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**Cyberbullying bystanders and moral engagement: a psychosocial analysis for pastoral care**

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Word count (exc. figures/tables): 4829 words

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Word count: 5,654 words

**Abstract**

One of the new challenges facing pastoral care in schools is dealing with the rapid growth of cyberbullying by school-aged children. Within digital cyberspace, cyberbullies are finding more opportunities to express their aggression towards others as social networks become technologically more sophisticated. An important feature of cyberbullying is the extent to which hostile messages can go viral, in the sense that they are seen and then forwarded to others many times over. This paper considers psychosocial aspects of why cyberbullying messages can go viral, and what can be done to reduce this phenomenon. This paper focuses on the role of the hostile cyberbullying bystander (viz. the person who receives and then forwards to others a cyberbullying message). **Finally, we** develop intervention strategies based on pastoral care, which **may be** effective in inhibiting hostile cyberbullying bystander behaviour.

**Introduction**

The prevalence of cyberbullying has escalated as social networks have grown in size and sophistication. Instances of cyberbullying are widespread, and are easy to find on Facebook, YouTube, Twitter, as well as on a host of other social networks (Chester, 2017; Citron, 2014). Dealing with the rapid growth of cyberbullying by school-aged children is a major challenges facing pastoral care in schools.

Cyberbullying can be defined as the act of posting images and texts, through digital media, with the purpose of causing distress, either directly, by sending these images and texts to the victims themselves, or indirectly, by sending them to those who know the victim or to the general public (Cassidy *et al.,* 2013; Langos, 2012).

It is difficult to assess the typical impact of cyberbullying on victims, as the nature of cyberbullying varies so much in type and context, but what is not in dispute is that it can often have serious consequences**. There are researchers, such as Lereya, who have investigated the long-term mental health consequences of bullying for victims (Lereya *et al.,* 2015). Others have addressed differences and connections between group norms and behaviour in bullying situations. For example, Salmivalli and Voeten (2004) have noted that the class context “has more effect on girls than on boys’ bullying-related behaviours” (p. 255).**

**When it comes, more specifially, to cyberbullying**, a variety of physical and psychological problems have been reported by victims, such as depression, lowered self-esteem, sleeplessness, a loss of appetite and feelings of social isolation **(Perren *et al.,* 2010; Sourander *et al.,* 2010)**, and in some cases has led to suicide (Bauman *et al.,* 2013; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; **O’Higgins & Connolly, 2011).**

The power of cyberbullying has much to do with the permanence of the hostile messages and images posted on social networks, and their repeated viewing and onward transmission to new viewers. In many cases, it is knowing that these messages and images will be permanent and could be widely viewed that motivates some cyberbullies to post them in the first place and causes so much distress to the victim (Dillon & Bushman, 2015).

Dealing with cyberbullying has largely focused on educating cyberbullies and potential cyberbullies not to engage in such activity, and educating victims and potential victims of cyberbullying on how to avoid becoming a victim of cyberbullying and how to build up their resilience if they are targeted (e.g. Papatrainou *et al.,* 2014**). In fact, there are many kinds of psychological risk factors associated with cyberbullying for victims and cyberbullies. According to Sourander *et al.* (2010), “Adolescents who were cybervictms only were more likely to be from families with other than two biological parents, and have psychosomatic problems” and “cyberbullies also had a high level of conduct problems, hyperactivity, frequent smoking and drunkenness and low prosocial behavior” (p.727).**

This paper focuses on the role of the hostile cyberbullying bystander: the person who receives and then forwards to others a cyberbullying message. **The hostile bystander has been chosen here for particular attention, because he or she has become, in their turn, a kind of cyberbully who is responsible for spreading explicit and devastating hostile comments and videos, that may engender mental and physical problems in the victim (Machackova *et al.*, 2018; Myers & Cowie, 2017; Song & Oh, 2018). It is important to highlight here that data, such as the written comments added by hostile bystanders, which contribute to the writing of this paper, are located on the internet and are publically accessible.**

Many hostile cyberbullying bystanders do not even know the victim personally, but simply enjoy viewing and sharing the hostile messages and images they find on social media. It is the action of hostile cyberbullying bystanders that can lead to these messages and images ‘going viral’. A key feature of cyberbullying is that it is in part fuelled by the cyberbully’s reduced level of moral engagement: the feeling that what you are doing is wrong is much reduced when you cannot see your victim face-to-face. Such moral disengagement is also evident in hostile cyberbullying bystanders.

