very negatively. Is it a handful of persons, several hundred or maybe thousands? Have your friends seen it? Your classmates? Your parents and relatives? What is written or uploaded may also be difficult to delete.

In sum, imbalance of power is an important criterion for defining cyberbullying. However, it may differ from the situation in offline bullying. Not knowing whom the cyberbully is and how many people have seen the picture or text can increase the feeling of inferiority and defenselessness.

Different Forms of Cyberbullying

The ways that cyberbullying is performed can vary and there has been suggested to be different forms (Willard 2007). Firstly, cyberthreats are threatening comments on the Internet, either to a known person or to unknown persons. An example is when a student writes to another student “Today is the day you are going to die”. Secondly, harassment is when someone repeatedly writing malicious comments by way of a mobile telephone or over the Internet. Thirdly, denigration is sending denigrating and malicious slander, spreading of rumors on the Internet. An example of denigration is when someone in writing depicts someone else as being a whore. Fourthly, impersonation is to pass oneself off as being someone else on the Internet and to do something while posing as this person. An example of impersonation is someone creating an account on a dating site, looking for dates, in someone else’s name. Finally, exclusion is to exclude and deliberately prevent others from taking part in activities on the Internet. An example is when a student is not allowed to join an e-game on the ground that he/she damages for the group playing by not being available at nighttime.

Prevalence of Cyberbullying in Sweden

The prevalence rates of cyberbullying in Sweden vary greatly (Berne 2014). More specifically, prevalence rates for cybervictims varies between 1% and 10.6% when assessed through self-report questionnaires. This fluctuation might be due to researchers using different terms and definitions when measuring the prevalence of cyberbullying. An additional possible explanation could be that researchers use different cut-off points and reference periods (Frisén et al. 2013b).

In much of the work on offline bullying, researchers dichotomize variables with specific cut-off points to establish groups (bullies, victims, bully/victims and different types of witnesses) for statistical purposes (Solberg and Olweus 2003). For example, one question often used to measure experiences of bullying has been

obtained from Olweus (1999), namely: “How often have you been bullied in school in the past couple of months?”. This is a multiple choice question, with the following response alternatives: “I have not been bullied in school in the past couple of months”, “It has only happened once or twice”, “Two or three times per month”, “About once per week”, “Several times per week”. The cut-off point of “two or three times per month” is often used to determine the presence of victims or bullies when this question is used (Solberg and Olweus 2003).

However, some researchers have chosen to use a lower cut-off point in research on cyberbullying than what is commonly used in research on offline bullying (Frisén et al. 2013a). More specifically, they have chosen to use “It has happened once or more” as a cut-off point.

Thus, it appears that some researchers in the cyberbullying field use a more lenient cut-off point, and do not put much emphasis on the criterion of repetition in comparison to offline bullying.

The reference period of “the past couple of months” have been widely used in measuring offline bullying (Solberg and Olweus 2003). Solberg and Olweus (2003) further argue that this time period constitutes a memory unit that is likely to enable students to remember offline bullying situations. However, it is rare that this reference period is used when measuring cyberbullying (Frisén et al. 2013b). Instead, it is more common to use “last year” and “ever”. One possible explanation for this could be that nasty or offensive text messages or unfriendly information (photos, videos, text) that have been uploaded might remain on the Internet for a long time. This might lead the researcher to regard the reference period “the past couple of months” as too short a period of time.

To conclude, it is important to pay attention to which terms, definitions, cut-offs and reference periods are used in studies measuring the prevalence rates of cyberbullying. Otherwise, it is difficult to understand why some researchers report that cyberbullying is a common problem while others tend to report that it is a rare occurrence.

Consequences of Cyberbullying

What sort of consequences can cyberbullying have for the victims? Research shows that being a victim of cyberbullying often leads to negative emotions, the most frequent being: to become angry, anxious, afraid and to feel shame (Ortega, et al. 2012). A smaller group of cybervictims nevertheless state that, “they do not care” (Ortega, et al. 2012). It has furthermore been found in a Swedish study that the victims of cyberbullying have more somatic, i.e. physical/bodily, symptoms, such as head- and stomachaches, than other students (Beckman et al. 2012). These symptoms are, of course, signs that these students are not feeling well and are to be taken seriously. It can for that reason be good to know that students who say they have head- or stomachaches may have been victims of cyberbullying, although the symptoms of course could have other causes as well. Moreover, two studies in Sweden

has found that victims of cyberbullying have poorer body esteem and body image than non-cybervictims (Frisén et al. 2013a; Landstedt and Persson 2014). Frisé et al. (2013a) found that Swedish cybervictims reported a poorer view of their general appearance and of their weight than non-cybervictims, and that girls who were victims of cyberbullying reported a poorer view of their general appearance compared to boys who were victims of cyberbullying. Landstedt and Persson (2014) found that Swedish cybervictims reported poorer body image compared to non-cybervictims. They also found that girls who were cybervictims reported poorer body image compared to boys who were cybervictims.

