Lesson 1: Bullying and cyberbullying: origins, definitions and differences

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1.1 Origins and developments of the phenomenon

Every day the media informs us of the increasingly urgent need to deal with a serious phenomenon among young people: bullying. The exponential growth of this phenomenon, especially in the school context, underlines the importance of tackling this problem, of studying it and understanding it so that bullying is prevented from becoming a real social scourge in the future.

International studies

The first research on the phenomenon of bullying at school developed in Norway and dates back to the early 1980s, when Olweus (1983) conducted a descriptive survey of the Norwegian school population, finding a high incidence and seriousness of the phenomenon in all age groups.

Starting with this first survey, over the years, all over the world, research has aimed at investigating both the frequency of the phenomenon of bullying and exploring the psychological or relational dynamics that are triggered between the subjects involved in bullying episodes. For example, in England research showed that incidences of bullying varied between different types of schools, with 19% of primary school, and 8% of lower secondary school pupils reporting bullying experiences (Whitney and Smith, 1993). However, other research in UK schools showed that, across four terms, anti-bullying interventions were associated with reductions in incidences of bullying in the schools, the levels of improvement being positively associated with the extent of engagement with the interventions among participants (Smith and Sharp, 1994).

Also, large research studies across many other countries, such as Australia, Belgium, Finland, Spain and the United States, show interventions implemented in schools have effects on levels of bullying. However, other variables have also been shown to be important in impacting bullying, such as the age of pupils. These include:

- **Age -** It has been shown that the incidence of bullying behaviors decreases as children get older. However, while incidences of bullying become less frequent, their rate of danger and severity increases (Smith et al., 2008).
- **Gender -** It has been shown that boys engage in a higher percentage of bullying incidents than girls. In contrast, girls use more forms of indirect bullying (Björkqvist, 1994).
- **Place -** School spaces have been shown to be preferential for bullying episodes
- **Stability of roles -** The roles of those involved in bullying tend to remain stable over time. Either as those who engage in bullying behaviour or those who are targets for bullying (Menesini, 2000).

1.2 Bullying and cyberbullying

Bullying

Bullying is a phenomenon that affects boys and girls without distinction. The term, "bullying" literally means "to intimidate" and can involve very obvious bullying or more subtle forms of bullying which concern the area of ??the relationship and acts through more subtle and veiled exclusion. This is often more difficult to identify for external observers as it involves "psychological" aggression rather than physical violence.

"For the purposes of the law, the term "bullying" means aggression or repeated harassment, by a single person or a group of people, against one or more victims, in order to cause them feelings of anxiety, fear, isolation or marginalization, through harassing acts or behaviour, physical or psychological pressure and violence, instigation to suicide or self-harm, threats or blackmail, theft or damage, offenses or derision, also the race, language, religion, sexual orientation, political opinion, physical appearance or personal and social conditions of the victim." (from art. 1 paragraph 2 of the law proposal 3139 of 2016).

While bullying may be disguised as “jokes” or “quarrels”, it differs in purpose from such interactions. Bullying is done with the intention of harming another, denigrating or humiliating him, to laugh "at someone". It aims to impose dominance and one's will on another, through the use of coercive tools.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/pDG1-BCZvTE?ab_channel=SELSketches

Bullying - Main features:

Intentionality constitutes one of the main characteristics of this phenomenon. Bullying is intended as a way to acquire advantages, social prestige and personal gratification through targeting another. The individual who engages in bullying behavior gets gratification or advantage from insulting, attacking or humiliating the person they have targeted, despite the evident suffering of that person.

The **repetitiveness** of the incident can be a feature of bullying, where the bullying interactions can repeat, can be thought of repeatedly by the victim (repeating the impact for them) or can be recorded and repeatedly shared on the internet/via social media.

There is also a marked **asymmetry** of power between the parties: the bully is someone who has greater power than the victim, due to age, strength, size, gender to which he belongs (generally a male is stronger than the female), or his popularity within the peer group.

In In addition, the **sensitivity of the victim to the violence suffered**, understood as vulnerability, causes the same to present physical or psychological characteristics that make him more prone to victimization. Sometimes, this leads others to think that victims deserve to be victims because they often engage in provocative and/or "different" behavior from their peers. Endorsing this thought can lead to “victim blaming” which can further add to the challenges of those targeted in incidents of bullying.

Amplify everything, there is also the notoriety factor of the act , i.e. the tendency to make the incident known to as many as possible by the person who engages in bullying behaviour. This is done to obtain "respect" and "popularity", and to keep constant one's level of power to instill in others a feeling of fear.

The presence of the Internet can lead to communication with others from a distance, which may create the impression that actions are apparently without consequences. Interactions can lead to impulsive, superficial and, sometimes, harmful behaviors towards others online. Cyberbullying is an example of this: where it is easy to share comments and/or photos on social networks easily and widely. However, this can lead to some individuals being targeted for bullying or intimidating behaviour online.

