INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying Across Contexts, Age Groups, and Cultures

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Research on cyberbullying has been growing steadily over the last 15 years as the Internet and Internet-connected devices take an ever-more prominent place in our lives. Cyberbullying takes place using the Internet or cell phones, and involves multiple acts of aggressive behavior against an individual who cannot easily defend him/herself (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012). The majority of this research on cyberbullying has focused on children and adolescents in middle school or high school and has demonstrated strong links with both internalizing problems (such as anxiety, depression, or suicidal ideation; Bonanno & Hymel, 2013; Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Tsitsika et al., 2015) and externalizing problems (such as aggression, suspensions from school, and drug and alcohol use; Kowalski et al., 2014; Tsitsika et al., 2015). Whereas less research has been conducted on cyberbullying among working adults or romantic partners, the existing findings seem to indicate that electronic mistreatment is also prevalent in these other contexts, and it is associated with a host of negative outcomes for individuals and organizations. For example, recent workplace research has found a link between cyberbullying and increased emotional exhaustion and decreased perceptions of fairness for employees (Farley, Coyne, Axtell, & Sprigg, 2016). Additionally, research on cyberbullying among romantic partners indicates that such mistreatment is associated with perceived stress among college students (Leisring & Giumetti, 2014) as well as depressive symptoms and delinquency among teens (Zweig, Lachman, Yahnner, & Dank, 2014).

To date, however, no efforts have been made to bring together this research across contexts, age groups, and cultures to gain a fuller perspective of the impact of cyberbullying and similar forms of electronic mistreatment. Social-ecological analyses have been proposed for understanding cyberbullying by taking into
account individual, peer, family, school, and cultural factors. However, as noted by Görzig, Milosevic, and Staksrud (2017, p. 1199),

the evidence to date is limited in terms of understanding the contexts in which cyberbullying takes place … Most research in this tradition [social ecological] has investigated cyberbullying in the context of schools, families, and peers; research looking at the wider cultural context, however, is scarce …

As will be seen in the pages that follow, the field of cyberbullying research, as is often the case with relatively new fields of investigation, has been fraught with a lack of clarity. Even defining cyberbullying remains unclear as definitions depend upon the type of cyberbullying being investigated (e.g., verbal, visual; Nocentini et al., 2010), the country in which the research is being conducted, and, within-country, the setting in which researchers are focusing their efforts (e.g., school, work, relationships). The purpose of the current book is to provide some unity to the disunity currently characterizing the field by examining the different contexts in which cyberbullying may occur, and the different lenses through which we can understand the phenomenon of cyberbullying.

**Cyberbullying Defined**

Over the last 15 years, researchers have failed to reach a consensus on exactly how cyberbullying should be defined (Kowalski et al., 2014; Slonje, Smith, & Friesen, 2013). This lack of consensus in conceptualizing cyberbullying has had implications for how cyberbullying is measured, leading to variations, for example, in prevalence rates across studies. One conceptual sticking point is the extent to which cyberbullying is both similar to and different from traditional bullying (e.g., Cassidy, Faucher, & Jackson, 2013). Traditional bullying has been defined as an act of aggression that is intended to cause harm or distress, that is typically repeated over time, and that occurs among individuals whose relationship is characterized by a power imbalance (Olweus, 1993; 2013). Building upon this definition, Smith et al. (2008, p. 376) defined 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.”

Support for building a conceptual foundation for cyberbullying out of the traditional bullying model can be found in the relationships between involvement in the two types of behavior across many studies. For example, in their meta-analysis, Kowalski et al. (2014) found correlations of 0.40 between traditional bullying victimization and cybervictimization. Similarly, they found correlations of 0.45 between being a perpetrator of traditional bullying and perpetrating cyberbullying. In addition, Olweus (2013) stated that only 10% of individuals are
cyberbullied independently of also being involved in traditional bullying. Together, these findings suggest that if an individual is involved with traditional bullying, he or she also tends to be involved with cyberbullying.