One explanation for why girls who were victims of cyberbullying experienced poorer body-esteem and body image than boys could be that the pressure to conform to a culturally defined ideal body size and ideal appearance, such as having a body that is thin but shapely (Grogan 2007), is stronger for girls. These findings may thus reflect a socialization into traditional gender roles, in which girls are taught from a young age that they are judged by how they appear to others (Grogan 2007). Nevertheless, evidence increasingly indicates that physical appearance has also become a growing concern among young men (Ricciardelli and Williams 2012).

Having poor body esteem and body image is in itself problematic but has also been found to have adverse consequences, for example eating disorder symptomatology (Shroff and Thompson 2006). As such, parents, school personnel and anti-bullying teams need to pay attention to the likelihood that victims of cyberbullying might suffer from poor body esteem and body image.

How are the cyberbullies affected? A study in Sweden investigated whether cyberbullies and bullies in school felt remorse over their actions (Slonje et al. 2012). A majority (70%) of the perpetrators of bullying in school settings felt remorse over their actions, but the pattern was reversed for cyberbullies: a slight majority (58%) did not feel remorse. A possible explanation for this difference is that the cyberbullies do not see the victims' reactions and therefore do not understand how the bullying affects them. It was furthermore shown by a meta-analysis that cyberbullies exhibit more difficulties in school, show less empathy and have a higher degree of moral disengagement than other students (Kowalski et al. 2014). Moral disengagement signifies someone behaving hurtful towards someone else without feeling guilt, remorse or self-condemnation, online and offline.

Given the severe effect of cyberbullying, the issue is of great concern. One important question is what can be done to prevent this problem and how cyberbullying can be stopped. There are, of course, no definite answer to this question, nor a cure-all against cyberbullying. We do however now that we adults have a responsibility to work to prevent cyberbullying and intervene when it occurs (Berne et al. 2016). Sweden is an interesting country with regards to this, because in Sweden there is legislation against bullying and there is a widespread use of the internet among students. To be more specific, there is a zero tolerance policy against bullying in Swedish schools, and staff is obliged by law to actively prevent discrimination, harassment and abusive treatment (SFS 2008:567; 2010:800). Additionally, among 25 European countries, Sweden is the country with the most frequent everyday internet usage among 9–16 year-olds (Von Feilitzen et al. 2011).

Interventions to Prevent Cyberbullying

There are currently some Nordic anti-bullying programs, such as the KiVa-program and the Olweus-program, whose representatives suggest that cyberbullying is mainly a problem in relation to bullying in school settings (Olweus 2013; Salmivalli and Poyhonen 2012). They have found that the programs decrease bullying both online and offline, and are therefore of the opinion that schools ought to continue to use programs aimed at bullying in school settings and by doing this will also counteract cyberbullying. There are, furthermore, some international research groups who develop and assess preventive measures focused on cyberbullying in particular (Menesini et al. 2012a; Wölfer et al. 2014). In the following part, two of the interventions proven to be effective in the preventive work against cyberbullying will be described; *Awareness about cyberbullying* and *Teaching students about what is illegal on the Internet*. Also, Swedish youths own suggestions on how to put a stop to cyberbullying if victimized are presented.

Awareness About Cyberbullying

A central part of the preventive work against cyberbullying is that students really do understand what cyberbullying is. It can furthermore be beneficial to raise student's awareness of the negative impact of cyberbullying, for cybervictims as well as for cyberbullies. Studies have found that information about the negative impact of cyberbullying is associated with less cyberbullying behavior (Menesini et al. 2012a; Wölfer et al. 2014). However, these studies have also shown that increasing students' knowledge about cyberbullying is not enough – the students themselves need to be involved in developing anti-cyberbullying material – such as a poster, website or video clip (Menesini et al. 2012a; Wölfer et al. 2014). One possible explanation for these findings could be that engaging with cyberbullying material can generate critical thinking and discussion among students, which might affect their attitudes and behaviors more than simply passively listening to a lecture.

Teaching Students About What Is Illegal on the Internet

It is beneficial to give students knowledge about how the law applies to the Internet, especially which cyberbullying behaviors that are criminal and what punishments they incur (Wölfer et al. 2014). As a practical exercise, schools can have the students undertake a role-play in which they carry out legal proceedings concerning cyberbullying. This would both provide knowledge about the law and improve the students' moral reasoning.

Suggested Coping Strategies

It is also an important part of the preventive work against cyberbullying to give students strategies concerning how to avoid problematic situations on the Internet, as well as strategies concerning how to cope with cyberbullying if victimized. In order to do so knowledge about the coping strategies that student's use is essential. A Swedish study investigated which strategies students stated that they would use in order to put a stop to cyberbullying if victimized (Frisén et al. 2014). We are now, in the coming paragraphs, going to present some of the results.

