



Nationality and ethnicity-based (cyber)bullying: how should we tackle this phenomenon in survey studies?

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KEYWORDS

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Bias bullying
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ABSTRACT

Nationality and ethnicity-based (cyber)bullying (NEBB) is generally understood as peer violence where the issues of nationality and ethnicity of the actors involved (mostly targets and perpetrators) come into play. Although central for this kind of bullying, the national, ethnic and cultural differences are not the only aspects that should be included in NEBB definition and measurement approach. Closer analysis of how specifically they may be involved and impact the dynamics and phenomenology of peer aggression suggests the need for establishing a set of criteria that may be implemented into operationalization strategies. This theoretical text presents the different level criteria that may be used for analysing and typologizing the phenomenon of NEBB. These include both behavioral and formal characteristics of hostile behaviours as well as specific issues concerning nationality and ethnicity of bullying actors and racist/nationalistic content. Then the impact of how aspects of the proposed criteria should be present in survey tools is discussed, in order to fully measure the specific types of nationality and ethnicity based bullying. Also the rationale is presented for including contextual aspects in both measurement strategies and interpretation of the results.

Ciber(acoso) basado en la nacionalidad y el origen étnico: ¿cómo debemos abordar este fenómeno en los estudios mediante encuestas?

PALABRAS CLAVE

Acoso basado en prejuicios
Intimidación por prejuicios
Violencia entre compañeros
Racismo
Etnicidad
Discriminación

RESUMEN

El (ciber)acoso basado en la nacionalidad y el origen étnico (NEBB, por sus siglas en inglés) generalmente se entiende como violencia entre iguales en la que entran en juego las cuestiones de nacionalidad y origen étnico de los actores involucrados (en su mayoría víctimas y agresores). Aunque fundamentales para este tipo de acoso, las diferencias nacionales, étnicas y culturales no son los únicos aspectos que deben incluirse en la definición y el enfoque de medición del NEBB. Un análisis más detallado sobre cómo estas pueden estar involucradas específicamente e impactar la dinámica y la fenomenología de la agresión entre iguales sugiere la necesidad de establecer un conjunto de criterios que puedan implementarse en las estrategias de operacionalización. Este texto teórico presenta los diferentes niveles de criterios que pueden ser utilizados para analizar y tipologizar el fenómeno de NEBB. Estos incluyen tanto características formales como comportamentales de las conductas hostiles, así como cuestiones específicas relacionadas con la nacionalidad y el origen étnico de los acosadores y el contenido racista/nacionalista. Luego, se discute el impacto de cómo los aspectos de los criterios propuestos deben estar presentes en las herramientas de la encuesta, a fin de medir completamente los tipos específicos de acoso basado en la nacionalidad y el origen étnico. También se presenta la justificación para incluir aspectos contextuales tanto en las estrategias de medición como en la interpretación de los resultados.

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Research on bullying, much of it on school-aged populations, now has a history of some forty-five years, since the English translation of Olweus' first book (1978; original 1973). As an offshoot of research on aggression generally, it was soon defined as being intentional behaviour that hurt another (as in aggression), with repetition and an imbalance of power (specific criteria for bullying). These criteria are now fairly widely accepted (Hellström et al., 2021), and the harmful effects signalled by them are well established (Kaufman et al., 2020).

Initially, as with aggression generally, verbal, and physical kinds of bullying were those mainly considered (Olweus, 1993). However, through the 1980s and 1990s there was increasing recognition of indirect forms of aggression, and bullying, notably as in spreading nasty rumours about someone and/or socially excluding them. By the 21st century, cyberbullying was a new kind of bullying increasingly recognised, first in emails and text messages, and then especially via social networking sites (Smith, 2014).

However somewhat orthogonal to this typology of forms of bullying, is the issue of whether the perpetration of bullying behaviour can be seen as a somewhat individual matter between the perpetrator and the target, or whether it is, at least in part, motivated by some group characteristic of the target. For example in the U.K., it is illegal to discriminate against someone because of certain "protected characteristics", namely age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage and civil partnership, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion or belief, sex, and sexual orientation (<https://www.equalityhumanrights.com/en/equality-act/protected-characteristics>).