However, although most researchers agree that cyberbullying, like traditional bullying, is an act of aggression whose intent is to harm the victim (see, however, Coyne et al., 2017 and Farley et al., 2016 who note that intent is difficult to establish in workplace cyberbullying, and, therefore, it is left out of their definition), some researchers perceive that cyberbullying differs from traditional bullying in the extent to which cyberbullying is repetitive and the degree to which the relationship between the cyberbullying victim and perpetrator is characterized by a power imbalance (Slonje et al., 2013). Minimally, the concepts of repetition and power imbalance do not necessarily mean the same thing for cyberbullying that they mean for traditional bullying (Vranjes, Baillien, Vandebosch, Erreygers, & de Witte, 2017). Repetition in cyberbullying may mean a single email being disseminated to hundreds of recipients (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2013) or an individual reading a bullying text message over and over again. Whereas in traditional bullying, power imbalance typically refers to differences in physical strength or social status, in the online world, power differentials may take the form of technological expertise or stem from anonymity (e.g., Cassidy et al., 2013; Kowalski et al., 2014).

In addition, not all researchers agree that all three components of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance are even necessary for cyberbullying to occur (e.g., Nocentini et al., 2010). More specifically, several investigators have suggested that repetition is not essential for a situation to be defined as cyberbullying (Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Nocentini et al., 2010; Slonje & Smith, 2008). Furthermore, the importance of the components of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance for defining cyberbullying appear to vary cross-culturally (Menesini et al., 2012; Nocentini et al., 2010; Palladino et al., 2017). Palladino et al. (2017) and Menesini et al. (2012), in their studies of several countries, found that the imbalance of power was the most important component for identifying behavior as cyberbullying. However, Nocentini et al. (2010), in a focus group study with participants from Italy, Germany, and Spain, found intentionality to play a critical role in determinations of cyberbullying.

In addition, the appropriateness of each of these components appears to depend on the context in which cyberbullying is being examined. For example, workplace bullying has been defined as “instances where an employee is repeatedly and over a period of time exposed to negative acts (i.e., constant abuse, offensive remarks or teasing, ridicule, or social exclusion) from co-workers, supervisors, or subordinates” (Hershcovic, 2011, p. 501; see also Einarsen, 2000). Workplace cyberbullying would be the occurrence of these behaviors online. Defined in this way, the power imbalance factor appears less critical as subordinates as well as superiors could perpetrate cyberbullying. Relatedly, Coyne et al. (2017, p. 947), who defined workplace cyberbullying as “repeated and enduring negative
behavior in the workplace that occurs via technology,” suggested that intent should not be included within a definition of workplace cyberbullying as workers will often disguise their true intent or attempt to rationalize their actions. Definitional issues surrounding these three components of intentionality, repetition, and power imbalance highlight the need for a book that examines the contextual and cultural lenses through which cyberbullying can be viewed.

Prevalence Rates of Cyberbullying

As noted at the beginning of this chapter, the majority of the research on cyberbullying to date has been conducted with middle school students in North American and Europe (see Chapter 4, this volume; Brochado, Soares, & Fraga, 2017). Not only has this largely ignored the international nature of the behavior, but it has also failed to account for other age demographics for whom cyberbullying is an issue and other settings in which cyberbullying might occur (e.g., the workplace).

As technology has become increasingly available, younger and younger children are using it in some form (see Chapter 2, this volume), increasing the likelihood that they, too, will become involved with cyberbullying (Çelik, Atak, & Erguzen, 2012). While data are limited on victimization and perpetration prevalence rates among very young children, existing data suggest that the rates are highly variable across studies and across countries. In one study, 18% of children in 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade in a US sample reported being victims of cyberbullying (DePaolis & Williford, 2014). Monks and colleagues conducted two studies with elementary school aged youth in the United Kingdom (Monks, Robinson, & Worlidge, 2009; Monks, Worlidge, Robinson, & Ortega, 2012). In the first study (2009), 23% of the youth ages 7 to 11 reported cyberbullying victimization and 5% reported cyberbullying perpetration. In a second study, Monks et al. (2012) found prevalence rates of victimization and perpetration of 21% and 5%, respectively, among youth of the same age. Similarly, among Italian youth, also 7 to 11 years of age, 21% said they had been victims of cyberbullying (Livingstone & Haddad, 2009). Among Turkish youth, however, between the ages of 8 and 11, rates were higher, with the children reporting a victimization rate of 27% and a perpetration rate of 18% (Arslan, Savaser, Hallett, & Balci, 2012). The most common venue by which cyberbullying seems to occur among elementary school aged youth appears to be online gaming (England, 2012).

