

# Bullying and Cyberbullying

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## Abstract

The purpose of this essay is to explore diverse forms of bullying according to multiple theoretical frameworks of aggression, victimization, and human development. We comment on existing anti-bullying legislation and bullying prevention programs. Bullying manifests in a variety of settings, and with the popularity and accessibility of the Internet, a new form of bullying has become prevalent: cyberbullying or cyber aggression. Different forms of cyber aggression are discussed, as well as psychosocial implications for both aggressors and victims. Current trends in bullying and cyber aggression such as Internet trolling and innovative prevention strategies are detailed, as well as potential areas of future research in the social and behavioral sciences.

*Bullying* is a subset of aggression that is characterized by repetition and a power imbalance between the perpetrator and the target. These defining characteristics increase the psychosocial impact of bullying over and above that of general aggression (Ybarra, Espelage, & Mitchell, 2014). As a form of aggression, bullying can be physical, verbal, or relational (damaging to friendships or social status). What is called *cyberbullying* (but is arguably more properly described as cyber aggression) is bullying that utilizes digital technology as the method of delivery of the aggressive acts. It is widely understood that all forms of bullying lead to harmful consequences for all parties involved, including depression and anxiety, social withdrawal, loneliness, and decreased attendance and performance in school. Studies have discovered that the psychosocial consequences of relational bullying are more serious than those of other forms (Bauman, 2008; Bauman & Summers, 2009). Concern about these forms of aggression is high because it is typically the youth who are impacted and whose tragic outcomes are disseminated by popular media. However, workplace forms of these behaviors also exist and cause harm to adults.

Most bullying and cyberbullying research is self-report survey research, although peer- and teacher-nominations are sometimes used as well. Surveys are often administered in the school setting; some cyberbullying studies have recruited participants from popular websites. Prevalence rates vary widely

depending on the measures used, the population sampled, and the way in which questions are asked (e.g., single item vs a list of behavioral indicators, definition provided or not). Bullying has been found in all countries where it has been studied, and all socioeconomic groups, races/ethnic groups; no group has been found to be immune. Schools are often the locus where bullying occurs or originates, and thus many studies have focused on bullying in the school context. There have been calls for researchers to report psychometric properties of their measures, and to be consistent across studies so that findings can be compared. Regardless of differences, it is generally agreed that bullying and cyberbullying are problems worldwide.

In the United States, most states have enacted legislation to address the problem of bullying in schools (see Stuart-Cassel, Bell, & Springer, 2011 for details). Although the laws vary, most require districts to create and disseminate an anti-bullying policy. The policies often include requirements for reporting bullying, investigating and responding to suspected or observed incidents, keeping records, specifying sanctions, and making referrals for counseling or other services as indicated. However, states vary widely in the specifics of the laws, and the extent to which cyberbullying is included. Only a few states require training for staff, and while most laws encourage districts to implement anti-bullying programs, there are no guidelines for selecting programs, and perhaps more importantly, no funding is allocated for any of these activities. At a time when educational institutions are under-resourced, this constraint limits the extent to which schools address the problem.

## THEORIES

### SOCIAL ECOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE

Espelage and Swearer (2011) have applied Bronfenbrenner's social ecological theory to the context of bullying. This perspective has moved research beyond the characteristics of individual bullies and victims to understanding the context (social groups, classrooms, schools) in which bullying occurs. More recent studies have addressed school climate as a factor in bullying, and have also begun to emphasize the role of the bystander. Prevention programs enlist bystanders who are seen as powerful agents who can stop bullying by taking an active role in bullying events. A few researchers have also begun to examine the role of teachers in the ecology of bullying (Hektner & Swenson, 2012; Veenstra, Lindenberg, Huitsing, Sainio, & Salmivalli, 2014; Yoon & Bauman, 2014) and findings show that teachers matter.

