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The Nature of Social Communication Technologies and Cyberbullying: Filtered Cues and Disinhibited Actions

By Warren J. Blumenfeld¹

Pheobe Prince moved with her family from Ireland, their country of origin, to begin a new life in the United States, settling in the beautiful western Massachusetts town of South Hadley. When she began attending South Hadley High School, she made a few friends who commented how happy and well-adjusted she appeared. Under the surface, though, she was concealing an intense emotional pain. On a continuing basis, other students at school tormented her on-line calling her an “Irish slut” and “a whore.” Fearing she could no longer endure her peers’ abusive taunts, Phoebe took her life. She was fifteen years old.

Friends described Tyler Clementi as a gentle, kind, and sensitive person who was an accomplished violinist at an early age. Tyler won a music scholarship to Rutgers University, and he was looking forward to his four years there and to a shining career. On September 22, 2010, however, that great potential ended when Tyler took his life by jumping off the George Washington Bridge. He was only 18 years old.

Tyler’s roommate, Dharum Ravi and another Rutgers student Molly Wei, both 18 years of age, faced charges of invasion of privacy by secretly webcam recording and live streaming on the internet Tyler engaging in sexual activity in his room with another male student. Dharum tweeted to the over 150 of his followers: “I saw him making out with a dude.” And then he tweeted, “Anyone with iChat, I dare you to video chat me between the hours of 9:30 and 12. Yes, it’s happening again!”

¹ Blumenfeld, W. J. (2013). The nature of social communication technologies and cyberbullying: Filtered cues and disinhibited actions. In M. Clough, J. Olson, & D. Niederhauser. (Eds.), *The nature of technology: Implications for learning and teaching*, Rotterdam, The Netherlands: Sense Publishers.

Ravi was tried and convicted in 2012 on 15 counts, including invasion of privacy, tampering with evidence, and bias intimidation. The later charge is defined as a “hate-crime,” which carries a penalty of up to 10 years imprisonment. Ravi served a total of 30 days jail, and was sentenced to three years probation, ordered to complete 300 hours of community service and to attend counseling programs for cyber-bullying and education on tolerance for human differences. In addition, he must pay \$10,000 to the probation department in increments of \$300 per month, which will go to people targeted in hate crimes.

Ryan Patrick Halligan was born in Poughkeepsie, New York in 1990. His parents described him as a shy, sensitive, and affectionate young child with an infectious smile that early on drew people close. Before he entered school, his parents had concerns about his speech, language, and motor skills development, and from pre-school through fourth grade, they enrolled Ryan in special education services. The family moved to Essex Junction, Vermont, where, by the fifth grade, he encountered face-to-face bullying on a regular basis in his school. Rumors soon circulated throughout the school that Ryan was gay. By middle school, his classmates continually teased and harassed him for having a learning disability and for allegedly being gay. They soon extended their taunts against Ryan into cyberspace.

On October 7, 2003, feeling that he could no longer live with the constant and escalating abuse, Ryan Patrick Halligan took his life. He was 13 years old. Reports (Spero News, 2006) indicate that Ryan displayed many of the symptoms of youth targeted by cyberbullying: he spent long hours on his computer, and he was secretive regarding his interactions on social communication technologies. His parents saw him manifest a number of changes in his behavior: he increasingly lacked interest in engaging in social activities that included his peers, and he exhibited a pronounced change in his overall attitude, his appearance, and his habits.

John P. Halligan, Ryan’s father, wrote: “I believe bullying through technology has the effect of accelerating and amplifying the hurt to levels that will probably result in a rise in teen suicide rates” (RyanPatrickHalligan.com). John established a web site in loving tribute to his son and as a clarion call to prevent what happened to Ryan from impacting the lives of any other young person. John expressed his hope:

This site is dedicated to the memory of our son Ryan and for all young people suffering in silence from the pain of bullying and having thoughts of suicide. We hope young people become less ashamed to ask for help when feeling suicidal. We hope adults gain knowledge from our tragedy. As a society, we need to find better ways to help our young people through their most difficult growing years (RyanPatrickHalligan.org, retrieved April 19, 2009).

1. The Advent of Cyberbullying: The Impact of Social Communication Technologies

Ross (2002) defines bullying as a form of terrorism since it involves an “unprovoked attack” upon another person or persons with the intention of causing harm. While bullying and harassment have long been problems for young people in our nation’s schools at every level, advanced information and communication technologies bypass, filter, and thus mitigate social cues that act in ways to constrain bullying. At the same time, these information and communication technologies extend abusive and destructive bullying practices to virtually all aspects of a person’s life. Thus, cyberbullying takes bullying to a more destructive and protracted level.

The American Psychological Association passed a resolution (2004) calling on educational, governmental, business, and funding agencies to address issues of face-to-face and cyberbullying. In the resolution, they particularly addressed acts of harassment “about race, ethnicity, religion, disability, sexual orientation, and gender identity” (p. 1). In addition, the resolution specifically emphasized the high rates of bullying around issues of sexual orientation and disability:

WHEREAS children and youth with disabilities and children and youth who are lesbian, gay, or transgender, or who are perceived to be so may be at particularly high risk of being bullied by their peers (Dawkins, 1996; Hershberger & D’Augelli, 1995; Hunter, 1990; Nabuzka & Smith, 1993; Pilkington & D’Augelli, 1995; Rigby, 2003; Yude, Goodman, & McConachie, 1998).