While the venue by which cyberbullying occurs changes as children enter middle and high school, shifting more to social media and text messaging, prevalence rates of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration remain stable or increase, depending on the study (Kowalski et al., 2012). Kowalski and Limber (2007), in a study of over 3600 middle school youth, found that 18% reported being a victim of cyberbullying and 11% reported perpetrating cyberbullying during the preceding two months. Mishna and colleagues, in their study of middle and high school students, reported victimization and perpetration rates of
50% and 33%, respectively (Mishna, Cook, Gadella, Daciuk, & Solomon, 2010). Meta-analyses of cyberbullying victimization rates among middle school students place the prevalence rate at around 15% (Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). (For more detailed coverage of cyberbullying prevalence rates among youth, see Chapter 2 and Chapter 5, this volume.)

Similar to traditional bullying (Chapell et al., 2006), involvement in cyberbullying in college as victim, perpetrator, or bully/victim seems to reflect the continuation of a behavior that started in elementary school and continued through middle and high school (Beran, Rinaldi, Bickham, & Rich, 2012; Selkie, Kota, Chen, & Moreno, 2015; Watts, Wagner, Velasquez, & Behrens, 2017). In a review of the literature of prevalence rates of bullying and cyberbullying victimization and perpetration among college students, Lund and Ross (2017) observed rates of cyberbullying victimization between 10 and 15% and a rate of cyberbullying perpetration of 5%. They found that college males were more likely than college females to report perpetrating cyberbullying, but no differences between males and females were observed for victimization. Another study reported cyberbullying victimization rates of 27.9% and cyberbullying perpetration rates of 8% among college students (Francisco, Simao, Ferreiro, & Martins, 2015; see also Kowalski, Morgan, Drake-Lavelle, & Allison, 2016; Selkie, Kota, & Moreno, 2016).

Cyberbullying is certainly not limited to individuals in school, although research on cyberbullying among adults is much more limited and much of it focuses on college students (Jenaro, Flores, & Frias, 2018). Outside the university setting, increasing attention is being directed toward cyberbullying as it occurs in the workplace and in romantic relationships. Kowalski, Toth, and Morgan (2018) found that 20% of the 3,699 participants in their sample reported that the majority of the cyberbullying victimization they had experienced occurred in adulthood, much of this at work. Privitera and Campbell (2009) found that 11% of Australian male workers reported having been cyberbullied. Gardner et al. (2016) found that 2.8% of the workers in their study had similarly been cyberbullied. Cyberabuse in romantic relationships can occur through any of a number of different channels, including text messages, emails, and social media platforms. Individuals who abuse their partners can use electronic forms of communication to harass, stalk, humiliate, or threaten their romantic partner, to name just a few forms the abuse can take (Bennett, Guran, Ramos, & Margolin, 2011; Leisring & Giumetti, 2014).

In examining the considerable variability in prevalence estimates across studies, it is important to keep in mind a number of variables. First, as noted earlier, researchers have yet to reach a consensus on how cyberbullying should be defined (Slonje et al., 2013). Thus, in any study, participants are being asked whether they have experienced cyberbullying as victim, perpetrator, or both based on definitions provided by the researchers themselves. Differences in these definitions across studies likely yield differences in prevalence rates of the behavior. Furthermore, depending on the context, different terms may be used to refer to the same or similar behavior. For example, particularly among adults, a variety of
terms are used somewhat loosely to refer to cyberbullying, including cyber incivility (Giumetti, McKibben, Hatfield, Schroeder, & Kowalski, 2012; Lim & Teo, 2009), virtual harassment (Ford, 2013), and cyberaggression (Coyne et al., 2017; Weatherbee & Kelloway, 2006), to name a few. Questions remain regarding the extent to which cyber incivility, for example, is the same as cyberbullying (see, e.g., Kowalski et al., 2018).

