Title of Paper

Cyberbullying and moral disengagement: An analysis based on a social pedagogy of pastoral care in schools

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Chris Kyriacou and Antônio Zuin

**Abstract**

The practice of cyberbullying in its various forms carried out by pupils has increased substantially. Many pupils, on a daily basis, are now using electronic devices such as mobile phones, smart phones and tablets, to transmit distressing messages and images to their peers. These often include the use of publically accessible social networking sites, such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. Given this increase, cyberbullying in schools has been widely investigated by researchers in many countries. A common feature of cyberbullying is the moral disengagement of those who practice it, based on the desensitization of prosocial values and emotional empathy toward another person. A consensus has emerged regarding the importance of establishing anti-cyberbullying policies and practices, and the need to address cyberbullying within the school’s pastoral care system and its personal and social education programme. However, few researchers have justified anti-cyberbullying practices within the framework of a particular educational theory. This paper examines how the theoretical and methodological assumptions underpinning a social pedagogy of pastoral care in schools can enable the education community to better understand and avert the moral disengagement which commonly underpins cyberbullying.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, Moral Disengagement, Social Pedagogy, Pastoral Care.

**Introduction**

Cyberbullying can be defined as the electronic transmission of distressing messages and images which target an individual repeatedly. The phenomenon of cyberbullying by pupils has grown substantially over the last ten years. This increase has been fuelled by the development of new ease-to-use and more powerful electronic devices, and by the rapid spread of electronically-based social networking sites.

Social networks now have millions of pupil users, and networks such as Facebook, Instagram and YouTube have established themselves as global phenomena. The increasing use made by cyberbullies of publically accessible social networks, means that the visibility of these distressing communications can now easily be extended to a huge potential audience, and each posting can be viewed repeatedly. The consequences for victims can be very serious, and include insomnia, depression, panic attacks and even suicide (Bauman *et al.,* 2013).

Research on cyberbullying in schools has also grown rapidly, covering the cyberbullying by pupils of other pupils (Kowalski *et al.,* 2012), the cyberbullying by pupils of teachers (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2015; Vogl-Bauer, 2014) and cyberbullying by teachers of pupils (Zuin, 2012). In studies of cyberbullying, a major issue concerns the relationship between cyberbullying and the moral disengagement of those who practice it. Research on traditional face-to-face bullying has already indicated that moral disengagement is a common characteristic of the bully’s behaviour. However, studies of cyberbullying have reported that cyberbullies often feel even less remorse and lack of empathy for their victims than is the case for traditional bullies (Slonje *et al.,* 2012).

Researchers are in general agreement with regard to establishing anti-cyberbullying educational practices, and incorporating anti-cyberbullying education in the school curriculum (Bussey *et al.,* 2015). However, there are few writings that have addressed how these practices can be guided by the theoretical assumptions underpinning a particular educational theory.

This paper examines how the theory and practice of social pedagogy, when applied to pastoral care in schools, can provide support to understand and address the moral disengagement which often underpins cyberbullying. To this end, we need to first of all consider how the moral disengagement of the cyberbully can be understood within the context of digital culture.

**Cyberbullying, Moral Disengagement and Digital Culture**

The foundations of moral disengagement are based on the desensitization of prosocial values and emotional empathy toward another person, so that morally disengaged individuals rarely put themselves in the place of the individual being denigrated and, as such, do not reflect on the consequences of their anti-social behaviour for the individual. Both traditional bullies and cyberbullies are often characterized by moral disengagement in relation to their victims.

Bandura (2002) has argued that the process of moral disengagement “may centre on redefining harmful conduct as honourable by moral justification, exonerating social comparison and sanitizing language. It may focus on agency of action so that the perpetrators can minimize their role in causing harm by diffusion and displacement of responsibility. It may involve minimizing or distorting the harm that flows from detrimental actions; and the disengagement may include dehumanizing and blaming the victims of the maltreatment” (p. 102).

One possible reason why moral disengagement is such a common characteristic of cyberbullying may stem from the fact that the cyberbully is not physically present when the victim is assailed with aggressive and demeaning comments or images sent directly to them or posted on the internet, and is thus less sensitized to feel any empathy and remorse for their actions. It is exactly because there is no face-to-face interaction with the victim that cyberbullies are much less likely to develop any empathy towards their target. This may be even more the case when the humiliating comments and images are posted on social networking sites, rather than sent directly to victim. When posting material on a social network, the audience that the cyberbully has in mind often comprises peers and any other cybernauts who may enjoy viewing this material, rather than the victim, which creates further emotional distance between the cyberbully and the victim.

Bussey *et al.,* (2015) have argued that “the lack of social censure that cyberbullying enables through the absence of face-to-face interaction means that many of the social restraints associated with traditional direct bullying are not in play for cyberbullying” (p. 31). In cyberbullying, there is no direct equivalent to social censure or intervention by bystanders, although when cyberbullies share comments and images with their peers, some degree of social censure may occur if valued peers criticise what they have received.

The cyberbully’s moral disengagement and lack of self-censorship is evidenced in the way that cyberbullies often regard what they do as simply entertainment. For example Smith *et al.,* (2008) reported that some pupils described the motives for cyberbullying as follows: “they do it more for fun”, and “they just got bored and were entertaining themselves” (p. 380). In fact studies on the motives for cyberbullying indicate that doing it for fun seems to be the most popular motive reported (Barlett *et al.,* 2014; Kyriacou, 2015a). This raises the important issue of why so many pupils are able to regard the humiliation and suffering of others that they have caused as fun, and why many fellow cybernauts indicate that they share this fun, thereby socially reinforcing the cyberbully’s behaviour.