Young people and even adults continue to endure schoolyard and workplace bullying and harassment. Bullying—also termed “face-to-face” (“f2f”), “real life” (“RL,”), “traditional, “in-person,” or “offline” 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 (JAMA, 2001). Bullying is a specific type of aggression in which (1) the behavior is intended to harm or disturb, (2) the behavior occurs repeatedly over time, and

(3) there is an imbalance of power, with a more powerful person or group attacking a less powerful one (Garret, 2003; Olweus, 1991; Olweus 1993; Orpinas & Horne, 2006; Ybarra & Mitchell, 2004). This asymmetry of power may be physical or psychological, and the aggressive behavior may be verbal (e.g., name calling, threats, taunting, malicious teasing), physical (e.g., hitting, kicking, spitting, pushing, taking personal belongings), or psychological (e.g., spreading rumors, engaging in social exclusion, extortion, or intimidation) (Farrington, 1993). In our era of advanced information and social communication technologies, however, a new variation has emerged, for we now live in the age of cyberbullying.

Cyberbullying occurs over information and social communication technologies such as Internet web sites, e-mail, chat rooms, mobile phone and text messaging, and instant messaging, and includes instances such as: (1) people sending hurtful, cruel, and oftentimes intimidating messages to others (e.g., “Flame Mail”) designed to inflame, insult, or enrage; (2) “Hate Mail” (also known as “Cyberharassment”), which constitutes hate-inspired and oppressive harassment based on actual or perceived social identities in terms of race, ethnicity, religion, sex, gender, sexuality, physical and mental abilities, socioeconomic class, and others; (3) people stealing other peoples’ screen names and sending inflammatory messages under those screen names to others; (4) anonymous postings of derogatory comments about another on web journals called “blogs” or on MySpace or Facebook; (5) 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 (a form of “sexting”); (6) people creating web sites with stories, cartoons, caricatures, pictures, or “jokes” ridiculing or mocking others; (7) posting material about a person involving private, sensitive, or embarrassing information, for example, “outing” a person’s sexual identity to classmates and sometimes to the targets’ parents or guardians; (8) sending intimidating or threatening messages (also known as “Cyberstalking”); (9) intentional interruption and harassment on gaming websites (so-called “Griefing”) causing grief to website players; or (10) actions designed to isolate and exclude a person from online social communication technologies.

2. Rates of Cyberbullying

Reports indicate that cyberbullying has increased exponentially as technologies have become more accessible and as new and advanced technologies continually emerge (Findelhor et al., 2000, 2006; Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center (2010) found that 73% of U.S.-American wired teens use social networking websites, up from 55% in 2006 and 65% in 2008. In comparison 47% of online adults use social networking websites compared with 37% in 2008 (Lenhart, Purcell, Smith, & Zickuhr, 2010). As far back as 2003, the University of California-Los Angeles determined that overall Internet usage by young people was approximately 91% of 12- to 15-year olds and almost all teens (99%) ages 16 to 18 have access to and use the Internet. The Youth Internet Safety Surveys (YISS-1 & YISS-2) (Findelhor et al, 2000, 2006), led by Dr. David Finkelhor, Director of the Crimes against Children Research Center at the University of New Hampshire to assess Internet victimization of youth between the ages of 10 and 17, found that Internet usage within this population had grown enormously during the 1990s. According to Finkelhor et al., (2006), by 2006, an estimated 61% of ten-years-olds to an estimated 81% of 16-year-olds were Internet users on a regular basis. In addition, the Pew Internet and American Life Project (Lenhart et al., 2005), found that 87% of 12- to 17-year-old use the Internet.

An additional report, *Generation M: Media in the Lives of 8-18 Year-olds*, released by The Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation found that already by 2005, home environments of the overwhelming majority of this country's youth were found to be "media saturated" (p. 10): 86% reported households with at least one computer, while 50% reported having three or more computers. Moreover, 64% reported home access to the Internet, and 60% reported having instant messaging programs. Nearly 75% of respondents reported living in homes containing at least three television sets. The study also reported that race was a factor in in-home media access: 80% of White youth, 61% of Black youth, and 67% of Hispanic youth have home access to the Internet, and 63% of White youth, 47% of Black youth, and 55% of Hispanic youth have access to instant messaging programs. The survey also found that by age, Internet usage ranged from 63% among 8- to 10-year-olds to about 80% among 11- to 18-year-olds. A parallel trend was reported for access to instant messaging. Fifty-one percent of all teenage Internet users, or

approximately 11 million, are estimated to go online on a daily basis (Lenhart et al., 2005). Many young people spend large amounts of time online communicating with other young people. The Generation M (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2005) survey found that

A combination of increased access to computers and the emergence of new, highly popular computer activities have resulted in more than a doubling of the amount of time U.S. kids spend with computers compared with the previous five years (p. 30).