Not all these characteristics are relevant for school-aged bullying, but many of them are, and are often labelled as "harassment", as for example in sexual harassment and racial harassment. Nevertheless, these behaviours may fit the definition of bullying, and are often referred to as prejudice-based bullying, identity-based bullying, or bias bullying (e.g., Mulvey et al., 2018). This article is focussed on bias-based bullying due to nationality or ethnicity.

Nationality and ethnicity-based bullying (NEBB)

Bullying among young people that is connected to nationality or ethnicity issues is recognized as a serious negative social phenomenon (Xu et al., 2020). It attracts a lot of attention as it is connected to other negative and commonly condemned phenomena such as racism or radical nationalism (Goodboy et al., 2016). Additionally, some empirical studies suggest that bias-based-bullying (that nationality or ethnicity based bullying is part of) brings more severe consequences than non-bias based bullying. For instance, Mulvey et al. (2018) in large scale research revealed that those who experienced bias-based bullying report more negative outcomes of bullying and higher levels of school avoidance as well as fear than those who experienced non-bias-based bullying. Important international institutions have developed policies and actions specifically tackling this kind of bullying, assuming that the mechanisms based on racial or nationalist motivations reinforce violence mechanisms in a

way that make bullying worse in terms of negative outcomes for individuals and society (e.g., UNESCO, 2019; United Nations General Assembly, 2016). The potential growing prevalence of this phenomenon is connected to the increasing scale of migration caused by various economic, political, and conflict reasons (Delaruelle et al., 2021; Pyżalski et al., 2022). To illustrate the dynamics, it is worth to point out that the last war migration in Ukraine resulted in the situation when almost 25% of Polish schools that admitted children from Ukraine increased their student population of 15% or more in just a few months (Pyżalski et al., 2022).

This article discusses nationality and ethnicity-based bullying (NEBB) that takes place among young people (children and adolescents). However, it is worth noting that this kind of interpersonal violence may also take place within adult social groups, for example in workplace settings (Okechukwu et al., 2014).

NEBB definitions and their limitations

First, general definitions of nationality and ethnicity-based bullying are discussed and potential problems and shortcomings of them are highlighted, particularly when it comes to operationalization of this phenomenon in the research tools used in surveys (Mulvey et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020).

NEBB can be defined as based on hostile behaviour against others based on their nationality or ethnicity. The nationality and ethnicity status (and cultural identity connected to them) of a target (or victim) is in that case devalued by a perpetrator(s). Most researchers restrict studies to this general definition and use it as a basis to operationalize the phenomenon of NEBB, mostly in surveys. This may bring a lot of challenges, particularly when it comes to measurement methodology.

The literature on the phenomenon of nationality and ethnicity-based bullying is to a great extent inconsistent and also uses other terms that cover the similar scope of a hostile behaviour, sometimes used interchangeably without proper distinction among different sub-phenomena. For instance, Graham (2021) implicates ethnicity-based bullying as a subtype of the identity-based bullying that also involves other identity-reasons, such as sexual identity (LGBT+). This should bring our attention to the issue of defining one's own identity, since people, not excluding young people, at the same time belong and affiliate themselves to different identities. Thus, someone can be at the same time be bullied due to two different identity backgrounds (e.g., belonging to the racial/nationality group and a sexual minority, or a disability status) (Galán et al., 2021; Plichta, 2015; Plichta et al., 2018). Additionally, in some cases nationality/ethnicity issues may play some role in a particular case of bullying but some other issues, e.g., connected to interpersonal communication or some personality traits, may be more significant.

A commonly used umbrella term for all the bullying connected to group affiliation of a target is bias-based-bullying or bias bullying (Mulvey et al., 2018; Newman & Fantus, 2015). In this context a lot of different stigmas are taken into account and authors of particular research studies simply name them

accordingly to extend the term of bias bullying (for instance: bias bullying connected to sexual identity).

