Chapter 25
Organizational Activity:
Cultural–Historical Perspectives on Workplace Cyberbullying Prevention

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ABSTRACT

Workplace cyberbullying and online harassment are ongoing problems requiring organizational intervention. This chapter utilizes cultural-historical activity theory as a lens to examine organizational activities. Organizational activities establish the productive norms of the workplace which produce and reproduce objects that serve the needs of an organization. By examining the framework of the workplace, organizational leaders and policymakers can more effectively create prevention policies. Activities are broken down into six interrelated parts: tools, subjects, objects, rules, communities of practice, and divisions of labor. The author argues the motivations of individual actors and the motivations of the organization as key pressure points requiring further analysis in order to foster proactive, preventative workplace bullying policy and the development of positive organizational communicative norms.

INTRODUCTION

Cyberbullying is an ongoing problem within organizations, leaving a lasting legacy as a negative stressor in the lives of many workers. Bullying occurs when a person is exposed to negative behaviors or actions repeatedly over time in a relationship in which a power imbalance is present (Olweus, 1993). Willard (2007) suggests cyberbullying is similar to bullying but involves unwanted online harassment, denigration, insults, and hacking that occurs over time and which may denote a difference in technological skill that leads to a power imbalance. Escaping cyberbullying is challenging because the ubiquity of digital technologies makes it difficult to leave online spaces and choosing to do so can leave people who experience cyberbullying further isolated from their work and social networks. One might suggest turning off the screen, but it is not always possible to walk away when one experiences cyberbullying, especially in the workplace (Palfrey & Gasser, 2010). Work obligations, forced team formations, and other organi-

zational features may make it impossible to avoid one's cyberbully. It is not realistic to suggest that one should completely cease electronic communication to end their torment. (Wong-lo & Bullock, 2011). Instead, cyberbullying prevention efforts must recognize cyberbullying as an element included in the everyday activities of organizations to better understand how corporate policy and culture can shape the (negative) behaviors of workers.

Digital abuse has many links to negative health outcomes for workers. Though there are nuanced differences between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, they share many similar results. Face-to-face bullying has been linked to negative consequences for the physical, mental, and social health of perpetrators and victims (Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). Workplace bullying has been linked to increases in cardiovascular disease in overweight populations (Kivimaki et al., 2003); awakening, restlessness, and other sleep issues (Hansen et al., 2016; Lallukka, Rahkonen, & Lahelma, 2011); headaches and joint pain/stiffness (Takaki, Taniguchi, & Hirokawa, 2013); and general work-induced sickness absences (Nielsen, Idregard, & Øverland, 2016). Employees experiencing bullying, report lower levels of job satisfaction and higher levels of job-induced stress, depression, anxiety, and intention to leave their current position (Quine, 1999; Gladstone, Parker, & Mahli, 2006). Cyberbullying has been linked to increased rates of depression and suicidal ideation across age groups and various contexts, although it is not entirely clear if those who experience cyberbullying become depressed or if those who are depressed represent ideal targets for cyberbullying perpetration (Bonde et al., 2016; Hinduja, 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kowalski & Limber, 2013). What is clear is that cyberbullying causes a great deal of distress for those who experience it (Finne, Knardahl, & Lau, 2011). The nature of that distress is ongoing and cyclical (Nielsen, Hetland, Mathhiesen, & Einarsen, 2012). Cyberbullying may also produce other, more invisible outcomes, such as but not limited to: A person being unable to complete their work, a person being less able to form and maintain healthy interpersonal relationships with coworkers, and/or a person being unable to recover from their experience with cyberbullying, all of which may negatively affect the organization.

Bullying and cyberbullying have cultural roots in the workplace. The persistence of unwarranted aggressive behaviors may be due to popular legitimizing myths that say bullying is inevitable, it is just teasing gone wrong, and victims just need to toughen up and deal with the harsh world in which they live (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). For some employees, especially white-collar workers, workplace bullying can even be viewed as a positive force in the workplace (Giorgi, Leon-Perez, & Arenas, 2015). For most, however, cyberbullying is a negative force requiring organizational intervention (Butler, Prentiss, & Benamor, 2018; de Wet & Jacobs, 2013; Esfahani & Shahbazi, 2014). Indeed, cyberbullying behaviors can exist within the framework of an organization (Samnani, 2013). Using a systems analysis of the organization, such as framing work activity using cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT, or activity theory), assists in identifying the structural components of the organization that allow cyberbullying to become an ongoing part of organizational activities. An activity system approach to learning behavior suggests that environmental and cultural factors contribute to behavioral development in addition to the modeling/seeing models used in social cognitive theories. To explicate that relationship, cyberbullying should be treated as part of the larger framework of hurtful and aggressive communication that occurs within organizations. Understanding how cyberbullying maps to the structural components of organizational activities can better prepare organizations to prevent cyberbullying outright.

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