The most popular online activities reported by youth in the Generation M report included visiting Web sites and participating in chat rooms, sending and receiving instant messaging and email messages, and playing games online. Young people are also constructing personal websites of their own in greater numbers including MySpace and Facebook (Lenhart et al, 2005). The Pew survey also found that 45% of teenagers own cell phones, and 33% use it to text message: “Instant messaging has become the digital communication backbone of teens’ daily lives...” with “roughly 32% of all teens” using “IM every single day” (p. iii, emphasis in original). In addition to sending text messages, they also share website links, music, photos, and video. Seventh grade was found to be the period of enormous growth in usage of all of these information and communication technologies:

Going to Junior High seems to be the tipping point when many teens who were not previously online get connected. While about 60% of the 6th graders in our sample reported using the Internet, by 7th grade, it jumps to 82% who are online. From there, the percent of users in the teen population for each grade climbs steadily before topping out at 94% for eleventh and twelfth graders (Lenhart et al., 2005, p. v.).

The Cyberbullying Research Center found in their 2011 random sample study of 4,441 youth between the ages of 10 and 18, within the previous 30 days, approximately 43 percent reported experiencing at least one of several incidents that could be considered cyberbullying. For example, 13.7% reported receiving mean or hurtful on-line comments, 15.8% had someone post mean comments on their MySpace, 12.9% had on-line rumors spread about them, and 17% reported generally being cyberbullied two or more times during the prior month.

Adolescent girls were more likely to have experienced cyberbullying than boys (25.8% vs. 16%). The study also found that girls are more likely to spread rumors while boys more often posted hurtful pictures and videos. Research also showed that all races are evenly represented as both cyberbullying

targets and as perpetrators. 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% of students reported receiving hurtful or angry messages online with 13% saying it happens “quite often;” 44% have received mean or threatening e-mails; 43% admit sending mean or hurtful things to someone online, and 7% admit to doing it “quite often”; 45% have been threatened online with 5% saying it happens “quite often”; 42% reported being bullied online with 7% saying it happens “quite often.”

Researchers conducting the two Youth Internet Safety Surveys (Finkelhor et al., 2000, 2006) reported significantly increased rates of behaviors attributable to online bullying and to online victimization in the intervening years between the two surveys with young people increasingly using information and communication technologies to threaten, embarrass, harass, and humiliate. One in 11 (9%) of survey participants reported being harassed online (Finkelhor et al, 2006) with almost one-third of the youth surveyed participating in behaviors attributable to online bullying. This is compared to 1 in 17 (6%) in YISS-1 (Finkelhor et al, 2000) harassed online with 12%-15% of those surveyed participating in behaviors attributable to online bullying.

Young people targeted for harassment varied somewhat by sex: 58% were female, and 42% male (Finkelhor et al, 2006). Youth targeted for harassment reported that 50% of the harassers were male, 28% were female, and in 21% of the cases, they did not know the sex of the perpetrator. In addition, the Pew (Lenhart et al, 2005) study, found that 21% of teens who use email, instant or text messaging, reported that after sending a message that was meant to remain private, it was then forwarded to others by the recipient.

GLSEN (Gay, Lesbian, and Straight Education Network), in its 2005 National School Climate Survey of 1,732 lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender students between the ages of 13 and 20, found that both face-to-face and online bullying “remain common in America’s schools” (p. 4).

[H]omophobic remarks were the most common type of biased language heard at school, with three-quarters of the students (75.4%) hearing remarks such as “faggot” or “dyke”

frequently or often at school....[N]early a fifth (18.6%) of the survey respondents reported hearing homophobic remarks from their teachers or other school staff (p. 4).

Nearly two-thirds (64.3%) felt unsafe at school because of their sexual identity, while 40.7% felt unsafe because of how they expressed their gender. Cyberbullying was a significant problem as well. More than two-fifths (41.2%) of respondents reported receiving threatening or harassing text messages or email from other students.

In their subsequent 2009 National School Climate Survey of 7,261 middle and high school students, GLSEN reported that on the basis of sexual identity, 84.6% were verbally harassed, 40.1% physically harassed, 18.8% physically assaulted, and 61.1% generally felt unsafe on their campuses. In terms of gender identity and expression, 63.7% were verbally harassed, 27.2% physically harassed, 12.5% physically assaulted, and 39.9% generally felt unsafe. Grade point averages of students more frequently harassed because of sexual or gender identity were almost one-half grade point lower than students who were less often harassed: 2.7 vs. 3.1. In addition, close to one-third of LGBT skipped at least one day of school in the month prior to the survey due to safety concerns. The report also showed increased levels of victimization of LGBT youth who were related to increased levels of depression and anxiety and decreased levels of self-esteem.

3. THE PSYCHOLOGY AND SOCIOLOGY OF CYBERSPACE: THE “FUNCTIONS” AND MEANINGS OF ABUSIVE ACTIONS

Psychology and sociology, as ever-expanding fields, have connected and redeployed their theories and concepts of human behavior to the virtual realities of cyberspace. What follows includes some of the theoretical foundations that may hold promise in addressing abuse of human-computer interactions.