So, the indicator of NEBB in this case is the rationale of a perpetrator that targets particular victims. The question emerges how one can know whether in a particular case the reason (or the main reason for bullying someone) was connected to nationality or ethnicity aspects (that are obviously connected to cultural specificity and in many cases religion). On one hand, that rationale may be self-reported by the actors of bullying – particularly perpetrators and to some extent targets and bystanders, who may be asked about the motives present or the content of verbal or non-verbal messages that can be known from self-reports and can be studied directly (for example in social media communication, when the texts young people publish in social networking sites are analysed).

What complicates things more is the wide range of different configurations when it comes to the identity of the actors involved in NEBB. For example, a perpetrator may belong to the majority group while the targets may be from an ethnic or national minority. But there is the same possibility that both types of actors belonging to minorities or even a perpetrator from a minority may target someone from the majority group. What is more, NEBB may be present among different subgroups of a certain ethnic or national minority.

An important issue is the extent to which the research tools acknowledge the different aspects underlined above. A discrepancy can commonly be observed between terms/concepts as a basis of the research and how those concepts have been translated into research tools (Xu et al., 2020). The best example here may be researching cyberbullying, understood as the electronic version of school bullying, while in the research tool (e.g., questionnaire), when asking about victimization or perpetration, terms such as “someone” are used instead of “classmates” or “students”. That may mean that in many cases what the participants report is not cyberbullying, but other kinds of electronic aggression described above when other individuals or groups are involved (e.g., adults, unknown offline anonymous individuals, people known only online from internet communities, group of people characterized by certain features, e.g., nationality/race). Specifically, when it

comes to NEBB the central issue is how racial and ethnical identity information of cyber/bullying actors are included in the tool. For example, if a target reports being attacked by others – does he/she also report data on ethnicity and nationality of the attackers? If yes, are the results later analysed in terms of differences of race/ethnicity between a target and those who bully him/her? Additionally, even when this is operationalized and analysed it does not mean that those differences were the reason for bullying that may have been caused by other issues. In this respect, there is a need to include questions directly asking the actors of bullying about the rationale for bullying (and whether nationality/ethnicity issues are indicated there).

All this brings a significant challenge to researchers who aim to properly define and measure the phenomenon. Next are presented four aspects or criteria that should be considered when defining and diagnosing NEBB, particularly when using self-report questionnaire or survey tools.

Measurement criteria for NEBB

To clarify important aspects for defining and measuring NEBB, four criteria are presented in Table 1 and discussed below. Awareness of those aspects and acknowledgement of them in the operationalization process will help determine what phenomenon is actually being measured. This may also help to analyse the results of other studies and instruments used in order to understand what actually has been measured, something that is not always clearly explained conceptually by researchers (Xu et al., 2020). The first two criteria may be analysed in any kind of bullying, not only NEBB. The second two criteria are specific to NEBB.

Character of the hostile actions

Different behavioural acts, including also different forms of public/private online communication and its impact differ when it comes to the effects on a target. That issue is not specific for NEBB and has been analysed for many years in the research on bullying (Thomas et al., 2015). Still some subtypes

Table 1
Aspects or criteria important for defining and measuring NEBB

Criterion	Description
1. Character of the hostile actions	This aspect focuses on the character of perpetrator’s actions and usually includes physical, verbal, relational and cyber actions. This defines which behaviours should be acknowledged and allows the analysis of different bullying acts separately.
2. Formal characteristics of the hostile actions according to the commonly used bullying definition	This aspect focuses not on the content of the hostile actions but on the way, they are applied within the perpetrator-target relationship. Commonly, this formal aspect is analysed through the lens of the standard definition from Olweus (1993) that also helps to distinguish bullying from other (mostly less harmful) cases of peer aggression. This definition uses three main characteristics: repetition of hostile actions, predominance of the perpetrator over the target, and the intention to harm.
3. Presence of nationalist/racist content in the bullying acts	This aspect refers to the content of bullying (of any kind) that is racist or openly showing racial or national prejudice.
4. Ethnicity and nationality of the actors (also in the cultural perspective)	This aspect analyses the interactions of NEBB actions from the perspective of ethnicity or nationality of those involved (mostly in the dynamics between a perpetrator(s) and a target).

of bullying tend to be neglected particularly in the practical settings. For example, exclusion can bring very severe effects in biased-based-bullying of young people with disabilities (Diez, 2010). At the same time, it is not included in some bullying tools and absent in various prevention programs (Rose et al., 2015). Also cyberbullying based on racial/ethnic grounds presents a high victimisation potential (Henry, 2013).

