The Dynamics of the Roles of Aggressor and Victim in Bullying and Cyberbullying: A Challenge for the Resilient Development of Students¹

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Abstract: The diversification of the current types of bullying among students due to the appearance of a new type of school violence, cyberbullying, has led to a series of reevaluations regarding the definition of school violence and the risks that are likely to appear in the education and development of students. The present paper offers a comparative analysis of the roles of the students involved in bullying and those of the students involved in cyberbullying. In the manifestation of the bullying behavior, students move easily from "being an aggressor face to face" to committing similar aggressions in the cyber environment. Meanwhile, traditional victims have new opportunities of expression via technologically mediated devices. Thus, in the current context, the game of violence among students creates much higher risks of developing long-term negative psychological consequences. However, students can also acquire effective ways of managing this problem, generating some positive consequences for their resilient development.

Keywords: bullying, cyberbullying, resilience, traditional aggressor, cyber aggressor, victimization

1. A New Form of Violence among Students: Cyberbullying

Current research on the topic of school violence shows the diversification of the forms of deviant behavior in the school environment as a result of their propagation in the virtual environment. Even if new acts of violence do not occur in the school yard, they represent forms of school violence because they have students as behavioral actors. Thus, aggressors have on hand a wider variety of harassment types, facilitated by technological resources, through which they can harm others. According to Menesini and Spiel (2012), the incidence of cyberbullying among students reaches the threshold of 10%. Most of the research on violence among students underestimates the actual number of students involved in cyber harassment. This underestimation is mainly the result

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of certain methodological limitations, respectively the use of broad spectrum items in the evaluation (Gradinger et al. 2010). Because cyberbullying has a much shorter history than traditional bullying, students are not sufficiently informed about its forms. Therefore, when asked about cyber violence, they tend to say either that they are not involved or that they are not aware of these types of behavior. However, when the evaluation targets specific behaviors, students identify a high percentage of these behaviors as being part of their conduct and of the conduct of their colleagues. Starting from this factual reality, the researchers of the harassment phenomenon in the school environment draw attention to the need for better information and popularization of what cyberbullying is, how it manifests and how we can defend ourselves from it (Ackers 2012).

Whether it takes place face to face or in the virtual environment, harassment among students implies the same development of a hostile behavior, repeatedly, with the purpose of harming a schoolmate. The relevance of the repetition of the phenomenon in time was recognized from the moment when traditional harassment was defined. As also recorded by Langos (2012), the unique expression of an act of harassment in the virtual environment can be replicated countless times. It is sufficient for a compromising picture to get into the online environment in order for the victim to suffer for an indeterminate period of time. The study performed by Smith et al. (2008) has indicated that approximately one third of the cases of cyber harassment were of short duration (up to about a month), but a quarter of them continued over an extended period of time (several months or even years). Even a single and brief experience as a victim of cyber harassment can have severe effects, given the wide audience that some technological channels may have. Thus, the intimidation image/video, respectively the distribution of abusive images of the victim in a group of friends, can have a devastating impact on the victim, sometimes more powerful than in case of traditional aggression.

The psychological consequences are similar, although there are differences in the specific forms of virtual harassment: more subtle, often anonymous, with an indirect contact between the victim and the aggressor. The victims of cyberbullying report low self esteem, feelings of solitude, disillusionment, lack of trust in people, in extreme cases leading even to harming themselves, just like the victims of bullying (Šléglová and Černá 2011). Regardless the form of aggression in which they are involved, victims feel grief, anger, sadness, fear, loneliness, frustration, invasion of privacy, irritation, hurt, depression (Patchin and Hinduja 2006), emotions that lead to an unhealthy lifestyle, of a poor quality, with negative effects in all areas of life. Ortega et al. (2009) have emphasized less significant emotional consequences in the case of cyberbullying, in comparison with bullying, although many emotional answers overlap. This result could be explained by the specificity of the *face to face* interaction, when victims have more emotional information about the

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aggressors. Victims could better *read* the intentions of the aggressor and this aspect might affect their emotional answer as related to the aggression.

Comparing the impact of the situations generated by the traditional bullying and by cyberbullying, Smith et al. (2008) found that the photographs and videos, as well as phone calls, were perceived as being less harmful than the exposure to traditional harassment. Web pages and aggressions using text messages were considered by students to be as harmful as the traditional forms of bullying, while attacks via chat or email were perceived as being less harmful in comparison to bullying.