3.1 The “Online Disinhibition Effect”

A number of similarities and differences exist between face-to-face (f2f) or real life (RL) bullying and cyberbullying. 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 cyberbully often do so to diminish others to inflate their own egos reflecting their insecurities. In addition,

both do not simply involve those who abuse and those who are abused (the “dyadic view,”) but rather involve a number of “actors” or roles across the social/workplace/school environment (see e.g. Sutton & Smith, 1999).

The very nature of social communication technologies, however, establish the conditions that make it possible for users to perform and act in cyberspace in ways they would not ordinarily act in f2f interactions. Suler (2001) proposes a conceptual framework enumerating a number of basic psychological features when taken individually and in differing synergistic combinations within various online environments, help to explain how people experience themselves and others. Taken together, these elements explain what Suler (2001) terms as the “online disinhibition effect”: the nature of social communication technologies combined with the relative anonymity of cyberspace create the conditions for users to experience fewer behavioral inhibitions than in RL f2f situations.

The online disinhibition effect can manifest itself in positive as well as negative ways. For example, through the anonymity of cyberspace, users can exhibit extraordinary acts of kindness or charity that they may have felt *inhibited* from expressing in RL. Suler describes this as “benign disinhibition.” For example, an individual can initiate a kind or charitable action pulling in a seemingly endless number of others from distances great and near anonymously that if identified might make the benefactor or the recipient uncomfortable. On the other hand, this anonymity and altered psychological environment may allow users to communicate more objectionable needs and desires onto others, Suler’s expression of “toxic disinhibition.”

Cyberbullying is a particularly cowardly form of abuse. Social communication technologies permit people who engage in cyberabuse to hide in the anonymity of cyberspace. With anonymity, those who cyberabuse 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, year, 2000). In cyberspace, according to Suler, the user experiences reduced or filtered sensual input, often unable to see or hear the person or people on the other end: no facial expressions signaling

emotional output, no ability to see or read body language and voice intonations. This is particularly evident in print e-communications: texting, instant messaging, SMA, website blogs, email, chat rooms, social media like Facebook and MySpace, and others. Even when employing audio and visual means of communication such as videoconferencing, podcasting, and internet phoning, much of the sensory input remains limited at best. 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). In addition, people who cyberbully can also communicate their hurtful messages to a wider audience (even thousands of people simultaneously near and far) with incredible speed.

Much of cybertime exists asynchronously (Turkle, 1995), that is, people often do not have to interact in real time, which can add to the disinhibition effect when one does not have to deal with the immediate reactions of others. Cyberspace also transcends distance by virtually shrinking space making geography irrelevant. This feature has advantages and disadvantages. It can bring people closer together, but for those with anti-social motives, the nature of social communication technologies can enable the user to abuse others not only next door, but also on the other side of the planet.

In addition, people can alter, change, emphasize different aspects of their personalities or identities, or totally reinvent themselves in cyberspace—they can show different *personae* (Latin for “that through which the sound comes” or the actor’s mask) (Turkle, 1995). Human-computer interactions permit individuals to engage in masquerade and change into a virtual costume known as an “avatar.” When communicating only with typed text in social communication technologies, the user has the option of being oneself, expressing only parts of one’s identity, assuming imagined identities, or remaining completely anonymous—in some cases, being almost invisible as with the “lurker” (Suler, 2005, p. 2).

Computers embody one of postmodernism’s important tenets by challenging, contesting, and ultimately destabilizing identities. Through computer-mediated interactions, individuals continually redeploy identities as fluid, changing, multifaceted, and non-essentialized. “In its virtual reality, we self-fashion and self-create” (Turkle, 1995, p. 180). This identity destabilization presents a number of possibilities, for it can allow individuals to relate in genuinely open and honest ways online about

themselves that might be frightening offline to discuss in real life personal encounters. On the other hand, with anonymity, the individual can act out hostile or sadistic emotions by abusing others online.

Cyberspace can have an equalizing effect. People begin on a relatively level playing field. Suler refers to this as the “equalized status” that regardless of one’s actual social status in terms of relative wealth, race, gender, sexual and gender identity and expression, physical and mental attributes, and many other social identities and characteristics, the nature of the technology aids in creating a virtual net democracy dependent largely on the technical skills of the user. Those of lesser social status or those who are the targets of abuse in RL can gain power and status, sometimes abusing others in cyberspace.

In a virtual sense, then, cyberspace communication can alter perceptions and one’s state of consciousness by becoming a make-believe world, a dream-like experience, even a game to the user in which the rules of RL no longer apply. Social communication technologies, therefore, have created a kind of transitional space that becomes an extension of the user’s intrapsychic world. Suler contends that sitting and gazing at a computer monitor for spans of time creates an experience that is somewhat surrealistic producing a dream-like state of consciousness. This state makes it quite attractive to the user, which may explain the forms of computer and cyberspace addictions.

