

Chapter XXVI

Towards a Communication-Based Approach to Cyber-Bullying

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ABSTRACT

Cyber-bullying, or the repeated (mis)use of technology to harass, intimidate, or terrorize another person (Franek, 2004), is a growing problem among adolescents and teenagers in schools. Although cyber-bullying inherently implicates important aspects of the communication process, scholars interested in computer-mediated communication have been slow to investigate this phenomenon. This chapter presents an initial effort to document this phenomenon from a communication-based perspective and offers a theoretical foundation for its examination. In so doing, the present chapter provides a review of how the concept of bullying has been traditionally been understood, contextualizes bullying within a mediated context, discusses existing research on cyber-bullies and victims, and applies existing theoretical approaches to understand the motivation behind and effects of cyber-bullying.

INTRODUCTION

Research examining social uses of technology has overwhelmingly focused on how it may be employed to produce positive effects (e.g., relational initiation and maintenance, social support, etc.).

With the exception of research on flaming and associated anti-social behavior, less attention has been focused on how technology may be utilized to negatively affect others. Cyber-bullying, or the repeated (mis)use of technology to harass, intimidate, or terrorize another person (Franek, 2004),

particularly by youths and adolescents, represents one such venue. Although recent popular press reports of cyber-bullying highlight the increasing frequency of such incidents, systematic scholarly research examining the processes and outcomes associated with cyber-bullying are lacking. Indeed, the few published studies in this area offer only modest insight by relying on the analysis of second-hand data as the primary means of profiling bullies and victims (e.g., Mitchell, Finkelhor, & Wolak, 2003; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Given that cyber-bullying inherently implicates aspects of the communication process as central to understanding the mode, manner, and means by which it is achieved, the present chapter outlines an initial effort to document this phenomenon from a communication-based perspective.

The objectives of the present chapter are to: (a) review of how the concept of bullying has been traditionally been understood, (b) contextualize bullying within a mediated context, (c) discuss existing research on cyber-bullies and victims, and (d) apply existing theoretical approaches to understand the motivation behind and effects of cyber-bullying.

DEFINING THE BULLY

Although definitions of what constitutes bullying vary across studies, most approaches share some common characteristics. One characteristic common to conceptualizations of bullying is that of the repetition of negative behavior (e.g., Franek, 2004; Olweus, 1995). For example, Olweus (1995) states that “a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students” (p. 197). In this respect, the victim is often targeted more than once and the target generally displays some characteristic (e.g., weaker, smaller, or less resilient) that allows him- or herself to be an easy target of bullying (Smith & Brain, 2000). Despite the inclusion of repetition as

a central feature defining bullying, scholars have acknowledged the potentially debilitating effects of a single instance of such behavior. Olweus (1993) has stated that under certain conditions a solitary incident of harassment may be considered an act of bullying (Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006). Naylor et al. (2006) assert that the fear induced from bullying may persist into adulthood from just one instance or incident. It is plausible that if the victim perceives a single instance of bullying to be extreme and fearful it could result in long-term consequences.

Another characteristic common to conceptualizations of bullying is that of an imbalance or abuse of power between the bully and victim. Most researchers consider bullying an imbalanced relationship where one individual holds more status or strength over another (Olweus, 1995; Smith & Sharp, 1994). For example, Smith and Sharp (1994) echo the same conceptualization as that of Olweus, specifically considering the negative behavior to be repetitive, but also characterize bullying as a ‘systematic abuse of power’ (p. 2). The underlying assumption is that because targets would have difficulty defending themselves from attacks, antagonists would be tempted to repeat the negative behavior. Moreover, scholars have argued that the inability of targets to defend themselves physically may extend into difficulty defending themselves verbally or psychologically as well. Hazler, Miller, Carney, and Green (2001) proposed that there are different forms of mismatches, and individuals who are less verbal may have a very difficult time engaging in verbal conflicts. Consequently, victims of bullying may not only have less physical strength, but also a weakened competence of (as well as confidence in their) verbal assertiveness. This verbal inadequacy may extend from a fear of physical attack, in that any verbal assertiveness may result in physical harm.

The two aforementioned characteristics, the repetitive nature and power imbalance, in combination with other factors help differentiate bul-

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