Virtual aggressors take advantage of the lack of real visibility, and the traditional imbalance of power can easily be overturned by technological means. Findings of educational practice show that some traditional victims of school harassment seek to rebalance their power status in front of the aggressor by appealing to the power of cyber resources. However, the hypothesis which argues that the status of aggressor or victim tends to remain in the virtual environment also exists. This was confirmed by a series of empirical research works (see Hinduja and Patchin 2012) that conclude that when it comes to bullying and cyberbullying we address the same populations of students for which these forms of violence coexist. Also, practice emphasizes the gender differences in what concerns the manifestations of the types of violence. The boys are champions, especially when talking about acts of direct violence.

An analysis, however brief, of cyberbullying reveals a number of differentiating characteristics compared to traditional bullying, which is why it is necessary to study it as a distinct phenomenon in relation to what is generically named violence among students.

2. The Aggressor and the Victim in School Bullying

School practice shows that boys are more prone to aggressiveness and more exposed to aggression than girls. The reports of acts of violence have as protagonists especially boys, accustomed to physical harassment. On the other hand, girls often resort to more subtle and indirect ways of harassment, for instance defamation, spreading rumors and manipulating friendship relationships. However, harassment using non-physical means, through words in particular appears to be the most common form of harassment.

Many results of research on this topic show that boys are more often aggressors in what concerns school violence and their victims are both boys and girls. More than 50% of the aggressed girls reported that they have been aggressed mainly by boys, another 15-20% say that they have been aggressed by boys as well as by girls. In case of boys, on the other hand, the vast majority, more than 80%, are aggressed mainly by boys. In short, boys are more often victims but also authors of aggressions. It is proved that the relations between boys are much tougher and more aggressive than those between girls (Olweus 1997). These differences have both biological roots as well as social and cultural

ones. Also, the fact that the transformation process in victim or aggressor is a long-term one, sometimes lasting for years, should be kept in mind (Olweus 1997).

The data collected so far clearly suggests that the personality features or the typical reaction patterns, in combination with physical strength or weakness in the case of boys, are important for the emergence and evolution of these behaviors in the school environment. At the same time, the environmental factors such as attitude, routine and behavior of important adults play a major role in determining the extent to which problems will manifest on a larger scale (Olweus 1997). The reaction pattern to violence offered by adults, as well as their involvement in managing the conflicts reported by children, are important in stopping or perpetuating violence in the educational environment.

The analysis carried out by Harcey (2007) shows that the victim may present the following characteristics: symptoms of depression, suicidal thoughts, feelings of loneliness, low self-esteem, anxiety, mental health problems, eating disorders, low popularity, and difficult sociability.

Some of these characteristics have most likely contributed in reaching the status of victims of aggression. At the same time, it is obvious that repeated harassment of colleagues must have increased considerably their uncertainty and evaluation, usually negative. Therefore, some of these characteristics are both causes as well as consequences of aggression. Also, there is a smaller number of victims, provocative victims or aggressive victims, victims which are characterized by a combination of the two reaction patterns, the anxious and the aggressive patterns. These students often have trouble concentrating and may struggle with reading and writing difficulties. They often behave in ways that can cause irritation and tension around them. Some of these students may be characterized as being hyperactive, their behavior being provocative in relation to the majority of colleagues, resulting in negative reactions from most of the class (Olweus 1997).

The most common type of aggressors usually have some of the following features, according to the analysis made by Harcey (2007): symptoms of depression, suicidal experience, mental health problems, eating disorders, substance abuse, deviation from norms (elements that span both in the criminal area and in the academic field), have friends that are aggressors and that are older and stronger, they make friends easily, they start dating from an young age and reach to an advanced level of the relationship, from a sociological and physical perspective are aggressive with their dates, have authoritative parents that are not receptive and supportive, there is a weak communication between the parents and the child, the lack of a role model in life, they come from a though environment, have suffered abuses when children, weak academic accomplishments, mediocre school adjustment, weak connection with school.

