Cyberbullying: A New Variation on an Old Theme

Warren J. Blumenfeld, Ed.D.

Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Iowa State University, Ames, Iowa
50011-3192, USA
`wblumen@iastate.edu`

Abstract. Cyberbullying, like face-to-face (f2f) bullying, involves deliberate and repeated aggressive and hostile behaviors by an individual or group of individuals intended to humiliate, harm, and/or control another individual or group of individuals of lesser power or social status. Cyberbullying, however, involves the use of information and communication technologies such as Internet web sites, e-mail, chat rooms, mobile phone and pager text messaging, and instant messaging. The author discusses the similarities and differences between f2f and cyberbullying, and the psychological dimensions unique to human-computer interactions, which tend to increase abusive behaviors, including cyberbullying. In addition, the author proposes the application of social norms theory in research initiatives to address issues of cyberbullying.

1 Introduction

Children, young adults, and even adults continue to endure schoolyard and workplace bullying and harassment. In our era of advanced information and communication technologies, however, a new variation on the old theme has emerged, for we now live in the age of cyberbullying. Cyberbullying, like face-to-face bullying (f2f) (also termed "real life"-RL- bullying), involves deliberate and repeated aggressive and hostile behaviors by an individual or group of individuals intended to humiliate, harm, and/or control another individual or group of individuals of lesser power or social status.

Cyberbullying, however, involves the use of information and communication technologies such as Internet web sites, e-mail, chat rooms, mobile phone and pager text messaging, and instant messaging. Instances of cyberbullying include: people sending hurtful, cruel, and oftentimes intimidating messages to others (e.g., "Flame Mail": designed to inflame, insight, or enrage; and "Hate Mail" (also knows as "Cyberharassment"): hate- inspired and oppressive harassment based on actual or perceived social identities-racist, ethnocentric, sexist, homophobic, anti-religious, ableist, classist, etc.); also people stealing other peoples' screen names and sending inflammatory messages under those screen names to others; anonymous postings of derogatory comments about another on web journals called "blogs"; young people creating online polling booths, for example, to

rate girls as "hottest," "ugliest," or "most boring" in the school; individuals taking pictures of others in gymnasium locker rooms with digital phone cameras and sending those pictures to others, or posting them on Internet web sites; people creating web sites with stories, cartoons, caricatures, pictures, or jokes ridiculing or mocking others; posting material about a person involving private, sensitive, or embarrassing information; sending intimidating or threatening messages (also known as "Cyberstalking"); or actions designed to exclude a person from online communication technologies.

Reports indicate that cyberbullying has increased exponentially as technologies have become more accessible and as new and advanced technologies continually emerge. A study conducted by UCLA (2003) to determine Internet usage by young people found that approximately 91 percent of 12- to 15-year olds and almost all teens (99 percent) ages 16 to 18 use the Internet. Much of their time online is spent talking with other young people. i-SAFE America, an Internet safety education foundation, conducted a nationwide survey of 1,566 students from grades four to eight to determine their experiences with cyberbullying (National i-SAFE Survey, 2004). The Survey found that 57 percent of students reported receiving hurtful or angry messages online with 13 percent saying it happens "quite often;" 44 percent have received mean or threatening e-mails; 43 percent admit sending mean or hurtful things to someone online, and 7 percent admit to doing it "quite often"; 45 percent have been threatened online with 5 percent saying it happens "quite often"; 42 percent reported being bullied online with 7 percent saying it happens "quite often."

2 "Functions" of Bullying and Social Learning Theory

Social rank theory, as used by Hawker and Boulton (2001), proposes that aggressive individuals actually hold a higher rank, power, or status within a social group. Therefore, aggressive behavior, and bullying in particular, may be reinforced, and it provides those who engage in aggressive behaviors a sense of belonging. Hawker and Boulton contend that peer victimization serves a number of functions. First, it establishes and maintains a social hierarchy within a given group (an "in-group"), and second, it maintains distinctions between members of the in-group, from members of other groups ("out-groups").

In addition, Tershjo and Salmivalli (2003), contend that those who bully fulfill the social "function" of establishing and reinforcing social norms. They found that students often justify bullying behaviors by blaming the targets of their attacks, and emphasizing that they somehow deserve the peer aggression or that they in some way deviate from the established peer social norms. This I contend is a form of "ruthless socialization."

