**A Psychological Typology of Cyberbullies in Schools**

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**Abstract**

*The rapid rise in recent years of cyberbullying in schools has largely taken the education community by surprise, and only now are we developing an understanding of how widespread cyberbullying in schools has become, the different forms that it can take, what motivates pupils to engage in cyberbullying, and what strategies schools can employ to prevent cyberbullying. This paper takes stock of research findings dealing with cyberbullying by pupils in order to create a psychological typology of pupil cyberbullies. Five common types are identified and described:* *the sociable cyberbully*, *the lonely cyberbully*, *the narcissistic cyberbully*, *the sadistic cyberbully, and* *the morally-driven cyberbully*. *A better understanding of these cyberbullying types will help ensure that the strategies used to prevent cyberbullying by pupils take account of the psychological attributes (both personal and social) that underpin such behaviour.*

**Introduction**

The growth in more sophisticated and easy-to-use electronic devices has helped to fuel the increasing use of digital social media by pupils in primary and secondary schools. Having a presence on digital social media, and being in regular electronic communication with friends, is now part of everyday life for many pupils. Unfortunately, this social phenomenon has also developed hand-in-hand with a rapid rise in recent years of cyberbullying by pupils which targets fellow-pupils and others, including their teachers (Kyriacou & Zuin, 2015; Waasdorp & Bradshaw, 2015).

This rapid rise in cyberbullying by pupils has largely taken the education community by surprise. Whereas at the start of the 21st Century, schools were only just beginning to think about whether school policies and practices regarding how to deal with bullying should include some mention of cyberbullying, it is now evident that dealing with cyberbullying by pupils has become a major issue for schools (DfE, 2014; Kowalski *et al.,* 2012).

We are only now developing an understanding of how widespread cyberbullying by pupils has become, the different forms that it can take, what motivates pupils to engage in cyberbullying, and what strategies schools can employ to prevent cyberbullying.

This paper presents a psychological typology of cyberbullies in schools. This typology was shaped by four key considerations:

• the extent to which the cyberbully acts as a detached, secretive and private loner, or acts socially and publically to gain attention and recognition amongst peers;

• the extent to which the cyberbullying is a personal attack on the victim fuelled by jealousy, hatred, and revenge;

• whether the cyberbullying builds on moral disengagement and empathetic disinhibition; and

• whether the cyberbullying is the consequence of an addiction to the use of social media that has got out of control.

The development of this typology was undertaken to contribute to a better understanding of cyberbullying types that will help ensure that the strategies used to prevent cyberbullying by pupils take account of the psychological attributes (both personal and social) that underpin such behaviour.

**The Nature of Cyberbullying**

Studies have struggled to develop a clear definition of cyberbullying, and the extent to which a distinct boundary can be established to demarcate what behaviour counts as cyberbullying and what does not (Kowalski *et al.,* 2012; Smith & Steffgen, 2013; Völlink *et al.,* 2015).

In considering traditional face-to-face bullying, four key aspects of the behaviour are typically highlighted: (i) the bully’s behaviour towards the victim is experienced by the victim as unpleasant and distressing; (ii) the bully is more powerful than the victim; (iii) the victim is repeatedly targeted by the bully; and (iv) the bully intentionally wishes to cause distress to the victim. It is worth bearing in mind here, that researchers differ somewhat on the extent to which each of these four aspects needs to apply. Can behaviour still be viewed as bullying if the intended victim is unaffected by the behaviour, if the bully is not more powerful, if the behaviour is not repeated, or if the bully does not intend to cause distress?

If defining traditional bullying presents researchers with challenges, the challenges are even more evident in trying to define cyberbullying. The following definition is adopted here: “Cyberbullying refers to the transmission by electronic means of demeaning, distressing, threatening and abusive messages and images which target a particular individual or a group of individuals”(Kyriacou, 2015a).

However, in the context of cyberbullying, issues to do with the effect on the victim, the bully-victim power relationship, the degree of repetition, and the role of intentionality, are much more complex. Posting a message on a website that can be accessed repeatedly, including by the victim, raises the issue of whether repeated viewing of a single message can be viewed as equivalent to repeated behaviour. If a victim remains unaware of what is posted, is the victim still a victim, or do they only become a victim once they are made aware of, and/or view the message? Furthermore, does the posting of the message constitute bullying even if the victim never knows about it, or can the behaviour only be labelled as bullying retrospectively at the moment that the victim becomes aware of it and/or is distressed by the message? If the bully is unknown to the victim, how does the issue of the power relationship come into play? If a pupil posts negative messages about their school, can the school be viewed as a victim, and/or moreover could the headteacher and other staff in the school feel they are victims even if no person is specifically named and targeted by the messages?