Swedish student's most commonly suggested coping strategy was telling someone (70.5%), especially parents (39.5%) and teachers (20.2%) (Frisén et al. 2014). This is a somewhat surprising finding, given that previous international studies have found that children and adolescents often do not tell adults about cyberbullying, because, among other things, they fear that their access to the technology will be restricted if they do (Sevcikova et al. 2015). Social representations theory offers an explanation for this difference in pattern; namely, the content of social representations in peer cultures might vary due to differences in contextual variables, such as culture (Augoustinos et al. 2012). Certain features in the Swedish sociocultural context can be assumed to have an impact on whom Swedish students suggest they would turn to if they were cyberbullied. Part of the preventive work against cyberbullying in Sweden is a matter of encouraging students to turn to adults, since it is the responsibility of adults to put an end to cyberbullying (Swedish National Agency for School Education 2011). Furthermore, the interaction between students and adults are less formal in Sweden compared to many other western societies (Sweden. se). As an example of this Swedish students call their teachers by first name. These aspects of the Swedish society will probably exert an influence on how comfortable Swedish students are in turning to adults about their worries.

Additional Swedish research nevertheless shows that there are a number of students who choose not to tell an adult that they have been bullied, one reason being that they have relations of poorer quality to the adults in their surroundings (Bjereld et al. 2017). It is thus an important part of the preventive work against cyberbullying to provide the means for open communication between students and adults. Both student's inclination to tell adults if something happens and to heed their advice are in that way increased.

According to Friends (2013), a Swedish anti-bullying organization, about 42% of Swedish 12- to 16-year-olds wished their parents had more knowledge about how to support them if they were victimized online. Additionally, they wished their parents would talk more with them about how to behave in the digital world, and also believed that parents should be good role models. Swedish students want their parents to be more involved regarding issues related to cyberbullying and cyber-safety. In research for preventing cyberbullying, it has been emphasized that parents should be invited to meetings at school with the purpose of increasing their knowledge about cyberbullying and how they can prevent it (Välimäki et al. 2012). These meetings are intended to encourage and support parents in communicating with

their children about these issues. It is especially important that parents clarify that they will not deny their children phone or online access if they are targeted online, as children might otherwise be reluctant to report to their parents that they are being cyberbullied.

The study by Frisé et al. (2014) shows that a very small amount of Swedish students would tell a friend if they were cyberbullied. A possible explanation is that they do not think they can get any help from their friends, another that they do not have all that many friends to tell. Additional research in five Nordic countries; Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden, also shows that the number of friends that victims of bullying have, is of great importance to their mental health (Bjereld et al. 2014). It is therefore important to teach students' different strategies concerning how to speak out or in other ways help a victim. Friends or other persons close to the victim could, for example, remove or block the cyber-bully's account. In another study Swedish students suggested that if they read a negative comment directed at a student, they could write a comment to the bully and question his/her action (Frisé et al. 2018). However, it is important to point out that this activity may have the opposite effect than what was intended. We found in another focus group study with students that sometimes confronting the bully can get out of hand, especially online, so that the parties involved retaliate against each other, neither wanting to give in, creating an escalating circle of aggression (Frisé and Berne 2016). Future research could therefore benefit from focusing on how peers can defend a targeted friend online without it backfiring at them. Peers could furthermore show concern and tell the victim that cyberbullying is not acceptable. It is, in other words, a matter of working against cyberbullying on a broad front, making it a concern for everyone, not only for cyberbullies and victims.

Interestingly enough, the Swedish study by Frisé et al. (2014) found that few students would protect themselves using technical means, for example by removing the cyberbully from their friend list, blocking a cyberbully or using a "report-function". Previous research has shown that it is helpful for students to use technical solutions to deal with cyberbullying (Raskauskas and Huynh 2015). As an adult, it is therefore important to know of the most common technical means of protection, in order to be able to offer assistance in bullying situations.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we propose that features of offline bullying take new forms in the context of cyberbullying. Anonymity and publicity are probably essential prerequisites for creating and fortifying the imbalance of power and repetition of acts of bullying in the cyber context, which indicates that researchers should try to adapt and use Olweus's definition of offline bullying for cyberbullying.

Research presented in this chapter furthermore shows that being involved in cyberbullying incidents have harmful consequences, for example, being the victim of cyberbullying is associated with physical/bodily symptoms, poor body esteem

and poor body image. Moreover, perpetrators of cyberbullying exhibit more difficulties in school, show less empathy and have a higher degree of moral disengagement.

Considering the severe and negative consequences of cyberbullying, it is an issue exceedingly important for professionals to work with. We have given a few examples of how to do so, such as raising students' awareness about cyberbullying and seeking out technical solutions. Moreover, this part of the chapter highlighted that many Swedish students rely on adults (teachers and parents) for help and support if they were cyberbullied, which is a valuable sign of trust that needs to be maintained. We also presented that a small minority of students suggest telling a friend when asked which strategies they would use in order to put a stop to cyberbullying if victimized. This shows that Swedish schools need to help students develop skills they can use to assist friends in difficult situations. We hope that this chapter, apart from contributing to an increase in knowledge of cyberbullying generally, will help preventing more students from becoming victims of it.

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