The trouble with bullying – deconstructing the conventional definition of bullying for a child-centred investigation into children's use of social media

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Abstract:

This paper deconstructs the conventional definition of bullying through analysis of its historical context, and identifies blind spots using lenses of gender, culture and setting. We explore theoretical and methodological problems associated with the conventional definition and its axiomatic use in bullying research, with particular reference to online bullying. We argue that because children may use 'bullying' to mean many different practices not captured in the conventional definition, using this definition often obscures the very phenomena researchers are aiming to describe. As a result, adults risk missing these practices in research and for interventions that use these studies as their evidence base.

Introduction

Bullying and its impacts on children's lives are long-standing concerns, with modern research interest emerging in the late 19th century (Burk, 1897; Koo, 2007). While descriptions of bullying in earlier work are recognisably consistent with current understandings, the pioneering empirical work undertaken by Dan Olweus (1978) is frequently cited as an originating point for current research literature. The definition of bullying developed in his work continues to influence the broader field of bullying research, including bullying via social media. An enduring feature of current research is to treat the conventional definition of bullying as a given. The conventional definition commonly includes these four elements – negative acts, repetition, intention, and power imbalance (Olweus, 1978, 1993; Rigby, 2004). Consistent *a priori* application of this definition has created an aura of authority and temporal stability that obscures its origins and development, its disciplinary paradigm and assumptions, and evidence that the term 'bullying' has multiple meanings and uses. Definitions, like theories, are made not born (Star, 1989); they are partial and situated knowledges that have histories.

This paper deconstructs the stability of the conventional definition of bullying, using key observations from the historical context and blind spots illuminated by subsequent research into bullying, with a particular focus on gender, culture, and children's experiences of online bullying. This focus arises from our investigation of 10-13 year old children's accounts of using social media. We have opted for the terms 'childhood bullying' or simply 'bullying' rather than the more common 'school bullying,' and 'online bullying' rather than 'cyberbullying'. Terminology can limit the view of a phenomenon, as seen in research where 'school bullying' results in a focus on peer interactions only in the classroom or school setting (Pyżalski, 2012). 'Childhood bullying' identifies the life stage of interest without restricting research to a

specific setting. Cyberbullying is commonly defined as bullying using any technology, including mobile phone as well as internet communication technologies (ICT). While there is substantial blurring between functions, the one-to-many potential audience of social media is a distinctive element worth highlighting within the more general field of electronic communications.

Historical context

Bullying was not a new research focus when Dan Olweus adopted the term for his investigations into aggression in schools in Sweden in the early 1970s, but his work became and remains highly influential in discussion of bullying between children in the school setting. Scholarly interest has waxed and waned over the centuries, but it regained prominence in recent history associated with broader concern about violence in post-World War II Europe (Koo, 2007). Peter-Paul Heinemann (1969) introduced the Swedish word *mobbning* to describe interactions he witnessed where a group of children attacked an individual perceived to be different. He drew a parallel with apartheid and oppression in wider society, arguing that this had been tolerated by society in children's behaviour but instead should be unacceptable. It reframed bullying as a social problem (Larsson, 2012). What Olweus presented in "Aggression in the schools: bullies and whipping boys" (1978) was a conceptual shift to focus on individuals through the lens of personality trait psychology.

The hope was to establish a means for predicting aggression, part of a broader project across several disciplines. Olweus criticised earlier theoretical formulations for excessively pathologising the victim and providing insufficient focus on aggressive individuals. He regarded group aggression towards a deviant individual as transitory and not as useful to this end, instead positioning individual psychological factors as more constant and relevant than situational factors. "[V]iewing school mobbing as a group phenomenon … may lead to an *overemphasis on temporary and situationally determined circumstances*" (Olweus, 1978, p. 5, emphasis in original). Trait psychology offered a theoretical framework to explore whether aggression was in some sense innate to the individual and generally stable over time. It sat comfortably alongside other individual attributes thought to affect aggression (Olweus and others, 1980; Olweus, 1977). Olweus hypothesised aggression as a stable latent characteristic that manifested given the correct conditions. Like a predisposition to a non-infectious disease, a trait resides within the individual awaiting the social trigger to become apparent. In Olweus' theoretical framework, that social trigger is the presence of the other type of individual – the 'whipping-boy'. He discusses the presence of *potential bullies* and *potential whipping-boys* in some classes, but claims that they were not actually bullies or whipping-boys because they did not have their polar opposite present to create the dyad and therefore the interactional trigger. This is also reflected in Olweus' taxonomy of bullies and whipping-boys, where he describes 'potential', 'pronounced' and 'less pronounced' individuals of both kinds.