Particularly, in case of NEBB it should be analysed which behavioural acts are included in the instrument to avoid the situation when one measures those with lower harm potential while omitting those that are important due to their high victimising potential.

Formal characteristics of the hostile actions according to the commonly used bullying definition

Bullying conceptually makes it possible to focus and measure on those peer violence cases that are really serious due to the level of victimization and potential long and short term consequences. Bullying instruments, particularly those that are definition based, try to capture the presence of main bullying characteristics: repetition, imbalance of power, and hostile intentions (Kaufman et al., 2014). For NEBB it will be also advisable to measure the presence of those characteristics so other cases than bullying (like for instance, students quarrels) are not identified as bullying.

In the context of NEBB a few important aspects should be acknowledged:

Firstly, bullying normally takes place among young people belonging to the same social group, e.g., a school class, sport team, etc. However, racist, and nationalist messages present in NEBB are in many cases out of this context. This happens for example when some young people are victimized online due to their race/ethnicity by entirely unknown individuals (Tynes et al., 2008).

Secondly, the power imbalance inherent for bullying, in case of NEBB may be connected to the proportion of students with different ethnicity or nationality in the particular class. Regardless of the situation in the whole country's population, the situation in the particular class may be different. For instance, a recent study on the Ukraine war immigration (Pyżalski et al., 2022) has shown that although in Polish schools Ukrainian children generally form a minority group, in some classes they form a substantial proportion or even outnumber children of Polish origin. This makes the power imbalance not obvious since traditionally NEBB is understood as violence connected to ethnic majority students against ethnic minority. Of course, it is not always the case that when students of a certain nationality or ethnicity are numerous that they misuse the imbalance of power based on this in the bullying process. There may even be a situation where students from a minority group, although outnumbering students of the majority in a certain setting, could be bullied more frequently due to their origin. Still, this aspect is of importance and has to be taken into account while measuring NEBB both in research and practical diagnoses.

Imbalance may be also a result of problems in the wider social context, for example how the group and its culture/reli-

gion is perceived in a certain community (sometimes in a really long perspective). Good examples here may be the Roma community, Muslim community, or an East European community in some countries. The research here records profound differences among countries based on their individual history, experiences of living together with people of concrete nationality/ethnicity/culture and political agendas popular in a certain moment (e.g., Asbrock et al., 2014; Fekete, 2014; Strabac & Listhaug, 2008).

When it comes to repetition, NEBB can also bring some specificity. Some scholars underline that even a single hostile act may be treated as bullying when its victimization potential is high. One situation is cyberbullying when sometimes a single action of a perpetrator (e.g., posting harmful content in social networking site) may be viewed and then disseminated by other people (Smith et al., 2012). Obviously in case of racist content the probability of such dissemination may be higher as some people, even not knowing the target, may disseminate the content due to racist reasons (Blaya & Audrin, 2019).

Even when not posted online, a single act of racial/ethnic aggression may be harmful since it touches the important aspects of one's identity connected to ethnicity, nationality and religion. In this respect, acts that really focus on degrading and insulting those qualities and values may be extremely painful even when perpetrated only once or a few times and may cause strong emotions and reactions such as suicidal ideation (Alegría, et al., 2016).

Additionally, racist/nationalist violence may be and indeed is commonly present outside the school/class context (Pyżalski, 2011; Soral et al., 2011). This indicates a new phenomenon that is distinct from school bullying/cyberbullying. This is particularly true in the case of race/ethnicity based aggression/violence, since the Internet as the communication platform erases the boundaries of traditional groups (e.g. peer school groups). This allows the users to contact or send content targeting members of various groups based in online and offline environments or both at the same time. This may also include bullying within traditional peer groups but often goes beyond this. In this case, one deals with online aggression against groups or even online hate speech in a broader sense (Pyżalski, 2011; 2012; 2022). Those terms refer to the situation when one makes public online comments or publishes on the Internet hostile materials against groups of people based on their certain characteristics such as affiliation to a certain religion or particular race or origin. Although those contents are not targeted against particular individuals, everyone who belongs to those groups may feel attacked (Soral et al., 2018; Tynes et al., 2008, Wachs & Wright, 2018). The research tools should be elaborated in a way that allows us to differentiate between bullying and online hate speech.