Research on cyberbullying indicates that it appears to differ from traditional bullying in a number of important ways (Bussey *et al.,* 2014; Kyriacou & Zuin, 2015; Smith & Steffgen, 2013; Völlink *et al.,* 2015). Firstly, the role of moral disengagement and empathetic disinhibition is much more evident in cyberbullying. Moral disengagement refers to the way in which one can justify anti-social behaviour as being morally justifiable - for example, by thinking of ways in which the victim’s behaviour, such as showing off their academic prowess in the classroom, meant that the bullying behaviour towards the victim was just and deserved. Empathetic disinhibition refers to the way in which the emotion of empathy that is invoked when you see that your actions are causing distress to another person can be markedly reduced if the victim is not directly in front of you.

Another aspect of cyberbullying is that the power relationship can be reconfigured when the action is anonymous or at a distance. In cyberbullying, the bully’s power draws on their being able to make use of the far-reaching effect of digital communication. In the digital world, anyone has the power to bully anyone they like, including their own teachers, and may even extend to targeting public celebrities.

Finally, the audience for the cyberbullying can go well beyond the cyberbully’s peers. This wider audience may include those who have nothing to do with the cyberbully or the victim. Indeed, the sending of more sensational messages and images by a cyberbully can go viral, giving the cyberbully a great sense of power and pride.

**A Psychological Typology of Pupil Cyberbullies**

Research on cyberbullying by pupils has been wide ranging (Foody *et al.,* 2015; Jacobs *et al.,* 2015;Smith & Steffgen, 2013; Sonje *et al.,* 2012; Vandebosch & Van Cleemput, 2009; Völlink *et al.,* 2015). A wide range of methods has been used for data collection, including questionnaires, interviews and group discussion, and has frequently involved asking pupils, including those who have reported that they have cyberbullied or been a victim of cyberbullying, to describe the motives of those who cyberbully. Whilst this is a complex field, there appear to be five types of pupil cyberbullies commonly identified (Kyriacou, 2015b), as described below. Of these, the first type, the sociable cyberbully, is the most commonly reported type, and appears to account for over half of all cases of cyberbullying by pupils.

● *the sociable cyberbully*. The sociable cyberbully is just having fun; their main motive is to entertain those in their friendship group; little thought, if any, is given to the effect this may have on the victim, and indeed in many cases, the victim is not sent a direct copy of the offending message or images.

● *the lonely cyberbully*. The lonely cyberbully is relatively isolated; they have few friends, spend a great deal of their time on the internet, and eventually get attracted to abusing individuals; whilst some of their victims are pupils and teachers at their own school, other victims may include well-known celebrities and other public figures, or someone they have become obsessed with.

● *the narcissistic cyberbully*. The narcissistic cyberbully is driven by a mixture of arrogance and self-importance; they are motivated by the desire to exercise power over their victim; they glory in the power that the internet gives them to attack their victim, and may take particular delight if the messages and images they transmit go viral, or lead to consequences which attract public attention.

● *the sadistic cyberbully.* The sadistic cyberbully takes enjoyment in the distress they have caused to their victim; this does not mean that they need to see evidence of the distress directly, as it may be enough simply to imagine the level of harm and suffering they are inflicting.

● *the morally-driven cyberbully*. The morally-driven cyberbully bases their action on a belief that the victim is receiving justice for some transgression they have committed; this transgression can cover a broad area, including the victim’s behaviour towards the cyberbully, or simply that the victim enjoys circumstances that the cyberbully envies; victims can also include individuals whose behaviour, as reported on television or social media, is viewed as reprehensible.

Whilst the behaviour of some cyberbullies seems to consistently fall within one of these five types, there are others who regularly appear to cross between two or more of these types.

**Conclusion**

Research on cyberbullying by pupils indicates that five common types of pupil cyberbullies can be identified. Recognising that there are different types has important implications for how best to engage with the cyberbully with a view to helping them to refrain from such behaviour. Further research could usefully explore whether pupils who engage in cyberbullying are different from those who engage in traditional face-to-face bullying, and, if so, what implications this might have for how schools can deal with cyberbullying more effectively.

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