Olweus' bullies were not just any boy. The intended focus was habitually cruel, highly aggressive individuals at risk of becoming violent adults (Olweus, 1977, 1979, 1980). Factors used in data collection surveys illuminate the personality traits of interest, including significant antisocial behaviour or intent - enjoying the discomfiture of others, starting fights, finding it fun to start trouble (Olweus, 1978, appendix). Bullying was constructed as deviant and uncommon behaviour, a proper subject for the language of psychological disorder. Prevalence estimates from these studies were that around 3-5% of boys may be classified as "pronounced" bullies, and similar for "pronounced" whipping-boys (Olweus, 1978). The victim in Olweus' dyad was originally an equally deviant character, although this became less prominent in later writing. While current research may not subscribe to trait psychology or the totality of Olweus' hypothesis, this definition of bullying remains highly influential especially in quantitative research (Meyer 2014). The (now) Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire dominates prevalence and other quantitative studies (e.g. Berne and others, 2013; Kubiszewski and others, 2014; Kyriakides and others, 2006; Solberg and Olweus,

2003). Olweus' work also pioneered approaches to addressing bullying problems in schools (Olweus, 1978, 1993, 1996). Part of the appeal is the clear and concise definition and psychological profiles of both bullies and victims (Walton, 2005), along with a standardised measure. These aspects of Olweus' research effectively established his definition as 'the' definition of bullying.

Blind spots

While the scope of bullying research has broadened substantially, the definition underpinning this work has remained distinctly static. The narrow focus inherent in the construction of Olweus' definition inevitably results in blind spots which affect the adequacy of the conventional definition when abstracted too far from its context. Analysing these blind spots through the lenses of gender, culture and the online setting illuminates the increasingly problematic quality of the conventional definition as bullying literature has developed. While not producing an exhaustive list, these lenses help to deconstruct the conventional definition's appearance of self-evidentiality and adequacy.

Gender

The very terms "bullies and whipping-boys" epitomises the genderedness of this period in bullying literature. It reflects an assumption that aggression is a masculine characteristic, and Olweus considered that the omission of girls from his initial studies was inconsequential (Olweus, 1978, 1979). While careful to clarify that his empirical investigations and theoretical sketch applied only to boys, he observed that "from a research technical point of view, the negative effects of the omission of the girls should be trivial" (1978, p. 18). As it turned out, this omission was far from trivial on both technical and theoretical grounds. When girls were included in empirical studies, higher rates of bullying problems among boys continued to appear, thus apparently supporting the assumption that girls were less involved in bullying (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 1998). The crux of the matter here is generalisation from a limited sample, in this instance a single gender. There was no chance for girls' experiences to inform the development of theory.

Carol Gilligan's (1982) critique of the research basis for Kohlberg's model of moral development exposed the problem of representation in psychological theory taking the 'male voice' as the norm. What was missing in bullying research was consideration of the impact of social and cultural norms related to gender on ways that aggression is enacted, and therefore potentially on how bullying is enacted (Salmivalli and others, 1998). The conventional definition was constructed with a specific focus on boys in a patriarchal sociocultural context. In this respect, it is unsurprising that it did not illuminate girls' bullying practices. Later work has focused on covert, relational and exclusionary interactions as pivotal to recognising girls' bullying (Duncan & Owens, 2011; Rigby, 1998; Simmons, 2002; Svahn and Evaldsson, 2011). This suggests that prevailing assumptions about gender and bullying problems arises from its constitution in research practices – a direct consequence of the gendered construction underpinning the conventional definition. Bevans and others (2013) demonstrate how this extends into the structure and analysis of survey instruments used to quantify bullying problems and requires attention in the context of research design. It illustrates the capacity for the conventional definition to hide aspects of the phenomenon it attempts to explain.

Simply including girls and expanding the range of practices that may be deemed bullying does not however constitute a critical review of gender socialisation and aggression, nor does it alter the gendered-ness of the construct of bullying that supports the conventional definition. If anything, it perpetuates and emphasises heteronormative masculinity and femininity (Carrera and others, 2011). Emotional and psychological bullying becomes less noticed among boys as it becomes connected with girls, obscuring boys' uses of non-physical aggression, and discussion of girls' physical aggression is effectively absent (Bhana, 2008; Walton,

2005). This has remained surprisingly under-theorised, even in feminist analyses. Critical perspectives on the socialisation of girls and aggression seem a curious gap. Some feminist analyses in bullying literature focus on ways bullying practices reproduce male violence against women and people of diverse sexualities and genders, repositioning sexism and homophobia in the wider social context as crucial to effective conceptualisation of bullying (Meyer, 2008, 2009). Others have focused on interactions between heteronormativity and mainstream views of girls' bullying (Duncan & Owens, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). However, these have had little impact in mainstream bullying literature.