Both individual and situational factors related to ethical decision-making must be considered when attempting to explain abuses of human-computer interactions, and in particular, cyberbullying. Social learning theory (sometimes referred to as "social cognitive theory" Bandura, 1986) proposes that individuals learn by observing others. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) found that an in-

dividual's values, attitudes, and behaviors are greatly impacted by co-workers and peers. Even when individuals judge a particular behavior or actions to be morally wrong, the organizational environment-that is, the perceived attitudes and behaviors of peers or co-workers-can severely "neutralize" their previously held moral judgments. They then often take on the actions consistent with the perceived organizational climate (see e.g., Vitell and Grove, 1987), especially individuals who are particularly susceptible to social influences, what Synder (1979) refers to as those high in "self-monitoring" who rely to a great extent on cues from social interactions to shape appropriate attitudes and behaviors. In this sense, then, behavior is not always an indication of beliefs or values, for an individual may take on actions in accordance with perceived accepted organizational or peer actions, even when those actions run counter to the individual's ethical judgment. These finding have implications for abuse of human-computer interactions as well. For example, Harrington (1995) found that individuals often illegally copy computer software ("softlift") when they perceive that it is widespread in their organization, and even though they themselves consider it unethical. In addition, individuals who rank higher in "other- directedness" (or "self-monitoring"), when surveyed, agreed with intentions to softlift more than those low in other-directedness.

3 Similarities and Differences and the "Online Disinhibition Effect"

Returning specifically to the issue of bullying, there are a number of similarities and differences between f2f or RL bullying and cyberbullying. The similarities include: both are about human relationships, power, and control, and actions can occur on numerous occasions. Also, both may involve what psychologists call the "Leveling Effect": people who bully often do so to diminish others to inflate their own egos reflecting their insecurities. In addition, both do not simply involve those who bully and those who are bullied (the "dyadic view,") but rather involve a number of "actors" or roles across the social/workplace/school environment (see e.g. Sutton & Smith, 1999).

Many of the differences with cyberbullying from f2f bullying center around what has come to be referred to as the "online disinhibition effect" (e.g., Suler, 2001). Users of technology often do things in cyberspace that they would not ordinarily do in f2f interactions. Firstly, cyberbullying is often even more invisible to adults than other forms of youthful bullying. In fact, i-SAFE (2004) found that 58 percent of respondents would not or have not told their parents or other adults about negative experiences online. Young people fear not only that reporting instances of cyberbullying would break a perceived peer norm of silence, which might increase the attacks on themselves or result in further isolation from peers, but also, they fear that adults might take away the technology from them as a way to end the attacks.

In addition, cyberbullying is a particularly cowardly form of bullying. Cyberbullies can often hide in the anonymity of cyberspace. With anonymity, cy-

berbullies do not have to "own" their actions, and they often do not fear being punished. The technology can also shelter the user from tangible feedback about consequences of one's actions, which can result in minimized empathy or remorse for the target of the bullying (Media Awareness Network 2006). Even with some of the more advanced technologies, the sensory experience in cyberspace is limited. The user of the technologies cannot hear the intonation of the voice, or see the reactions, including body language, of the person on the other end of the "message." Therefore, people who engage in cyberbullying can inflict pain without having to see the effects, which can result in a "deeper level of meanness" (Harmon, 2004). People who cyberbully can also communicate their hurtful messages to a wider audience with incredible speed.

With all of this taken into account, it becomes clearer that cyberspace can also inhibit a user's sense of responsibility for actions online. Researchers (e.g., Staub, 1978) suggest that denial of responsibility (RD) can be seen as an enduring human trait measured along a wide continuum from high to low. Those low in RD tend to accept responsibility for their actions, while those closer to the high side of the scale tend to deny responsibility, tend not to be responsible for the well being of others, and are likely not to follow societal or personal rules. BloomBecker (1990), who has investigated computer-related crimes, found that this denial of responsibility is a major factor leading to computer abuse. For example, BloomBecker profiled Robert Morris, a graduate student who lacked a sense of responsibility (high RD), though he was raised in a family where considerable attention focused on his moral development. Morris, who methodically infected a large number of computers with his Internet worm, when discovered and apprehended, rationalized his actions as being beneficial in that he contributed to the identification of weaknesses in the nation's computer networks and systems. He justified his actions as providing a valuable service. In my own investigations of cyberbullying, perpetrators, when identified and asked why they sent abusive messages to others online retort, for example, "I was only telling the truth. She is ugly, and I felt she had to know it!" Their rationalization-denial of responsibility-centers around offering the targets of their abuse needed and useful information.