Second, the definitions of cyberbullying provided by researchers to participants inform the measures and methodology used in a particular study. Whereas some studies may simply ask participants a single question (“Have you ever been cyberbullied?”), others may ask multiple questions regarding the venue by which cyberbullying may have occurred (e.g., “Have you ever been cyberbullied via social media?”), and still others may ask about specific cyberbullying behaviors (e.g., “How often have you had negative rumors or gossip spread about you online?”). Depending on the type of measure used, prevalence estimates will vary. The time parameter used in these questions will also determine prevalence. Brochado et al. (2017) observed in their scoping review that the most common time period across studies was one year; however, participants could be asked if they had been cyberbullied or cyberbullied others in the past two months, six months, lifetime, etc., yielding varying rates of cyberbullying victimization and perpetration.

Prevalence rates will also vary with the liberal versus conservative criteria used to determine whether cyberbullying occurred, for example, including participants who report the behavior having occurred at least once versus two to three times a month or more. Characteristics of the sample, such as age, gender, and race/ethnicity, also influence prevalence statistics, and these demographic characteristics may interact with other features of the measurement setting. For example, in one study of traditional bullying, African American youth presented with a definition-based question about their bullying victimization underreported their experiences relative to White participants compared to when they were asked more specific behavior-based questions about their bullying experiences (Sawyer, Bradshaw, & O’Brennan, 2008).

Finally, as discussed above, prevalence statistics vary with the context (e.g., school, workplace, relationships) and country of origin in which the data are collected. However, even meta-analyses and scoping reviews may not tell the complete picture regarding prevalence statistics as most of those published to date have relied on studies published in English, omitting many cyberbullying studies that have been conducted in other countries but that were written in languages other than English (Brochado et al., 2017). Importantly, even when certain of these parameters are held constant, such as comparing studies within the same country or for a given time parameter, considerable variability in prevalence estimates has been found (Brochado et al. 2017).

In summary, the existing research suggests that there is wide variability in prevalence rates for cyberbullying victimization (ranging from 2.8 to 50%) and cyberbullying perpetration (ranging from 5% to 33%). The variability in these
prevalence rates is likely due to a number of factors, including differences in the cyberbullying definition adopted, the type of measure used, the time parameter used in the measure, the frequency criterion adopted by the researchers (once vs. two or more times), and the context (e.g., school, workplace, and romantic relationships). Whereas there is wide variability in prevalence rates across studies, researchers have tended to report similar findings regarding the correlates or outcomes of cyberbullying. We turn to this next.

Outcomes of Cyberbullying

The outcomes associated with cyberbullying for both victims and perpetrators are perhaps the most consistent aspect of the behavior across contexts, ages, and cultures. School-aged youth, emerging adults, as well as members of the workforce who are victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying report negative physical and psychological effects. Among youth, victims and perpetrators of cyberbullying report higher levels of anxiety, depression, loneliness, and suicidal ideation (e.g., Didden et al., 2009; Hinduja, & Patchin, 2010; Kowalski et al., 2014). Compared to individuals who are not involved in cyberbullying, they also report lower levels of self-esteem, disinterest in school, and poor academic performance (Gardella, Fisher, & Teurbe-Tolon, 2017; Kowalski & Limber, 2013).

Although research regarding the effects of cyberbullying on adults, specifically adults in the workplace, is much more limited, available evidence suggests that the outcomes are very similar to those experienced by youth. Among the negative effects of cyberbullying victimization reported among employees are increased anxiety, emotional exhaustion and mental strain, and lower job satisfaction (Baruch, 2005; Coyne et al., 2017; Farley et al., 2016; Snyman & Loh, 2015; Staude-Müller, Hansen, & Voss, 2012; Vranjes et al., 2017). In addition to these individual costs, higher absenteeism and turnover intentions, reduced job performance, and counterproductive work behaviors also result in costs to the organization (Baruch, 2005; Coyne et al., 2017; Farley et al., 2016; Gardner et al., 2016).