In the case of Facebook, for example, there are fan pages whose members take pleasure in humiliating and vilifying their targets; their pleasure in doing so is made available by simply clicking ‘like’ when they view a hostile message or image. Similarly, on YouTube, there are countless hostile visual recordings, where comments supporting the cyberbullying have been added by viewers.

In this paper we can distinguish between three types of cyberbullying bystander.

The ‘hostile’ cyberbullying bystander who forwards the hostile message to others, and may add additional hostile comments, or add comments praising the original cyberbully. The ‘passive’ cyberbullying bystander who does nothing. **The ‘defender’ cyberbullying** bystander who criticizes the original cyberbully and/or the distribution of this message by others, and, if the victim is known, will comfort the victim. In this paper, we seek to explore the reasons why those who practice cyberbullying behave in a morally disengaged manner, and to develop a typology of the moral disengagement of hostile cyberbullying bystanders.

We also argue that social networks can become forums for the visibility, discussion and promotion of intervention strategies that are able to combat cyberbullying, and which themselves can progressively go viral. In order to consider the psychosocial issues involved, we need to explore the relationship between moral disengagement and the behaviour of hostile cyberbullying bystanders.

**Moral Disengagement and Cyberbullying**

Bandura's (1999) social cognitive theory explains how a person’s social behaviour is governed by moral reasoning and self-regulatory mechanisms. The activation of this process is referred to as moral engagement. Anti-social behaviour towards others is to some extent inhibited by such moral engagement. However, Bandura (2015) has also pointed out that a person can become morally disengaged when circumstances block or bypass the need to apply one’s moral standards.

There are three common examples of how moral disengagement can occur in relation to cyberbullying. Firstly, the person may find an excuse for their behaviour. Secondly, the person may use euphemistic language to describe their behaviour as unproblematic. Thirdly, the person may view the behaviour as righteous and justifiable.

The particularities of digital culture are cultivating new forms of sociability (Van Dijck, 2013) and consequently new reasons for moral disengagement. In particular, because social networks are less personal than face-to-face contact, the cyberbully will feel more distant from the victim (Willard, 2006), and the absence of face-to-face contact also means the cyberbullying does not directly see the victim suffer (Runions & Bak, 2015); in both cases, empathy with the victim is thereby less likely to occur.

**Cyberbullying and the role of bystanders in digital culture**

Researchers have increasingly recognized the crucial importance of bystanders regarding both the propagation of cyberbullying as well as combating cyberbullying (e.g. Mishna *et al.*, 2010; Pearce *et al.,* 2011).

For example, a study by Erreygers *et al.* (2016) noted that bystanders of cyberbullying actions who are less impulsive, and take time to reflect on the consequences of the reposting hostile images and comments, are more inclined to help the victims of cyberbullying than those who act more impulsively. As such, enhancing a bystander’s ability to be less impulsive could help the spread of cyberbullying messages. Similarly, enhancing a bystander’s ability to empathise with the victim may stimulate bystander intervention (Davis & Nixon, 2012).

There are, however, a number of factors that can influence the cyberbullying bystanders’ behaviour such as the nature of the social network itself (particularly whether it is public or private), and how the victim appears to have responded to the cyberbullying (Desmet *et al.,* 2014; Holfeld, 2014; Quirk & Campbell, 2015). In addition, we also need to take account of the fact that the bystander’s membership of a particular social network, may predispose the bystander to join in with the cyberbullying in order to retain membership the network. Indeed, in some cases, the bystander may even escalate the cyberbullying in a desire to show off (Bastiaensens *et al.*, 2014).