In addition, cyberbullying is often even more invisible to adults than other forms of youthful bullying. In fact, i-SAFE (National I-SAFE, 2004) found that 58% 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 from them the technology for the expressed purpose of ending the cyberbullying. Social communication technologies have opened new windows to the world for young and old alike. While the targets of cyberbullying might in the short term gain from closing the windows by shutting down the technology, overall, by taking this action (or having this action taken to protect them), they close as well these social windows since virtually all of their peers remain connected.

3.2 Freud Peering from the Computer

In psychoanalytic parlance, the concept of “transference” (as introduced by Sigmund Freud, 1912) refers to an individual’s unconscious redirection of feelings from one person to another. Kapelovitz (1987) defines transference as “the inappropriate repetition in the present of a relationship that was important in a person's childhood” (p. 66). Taking this concept into the realm of social communication technology interactions, Suler (2005) makes clear that though the technology is certainly not a past or current member of our human family, “... but rather we recreate in our relationship with the computer some aspect of how we related to our family members” (p. 2). Often, and primarily on an unconscious level, the very nature of the information and social communication technologies provide the (cyber)space for individuals to recreate and replay past relationships, and also to satisfy unmet, frozen, or thwarted needs from childhood. In addition, Suler discusses the notion of “erotic transference,” which he makes clear does not consist of sexual feeling *per se* toward computers, “...but rather the perception of the computer as powerful, perhaps in ways similar to how parents are perceived as powerful” (p. 4). Related to cyberbullying, social communication technologies provide the users the means to act out unmet needs for power and control over others, or to transfer frozen needs for attention or acknowledgement not sufficiently satisfied within the family constellation.

Brain (n.d.) theorizes that perpetrators of computer-generated abuse, and in particular, the production and transmission of computer viruses, do so for a number of psychological motivations. Some may transmit viruses simply for the emotional “rush” or thrill, much the same way as would an individual who vandalizes or intentionally sets destructive fires. In addition, creating and transmitting a computer virus works much the same as an explosion for someone who finds joy in watching cars crash or bombs explode. Another reason is simply finding adventure in and claiming bragging rights for exploiting security holes in computer systems before someone else beats them to it.

The same emotional thrill and sense of adventure can result for perpetrators of cyberbullying, possibly to the same degree as those fashioning and disseminating explosive computer viruses. By posting a hurtful or threatening message through social communication technologies, the perpetrator places an emotional bomb on an unsuspecting potential victim.

Social communication technology users now have the potential to cyberbully any time and to any place. Home, therefore, is no longer a refuge from this abuse. Although perpetrators of cyberbullying often do so outside the parameters of the school grounds or workplace, it invariably affects the overall school and workplace climate and environment, and the individuals' educational or work performance, as well as their short- and long-term psychological states. Policies and legislation have not always caught up with cyberabuse, for it is often outside the legal reach of workplaces, schools, and school boards when it occurs external to the workplace site or school property.

Cyberbullying and face-to-face bullying are similar in that both are associated with higher rates of mental health problems. Low self-esteem, feelings of loneliness (Asher, Hymel, & Renshaw, 1984; Asher, Parkhurst, Hymel & Williams, 1990; Hymel, Rubin, Rowden & LeMare, 1990), depression (Rigby, 2003; Strauss, Forehand, Freme & Smith, 1984; Vosk, Forehand, Parker & Rickard, 1982), suicidal ideation, and anxiety disorders (Prinstein, Boergers, & Vernberg, 2001; Swearer, Grills, Haye, & Cary, 2004; Kim, Koh & Leventhal, 2005; Bond, Carlin, Thomas, Rubin & Patton, 2001; La Greca & Harrison, 2005) have been shown to be some of the most common mental health outcomes related to being the target of abusive behaviors. These targets may also experience increased school and workplace absenteeism (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000) and they often find it difficult to concentrate on schoolwork (McClure & Shirataki, 1989). Studies report that between 5 and 10% of students stayed at home to avoid being bullied (Rigby & Slee, 1999; Smith, Morita, Junger-Tas, Olweus, Catalano & Slee, 1999). Also, a study conducted by Education Statistics Services Institute (DeVoe, J., Kaffenberger, S., Chandler, K., 2005;) found that student targets of bullying were more likely to receive lower grades than their non-bullied counterparts. Targets of both direct and indirect bullying (e.g. actions such as social isolation and spreading rumors) were more likely to receive mostly Ds and Fs than those bullied either directly only or indirectly only

According to GLSEN's (2009) national survey of 7,261 middle and high school lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender youth, within the past month prior to the survey, 29.1% missed a class at least once and 30% missed at least one day of school because of safety concerns. This is compared with the

overall national average of 8.0% missing a class at least once and 6.7% missing at least one day of school for students of all social identities due to safety concerns. In addition, grade point averages of students more frequently harassed because of sexual or gender identity was almost one-half grade lower than students who were less often harassed: 2.7 vs. 3.1 respectively.