The experience of cyberbullying depends, in part, on the frequency with which the cyberbullying occurs and the perceived severity of the cyberbullying (Cassidy et al., 2013). Importantly, however, just as there are individual differences in perceived severity, there also appear to be country differences in perceptions of cyberbullying severity. In one study with over 1900 adolescents in middle and high schools in Italy, Germany, Turkey, and Estonia, Italian students perceived anonymous online attacks as less severe than participants from the other three countries (Palladino et al., 2017).

Overview of the Book

An examination of the definition, prevalence, and outcomes associated with cyberbullying highlights both the great strides that have been made in the field in the last 15 years, but also the work that remains to be done. A strong foundation
has been laid, but the literature is filled with gaps and questions that remain to be addressed. To address some of these gaps in the literature that were outlined at the beginning of this chapter, we bring together cyberbullying researchers who examine cyberbullying within three contexts: school (from grade school to college), the workplace, and romantic relationships. Within each of these three contexts, we aim to provide readers with three different lenses through which to view cyberbullying. First, experts will provide a review of existing research on cyberbullying within the particular context (i.e., in school, in the workplace, or among romantic partners) and outline the possible predictors and outcomes of cyberbullying within that context. Second, experts will provide a review of cross-cultural issues within the school, workplace, and relationships, to help us understand how these problematic behaviors may be similar and different across national borders and cultural boundaries. Third, experts will take a developmental perspective to look at how the predictors and outcomes of cyberbullying and electronic mistreatment may be similar and different at various age points in one’s life.

In Chapter 2, we provide an overview of the increasing use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). While ICTs have made much of our communication more fluid, they have also been fraught with negative outcomes, including cyberbullying. The chapter examines the variable use of ICTs and cyberbullying involvement by age, race/ethnicity, and gender. The demographic correlates of ICT use are important as the means by which cyberbullying occurs for a particular demographic reflect the most common type of technology used by that group.

The following three chapters focus on cyberbullying in schools. The first chapter in this group, Chapter 3 by Sheri Bauman and Diana Meter, provides a review of cyberbullying research conducted on school-aged youth within the United States. Their chapter examines both risk factors and outcomes associated with cyberbullying involvement. In addition, they examine the relationship between involvement in traditional bullying and cyberbullying as victim and perpetrator. Before turning their attention to policies and laws, Bauman and Meter devote particular attention to online gaming, an understudied area within the cyberbullying community that has particular relevance for younger children involved in cyberbullying. In the second chapter in the “Cyberbullying in Schools” section of the book (Chapter 4), Peter Smith, Susanne Robinson, and Anke Görzig focus on cross-cultural issues. In spite of the fact that much of the research on cyberbullying has been conducted in Western countries, cyberbullying occurs throughout the world. It is, therefore, important to examine similarities and differences in cyberbullying across countries. Smith and colleagues compare the data from two large scale surveys: the EUKO (EU Kids Online) survey which compared cyberbullying across 25 European countries, and the HBSC (Health Behavior of School-Aged Children) survey, which examined cyberbullying across 42 European and North American countries. Variations in cyberbullying across countries are explained using the five factors of the EU Kids Online Model—cultural values, education system, technological infrastructure,
regulatory framework, and socio-economic stratification. The “Cyberbullying in Schools” section is rounded out with a chapter by Elizabeth Englander (Chapter 5), who adopts a developmental perspective as she discusses variability in prevalence estimates of cyberbullying across the school years from elementary school through high school. She examines some of the causes for differences in prevalence between younger and older youth including differential access to technology, cognitive limitations in younger children, and less education about cyberbullying and uses of technology among younger children. She also discusses the importance of examining prevalence rates of cyberbullying across developmental stages. This examination provides information about relationship dynamics at each developmental period.