CYBERBULLYING

"For the purposes of the law, the term «cyberbullying» means any behavior or act, even if not repeated, which is perpetrated through the use of the telephone network, the internet, instant messaging, social networks or other telematic platforms . It also means the creation, publication and online diffusion (through the network, chat rooms, blogs or forums) of images, audio or video recordings, or other multimedia contents, made for the purpose of offending the honor , the decorum and reputation of one or more victims, as well as identity theft and impersonation operated by computer means in order to acquire and manipulate personal data, or to publish information harmful to the honour, decorum and reputation of the victim." (from art. 1 paragraph 2 of the law proposal 3139 of 2016).

However, the new Law n.71 of 2017 seems to include other more significant aspects by designating cyberbullying as "any form of pressure, aggression, harassment, blackmail, insult, denigration, defamation, identity theft, alteration, unlawful acquisition, manipulation, treatment offense of personal data to the detriment of minors, carried out electronically, as well as the dissemination of online content concerning one or more members of the minor's family whose intentional and predominant purpose is to isolate a minor or a group of minors by placing serious abuse, malicious attack, or ridicule".

These acts are carried out with the aim of insulting, damaging reputation, instilling fear in someone, gaining popularity within a group, or simply having fun or fighting boredom. It is therefore a question of intentional bullying carried out in a lasting and systematic way, to the detriment of the same, or themselves, person/s, in which there is a situation of imbalance of forces, where those with power, virtual in this case, exercise it to the detriment of those who are weaker.

Via web, the audience that witnesses the harassment is exponentially numerous and, therefore, the social feedback that follows is made even more rapid and burdensome, if defamatory. For this reason the victim often develops paranoid thoughts because he believes that even in his absence, the rumors on the network about him are incessant, continuous and constant.

Wide access to computers and smartphones can lead to large amounts of online interactions and engagements among young people. The perpetrator of the bullying and the victim are separated by a computer screen or a smartphone display: this prevents the full understanding of how painful is what the victim suffers or how serious the action carried out by the cyberbully is. Non-consensual sharing of photos, videos or private information of the victim, the spreading of gossip through technological tools and means such as the mobile phone or e-mail, or the implementation of repeated threats directed at the victim, are just some examples of cyberbullying actions.

https://www.youtube.com/embed/vtfMzmkYp9E?ab_channel=StopBullyingGov

MAIN FEATURES

The possibility of having an anonymous identity which makes it difficult to trace perpetrators of bullying makes perspective or mediation difficult. The simplicity of accessing the network also allows the material posted online to circulate quietly and unconditionally with no time limits and to remain on web sites for a long time. In this situation, the psychological mechanism of moral disengagement (Bandura, 2002) can be a variable that pushes the cyberbully to target someone. What is called "dehumanization of the victims" occurs when the cyberbully ends up dissociating themselves from the displeasure that would be caused to them. This flattening of empathy, (understood as the ability to "put on the shoes of the other"), slows down or blocks understanding of the suffering of others or consequences from their actions towards the person who is targeted. In fact, in cyberbullying, the absence of real contact between the bully and the person targeted (face to face contact) facilitates and amplifies dehumanization. Furthermore, the absence of space and time limits allows the phenomenon to spread everywhere and infinitely over time, while the invisibility and the possibility of creating a fake personality and virtual identity allows the cyberbully to increase his own power : also for this reason the level of disinhibition is high, leading to different patterns of actions or behaviors than would would done by them in real life. In fact, the possibility of being "another person" online can weaken ethical restraints. Furthermore, the absence of a relationship and knowledge with the other person further amplifies this factor: in some cases cyberbullying can involve people who do not really know each other.

Difference between bullying and cyberbullying

Although we are talking about two damaging phenomena that harm the well-being of other people, there are multiple and substantial differences between bullying and cyberbullying. In general, the actors in bullying are well defined and are represented by the bully, the supporters, the victim and the observers. Abusive actions often develop between people from the same school or the same company, between people who know each other. In fact, the episodes often occur in the classroom, at school, in sports groups and take place at precise times: during recess, on the way from home to

school, in the changing rooms of the sports centre. In this phenomenon, the bully's need to make himself "visible", to be the center of attention, is evident: the level of disinhibition of the "bully", in these cases, often also depends on the group dynamics. The bully carries out aggression, regardless of the consequences of his actions that cause suffering in the "victim".

Regarding cyberbullying, on the other hand, people from all over the world can be involved, even those who are not known. The material can be shared all over the world and circulated on the web at any time, even remaining on the sites for a long time. In this phenomenon there is a high level of disinhibition of the cyberbully: in fact, he implements things that in real life would be more contained, perhaps also because his power is more increased by invisibility and by the fact that he cannot concretely see the effects of his actions/ deeds. A study carried out by some scholars has highlighted that those who have experienced offline bullying can engage as aggressors online, reversing the role in the two contexts, perhaps driven by anonymity and a desire for revenge (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004). Another reversal of roles, but in the opposite direction, is instead reported by a different study which highlights how victims of electronic bullying can also be bullies in the traditional context (Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2008).

1.3 Exercise

Describe the two main characteristics of bullying:

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Now, tell us what you consider not to be bullying:

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