Chapter 21

Cyberbullying and Internet Safety

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ABSTRACT

The chapter considers cyberbullying in relation to Internet safety, concentrating on recent, high quality empirical studies. The review discusses conventional debates over how to define cyberbullying, arguing to limit the term to repeated, electronically-mediated incidents involving intention to harm and a power imbalance between bully and victim. It also takes note of the critical perspective that cyberbullying—through its generic and individualistic framing—deflects attention from the racism, sexism, ableism, and heterosexism that can motivate or exacerbate the problem of such bullying. The review concludes that: (a) cyberbullying, rigorously defined, is a phenomenon that is less pervasive and dire than widely believed; and (b) cyber-aggression and online harassment are more prevalent, yet understudied. Fueled by various societal inequalities, these latter forms of online abuse require urgent public attention. The chapter’s recommendations are informed by a view of young people as apprentice citizens, who learn democratic participation by practicing it.

INTRODUCTION

What is cyberbullying? We thought to begin this chapter with a compelling vignette that we could refer back to, as we discussed the research. But we were stymied trying to draw from an actual case discussed in the media or legal briefs, or to select a fictional story, a hypothetical incident used in survey research, or a rich description from a qualitative study.

All the high-profile media cases linked to cyberbullying told stories of misogyny, racism, and homophobia so severe as to constitute serious criminal acts better dealt with by the justice system, rather than the relatively less serious incidents more amenable to an educational approach that the term cyberbullying conjured. Complicating matters still further, the real-life cases that received media attention usually ended in suicide by the victim—misleadingly implying that cyberbullying
causes suicide. We initially thought of selecting one of these stories, because they had actually happened, would be widely known, and would highlight the gravity of the underlying issues. We began to realize that this strategy is common in the research literature. Wingate, Minney, and Guadagno (2013), for example, begin their review article by recounting the story of Jamey Rodemeyer, a 14-year-old who had come out as gay and been subject to homophobic bullying by peers at school and online—later, after Jamey’s suicide, the bullying was investigated as criminal harassment. Wong-Lo and Bullock (2014) introduce their topic of bystander culture in cyberbullying by referencing Amanda Todd, the 15-year-old whose video, titled My Story: Struggling, Bullying, Suicide, and Self Harm, garnered over a million viewers after Amanda committed suicide. Other researchers mention cases like these that end in suicide in their conclusion; for example, Wright and Burnham (2012) do this to underscore for The Professional Counselor audience the importance of earliest possible “cyberbullying interventions” (p. 175).

We also turned to fiction as a possible source. J. K. Rowling’s (2012) novel The Casual Vacancy, in various reviews, has been said to contain a subplot about cyberbullying. One of the teenage characters, Sukhvinder Jawanda, is subjected to bullying at school and tormented daily with anonymous, hateful postings to her Facebook wall. Over the course of the book, Sukhvinder is subjected to racist, sexist, and homophobic epithets, insults to her family’s Sikh religion and national origin, and demeaning comments about her body (hairy, fat) and dyslexia. While Rowling makes clear that Sukhvinder has other reasons besides the acts of her “anonymous cyber-torturer” (p. 132) to be depressed, the cyberbullying does contribute significantly to her self-loathing, slicing her arms with a razor blade, and suicidal thoughts.

If fiction and high-profile media cases tend to the extreme yet also, in their detail, hint at patterns of online harassment and abuse that amount to hate crimes and institutional forms of oppression, then hypothetical vignettes developed for research purposes achieve nearly the opposite effects. In trying to devise a scenario with broad resonance, researchers, often by design, strip the cyberbullying incident of context. For example, Price and colleagues (2014) used the animation Broken Friendship, wherein Katie passes along her best friend’s password to “the beautiful people,” who then use it to create humiliating images and emails of Katie’s friend, and these are then spread among teens at the school. The authors explain that the figures in the animation were “deliberately shown in silhouette to ensure the removal of any identifying cultural context, allowing for personal identification and interpretation of the scenario from any situation” (p. 5). Unfortunately, as we will discuss in more detail in a later section, this may have the effect of obscuring the complex workings of power, including who gets to belong to the “beautiful people” and by what means. From this more critical sociocultural perspective, the term cyberbullying serves as a euphemism for phenomena better described as, for example, online sexual harassment, where “harassment is based on unequal, gendered power relations within and between the sexes” (Kelly, Pomerantz, & Currie, 2006, p. 21).

Does this mean we abandon the term cyberbullying altogether? In what follows, we will argue for provisionally retaining the term, particularly if tightly defined, for reasons related to maturity, whether defined by age, life experiences, or both. First, the term bullying conjures images of the schoolyard bully stealing a weaker child’s lunch money; it thus associates the activities covered by the term with young people, giving it an advantage over more legalistic terms like harassment by reminding adults that proposed remedies should be seen within a developmentally appropriate frame. Imagine a young person reading through the comments section of various online news sites, which are rife with incivility; afterwards, he makes obnoxious comments about his fellow
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