The next section of the book examines cyberbullying in the context of the workplace, a relatively understudied area of investigation. In Chapter 6 (Cyberbullying in the Workplace: A Review of the Research), Jenna Scisco reviews the literature on workplace cyberbullying. You will note the relatively recent publication date of much of this literature, reflecting the recent attention of cyberbullying researchers to cyberbullying as it occurs outside the realm of school-aged youth. Erin Richard, Julianna Walsh, and Zhiqing Zhou focus on cross-cultural issues related to workplace cyberbullying in Chapter 7 (Cyberbullying in the Workplace—Cross-Cultural Issues). Because of the paucity of research on not only workplace cyberbullying but more specifically culture and workplace cyberbullying, they begin their chapter by reviewing the literature on workplace bullying and culture, turning their attention to culture and computer-mediated communication. In their discussion of computer-mediated communication, Richard and colleagues focus specifically on the role of high-context versus low-context cultures as well as the concept of face. They then advance a model of workplace cyberbullying and its possible predictors based on the sender-message-receiver model of communication. Nicole Mowry and Gary Giumetti address “Cyberbullying in the Workplace—Developmental Perspectives” in Chapter 8. In their chapter, Mowry and Giumetti begin by providing an overview of age differences in workplace technology use. Then, they describe research on age differences in cyberbullying among adults in the general population and employed adults more specifically. They also discuss some possible ways in which age may interact with cyberbullying in predicting outcomes for employees. They conclude the chapter with a number of future research directions related to age and workplace cyberbullying.

The final context in which cyberbullying is viewed in this volume is the context of romantic relationships. Chapter 9 (Cyberbullying in Romantic Relationships: A Review of US Research) by Penny Leisring begins with a look at different forms of cyber abuse in romantic relationships, namely emotional/psychological abuse, intrusion/monitoring behaviors, exclusionary acts, and sexual coercion. Dr. Leisring then examines correlates of cyber abuse for both victims and perpetrators, noting the relationship of many of these correlates to those that
accompany traditional partner abuse. She concludes her chapter with suggestions for individuals, parents, and clinicians, and provides suggestions for cyber abuse prevention programs. As with the other lenses through which cyberbullying can be examined, cyber abuse in dating relationships can also be examined cross-culturally, which Esther Calvete, Manuel Gámez-Guadix, and Erika Borrajo do in Chapter 10 (Cyberbullying in Romantic Relationships—Cross-Cultural Issues). In their discussion of cyber abuse in romantic relationships (CARR), Calvete and colleagues highlight the measurement issues that have plagued not only the field of cyberbullying in general, but the study of CARR more specifically. After examining a multitude of measures that have been used across studies to examine CARR, Calvete et al. identified five common modalities that they describe in their chapter—direct verbal aggression, control/monitoring, relational abuse, excessive communication, and cyber sexual abuse. They also discuss the varying prevalence estimates of CARR, which, they note, likely stem from the myriad instruments used to measure the construct. Following an examination of the reciprocal relationship between cyber abuse victimization and perpetration and cultural influences on this relationship, Calvete et al. conclude the chapter with recommendations for individuals and practitioners. The final chapter viewing cyberbullying in the context of romantic relationships is Chapter 11 (Cyberbullying in Romantic Relationships—Developmental Perspectives) by Diana Bennett and Michelle Ramos. Using the term Electronic Dating Aggression (EDA), Bennett and Ramos examine the prevalence rates and correlates of EDA in adolescence and emerging adulthood. They include in their chapter a discussion of the transitions that accompany these developmental stages, and the use of electronic media to accomplish developmental tasks such as the development of identity, autonomy, and romantic relationships.

We conclude the book in Chapter 12 with a look at common themes that emerge across the different cyberbullying lenses. We also discuss the similarities and differences in the research findings across contexts, age groups, and cultures. Then, we outline a series of future research directions related to cyberbullying in schools, in the workplace, and in romantic relationships.

References


