Establishing an Accurate Operational Definition of Cyberbullying

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Cyberbullying is a serious form of victimization that exposes juveniles to a variety of harassment, ridicule and stalking behaviors. Modern technology allows adolescents to engage in peer group activities online, which removes the physical constraints that govern face-to-face interactions. Constant access to social networking provides more frequent opportunities for cyberbullying to occur. This is especially true for adolescents and young adults who have grown up with the internet as a part of their everyday social experience.

A common operational definition of cyberbullying in sociology and criminology is based on the idea that cyberbullying is an electronic form of face-to-face bullying. Holt (2013) provides an operational definition based on a synthesis of former research, “Bullying in the physical world is defined as intentional, aggressive behavior that involves an imbalance of power (Nansel et al. 2001, 2094); therefore, cyberbullying is intentional, aggressive behavior that is performed through electronic means (Hinduja and Patchin 2008, 129; Reeckman and Cannard 2009, 41)” (142). This theoretical definition is based on the assumption that cyberbullying is an extension of the current research on face-to-face bullying. However, little research has been conducted to evaluate if face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying are the same social phenomenon.

My Graduate Student Research Conference (GSRC) presentation will present my master of arts thesis findings on the differences between cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying when using measures that should present similar results. This research tests the current operational definition of cyberbullying as an electronic form of face-to-face bullying. To examine the validity of the operational definition of cyberbullying I will employ confirmatory factor analysis and principal component analysis that specifically test for statistical relationships between variables used to identify the two forms of bullying victimization. I will analyze nationally representative data from the National Crime Victimization Survey: School Crime Supplement, 2013.

My results display that similar questions used to measure face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying do not result in the expected patterns of homogeneity that the current definition predicts. This is not to say that face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying are completely separate
phenomenon. However, it does bring the suitability of the operational definition into question and provides a path for future research into those differences. My research establishes statistical differences between the two forms of victimization and suggests some of the current research on cyberbullying may be misleading due to inaccurate methodology or measurements.

These results provide a basis for evaluating past and current research in cyberbullying, expanding the implications into several areas. The broader impact of my research is that it could be used to develop more accurate measures of these social phenomenon. Sociology would benefit from the groundwork of an operational definition that more accurately reflects cyberbullying. My research could be used to inform public policy on cyberbullying and provide a more precise understanding of self-reported cyberbullying victimization. This work extends at an interdisciplinary level into psychology and education through behavioral action, cognitive functions, and learning dimensions. Finally both law enforcement and the judicial system could benefit from understanding the separation of face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying on a practical basis.