**A psychosocial typology of the moral disengagement of hostile cyberbullying bystanders and intervention strategies**

We characterize here six different types of moral disengagement, which underpin the behaviour of hostile cyberbullying bystanders and suggest intervention strategy for each of these. Each intervention strategy here can be used as part of a workshop for all pupils on cyberbullying. In addition, the theme of each intervention strategy can also usefully be applied when dealing with a specific case of cyberbullying, where each person involved (the cyberbully, the bystanders, and the victim) may be seen on their own or brought together, to discuss the cyberbullying incident, as appropriate. The focus in these interventions is to change the behaviour of hostile cyberbullying bystanders,

**#** **Diffusion of responsibility and mitigation of guilt in the virtual environment.** When a group of bystanders witness aggression, the responsibility to intervene on behalf on the victim may be diluted (Latané & Darley, 1970). Darley & Latané (1968) cite the case of a woman who was stabbed by a criminal several times in a New York street in the 1960s, with “38 bystanders watching the murder from the safety of their apartments and no one even called the police” (p. 377). The diffusion of responsibility is identified as one of the main types of moral disengagement, because it allows the bystanders to believe they have moral values, even if they take no action concerning the suffering of others. This belief ​​is self-justified by reasoning that somebody else could do something, so they do not have to take any risk in defending the victim. In the case of hostile cyberbullying bystanders, the decision to not interfere occurs precisely because the presence of others camouflages the psychological costs resulting from non-intervention (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016). Cyberbullying bystanders are often well aware that the humiliating and slanderous images and comments are being viewed by many people, which helps to further disperse the responsibility to intervene and, consequently, the mitigation of guilt from non-intervention in cyberbullying (Desmet *et al.,* 2016; [Machackova](http://www.sciencedirect.com.ezproxy.york.ac.uk/science/article/pii/S0140197115001049) *et al.,* 2015). Added to this, the absence of physical contact provides these bystanders with the justification for noninterference: as they cannot directly see the pain this is causing the victim they cannot know the action is questionable (Holfeld, 2014). Shame as a moral feeling, which could provide self-criticism to the bystander given his decision to not intervene, is also camouflaged, for example, by blaming the particularities of the Internet, concluding that there is nothing that can be done. This is because the images and comments posted by the cyberbully will remain forever on the internet whatever they do (Dillon & Bushman, 2015).

*Intervention strategy:* Hostile bystanders may blame the particularities of the Internet to justify their non-intervention, so that the so-called diffusion of responsibility takes place. One possibility for intervention would be to emphasize in a workshop for all pupils the importance of the hostile bystander to recognise their responsibility for the spread of images and comments posted in social networks. In addition, it would be extremely important for hostile bystanders to also appreciate that the justification of not intervening, by communicating with the sender (e.g. by telling the sender that this material is not welcome), implicitly involves an acceptance of these humiliating images and comments concerning the victim.

**#** **Self-defense by online anonymity.** According to Bandura (1999) it is easier to inflict damage on someone when the suffering is not visible and “when injurious actions are physically and temporally remote from their effects (...). We are now in the era of faceless warfare, in which mass destruction is delivered remotely with deadly accuracy by computer and laser-controlled systems” (p. 199). With regard to this type of moral disengagement of bystanders, who avoid confrontation with their own self-regulatory mechanisms based on moral and self-harm standards, self-defense occurs through the sense of self-concealment in the vast mass composed of other bystanders of cyberbullying practices. While anyone’s computer can be identified by its IP (Internet Protocol), cyberbullying bystanders feel they are protected by the screens of their electronic devices from the actual and real consequences of their actions. At the same time, they shield themselves from having to worry about the suffering of cyberbullying victims because they are literally far away from them (Brody & Vangelisti, 2016).

