



Qualitative Methods in School Bullying and Cyberbullying Research: An Introduction to the Special Issue

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Introduction

School bullying research has a long history, stretching all the way back to a questionnaire study undertaken in the USA in the late 1800s (Burk, 1897). However, systematic school bullying research began in earnest in Scandinavia in the early 1970s with the work of Heinemann (1972) and Olweus (1978). Highlighting the extent to which research on bullying has grown exponentially since then, Smith et al. (2021) found that there were only 83 articles with the term “bully” in the title or abstract published in the Web of Science database prior to 1989. The numbers of articles found in the following decades were 458 (1990–1999), 1,996 (2000–2009), and 9,333 (2010–2019). Considering cyberbullying more specifically, Smith and Berkun (2017, cited in Smith et al., 2021) conducted a search of Web of Science with the terms “cyber* and bully*; cyber and victim*; electronic bullying; Internet bullying; and online harassment” until the year 2015 and found that while there were no articles published prior to 2000, 538 articles were published between 2000 and 2015, with the number of articles increasing every year (p. 49).

Numerous authors have pointed out that research into school bullying and cyberbullying has predominantly been conducted using quantitative methods, with much less use of qualitative or mixed methods (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Hutson, 2018; Maran & Begotti, 2021; Smith et al., 2021). In their recent analysis of articles published between 1976 and 2019 (in WoS, with the search terms “bully*; victim*; cyberbullying; electronic bullying; internet bullying; and online

harassment”), Smith et al. (2021, pp. 50–51) found that of the empirical articles selected, more than three-quarters (76.3%) were based on quantitative data, 15.4% were based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative data, and less than one-tenth (8.4%) were based on qualitative data alone. What is more, they found that the proportion of articles based on qualitative or mixed methods has been decreasing over the past 15 years (Smith et al., 2021). While the search criteria excluded certain types of qualitative studies (e.g., those published in books, doctoral theses, and non-English languages), this nonetheless highlights the extent to which qualitative research findings risk being overlooked in the vast sea of quantitative research.

School bullying and cyberbullying are complex phenomena, and a range of methodological approaches is thus needed to understand their complexity (Pellegrini & Bartini, 2000; Thornberg, 2011). Indeed, over-relying on quantitative methods limits understanding of the contexts and experiences of bullying (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Patton et al., 2017). Qualitative methods are particularly useful for better understanding the social contexts, processes, interactions, experiences, motivations, and perspectives of those involved (Hutson, 2018; Patton et al., 2017; Thornberg, 2011; Torrance, 2000).

Smith et al. (2021) suggest that the “continued emphasis on quantitative studies may be due to increasingly sophisticated methods such as structural equation modeling ... network analysis ... time trend analyses ... latent profile analyses ... and multipolygenic score approaches” (p. 56). However, the authors make no mention of the range or sophistication of methods used in qualitative studies. Although there are still proportionately few qualitative studies of school bullying and cyberbullying in relation to quantitative studies, and this gap appears to be increasing, qualitative studies have utilized a range of qualitative data collection methods. These methods have included but are not limited to ethnographic fieldwork and participant observations (e.g., Eriksen & Lyng, 2018; Gumpel et al., 2014; Horton, 2019), digital ethnography (e.g., Rachoene & Oyedemi, 2015; Sylwander, 2019), meta-ethnography (e.g., Dennehy et al., 2020; Moretti

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& Herkovits, 2021), focus group interviews (e.g., Odenbring, 2022; Oliver & Candappa, 2007; Ybarra et al., 2019), semi-structured group and individual interviews (e.g., Forsberg & Thornberg, 2016; Lyng, 2018; Mishna et al., 2005; Varjas et al., 2013), vignettes (e.g., Jennifer & Cowie, 2012; Khanolainen & Semenova, 2020; Strindberg et al., 2020), memory work (e.g., Johnson et al., 2014; Malaby, 2009), literature studies (e.g., Lopez-Ropero, 2012; Wiseman et al., 2019), photo elicitation (e.g., Ganbaatar et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2006; Walton & Niblett, 2013), photostory method (e.g., Skrzypiec et al., 2015), and other visual works produced by children and young people (e.g., Bosacki et al., 2006; Gillies-Rezo & Bosacki, 2003).

This body of research has also included a variety of qualitative data analysis methods, such as grounded theory (e.g., Allen, 2015; Bjereld, 2018; Thornberg, 2018), thematic analysis (e.g., Cunningham et al., 2016; Forsberg & Horton, 2022), content analysis (e.g., Temko, 2019; Wiseman & Jones, 2018), conversation analysis (e.g., Evaldsson & Svahn, 2012; Tholander, 2019), narrative analysis (e.g., Haines-Saah et al., 2018), interpretative phenomenological analysis (e.g., Hutchinson, 2012; Tholander et al., 2020), various forms of discourse analysis (e.g., Ellwood & Davies, 2010; Hepburn, 1997; Ringrose & Renold, 2010), including discursive psychological analysis (e.g., Clarke et al., 2004), and critical discourse analysis (e.g., Barrett & Bound, 2015; Bethune & Gonick, 2017; Horton, 2021), as well as theoretically informed analyses from an array of research traditions (e.g., Davies, 2011; Jacobson, 2010; Søndergaard, 2012; Walton, 2005).

In light of the growing volume and variety of qualitative studies during the past two decades, we invited researchers to discuss and explore *methodological* issues related to their qualitative school bullying and cyberbullying research. The articles included in this special issue of the *International Journal of Bullying Prevention* discuss different qualitative methods, reflect on strengths and limitations — possibilities and challenges, and suggest implications for future qualitative and mixed-methods research.