Related to those who have suffered bullying and cyberbullying, in some cases, targeted students have turned into the perpetrators of school violence. For example, this was the case in 75% of school shootings during the 1990s and early 2000s (Pescara-Kovach, 2006). In addition, students who were bullied at least once a week experienced poorer health. Garrett (2003) provides a comprehensive list of symptoms and disorders, including constant high levels of stress and anxiety; frequent viral infections, aches and pains in the joints and muscles with no obvious cause; also back pain with no obvious cause, which will not go away or respond to treatment; headaches and migraines; tiredness, exhaustion, constant fatigue; insomnia; poor concentration; and other symptoms. Face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying can also lead to suicidal ideation, attempts, and completion as noted earlier.

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 in Harrington, 1995) 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 in Harrington, 1995), 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 a study of cyberbullying (Blumenfeld and Cooper, 2010), a perpetrator, when identified and asked why he sent abusive messages to others online retorted, for example, “I was only telling the truth. She is ugly, and I felt she had to know it!” (from unpublished transcripts). His rationalization—denial of responsibility—centers on offering the target of his abuse supposed needed and useful “information.”

3.3 Social Dominance, Social Identity, and Social Rank Theories

Psychologists Jim Sidanius and Felicia Pratto (2001) proposed their Social Dominance Theory, which posits that human societies are predisposed toward arrangements that maintain and perpetuate group-based hierarchical systems of social organization. In this connection, a number of researchers argue that the mere recognition of two groups into dichotomous social categories is sufficient for hostility—that is, group membership itself has profound effects on psychological functioning, irrespective of personality types and other individual differences. It is thought that the individual is transformed in group situations. People will show favoritism toward the in-group and hostility and discrimination toward the out-group even: 1) when group membership is random and anonymous, 2) in the absence of intergroup interaction, 3) where there is no history of explicit intergroup competition, enmity, conflict, or status concerns, and 4) where no self-interest is involved.

The so-called “minimal group²” studies demonstrate that group members will compete with perceived out-groups even when there is no rational reason to do so. This is acted out not only in face-to-face encounters, but also through cyberspace.

Henri Tajfel & John C. Turner (1986) give a possible explanation for this: an individual’s self-esteem is often connected to the position of their group (collective self-esteem) and that even within these “minimal groups,” there is implicit competition for valued status. (According to Crocker and Luhtanen [1990], collective self-esteem is defined as the extent to which one evaluates group membership positively.)

² This is a research methodology used in social psychology for investigating the minimal conditions essential for discrimination to occur between groups. Researchers employing this approach have shown that even random or superficial differences between groups (e.g. the color of their hats) can activate a propensity to favor one's own group and disfavor or act against others.

The “minimal group” discriminatory factor was one of the conclusions stemming also from the Sherif, et al (1961) summer camp studies. Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues (Sherif, 1964; Sherif et al 1961; Sherif and Sherif, 1953) are principal proponents of the notion that conflict (emphasized by hostility, negative stereotyping, and aggression) arise over competition for scarce resources. Sherif looked at the “objective relationship” between groups: the relationship emphasized by competition and by cooperation between the groups. This classic study on the effects of competition and cooperation in intergroup relations was based on the theories of Morton Deutsch (1949).

Muzafer Sherif and his colleagues (1961/1988 reissued) conducted their “Robbers Cave” study at a boys’ summer camp over a two-week period. Several days after the twenty-four 11- and 12-year-olds arrived, researchers quasi-randomly divided them into two groups, the Rattlers and the Eagles in one study (the Bulldogs and the Red Devils in another version of the study), and placed them in competitive activities: football, tug-of-war, and cabin inspections. Hostility soon developed between the two groups culminating in name-calling, stereotyping, glorification of the in-group’s achievements and denigration of the out-group’s achievements, vandalism of one another’s cabins, and a massive food fight at a camp picnic. When the presence of another group was definitely announced [emphasis added] the Rattlers immediately wanted to challenge them, and to be the first to challenge (Sherif et al., 1961, p. 94).

Later in the camp session, researchers devised cooperative activities to determine whether this would improve relations between the groups. Counselors staged a number of “emergencies” such as having a camp vehicle break down and finding a split in the camp’s water line, which required cooperation between members of the Rattlers and Eagles. Researchers discovered that the introduction of a goal that members of both groups worked toward cooperatively significantly reduced tensions and conflict between the groups—hostility between groups declined substantially, the boys made friends with members of the other group, and they even began to work alongside one another spontaneously.

Researchers concluded that maladjusted, neurotic, or unstable psychological tendencies or behaviors were *not* necessary for the development of intergroup conflict and hostility. What was required, however, was an “objective” or “functional” relationship of competition (a perceived opposition of real

vested interests), giving rise to a degree of ethnocentrism and prejudice emphasized by negative stereotyping, negative perceptions, and hostility, along with a high level of in-group solidarity and cohesion, feelings of in-group superiority, and justification for negative opinions of the out-group (Sherif and Sherif, 1969). Conflict, discrimination, and negative stereotyping come about when there were either limited resources or a goal in which only one group of two or more could attain.

Researchers replicated results in a number of independent studies in several other countries using a wide variety of subjects—female and male, old and young (e.g., Brewer, 1979; Tajfel, 1982). Results vary, however, by country reflecting different cultural norms. For example, Wetherell (1982) concluded that while all three groups in their study (children of European, Samoan, and Maori origin) clearly showed in-group favoritism, the latter two showed somewhat less than the first by repeatedly choosing to share with the perceived out-group. Wetherell explained this by the value Polynesian societies place on generosity to others as a marker of high status.