*Intervention strategy:*The lack of empathy afforded by anonymity and distance from the victim, needs to be addressed in the workshop by sensitizing participants to the serious consequences of reposting images and aggressive comments concerning the victim. If the consequences, such as depression and isolation, were discussed, it would be possible for the hostile bystanders to think twice before forwarding cyberbullying material, and would stimulate the development of the bystanders’ own moral engagement by creating empathy-based relationships between them and cyberbullying victims.

**# Believing that targeting those who are ‘different’ is justifiable.** This kind of moral disengagement is based on the grounds that the cyberbullying victims deserve to suffer because they are different in some way. This is because, in a similar fashion to face-to-face bullying, they have identifiable features or characteristics (e.g. appearance, ethnic origin, personality, ability or special educational needs) which results in holding them responsible for being a target of cyberbullying. It is exactly this type of comparison regarding the victims that provides bystanders with the idea that they will not become a potential victim of cyberattacks, precisely because they do not have these characteristics (Holfeld, 2014). The speed and scope of the prejudiced stereotype assertion is much higher when comparing cyberbullying with the traditional face-to-face bullying, a fact which further enhances the harmful consequences of cyberbullying. Moreover, the absence of face-to-face contact may further reinforce this type of advantageous comparison and therefore strengthen the power of the biased stereotype.

*Intervention strategy:*Victimising those who are ‘different’ is a common feature of cyberbullying. Workshops with pupils need to promote a discussion on the reasons why hostile bystanders might wish to endorse cyberbullying practices related to such comparisons. In addition, pupils should reflect on the fact that humiliating someone in the virtual environment due to their physical characteristics, for example, will not ensure that hostile bystander does not become the next victim. The hostile bystander must be aware of the particular harm and pain caused to victims due to humiliating comments about their personal characteristics, particular as certain characteristics, such as a facial disfigurement, is something the victim may already be troubled by and can do nothing about.

**#** **Using euphemistic language.** Bandura (1999) states, as outlined above, that the use of euphemistic language is one of the main forms of moral disengagement when it “is widely used to make harmful conduct respectable and to reduce personal responsibility for it” (p. 195). With regard to the cyberbullying bystanders, the possibility of experiencing empathy with respect to the victims of cyberbullying, may be mitigated by the use of expressions that camouflage the aggressions viewed, such as: ‘teasing’, ‘just having fun’, ‘having a laugh’, and on social media such as Facebook, Twitter, or YouTube, clicking on words such as ‘share’ or ‘like’. Consequently, the pain caused to the victim is masked by using these expressions. According to researchers, bystander are often not concerned by the offensive material posted by cyberbullies because these are not even seen as attacks, such is the level of desensitization of both those who practice cyberbullying, as well as those who view these acts in the social networks (Runions & Bak, 2015).

*Intervention strategy:* in relation to this type of moral disengagement, workshops with pupils need to emphasise how terms such as ‘just teasing’, ‘just having fun’, ‘it’s only a joke’ simply mask the reality. Cyberbullying bystanders need to be aware that such ‘jokes’ are actually violent assaults, which can never be mitigated by the use of euphemistic language. Indeed, expecting victims to accept euphemistic language, may sometimes increase the victim’s suffering by suggesting that the victim can not take a joke or accept being teased in the right spirit, and that it is the victim who is at fault because they are too easily upset.

**#** **Submission to the audiovisual influence of the cyber-perpetrator.** On certain occasions, the cyberbullying bystander may feel encouraged to morally disengage from the aggression because the material posted has already been widely distributed, and may even have gone viral. The bystander may feel that the widespread circulation of the material denotes that the cyberbully is a person of influence and status, who is widely recognized in the social network, and who may have many followers. **Indeed, Kernaghan and Elwood (2013) consider cyberbullying as a form of theatre with performers and an audience, where cyberbullies perform and bystanders applaud. In addition to addressing cyberbullying as a kind of visual performance, there are other interesting perspectives on cyberbullying, which have implications for our understanding of bystander behaviour (Pörhöla, 2018). In order to understand such behaviour, it is important to note here that** even if the bystander disagrees with the cyberbullying, they will tend to remain silent, and would be very reluctant to be critical of those who have forwarded the material, or posted positive comments about the material. In some situations, the cyberbully and their followers may explicitly call for other viewers to support the circulation of cyberbullying material (Festl, 2016; Sari & Camadan, 2016). This type of moral disengagement in response to a powerful cyberbully and/or the widespread endorsement of the material by followers, can prompt the bystander to justify the cyberbullying by arguing that they were only ‘joining in’ so that the responsibility for their hostile cyberbullying behaviour did not rest with them.