Presence of nationalist/racist content in the bullying acts

To define a certain kind of bullying as NEBB the reason should be the race or ethnicity of a target (Mulvey et al., 2018; Xu et al., 2020). As such, the situation when someone of different race or nationality is bullied is not *per se* NEBB. It becomes NEBB when the content of communication that is present in

violent acts indicates that the reason or the main reason of someone being attacked is their origin. By communication one should understand mostly the messages in verbal bullying (e.g., unwanted nicknames connected to nationality, ethnicity, or racism comments) or messages (verbal but also visual) in cyberbullying (like memes or social media comments referring to someone's ethnical/national identity). This may cause a lot of problems while defining the concept of NEBB. First of all, there is the question of cyber/bullying rationale that may be connected to various reasons in one case. For instance, the perpetrator may claim to attack someone due to nationality and ethnicity reasons, but simultaneously claim other reasons like those connected to special needs, image, or economic status; he/she can also assess how important racial/nationalist motivation is in comparison to other reasons. There the question

emerges whether this NEBB motivation should be the main one to classify bullying as NEBB or it should be present no matter what its importance as assessed by a perpetrator. There is also the possibility of a perpetrator denying that nationality/ethnicity issues are the reason for bullying even in situations when actual behaviour suggests the contrary. So, one obtains different results asking directly about motives and asking about actual behaviour (when certain hostile activities are listed, e.g., calling someone names connected to their nationality/ethnicity).

Ethnicity and nationality of the actors

To capture the specificity of the phenomenon, NEBB should be analysed focusing on the nationality and ethnicity of actors involved. This nationality/ethnicity (but also cultural) differ-

Table 2

Recommendations for designing survey instruments measuring NEBB

N° of criterion	Recommendation	Rationale
2	NEBB survey tools should include questions on the context of peer violence (so a student status or a peer from the same reference group in case of a target or perpetrator).	This aspect is very important since when not included what is measured may not only be (cyber)bullying (understood as peer violence based on social relations within the same group) but also some other phenomena such as the hate speech or online harassment that may be conducted outside this context.
2,4	NEBB survey tools should in parallel measure the perspective of targets, perpetrators, and bystanders.	Racist and ethnicity based motives may be not interpreted properly by all involved. The prevalence may be wrongly assessed as higher or lower than it really is. Triangulation of respondents may help to see it in perspective and assess it more correctly.
1	Survey instruments should include a wide range of behavioural items listing concrete actions including physical, verbal, relational, and cyber acts.	The potential victimization of various hostile acts differs in severity. This means the list of potential aggressive acts should be as complete as possible and cover all the main bullying types. Omitting some aspects (e.g., exclusion due to one's ethnicity/nationality) may result in underestimation of NEBB prevalence.
1,3	Survey instruments should have a special section on exclusion and relational bullying in general, based on racist/nationalist grounds.	Exclusion seems to be a basic type of NEBB that often precedes the active forms of peer violence (e.g., physical, or verbal bullying).
3	Items in behavioural bullying scales should be formulated in a way that captures the racist/nationalist content.	This strategy helps measure those aggressive actions that by the specific content indicate that the particular case is NEBB. For example, instead of <i>Someone was calling me names</i> , one should extend the item to <i>Someone was calling me names connected to my nationality or ethnicity</i> .
2,3	Generally, research instruments should address regularity of the actions measuring the numbers of acts perpetrated or experienced by a target in a certain period, e.g., a month. However, some items should also focus on single racial/ethnic aggression acts with high victimization potential.	Repetition of the actions is a commonly accepted characteristic of bullying that is based on reasoning that frequently repeated acts cause more harm due to summing up their victimization power and causing a target to feel helpless. However, the specificity of some racist content and the context of aggressive acts including such context suggest that such single acts should be included particularly in victimization scales. For example, students may be asked the following question: <i>Have you experienced in the last year a situation in which you have been treated very badly by your class peers due to your race/ethnicity and it caused extreme negative emotions in you?</i>
4	Items in prevalence instruments should include racial or ethnic background as the reasoning for bullying (particularly named as a main reason).	Generally, it is not enough to know that bullying was conducted against a person of different nationality/ethnicity since one can be bullied on different grounds despite the racial/ethnic configuration between actors.
3	Survey instruments should extend characteristics different from ethnicity and nationality that can function as stigmas that can be the reason for bullying.	The rationale for this recommendation is that stigmas often overlap and, in many cases, when they are not measured bullying may be attributed only to ethnicity and nationality issues, even though it may be based on multiple social identities.