First of all, aggressors have a pressing need for power and dominance; they seem to enjoy holding control and the submission of others. Second of all,

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taking into account the family conditions in which many of them were raised, it is natural to assume that they have developed a certain degree of hostility towards the environment. Such feelings and impulses can make them feel satisfaction by harming and causing suffering to others. Finally, there is clearly a favorable component for their behavior, which brings them benefits: aggressors may even come to compel the victims to provide them various goods or services (Olweus 1997). Furthermore, an aggressive behavior is in some cases considered to be a form of social prestige. When more students commonly engage in behaviors of intimidation of another student certain social/psychological mechanisms that occur within the group may appear. Some have been discussed in detail by Olweus (1997, 2001), the most significant being: social contagion; the decrease of control or inhibitions against aggressive tendencies: diffusion of responsibility; progressive cognitive changes in what concerns the perception of the aggression of the victim. All these mechanisms can contribute to the explanation of the fact that some students that are usually non-aggressive can eventually participate in various acts of aggression.

3. The Aggressor and the Victim in School Cyberbullying

Cyber harassment is similar to indirect intimidation, thus one may state that girls are more involved, although the technological aspect is more suited for boys.

Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) and Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) have not discovered significant differences from a biological point of view for the aggressors and victims in cyberbullying. However, it has been found that girls are often the victims of cyber harassment. No differences of a biological type were recorded in the cases where the identity of the aggressors has been known, these being both boys and girls.

Smith et al. (2008) show in a qualitative study that cyber aggressors took part in the aggression *for fun*, not to show strength in front of colleagues, so they used technology instead of face to face confrontation. "Just for fun" is the expression often used by students in order to rationally explain why they bully others. To the extent to which that might be true, it raises the question of why some students think it would be fun to intimidate others. In cyber harassment, the culprit does not see directly, most of the time, the reaction of the victim; this may reduce gratification for students who enjoy seeing pain inflicted on others, but can also reduce any inhibition for the inflicted pain due to the lack of empathy to the suffering. The culprit can get equal rewards by spreading their abusive actions (photos or films), thus amusing those of the gang and building a broad audience involved in cyber harassment.

Some victims think that anonymity worsens the impact, but most of them feel that it is similar to the impact of traditional intimidation, while some think it has a lighter impact, because one is not physically hurt and one can prevent the actions of cyber harassment. Students have expressed their pessimism about the

possibility of preventing cyber harassment. This pessimism may be justified by the improbability for the intimidation to be annihilated. It was found that 5.5% of students said that they had been victims of the online environment, while 4.8% admitted they were virtual aggressors (Smith et al. 2008).

Virtual aggression consists of the relational dynamics of at least two well-defined positions: the aggressor and the victim. Its communication channels, instantaneity and lack of face to face contact, bring with them differentiating characteristics for cyberbullying (Smith et al. 2008). According to these authors, communication between the aggressor and the victim may be manifested in a variant continued in time and space. The author is often anonymous and the acts of cyberbullying always have an indirect nature, mediated by the technological resource.

The status of victim of harassment has a dynamic during the development stages of the student, decreasing significantly from 12 to 17 years old, according to Ortega et al. (2009). In what concerns virtual aggression, it has been found that the highest frequency of the behavior is manifested around the age of 14. The explanation for this phenomenon could be related to the fact that during teenage years (14-15 years old) courtship and dating begin. Contemporary adolescent socialization appears to include the widespread use of technology, particularly mobile phones and the internet.

The results obtained by Ortega et al. (2009) showed that the most common emotional response is rage; however, a significant number of victims were emotionally strong enough to declare that cyber attacks did not bother them. This finding can be interpreted in relation to the perceived emotional distance when a technological resource mediates the interaction or when the aggressor is unknown. The perception of anonymity may be interpreted as an element that protects victims of that disturbing social feeling.

In what concerns the biological gender (Barrett, et al. 2000 and Mestre, et al. 2006 apud. Ortega et al. 2009) it was found that women, more than men, said that they felt a number of negative emotions concerning the different types of attack. These results could be related to the finding that women show a greater level of accuracy in perceiving and understanding emotions. Also, they give a greater importance to social contacts; they invest emotionally in them, even when they are technologically mediated. It is also possible that men are not willing to admit that victimization affects them emotionally. The severity of the victimization was associated with different emotional consequences. The victims that have been severely affected by different types of aggression reported feelings of: embarrassment, stress, anger, depression and loneliness.

Bullying and cyberbullying produce similar emotional profiles, although specific differences are recorded. This overlap of the emotional consequences shows the similarity and the coexistence of the two phenomena in the lives of students.