Culture

As Smith and others (2013) observe, bullying is an Anglo-Saxon, Northern European term. There are no simple cognates or direct equivalents in many other linguistic and cultural settings. Similarly, cross cultural comparison presents a major issue for the conventional definition as a consequence of its emphasis on individual behaviour and minimisation of the relevance of context. Some efforts at translation use general terms for aggression and violence that miss the nuances of the English term (Smith and others, 1999). The burgeoning concern and literature associated with bullying has resulted in importation of the term, along with its definition, as a means to overcome this problem (Smith and others, 2013). This could be viewed as a form of intellectual colonialism, reinterpreting interactions based on another cultural paradigm while ignoring the significance of social and cultural context. Schott (2014) identifies the significance of language and cultural context and connects this with the question of whether a cross-cultural definition of bullying is possible. Moreover, the one-way influence of ideas about bullying suggests an unacknowledged cultural imperialism. Western research takes little account of findings from research in non-Western countries and much published research focuses on importing and imposing the conventional definition of bullying and the implied concept along with it into other cultural contexts. The foreignness of the concept of 'bullying' is exposed by the struggles to translate the word beyond general terms for violence or aggression (Carrera and others, 2011; Smith and others, 2002).

A fascinating case study is presented by the Japanese term *ijime*, possibly the longest-standing cross-cultural comparison in the literature. In contrast with other terms used in translation that emphasise physical abuse, it is the qualities and effects of interactions, social exclusion, and the social context that are defining features of *ijime.* It cannot be understood adequately without this (Koo, 2007; Yoneyama & Naito, 2003). This leads to another dimension where *ijime* departs from simple equivalence with bullying. Walton (2005) discusses Japanese research showing *ijime* as distinctively non-gendered, not taking gendered forms or theorised in gendered terms. In this light, Smith and others' assertion that bullying is "something of a natural category" (2013, p. 28) becomes unconvincing. *Ijime* is substantially different from the mainstream Western paradigm of individual and abnormal psychology; however it has not often been viewed by Western authors as presenting this degree of challenge to the Western paradigm. Referring to practices of policing social order, it describes the behaviour of ordinary rather than abnormal children (Horton, 2011). While it may be reasonable to observe that most cultures would be familiar with interactions where one takes advantage of others' disadvantaged positions, this does not appear similar enough to the conventional definition of bullying and does not distinguish it well enough from normal interactions. Proposing simple cross-cultural equivalence ignores the power of linguistic and cultural as well as disciplinary paradigms to shape our view of the phenomenon (Coleyshaw, 2010).

Online bullying

Initially, online bullying was treated by researchers as identical to in-person or traditional bullying, just in a different setting. The conventional definition was applied uncritically to this new phenomenon. This has been especially characteristic of quantitative approaches seeking to establish prevalence and to validate

measurement tools (Menesini & Nocentini, 2009; Topcu & Erdur-Baker, 2010). This approach has significant disadvantages for conceptualisation as well as measurement, particularly where such work predates exploratory studies. It does not usually include a critical evaluation of the construct of 'bullying' or discussion of the theoretical assumptions at work. Existing measurement methods rely heavily on listing specific behaviours, which has proved increasingly problematic in online settings. Constantly evolving platforms and practices make it effectively impossible to create a definitive list, and therefore a definition using this method (Lankshear & Knobel, 2010). Given that the influence of context is minimised in the individual psychology paradigm, it is unsurprising that this was not considered problematic. It exposes how the conventional definition continues to be treated as axiomatic.

More exploratory and conceptual studies of online bullying have raised some valuable questions about superimposing the conventional definition unmodified from the in-person context onto this new context. The distinctive characteristics of computer-mediated communication have provided an opportunity to interrogate 'bullying' at a more conceptual level. What has emerged is a complex picture of interactions that may fit elements of the conventional definition, but appear sufficiently distinct for some to argue that online bullying is a unique construct (Dooley and others, 2009; Law and others, 2012b). Law and others (2012a) go as far as arguing that 'cyberbullies' are not bullies in the conventional sense, an argument that arises from significant differences in motivation and retaliation, blurring of the lines between aggressor and target, and substantial ambiguity regarding the element of power imbalance. If 'bullying' is so significantly influenced by the setting, this poses serious problems for both the logic and utility of the conventional definition and its individualistic paradigm.