Tajfel's and Turner's overall "Social Identity Theory" attempts to explain the minimal group findings by proposing a three-pronged psychological process (social categorization, social identification, and social comparison) linking a group member's need for a positive self-image to discriminatory intergroup behaviors.

Social Categorization: Jerome Bruner (1956) states that "the main function of categorization is to reduce the complex object world to a more simple and manageable structure" (in Taylor & Doria, 1981, p. 83). This categorization process in the formation of social groupings is the same process associated with the construction and maintenance of stereotypes.

Social Identification: Tajfel defines "social identification" as the knowledge that one belongs to a group, along with the emotional and value significance attached to that membership. For Sumner (1906), the categorization of individuals into distinct ethnic groupings originated in the first human's struggles (and competition) to meet their basic needs. Social Identity theories insist, however, that the simple fact of belonging to one group over another, the mere subdivision or categorization of persons into in-groups and out-groups—even when issues of competition for scarce resources and incompatible group

goals are absent—is enough to trigger ethnocentric (xenophobic, discriminatory) attitudes favoring the in-group (Allen & Wilder, 1975; Billing and Tajfel, 1973; Tajfel, Billing, Bundy, & Flament, 1971). A major premise in social identity theory, as proposed by Tajfel, is that social identities themselves create and maintain attitudinal and behavioral discriminations favoring the in-group (Tajfel, 1978, 1982; Tajfel and Turner, 1986). The stronger are the individuals' identification with their in-group, the greater is the tendency to perceive out-group members as undifferentiated members of another social category, and to perceive oneself and other in-group members as different or dissimilar from the out-group (i.e., the “out-group homogeneity effect”). This in turn provides the basis for stereotyping out-groups and out-group members.

Social Comparison: Social Comparison Theory states that identity is organized and maintained through intergroup comparison. It is the process by which individuals will pursue a positive self-identity by comparing one's sense of self with the relevant out-group, and in the process clarifying and crystallizing one's self identity. Therefore, for the individual to feel positive about membership in a social group, they must first feel positive about that social group. Group theorists, such as Festinger (1954), argue that “individuals are attracted to groups in which the members have opinions similar to their own so that they can evaluate their own opinions with precision.” In this process, group formation is enhanced.

Fried (1961) proposed that the degree and intensity of conflict differed depending on the organization of the society. He differentiated between three levels of social organization: 1) Egalitarian Societies, that lack rank statuses; 2) Ranked Societies that have status differentials but not differentiated access to strategic resources of the society; and 3) Stratified Societies that have status differentials giving different access to strategic resources. He proposed that the intensity and severity of conflict increases from one level to the next. At the final level, however, the economic imperative for conflict becomes dominant because of the subgroup differentiation between those who have access to strategic resources and those who lack such access.

By deploying these social identity theories, we can begin to understand why perpetrators of f2f bullying and cyberbullying may select specific targets for malevolence over others. The mere fact that

they comprise different social groupings, even though very superficial differentiations actually exist, could be enough to create, at least in the perpetrators' minds, sufficient reason for competition. This, along with the addition of the nature of social communication technologies, creates conditions for and often rationalizations cyberbullying.

In this connection, "Social Rank Theory," as used by D. S. J. Hawker and M. J. Boulton (2001), proposes that aggressive individuals actually hold a higher rank, power, or status within a social group. Therefore, aggressive behavior, and abuse in particular, may be reinforced, and it provides those who engage in aggressive behaviors a sense of belonging. Hawker and Boulton contend that aggression toward others 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, T. Teräshjo and C. Salmivalli (2003), contend that aggressive individuals fulfill the social "function" of establishing and reinforcing social norms. They found that students often justify abusive 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 can be considered as a form of "ruthless socialization."

Experiences of being cyberabused, regardless of whether it is physical, relational, or verbal, appear to have devastating short- and long-term effects on youth as well as adults with consequences far beyond mere embarrassment.

3.4 Social Learning Theory

Social learning theory (sometimes referred to as "social cognitive theory," Albert Bandura (1986) proposes that individuals learn by observing others. Salancik and Pfeffer (1978) found that an individual'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

(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 findings have implications for cyberbullying as well. For instance, in the case of what has come to be known as online polling booths, young people create “booths” for large numbers of their peers, for example, to rate girls and boys as the “hottest,” “ugliest,” “most boring,” “biggest dyke,” or “wimpiest fag” in the school. Someone who might not ordinarily engage in such abusive behaviors can be caught up in the storm of social pressure to “contribute” their vote in order to fit in and also to avoid becoming a target of such abuse if they had not joined in the perceived group norms of engagement.

In addition to the nature of social communication technologies, which alters psychological conditions for users from that of usual interface interactions, we need to attempt to explain some of the possible reasons why perpetrators of cyberbullying target and victimize certain individuals and groups over others.