4. Role Changing

The dynamic of the roles of aggressor and victim in bullying and cyberbullying has led to a series of research concerning the adoption, overlapping or exclusion of the possible statuses for the involved students. In what follows, we will analyze some conclusive results that will highlight the movement of students in these roles.

Ybarra and Mitchell (2004) investigated online harassment among users aged between 10 and 17 years old from the USA. 15% of students from the sample were online harassers, 51% of the online harassers were also traditional victims and 20% were cyber victims. These results emphasize an extensive overlap of the online harassment with traditional victimization and of the online harassment coexistence with the traditional victimization.

Slonje and Smith (2008) analyzed the coexistence of traditional victimization and harassment in the cyber environment. Subtracting the percentage of victims of cyber type from the number of victims of global type, 9% of the students were traditional victims. Of these, 10% were cyber harassers.

Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) surveyed the relationship between electronic harassment, traditional harassment, electronic victimization and traditional victimization and analyzed if being a traditional harasser or victim anticipates the same status in the electronic environment also, and if being a traditional victim anticipated being a cyber harasser. Their analysis indicated that the harasser and victim statuses are maintained in the electronic environment also, almost all cyber harassers were traditional harassers and almost all cyber victims were traditional victims.

Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston (2008) have emphasized the connections between traditional harassment, cyber harassment, traditional victimization and cyber victimization in 3767 students from grades 6-8 from the USA. Based on student responses 21% have been identified as victims, 13% as harassers, 18% as harassers-victims and 48% as uninvolved students. Among harassers-victims of traditional violence a large percentage of cyber victims (36%) and cyber harasser (23%) were identified.

Gradinger et al. (2010) found that only some students are exclusively cyber victims. In turn, the majority of cyber victims were also traditional victims. These results emphasize the convergent character of the traditional and cyber forms of victimization. Moreover, the results obtained by Gradinger et al. (2010) show that the coexistence patterns are even more complex. Surprisingly, students were either traditional harassers-victims, or mixed harassers-victims. Few students that were harassers-victims manifesting themselves only in the cyber space have been found.

Research (Ybarra and Mitchell, 2004; Raskauskas and Stoltz, 2007; Slonje and Smith, 2008; Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston, 2008; Gradinger et al., 2010) shows that in the school environment there is a great movement of students

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between the roles of aggressor and victim in traditional and cyber forms. The synthesis of research on the dynamics of the roles in bullying and cyberbullying shows that these forms of harassment coexist among pupils. We cannot speak of exclusive categories of students involved as aggressor or victim, exclusively in a form of harassment or another. Although there is the possibility for a traditional status to change into another, a cyber one, apparently the roles played in bullying are also kept in cyberbullying.

5. Controversies, Consequences, Discussions

The extension of violence among students is a warning signal to the leaders of the educational environment, in the context in which negative psychological consequences on the medium and long term for students involved in any form of harassment have been proved to exist. The study of these new types of aggressive behavior, of the dynamics of roles in the face to face and virtual socialization and of the emotional profiles of the involved students should contribute to the anti-violence strategy promoted in school. The educational policy against violence has as secondary objective to form life skills that necessary to approach every day challenges as well as resilient development in the future among students.

The intense research of the current forms of violence in the educational environment contributed to the finding of some paradoxical positive consequences of this phenomenon, important in the resilient development of students. Thus, Šléglová and Černá (2011) note that cyberbullying determined students to outline a cognitive prototype of the aggressor, subsequently used in different social situations that may fall into the category of risk situation. Thus, students can prevent interaction with people that they do not consider to be reliable. Also, it has been stated (Šléglová and Černá 2011) that the cyberbullying that takes place among students has increased the level of caution in using digital resources, especially those that are risky. If the entering on the market of technological devices, of the internet and of the mobile telephony has aroused a great deal of enthusiasm, especially among young people, now they understand that behind the attractiveness and usefulness of these resources risks that are to be treated with caution also exist.