The notion of anonymity is a distinctive element of the online setting, made possible through its mediated dimension where nicknames have been a common feature chatrooms and forums. It supports a degree of privacy and exploration of identities in the virtual setting impossible in most 'real life' contexts (Turkle, 1995). This is often represented as a unique danger in online bullying, permitting a screen for bullies to hide behind. By contrast, these exploratory studies show that children usually know the others involved in interactions they describe as bullying, and they are thus not anonymous. This fits with boyd's (2014) ethnographic study of young people's uses of ICT, where online and offline settings are connected rather than separate. It appears more common for children's online and 'real' lives to be contiguous and that online bullying may be more an extension of fraught interactions with people they know (Dooley and others, 2009; Kwan & Skoric, 2013; Law and others, 2012a). Some of the empirical data in these studies indicates children and young people recognise a greater likelihood of doing or saying something they would not if it were face-to-face. 'Faceless' may become a more apt term to capture this difference rather than anonymous, pointing to the lack of a sense of 'person' when a physical face, expressions and voice are not connected with an interaction.

It is evident that the conventional definition renders 'bullying' a gloss which obscures crucial aspects of the phenomenon it proposes to explicate. Unlike Olweus' proposition that situationally determined circumstances were peripheral, online bullying presents an example where setting is crucial to comprehending the phenomenon as do culture and gender. The conventional definition is left struggling to distinguish between types of aggressive interactions. The conventional definition of 'bullying' was designed to categorise a specific subtype within a wider field of interactions, and the implications of using 'bullying' to encompass more types of aggressive interactions has not been well explored. It has arguably contributed to a diminished vocabulary for the complex phenomenon of peer aggression in childhood. Some conceptual work has made distinctions between bullying and other types of peer aggression (Keltner and others, 2001; Mills & Carwile, 2009; Smith & Boulton, 1990). However terms such as 'rough-and-tumble play' or 'teasing' lack the trendiness that 'bullying' has acquired. This problem has been recognised in some conceptual

discussions of online bullying as well as bullying more generally. Some authors have proposed re-expanding the range of terms to classify aggressive interactions as a means to circumvent this dilemma, including cyberaggression (Smith and others, 2013) and electronic aggression (Pyżalski, 2012), and retaining 'bullying' as a more specific term. Others suggest a more radical shift in definition and paradigm that may result in a better fit with the phenomenon (e.g. Duncan, 2013; Schott, 2014).

Methodological problems

Critical review of these blind spots suggests that there is not a single 'type' of bullying, and that the artificial homogeneity imposed by the conventional definition struggles to encompass the complex phenomena actually or potentially associated with the term. While fertile ground clearly exists for feminist, post-colonial and critical interrogation, many of these possibilities remain un-explored or under-explored. The dominance of the individual psychology paradigm and lack of attention to theory, are characteristic of quantitative bullying research (Meyer 2014). Both perpetuate issues of inadequacy for the ways that childhood bullying is defined compared with the actual phenomenon of interest. This creates substantial methodological problems when turning attention to the ways that a definition is used in research design and how knowledges are valued.

Following Olweus, the practice of positing an *a priori* definition of bullying in quantitative investigations has dominated. It is common in descriptions of investigation methods for participants to be given a statement or vignette that captures the key elements of the conventional definition prior to interview or survey, a practice also called priming. While priming has the benefit of establishing consistency between participants and studies, it also imposes a researcher-generated paradigm and categories. One of the desired effects of a consistent definition is to enable comparison between studies and avoid the problem of over-inclusivity, where participants or researchers may have different concepts connected with a term or idea that are not distinguished from each other. Vaillancourt and others (2008) addressed this in relation to bullying research, to investigate whether researchers and young people are talking about the same thing. What emerged was a reflection of blurred boundaries where children's spontaneous definitions consistently included negative acts, but frequently did not include the elements considered by researchers and adults to be distinctive of bullying – power imbalance, repetition and intent. They concluded that this demonstrates the necessity of priming in childhood bullying research. In fact, this conclusion perpetuates the assumption that the conventional definition of bullying is universal, static and correct, and that children's working definitions are inaccurate.

In contrast, other researchers have emphasised the role of exploratory research to illuminate aspects of the phenomenon that researchers may not be in a position to surmise. Duncan (1998) discovered that richer data emerged when *a priori* categories were not introduced during group interviews. This was originally intended as preliminary research toward refining a questionnaire-based quantitative study. Participants raised subjects that they clearly identified as part of bullying but which included factors that he as the researcher would not have anticipated. This and other similar studies present an alternate interpretation of the discord between a researcher-generated definition and children's definitions emerging from data.