Much of cybertime exists asynchronically, that is, people often do not interact in real time, which can add to the disinhibition effect when one does not have to deal with the immediate reactions of others. Also, people can alter, change, or emphasize different aspects of their personalities or identities in cyberspace-they can reinvent themselves or show different per sonae (Latin for "that through which the sound comes" or the actor's mask) (Turkle, 1995). They, therefore, can change into a virtual costume known as an "avatar," and engage in masquerade. In this sense, cyberspace can have an equalizing effect. People begin on a relatively level playing field-a virtual net democracy. Those of lesser social status or those who are the targets of bullying in RL can gain power, sometimes bullying others in cyberspace.

In a virtual sense, then, cyberspace communication can alter perceptions by becoming a make-believe world, a dream-like experience, even a game in which

the rules of RL no longer apply. Cyberbullying can occur any time and any place. Home, therefore, is no longer a refuge from bullying and harassment. Although cyberbullying often occurs outside the parameters of the school grounds or workplace, it invariably affects the overall school and workplace climate and the individuals' educational or work performance, as well as their short- and long-term psychological state. Since policies and legislation have not always caught up with cyberbullying, it is often outside the legal reach of workplaces, schools, and school boards when it occurs outside of the workplace or school property.

4 Social Norms Theory: Research Implications[1]

A number of strategies have been suggested to reduce instances of cyberbullying, though it must be pointed out that what might be successful in one location, might not be efficacious in another. There are no simple one-size-fits-all methods. Various factors must be considered in developing a program of action, factors such as the environmental "climate" of the school, workplace, community, or country, plus demographic variable in terms of age, gender, culture, and others. For example, what might work effectively in one public elementary school, might fall far short within a workplace environment.

In my continuing research on the phenomenon of cyberbullying, I have been investigating ways to employ as my theoretical foundation what has come to be known as "Social Norms Theory." First suggested by H. Wesley Perkins and Alan Berkowitz (Perkins & Berkowitz, 1986), social norms theory is based on the premise that behavior is often influenced by erroneous perceptions of how other members of a social group think and act. What an individual believes others think and do (in social norms theory called a "perceived norm") and what in fact are others' real attitudes and actions (an "actual norm") are often at odds. The distance between a perceived and an actual norm is referred to as "misperception." For example, Perkins and Berkowitz (1986) found that college students often overestimated the extent to which their peers supported unhealthy drinking behaviors, and that these misperceptions predicted how individuals drank.

Social norms theory involves interventions that are intended to correct misperceived social norms. A critical element in this approach is to correct misperceptions of norms by focusing on the positive and healthy attitudes and behaviors of the majority in an attempt to increase it. This element should be developed in consort with the use of information regarding these positive norms to direct interventions with abusers. Fabiano (1999) enumerates six stages in the social norms intervention process: 1) assessment to collect data; 2) selection of the normative message; 3) testing the message with the target group; 4) selecting the normative delivery strategy; 5) determining the "dosage" (amount, form) of the message; and 6) evaluation of the effectiveness of the message.

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[1] Because cyberbullying remains an emerging phenomenon, which has yet to be extensively researched, and due to space considerations, I am unable to provide here a detailed description of potential strategies to address the problem.

Focusing on peer influences, social norms interventions have shown promise, especially when combined with other strategies-for example, with detailed policy changes[2] -in addressing issues related to changing unhealthy patterns of alcohol consumption and the use of tobacco, prevention of sexual assault, improvement of overall academic climate in an educational institution, and reducing discriminatory behaviors.

I propose that social norms theory can be an effective strategy in the reduction of bullying behavior generally, and specifically, cyberbullying, cyberharassment, and cyberstalking. In one study (Salmivalli et al, 1996), researchers found that between 80 to 90 percent of young people expressed aversion to bullying behavior and disapproved of people who bully others, though this proportion decreased somewhat during adolescence. The same study showed, however, that merely 10 to 20 percent of those surveyed actively intervened on behalf of those who were victimized by the bullying behavior of a peer or peers. In addition, Bigsby (2002) examined perceptions of bullying behavior in an elementary school and found that students and their parents overestimated (misperceived) the degree and amount of bullying behavior that occurred. This indicates that while bullying behaviors-and aggression in general-may be (mis)perceived as being an accepted norm by a significant number of people in a given environment, in reality, the vast majority find these behaviors distasteful at best. Social norms theory in many contexts has proven effective in empowering those that oppose an unhealthy or abusive behavior, as well as empowering "by-standers" who are aware of negative behaviors, but who feel powerless to intervene.

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[2] Policy statements need to be detailed and specific. For example, though she did not investigate the practice of cyberbullying per se, Harrington (1994) found that generic company codes of ethics and executive statements had little or no significant effect on employees' computer abuse judgments.

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