*Intervention strategy:*regarding this kind of moral disengagement, educators could promote debate in workshops about the meaning of someone feeling included in a particular social network group. Bystanders need to be encouraged to resist appeals by the cyberbully and hostile cyberbullying bystanders to endorse and repost humiliating images and comments, in order to feel included in a social network group, and to understand that if the material is already in wide circulation, this does not lessen their responsibility in how they respond to the material. The workshop needs to explain how membership of a social network often places individuals under group pressure to agree with material in circulation, and they need to be able to resist appeals to join in with cyberbullying in order to maintain their feeling of being included within this group. Bystanders need to develop strategies to maintain their individuality in the face of such pressure.

**#** **The desire to go ‘viral’.** The desire to show off electronically in the social media has driven the development of a new kind of moral disengagement in digital culture. Getting material you have posted on the internet liked by others and widely circulated can provide a great deal of satisfaction to the originator. This is also true for the cyberbully, and to some extent, for bystanders who can also become caught up in the excitement of being involved in further circulating material that has gone viral. In such cases, the bystander who ‘liked’ the cyberbullying material may not see their behaviour as endorsing the material (Gahagan *et al.,* 2015; Runions & Bak, 2015), or as contributing to the cyberbullying. However, by contributing to the phenomenon of material which go viral, the bystander is thereby fueling this competitive aspect of digital culture. In this culture, those who post cyberbullying material feel the need to be more and more offensive in what they post for it to have any chance of gaining the attention of bystanders and potentially going viral.

*Intervention strategy:*regarding this kind of moral disengagement, educators should discuss with pupils the meaning and possible consequences of ‘liking’ an aggressive posting, both in thinking about its effect on the victim, and the way it contributes to creating a poisonous aspect of digital culture. In addition, bystanders could be encouraged to create new groups within social networks which combat cyberbullying practices. Moreover, pupils could be encouraged to join groups that post comments that are critical of cyberbullying material, and if these are reposted by others, then these messages, can themselves go viral. Indeed many anti-bullying organisations have produced materials on cyberbullying, including short films, which have been widely circulated, and some of these have gone viral. These could be viewed and discussed in the workshop with pupils. Doing so, could also help previously hostile bystanders become socialized into a positive prosocial school culture which is resistant to online bullying and promotes moral engaged practices.

**Combatting cyberbullying through prosocial online bystander behaviour**

The behaviour of hostile cyberbullying bystanders is an important feature of cyberbullying in its use of social media to spread hostile messages. We argue that workshops on cyberbullying can be used to promote new forms of moral engagement and enhance pro-social online behavior amongst cyberbullying bystanders. **In addition, schools could promote situations which are designed to develop interpersonal interaction between teachers and pupils whereby moral reasoning could be used as a strategy to engender forms of moral engagement.**