Qualitative research designs that avoid priming tend to elicit different insights into bullying as a complex phenomenon in the context of children's peer interactions. This presents a counter-argument to the assumed need to impose *a priori* definitions. Variations between the conventional and children's definitions may be significant to the real world contexts that research aims to reflect. Rather than representing an inconvenience, may instead point to some inadequacy in the definition or its uses and have potential to lead to new understandings and different approaches to intervention (Duncan, 2013; Espelage & De La Rue, 2012). The practice of priming risks obscuring the phenomenon that the research seeks to

uncover. It positions children's definitions as less valid interpretations of their experiences and marginalises their competence as reliable reporters of those experiences. It obscures interactions they may define as bullying that may not fit the conventional definition and highlight interactions adults include as bullying but not experienced as such by them.

An additional methodological problem is the tendency in empirical quantitative research to neglect theory. It creates an impression that it is somehow neutral, dealing in fact rather than interpretation. While this may fit with the ideal of 'value-free science' (Proctor, 1991), definitions and paradigms influence perception of the problem in real world settings as well as in the literature. Engaging with theory is integral to addressing the blind spots and their implications for defining bullying. For example, Davies (2011) discusses the dilemma for teachers in discerning between normal conflict and unacceptable behaviour ('bullying') requiring intervention, and highlights the role of definition in shifting perception of both an interaction and of the individuals involved.

Similarly, what constitutes online bullying or troubles for children or young people may be quite different from adult presumptions (Livingstone, Kirwil, Ponte, & Staksrud, 2013; Wint, 2013). Because children actively engage in interpretive reproduction of the cultures around them (Corsaro, 2009), it is crucial to consider ways that they may respond to 'bullying' as a loaded term associated with adult-generated concepts. The field of child-centred research argues that children can be reliable reporters of their experiences (Kellett and others, 2004); more recent sociology of childhood theorises children as competent social actors in contrast to constructions of children as incomplete and incapable (Burman, 2008; Mayall, 2013). In these respects, child-centred approaches present a way to incorporate children's knowledges into bullying research and literature (Guerin, 2006; Kellett, 2005).

Conclusion

'Bullying' is a dynamic concept in practice and not as static as the tenacious conventional definition suggests. Shifts in the conceptual development of 'bullying' pose important critiques of the dominant approaches to defining and researching this phenomenon. Existing critical analyses and alternative views have had minimal impact in empirical quantitative research, despite repeated calls for improved dialogue between qualitative and quantitative research (Smith & Brain, 2000; Thornberg, 2011). Research into online bullying has highlighted how setting is more than a bare stage for children's social interactions. Similarly, the differences between children's spontaneous definitions of bullying compared with the conventional definition challenge the prevailing assumption of a match between the phenomenon in children's cultures and how it is conceived of in adults' formulations. 'Bullying' may be used by children to mean many different practices not captured in the conventional definition. As a result these are being missed in research and, arguably with greater consequences, by the interventions using this research as their evidence base.

Negative aggression between children resulting in harm remains a legitimate concern for researchers, educators, parents, and for children themselves. Nevertheless, even established concepts like bullying are worthy of critical reappraisal using a variety of methodological and epistemological approaches, in particular to compare previous theories with current experience. It is important to remember that social concepts are dynamic, iterative practices reproduced in social interaction, and that childhood bullying has a distinct and complex social history. Treating bullying as a singular, static phenomenon and the conventional definition as universal does a disservice to the practice of research and to those who are the focus of research. Omitting children's knowledges risks misunderstanding their troubles and ineffective targeting of interventions. The dilemma remains that bullying is used for a wider range of phenomena than the carefully delineated problem of highly aggressive boys at the heart of Olweus' study.

There may not be a single solution to this dilemma. Bullying is a powerful word. It has a strong cultural currency for commanding attention and demanding a response to issues of aggressive or violent interactions. While there have been numerous redefinitions and alternate paradigms proposed, it may seem tempting to abandon the term altogether. Alternatives would be to expand the range of terms for these problematic interactions, particularly in relation to the online setting and further investigations into what bothers children and young people in online interactions. These may be useful ways forward but will rely on developing a range of terms that explicate troublesome behaviours rather than subsuming them under the 'bullying' umbrella. It is clear that the conventional definition of bullying should not be treated as axiomatic.

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