## GROUP DYNAMICS

Salmivalli (1999, 2010; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 1996) illuminated the role of the peer group and underscored that a bullying event typically involves more than the bully/victim dyad. She identified additional roles of Bully Reinforcer (those whose behavior encourages the bully), Bully Assistant (those who join in once the bully initiates the aggression), and Victim Defender, and Outsider. This model led to research that examined these roles and their influence. Recently there has been an emphasis on empowering bystanders to intervene to stop the bullying. More research is needed to determine how effective this is and to evaluate the impact of intervening on the bystander.

## ATTRIBUTION THEORY

One line of research has focused on how youth attribute the causes of bullying. Researchers have identified a *hostile attribution bias*, which has been detected in some youth who bullying. This suggests that individuals with this bias are prone to interpret neutral or ambiguous events to hostile intent. For example, if someone bumps into him in the hallway, the person with this bias will believe the action was intentional and motivated by an intent to harm whereas those without such a bias would think the crowded halls are responsible for the accidental collision. On the other hand, some youth are more likely to blame themselves when they are victimized; they attribute the cause of the event to their own flaws (self-blaming bias). Thornberg and Knutsen (2011) found that adolescents tend to explain bullying by attributions about the bully and victim.

## SOCIAL INFORMATION PROCESSING

This theory, closely associated with the work of Crick and Dodge (1994), is an additional perspective on the cognitive mechanisms involved in bullying and victimization. The individual comes to a social situation with biological or genetic propensities, a set of prior experiences, and social cues. This initiates a process that begins by encoding (involving sensation, perception, attention, and focus), followed by representation (leading to interpretation of the situation). Then the individual begins to decide how to respond, by first generating possible responses, then considering the consequences of those responses and the likely outcomes, and finally enacts a response. It is in the interpretation of cues that the attributions are applied. Crick and Dodge propose that the way peers respond to the behavioral response becomes part of the dataset of prior experiences that influences future processes.

Theorists later expressed reservations about the theory because of the absence of the emotional component. Other relevant constructs include self-efficacy, which refers to one's belief about one's own ability to successfully enact a behavior (Bandura, 1977). In generating possible responses, the individual must take into account his or her self-efficacy to perform the response. That is, one may think of a possible response, but reject it because one lacks self-efficacy for doing that behavior.

Social information processing has been studied as a predictor of social adjustment in children, including their roles in bullying. Other research has examined gender and age differences in these processes. The theory is the framework that guides much current research on bullying and victimization.

#### EVOLUTIONARY THEORY

Evolutionary theory has also been applied to bullying; Ellis *et al.* (2011) highlight the adolescent/young adult phase because this is the period in which individuals acquire the competencies, both physical and social, needed to reproduce. Bullying is used by some adolescents and young adults to control resources to increase the likelihood they will reproduce (Ellis *et al.*, 2011). This is consistent with the evidence that bullying peaks in middle school, which is a time of change from small to larger schools with a new social hierarchy, and also a time of sexual maturation.

#### VICTIMIZATION

The bullying literature tells us that there are characteristics of individuals that increase their risk for being victimized: small stature, shyness, poor social skills, low self-concept, physical differences (obesity, late or early maturing), and peer rejection are well-known predictors of victimization (Smith, 2014). Studies have found links between victimization by bullying or cyberbullying and a range of suicidal behaviors (ideation, plans, and attempts) (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013) and many problems such as depression and anxiety. Bullying researchers have also examined the stability of bullying roles, with mixed findings. Most studies (e.g., Camodeca, Goossens, Terwogt, & Schuengel, 2002; Schäfer, Korn, Brodbeck, Wolke, & Schulz, 2005), find greater stability for the bully role than for the victim role, but longitudinal studies are fairly short term, generally.

#### PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Research about prevention of bullying was initiated by Dan Olweus of Norway in the late 1970s in response to several suicides that were attributed to

peer victimization (Olweus, 1978). His work led to a widely used measure of bullying and victimization, and to a comprehensive school-wide approach to bullying prevention. Although Olweus initially found significant reductions in bullying and victimization when his program was implemented, other researchers, particularly those in the United States, have had less successful outcomes. There has been a proliferation of anti-bullying programs, only some of which are grounded in research and a smaller proportion that have been rigorously studied for efficacy and effectiveness. One very promising program is that developed by Christina Salmivalli and her team in Finland (<http://www.kivaprogram.net/evidence-of-effectiveness>; Salmivalli, Kärnä, & Poskiparta, 2011). This program has now been translated into several languages, and is undergoing randomized clinical trials in several countries.

### CYBER AGGRESSION

Bullying has interested researchers for several decades. With the proliferation of technology, a new form of aggression has manifested. Research on the causes, dynamics, and implications of cyberbullying is growing and beginning to expand beyond basic prevalence studies to examine more dynamic processes.

Cyberbullying is frequently examined in the context of schools and youth, but can extend into the workplace for adults. Tokunaga (2010) summarized extant research and estimated that 20–40% of all adolescents had reported experiencing cyberbullying at least one time during their lives. It has become clear that cyberbullying is not a problem isolated to individual aggressors or victims, but instead is a problem that is embedded within social structures and environments. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory highlights the complex and deeply integrated social characteristics of cyberbullying (Festl & Quandt, 2013). Individuals are now connected in multidimensional structures that correlate with Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems. Friendships become microsystems, classrooms and cubicles become mesosystems, and schools and work environments become exosystems. Between these systems, a constant and immediate flow of information is being transferred and aggressions can be readily exchanged within the systems. Johnson (2010) proposed that there is now a techno-subsystem within the microsystem that surrounds and saturates the individuals and infuses all the surrounding layers.

There are unique features of cyber aggression that suggest that the potential for harm exceeds that of face-to-face bullying (Campbell, 2005), and research appears to confirm this concern (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013). Aggressors have unlimited access to victims, and destructive messages can be sent to victims

at any time from any location. Aggression and victimization can also extend beyond the initial victim as internet or mobile phone messages can easily be forwarded or exchanged with individuals outside of the original aggressor and victim. From the perspective of the victim, it may appear that the audience is infinite. An additional characteristic of digital aggression is that the content is both permanent and editable, meaning that humiliating content can be retrieved at a later time to further embarrass the victim. It has been observed that aggressors have a tendency to say and do things in cyberspace that would not be said or done in a face-to-face setting. Suler (2004) identified this phenomenon, the *online disinhibition effect*, which increases the level of cruelty that is expressed. Cyberbullies can be anonymous, or establish an online character that is not tied to their true identity, furthering their disinhibition in online interfaces. Finally, because nonverbal clues are diminished or absent, the aggressor does not witness the impact of the action on the victim, depriving him or her of the chance to empathize with the target and alter future behavior.

Many studies have found strong positive correlations between behavior in face-to-face bullying and digital aggression (Bauman, 2013). This aggression has serious psychosocial consequences for both the aggressor and the victim. Wright and Li (2013) concluded that peer rejection and cyber victimization were predictors of cyber aggression 6 months later. Psychosocial consequences have been found for both aggressors and victims including depressive and somatic symptoms, acting out (carrying weapons or abusing substances), increased suicidal behavior, sense of helplessness, and risky sexual behavior (Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Litwiller & Brausch, 2013; Parris, Varjas, Meyers, & Cutts, 2012). Future research should focus on effective prevention strategies in order reduce that harmful effects of this behavior.

A troublesome online behavior that has not yet attracted wide attention of researchers is that of *trolling*. A troll is a person who deliberately creates distress on the Internet by making rude, inappropriate, vicious, and crass comments on sites where such behavior is clearly unwelcome. For example, trolls have disturbed grieving individuals by posting nasty or untrue statements on memorial pages designed to allow those who knew the deceased person to post messages of condolences. Families create such pages so that coworkers, friends, and family can share memories of deceased individual and share in their mourning and grief. Internet trolls seek these pages, although they do not know the individuals mourning or the deceased.