In these times of new types of social networks and new forms of socialization within digital culture, there is now the possibility to stimulate the moral engagement of internet bystanders online. If Facebook fan pages and the videos and comments posted on YouTube are widely used to disseminate cyberbullying practices, these very same social networks and their links can be used to increase and make *visible* the initiatives of individuals and social groups who engage in combating cyber aggressions. In the UK, for example, the campaign ‘Get Safe Online’has received government support to promote and propagate such practices. Desmet *et al.* (2016) highlighted the importance of such programs to promote the responsible use of the Internet: “these strategies may help in the execution of positive intentions, e.g. in providing advice to victims on how to prevent or react when being cyberbullied” (p. 410**). A number of interesting and innovative practices have been developed recently to tackle cyberbullying, such as the programme “Media Heroes”, which “promotes cognitive and affective empathy through empathy training by presenting students with different cyberbullying-related stimuli (e.g. text-based stories, news items, video, plays) and encouraging them to reflect about involved people’s thoughts, motivations and feelings before enacting the situations themselves” (Schultze-Krumbholz *et al.,* 2016, p. 148). In a similar vein, Richardson *et al.* (2017) has also described a Council of Europe cross-cultural project designed to produce a range of interventions to oppose bullying and cyberbullying.**

**One particularly interesting** example of such practices **against cyberbullying** refers to a 13-year old Irish student who in 2016 posted a video on YouTube entitled **‘Cyberbullying: Create No Hate’,** with almost 600,000 views and hundreds of comments (YouTube, 2016).While the student was asking if any of the viewers had ever committed, suffered or witnessed cyberbullying, his nose began to bleed, his wounded eyes and face shocked the audience precisely because they bring to light the fact that cyberbullying practices generate extremely damaging and real consequences. The case of this 13-year old student is exemplary with regard to the moral engagement of cyberbullying bystanders. It is known that certain adolescents who are victims of cyberbullies are reluctant to come forward with their suffering. This is because they fear retaliation from the cyberbully or being deprived of using social networks. Nevertheless, this Irish student understood that social networks provide a voice to make bystanders reflect on the physical and psychological harm, and think about their own moral disengagement every time they witness cyberbullying and decide not to intervene. Subsequently, if the demeaning images and defamatory comments posted on Facebook and YouTube can remain forever on the internet, initiatives to combat cyberbullying such as this can also remain indefinitely in the same networks. Therefore, the intervention of the bystanders can become create a wave of anti-cyberbullying prosocial behaviour.

Dillon and Bushman (2015) argued that “Due to the textual persistence of computer-mediated communication, a single post online can go viral and either viewed or reposted multiple times, increasing the number of cyber bystanders eligible to intervene” (p. 145). **In the same way, the schools must directly intervene against cyberbullying practices.** **Kyriacou and Zuin (2016) argue that schools need to teach and demonstrate prosocial values right across the curriculum, with a strong emphasis on considering where and how young people may become morally disengaged from victims of cyberbullying.**

Perhaps one way to develop intervention models focusing on bystanders is to encourage bystanders to accept a responsibility that they need to act in a way that is in opposition to the cyberbullying, for example, by posting a message that disapproves of the cyberbullying. In addition, when social networks become platforms for the visibility, elaboration and discussion of such intervention strategies, there is then an opportunity that strategies and practices designed to combat cyberbullying may progressively go ‘viral’ as more and more viewers circulate these within their social networks. In such cases going viral would have a positive connotation, as an example of how those who use social media can work together to produce new forms of moral engagement within digital culture.

**Conclusion**

The objective of the authors of this paper was to present a typology of the moral disengagement of cyberbullying bystanders that may be of use to pastoral care professionals engaged in seeking to reduce cyberbullying by school-aged children. Such a typology continually needs to renew itself to the extent that the characteristics of social networks are in continuous change. Messages are more likely to become viral if their content are sensational and it is easy for bystanders, using words such as ‘share’ and ‘like’ (which aid moral disengagement) to forward such messages to others. Understanding the nature of the moral disengagement that underpins the behaviour of hostile cyberbullying bystanders can enable educators to conduct workshops on cyberbullying for all pupils, and conduct meetings with pupils involved in specific cases of cyberbullying, that can deal more effectively in reducing cyberbullying by school-aged children. Such workshops, focusing on the behaviour of bystanders, can also help create a climate within digital culture where acts of cyberbullying are viewed as unwelcome, unacceptable, and are challenged.

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