Included Articles

Qualitative studies — focusing on social, relational, contextual, processual, structural, and/or societal factors and mechanisms — have formed the basis for several contributions during the last two decades that have sought to expand approaches to understanding and theorizing the causes of cyber/bullying. Some have also argued the need for expanding the commonly used definition of bullying, based on Olweus (1993) (e.g., Allen, 2015; Ellwood & Davies, 2010; Goldsmid & Howie, 2014; Ringrose & Rawlings, 2015; Søndergaard, 2012; Walton, 2011). In the first article of the special issue, *Using qualitative methods to measure and understand key features of adolescent bullying: A call*

to action, Natalie Spadafora, Anthony Volk, and Andrew Dane instead discuss the usefulness of qualitative methods for improving measures and bettering our understanding of three specific key definitional features of bullying. Focusing on the definition put forward by Volk et al. (2014), they discuss the definitional features of *power imbalance*, *goal directedness* (replacing “intent to harm” in order not to assume conscious awareness, and to include a wide spectrum of goals that are intentionally and strategically pursued by bullies), and *harmful impact* (replacing “negative actions” in order to focus on the consequences for the victim, as well as circumventing difficult issues related to “repetition” in the traditional definition).

Acknowledging that these three features are challenging to capture using quantitative methods, Spadafora, Volk, and Dane point to existing qualitative studies that shed light on the features of power imbalance, goal directedness and harmful impact in bullying interactions — and put forward suggestions for future qualitative studies. More specifically, the authors argue that qualitative methods, such as focus groups, can be used to investigate the complexity of power relations at not only individual, but also social levels. They also highlight how qualitative methods, such as diaries and autoethnography, may help researchers gain a better understanding of the motives behind bullying behavior; from the perspectives of those engaging in it. Finally, the authors demonstrate how qualitative methods, such as ethnographic fieldwork and semi-structured interviews, can provide important insights into the harmful impact of bullying and how, for example, perceived harmfulness may be connected to perceived intention.

In the second article, *Understanding bullying and cyberbullying through an ecological systems framework: The value of qualitative interviewing in a mixed methods approach*, Faye Mishna, Arija Birze, and Andrea Greenblatt discuss the ways in which utilizing qualitative interviewing in mixed method approaches can facilitate greater understanding of bullying and cyberbullying. Based on a longitudinal and multi-perspective mixed methods study of cyberbullying, the authors demonstrate not only how qualitative interviewing can augment quantitative findings by examining process, context and meaning for those involved, but also how qualitative interviewing can lead to new insights and new areas of research. They also show how qualitative interviewing can help to capture nuances and complexity by allowing young people to express their perspectives and elaborate on their answers to questions. In line with this, the authors also raise the importance of qualitative interviewing for providing young people with space for self-reflection and learning.

In the third article, *Q methodology as an innovative addition to bullying researchers' methodological repertoire*, Adrian Lundberg and Lisa Hellström focus on Q

methodology as an inherently mixed methods approach, producing quantitative data from subjective viewpoints, and thus supplementing more mainstream quantitative and qualitative approaches. The authors outline and exemplify Q methodology as a research technique, focusing on the central feature of Q sorting. The authors further discuss the contribution of Q methodology to bullying research, highlighting the potential of Q methodology to address challenges related to gaining the perspectives of hard-to-reach populations who may either be unwilling or unable to share their personal experiences of bullying. As the authors point out, the use of card sorting activities allows participants to put forward their subjective perspectives, in less-intrusive settings for data collection and without disclosing their own personal experiences. The authors also illustrate how the flexibility of Q sorting can facilitate the participation of participants with limited verbal literacy and/or cognitive function through the use of images, objects or symbols. In the final part of the paper, Lundberg and Hellström discuss implications for practice and suggest future directions for using Q methodology in bullying and cyberbullying research, particularly with hard-to-reach populations.

In the fourth article, *The importance of being attentive to social processes in school bullying research: Adopting a constructivist grounded theory approach*, Camilla Forsberg discusses the use of constructivist grounded theory (CGT) in her research, focusing on social structures, norms, and processes. Forsberg first outlines CGT as a theory-methods package that is well suited to meet the call for more qualitative research on participants' experiences and the social processes involved in school bullying. Forsberg emphasizes three key focal aspects of CGT, namely focus on participants' main concerns; focus on meaning, actions, and processes; and focus on symbolic interactionism. She then provides examples and reflections from her own ethnographic and interview-based research, from different stages of the research process. In the last part of the article, Forsberg argues that prioritizing the perspectives of participants is an ethical stance, but one which comes with a number of ethical challenges, and points to ways in which CGT is helpful in dealing with these challenges.

In the fifth article, *A qualitative meta-study of youth voice and co-participatory research practices: Informing cyber/bullying research methodologies*, Deborah Green, Carmel Taddeo, Deborah Price, Foteini Pasenidou, and Barbara Spears discuss how qualitative meta-studies can be used to inform research methodologies for studying school bullying and cyberbullying. Drawing on the findings of five previous qualitative studies, and with a transdisciplinary and transformative approach, the authors illustrate and exemplify how previous qualitative research can be analyzed to gain a better understanding of the studies' collective strengths and thus consider the findings and methods beyond the original settings where

the research was conducted. In doing so, the authors highlight the progression of youth voice and co-participatory research practices, the centrality of children and young people to the research process and the enabling effect of technology — and discuss challenges related to ethical issues, resource and time demands, the role of gatekeepers, and common limitations of qualitative studies on youth voice and co-participatory research practices.

Taken together, the five articles illustrate the diversity of qualitative methods used to study school bullying and cyberbullying and highlight the need for further qualitative research. We hope that readers will find the collection of articles engaging and that the special issue not only gives impetus to increased qualitative focus on the complex phenomena of school bullying and cyberbullying but also to further discussions on both methodological and analytical approaches.

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