ence is the core of a phenomenon that is based on prejudice against a person of another race/ethnicity identity that can be fully understood only from the perspective of those of different race. This may be analysed by focussing on the configuration of perpetrator-target dyad in the terms of racial/ethnic identity. In this situation it is possible to learn whether a young person is bullied or perpetrates bullying against the same race/identity person or there is a difference in this respect. However, this criterion brings some serious challenges when it comes to its implementation in the survey instrument. It requires very sensitive questions when a respondent (e.g., a target or a perpetrator of bullying) is asked to reveal not only main aspect of his/her ethnic/racial identity but also sometimes even more sensitive issues like commitment to cultural practices (e.g., certain clothes) or religious practices (Pyżalski, et al., 2022). It is also the case when bullying actors describe the second person involved (e.g., a perpetrator describes the target, or vice versa). Inclusion of such questions may in some cases be criticized by ethical committees of scientific bodies or educational authorities. Even when included, such questions may have a lot of missing data since the respondents may feel reluctant to disclose such information. It also requires sometimes detailed knowledge concerning issues how specific groups construct and label their identities (Aspinall, 2009). Nonetheless, lack of this data may be a serious problem in the measurement of NEBB.

NEBB measurement methodology recommendations

Based on the above analysis, Table 2 presents recommendations for designing survey instruments measuring NEBB, with a rationale for each referring to the numbered criteria in Table 1 and as described above.

Conclusions

We stand on the position that proper prevention and intervention in the NEBB situation requires not only a clear definition of this phenomenon, but a good quality measurement based on it. This is vital to effectively target prejudice and biased behaviours among young people. Wrongly designed and operationalized instruments provide invalid data that may lead to wrong decisions concerning the need to tackle NEBB in a particular population or community.

Thus, the criteria presented should be considered for designing survey instruments (questionnaires and scales) that are aimed to measure NEBB. These criteria cannot cover all the important aspects for NEBB measurement methodology; but those considered here are important, but too seldom acknowledged by the researchers measuring this phenomenon.

Finally, our analysis points out that the wider social and temporal context in which NEBB takes place should be taken into consideration. This is vital not only for formulation of NEBB definitions and designing research instruments but above all for data interpretation. Here, Bronfenbrenner's (1978) ecological model may be helpful, with its emphasis on wider levels (exosystem and macrosystem) beyond those

of the individual and immediate family, peers, and school. While difficult to incorporate in the immediate measurement of NEBB, the social context in which it is taking place should be fully reported in the methods section of any publication. This might include how particular minority groups are situated in that society and portrayed in the mass media. Any relevant events might be noted (e.g., protest movements such as “Black Lives Matter”; or the Ukraine war and consequent immigration including children in schools). In line with Bronfenbrenner's (1989) notion of the chronosystem, the date of data gathering should be given, to situate the findings in what can be rapidly changing social contexts. Giving the date of data gathering is often neglected (Smith & Berkun, 2020), but is especially important in NEBB. Reporting on the wider social context of data gathered is in line with the SRCD (2020) New Sociocultural Policy Enacted Across all SRCD Journals (<https://www.srkd.org/news/new-sociocultural-policy-enacted-across-all-srkd-journals>).

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Conflict of interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest to declare.

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