It has been suggested that internet trolls exhibit *deindividualization*, or a state in which they lose their usual self-restraint in a group setting or where they believe themselves to be anonymous. The ability to be anonymous is enhanced by the technology, so it may be that individuals are more likely not

to inhibit their aggressive impulses in that setting (Bishop, 2013; Demetriou & Silke, 2003). What is unknown at this point is whether this aggressive behavior manifests in other environments as well, or whether this outlet reduces the need to aggress in person. Bishop (2013) suggested there may be a connection between anti-social personality disorder, as defined by the *DSM-V criteria*, and trolling. Researchers might study trolls to learn more about the motives and characteristics (psychological and biological) that increase the likelihood of such behaviors.

A related phenomenon is that of websites that are platforms for cruelty. These sites often appear, are taken down, and replaced by other sites. Young people are often unprepared for the level of mean-spirited and vulgar comments that are posted. Examples are formspring.me, thedirty.com, college-abc.com, and so on. Analyses of the content of these sites could inform our understanding of this type of aggression. As with trolls, it would be informative to know whether users of this anonymous method to express aggressive impulses are aggressive in other contexts, or whether these sites are additional outlets for persons who are overly aggressive in all contexts.

Whether cyberbullying occurs in school with adolescents or workplaces with adults, the social and behavioral consequences cannot be ignored, and effective prevention strategies should be adopted according to the environment. The most effective prevention strategies for face-to-face bullying have been school-wide approaches, which target multiple levels of a school's ecology. Whether this strategy would also be effective against cyberbullying remains to be determined, although initial research bodes well (Williford, Elledge, Boulton, DePaolis, Little, & Salmivalli, 2013). However, because most cyberbullying originates outside of school, and does not use school equipment, there is considerable confusion about whether schools have the authority to intervene.

The development of innovative and novel methods for helping victims cope with cyberbullying is an area in need of attention. Bronfenbrenner's Ecological Systems Theory reminds us that there are multiple systems influencing the behavior that can be harnessed to reduce it. Traditional anti-bullying campaigns are present in the school (microsystem), but innovative messages can be delivered technologically as well, maximizing effectiveness of prevention (Spears, 2011). For example, researchers in Australia are working with online marketing experts to create anti-bullying campaigns that are targeted to specific users through networked spaces such as Facebook and YouTube. These are also spaces where cyber aggression frequently occurs, but prevention has not yet been implemented. Market experts arrange to have ads appear on the screens of shoppers based on their collection of user data. The potential for distributing anti-cyberbullying messages using a similar approach is

very promising and has the potential to reach the expansive and increasing population using the internet (Spears & Zeederberg, 2013).

Research should also be focused on large, nationally representative samples in order to gain an accurate portrayal of the extent and multifaceted dynamics of cyberbullying (Bauman, 2012). The problem and psychosocial consequences are not isolated to youth or adults; therefore collection of data should reach as broad of an audience as possible.

## CONCLUSION

The bullying research tradition is credited to the work of Dan Olweus of Norway, whose pioneering work raise awareness that bullying is not simply a rite of passage or something to be endured during childhood toward the goal of building character. Since then, researchers around the world have examined many aspects of this aggressive behavior and provided an empirical basis for the proliferation of anti-bullying programs. Not all schools are equally enthusiastic about implementing such programs, which are costly in terms of both time and resources. We believe that attention to this problem is imperative and as schools and relationships formed in school are the most frequent locus of bullying activity, schools have a moral obligation to engage in whole school programs with evidence of effectiveness.

We believe that cyberbullying, because of its unique features, is a promising field for study, and that field needs to take into account the broader field of aggression research and build upon it using novel approaches. It seems that survey research and self-report questionnaires will not yield much ground-breaking information; harnessing the technology, as in Underwood's Blackberry project (Underwood, Ehrenreich, More, Solis, & Brinkley, 2013; which extracts the data from participants' mobile devices) and other projects that use social media data have great promise. Cyberbullying research also needs to be nimble as platforms and devices change rapidly.

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