In order to manage cyber harassment, students tried to adopt particular strategies determined by a number of individual factors as educational prevention and intervention policies in this area are still not firmly outlined and were not promoted enough in the school environment. Thus, students particularly adopt a defensive attitude in what concern technology. Whether they use pseudonyms or other means to protect their identity, students realize that the virtual environment is not always safe and that they need to take precaution measures against possible specific risks. Šléglová and Černá (2011) also note other recorded methods in the management of cyberbullying: dealing with the cyber aggressor when his identity was found, and seeking support from

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colleagues or adults in order to solve the problem. However, practice shows that these strategies sometimes do not work (for instance, using online pseudonyms) and sometimes cannot be used (for instance, looking for support from adults). Therefore, prevention policies must focus on informing students about how to protect themselves in the virtual environment but also on adult training in the management of this phenomenon.

Olweus (2012) noted that it is unnecessary to approach cyberbullying in particular because the current prevention and intervention programs for traditional violence among students also take into account this form of manifestation. He also argued that cyber harassment is a phenomenon of a large scale, the number of acts of cyberbullying stagnating in recent years, and emphasized at the same time that students that are faced with this kind of harassment usually experience the others also. Although his expertise and arguments are powerful, there are some discussions that attack his position.

Smith (2012) believes that the understatement of cyberbullying in Olweus's vision is due to the implications regarding his popular anti-bullying program, in which great resources have been invested during the last years and which should be rethought. Smith (2012) agrees that the incidence of cyberbullying is small compared to bullying. These phenomena almost cannot be taken separately. Although during the last years the phenomenon of face to face violence stagnates, cyber harassment has increased. Smith (2012) believes that, in order to talk about cyberbullying, a theoretical collaboration from many fields (psychology, pedagogy, law, computer science and technical sciences) is necessary. He also believes that cyberbullying exceeds by far the school context, being hard to find a space in which its negative effects cannot occur. This researcher shows that the definition of the concept of cyberbullying shifts from the definition of bullying, so that new programs and prevention and intervention strategies must be considered. In his conception, cyberbullying is a form of indirect harassment, which can be anonymous. The aggressor does not see the reaction of the victim, so his desire to display power cannot be highlighted, but one must insist on his purpose to harm the victim. The audience that a victim of cyberbullying can have is much higher than in the case of traditional violence. Witnesses have the possibility to be with the victim when attacked, with the aggressor when committing the offense or anywhere else in the virtual space. Thus, in the case of cyberbullying also, intervention strategies should include witnesses (the largest category of students involved) to this behavior among those who can be trained to fight against the spread of this phenomenon.

It has already been shown that in the case of cyberbullying not using new technologically mediated devices or the lack of experience in traditional violence do not protect the potential cyber victims (Lacherza and Conti 2013). Anyone can be attacked in the online environment, victimization could be transmitted by other users through which the harassment action takes effect and reaches the victim. Many research studies attest the quality of the school climate as a first

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protective factor before the onset of cyber harassment (Bayar and Uçanok 2012). Thus, even if we cannot prevent the multitude of forms of aggression that can occur in the virtual environment, one of the objectives of the resilient development from the point of view of this scourge remains the consolidation of the school climate quality and of the positive relationships between students. Cyberbullying is equally present in most industrialized countries (Vazsonyi et al. 2012), representing an unfortunate consequence of the technological progress. In such a context, victims may adopt a zero tolerance attitude to harassment; they can face the aggressor or seek support from colleagues and teachers.

In order to deal with it, we have on hand a variety of examples of good practices adopted by the developed countries, which ultimately rely on the human being's return to his or her natural social features, to authentic communication, to the strengthening of relationships between peers and the abandonment of unhealthy habits.

6. Conclusions

Although traditional forms of aggressions still prevail in schools, the development of technology accelerates the assault of cyber attacks in students' lives. In cyberbullying, the differences of gender, age or role (aggressor, victim or witness) are insignificant or can easily be violated by technological opportunities, like anonymity. At the same time, the roles played by the students in bullying are adopted in the cyber space social behavior. This phenomenon penetrates the social area of nowadays student's life. The consequences of virtual aggressions go beyond the school perimeter, becoming very dangerous for the student's development. A single act of virtual aggression may lead to extreme consequences for the victim. The conclusions of previous research urges the people responsible with school safety, in order to avoid the growth of the number of students reporting victimization and to support the development of prevention and intervention skills in the case of cyberbullying. The implication of students in cyberbullying and bullying constitutes a very common behavior in nowadays educational context, as the previous studies show. The two types of schools violence need to be analyzed independently, but also in their interdependence in order to be understood in their entirety.

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