Bullying must not simply be seen as a “youth problem,” but must be viewed as resulting from larger psychological and societal issues. Institutional bullying and harassment do not exist within a vacuum, but rather reflect and actually reproduce the messages and actions stemming from the social environment. I refer to this as “the social ecology of bullying and harassment” (see Starobin and Blumenfeld, in press). Ecology can be defined as the relationships between organisms and their environment. We must, therefore, investigate the larger sociological and psychological environment for us to determine, understand, and if necessary, institute procedures to change our institutional environments.

Looking through the lenses of Social Rank Theory and Social Learning Theory,

perpetrators of cyberbullying may need or desire higher social status within their social environments. Young people learn the social rules by others around them: family, peers, teachers, the media, social and political leaders, celebrities, and others. From them, they learn what and who are valued and scorned in their societies. This helps to explain some of the reasons why users of social communication technologies more often select certain individuals from specific social groups for cyberbullying than others.

According to the Federal Bureau of Investigation (2010), of the reported 6,624 single bias incidents, the motivation for 47.3% was a racial bias on the part of the perpetrators, 20.0% were religious biases, 19.3% comprised sexual orientation biases, and 12.8% comprised an ethnicity/national origin bias. Disability biases accounted for 0.6 percent of single-bias incidents (FBI, 2010).

People selected Phoebe Prince for cyberbullying as “a foreigner” from Ireland, Tyler Clementi for being gay, and Ryan Patrick Halligan for being perceived as gay and having a learning disability. As the song “You’ve Got To Be Carefully Taught” from the Rogers and Hammerstein (1947) Broadway musical makes clear:

You've got to be taught to hate and fear. You've got to be taught from year to year. It's got to be drummed in your dear little ear. You've got to be carefully taught.

You've got to be taught to be afraid of people whose eyes are oddly made,
And people whose skin is a different shade. You've got to be carefully taught....

Young people in the schools and employees in the workplace learn the social norms and rules, while social communication technologies supply the nature and the means to initiate and maintain their “ruthless socialization.”

4. A STRATEGY FOR CHANGE

4.1 Social Norms Theory

A number of strategies have been suggested to counter perceived social support for unethical actions both in real life and in cyberspace. One in particular of these theoretical foundations 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. Patricia 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.

Focusing on peer influences, social norms interventions have shown promise, especially when combined with other strategies—for example, with detailed policy changes—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.

Social Norms Theory can be an effective strategy in the reduction of abusive behavior in real life and in cyberspace. In one study (Salmivalli et al, 1996), researchers found that between 80 to 90% 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% 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.

In addition, while it is not the intention here to give a comprehensive narrative on how to reduce and ultimately eliminate instances of cyberbully, which social technologies provide in the public schools and communities—for what might work effectively in one area or school might not function in another—some foundational guidelines for educators can be considered.

Assessment: Hold public hearings, and/or conduct interviews, or distribute research surveys in your school, community, and/or your state/province to assess the level and forms of face-to-face and cyberbullying.

Policies: State Departments of Education, school districts, and individual schools are encouraged to develop policies protecting students, staff, and faculty from bullying and cyberbullying.

Personnel Trainings: Schools are encouraged to offer on-going and comprehensive training to school personnel in violence prevention, suicide prevention, and specifically issues of bullying and cyberbullying. These training sessions will address issues of reporting as well.

Counseling: Schools and communities are encouraged to provide affirming school- and community-based counseling for the targets as well as the perpetrators of bullying and cyberbullying and their families.

Information in Libraries: School and community libraries are encouraged to develop and maintain up-to-date and age-appropriate collections of books, videos, CDs, DVDs, journals, magazines, posters, internet websites, and other information on issues that address bullying, and the nature of social communications technologies and cyberbullying prevention.

Curriculum & School Programs: It is imperative that school administrators and curricular specialists develop and incorporate accurate, up-to-date, on-going, comprehensive, and age-appropriate educational units across age groups and academic disciplines in schools courses, programs, assemblies, and in school and community newspapers related to the nature of social communication technologies and how they can promote detrimental and inappropriate actions, including cyberbullying.

Teacher Certification: College and university teacher education programs are encouraged to include detailed lessons on the nature of social communication technologies and how they can provide users the space for cyberbullying and other toxic cyberactions.

In general, a holistic approach is the best approach to take. This means that all areas of the school as well as the local community need to come and work together to address the problem of bullying in all its forms, including on-line.

5. Concluding Questions

Today, the world is undergoing a technological revolution to match and surpass the industrial revolution of previous decades and centuries, the likes of which still have unforeseen benefits and opportunities, challenges and consequences. Though there is no going back, we must consider and address a number of critical questions as we proceed. Sherry Turkel (1995) provides three questions worth exploring regarding the impact of social communication technologies:

- What will social communication technologies do to our commitment to other people?
- Will social communication technologies satisfy our needs for connection and social participation, or will they further undermine fragile relationships?
- What kind of responsibility and accountability will we assume for our virtual actions? (p. 178).

How we answer these and other important questions will have implications for this and future generations. Drawing students' attention to these questions, human thinking and behavior, the nature of technology, and the ways technology impacts human thinking and action all have an important role to play.

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