In an overview of research on types of cyberbullies, Kyriacou, (2015a) identified five main types:

● *the sociable cyberbully* – cyberbullying for fun in order to entertain one’s friendship group without any serious consideration for the victim’s feelings.

● *the lonely cyberbully* – here the cyberbully is relatively isolated, has few friends, spends a great deal of their time on the internet, and eventually gets attracted to abusing individuals, including celebrities and others with whom they have little or no personal contact;

● *the narcissistic cyberbully* – here the cyberbully is driven by a mixture of arrogance and self-importance, and motivated by the desire to exercise power by administering harm to another person;

● *the sadistic cyberbully* – here the motive is the enjoyment of causing distress, harm and suffering to another person;

● *the morally-driven cyberbully* – here the cyberbully feels the victim is receiving justice for some transgression they are responsible for, or the victim enjoys circumstances that the cyberbully envies.

 Whilst the behaviour of some cyberbullies seems to consistently fall within one of these five types, there are others who regularly appear to cross between two or more of these types. Recognising that there are different types of cyberbullies has important implications for how best to engage with the cyberbully with a view to helping the cyberbully to no longer engage in such behaviour.

A key feature of digital culture is that the boundary between the public and private domain has become increasingly blurred. This vagueness creates an opportunity for pupils to share their private attitudes publically, with a sense of omnipotence, and without reflecting on the limits of their actions. Another key feature of digital culture is that what is posted on social network sites can remain accessible in the virtual environment for many years, and can be repeatedly copied and reposted on other sites. When this happens quickly, the material is referred to as having gone viral.

In traditional bullying, the victim is targeted repeatedly by the bully. In cyberbullying, the notion of repetition acquires another meaning, as each time a cybernaut views the material and shares it with others, the act of cyberbullying is repeated. All that is needed in digital culture is one posting by the original cyberbully to trigger a process of repetition.

It is thus not surprising that many pupils who have experienced cyberbullying find it much worse that face-to-face bullying (Menesini, *et al.,* 2013; Smith *et al.,* 2008), especially as cyberbullies can hide their identity by creating a fake user name. The posting of pictures and video recordings on social networking sites is cited as particularly distressing (Smith *et al.,* 2008), and this distress is further enhanced by the victim’s awareness that these images can be accessed on the internet for a long time.

In digital culture, electronic interaction between pupils has become an essential part of their personal identity (Hanson *et al.,* 2010; Livingstone, 2009). Given this situation, the moral disengagement of the cyberbully is a manifestation of digital culture, especially in the sense that the cyberbully often feels rewarded whenever their aggressive comments and images of victims are viewed by others.

There are now countless images and video recordings posted on social networking sites, showing pupils being verbally and physically attacked. There are also many cases where pupils use their smart phones to record demeaning images of their teacher (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2015). The moral disengagement evident here appears to be nourished by the cyberbully’s overwhelming satisfaction at seeing that their message or video recording has outperformed other postings in terms of hits (Menesini *et al.,* 2013; Smith *et al.,* 2008).

In the face of the challenge that cyberbullying by pupils poses to the education community, the theoretical and methodological assumptions underpinning a ‘social pedagogy of pastoral care’ may provide support to better understand and avert the moral disengagement which commonly underpins cyberbullying.

**Moral Engagement, Social Pedagogy and Pastoral Care**

Social pedagogy is based on a social relationship between a social pedagogue and the pupil through which the social pedagogue seeks to enhance the pupil’s well-being. Whilst social pedagogy can be usefully applied to benefit all pupils within a pastoral care setting, it is most widely evident in the support given to pupils who face adverse circumstances in their lives. These include pupils described as vulnerable or troubled. Social pedagogy can be described as the pedagogical expression of pastoral care.

The theoretical basis of social pedagogy was initially developed in Germany in the nineteenth century by social philosophers concerned with how to develop social communities in ways that would benefit all its members (Kyriacou, 2015; Stephens, 2013). As noted by Lorenz (2008, p. 634): “*Sozialpädagogik* as a new disciplinary field explored the linked tasks of preparing individuals to communal and societal life and, at the same time, bringing society as a community to orient its culture and social life towards the personal developmental and social needs of individuals”.

The introduction of social pedagogy was based on the hope that individuals would be educated (through schooling, socialisation and their general upbringing) to establish bonds of communal well-being and respectful coexistence. The key concept of *Bildung* (cultural formation) refers to enabling individuals to coexist with others in such a way as to exercise their rights and duties as a citizen, and being morally engaged in their dealing with others.

 The essence of a social pedagogical approach lies in building a relationship with the pupil based on trust, care and support, and helping to equip and empower the pupil to deal with the challenges they face in their lives in socially appropriate ways (Kyriacou, 2015b). Typical activities include mentoring, giving advice and direct help, liaising with others, acting as an advocate on behalf of the pupil, and providing activities designed to enhance the pupil’s social development. Unlike punitive approaches to dealing with cyberbullies, a social pedagogic approach primarily seeks to reform the cyberbully through mentoring, and may also involve working with the cyberbully’s parents or carers.

The theoretical and methodological assumptions of social pedagogy became widespread throughout mainland Europe during the twentieth century, eventually spreading to the United Kingdom (Kyriacou, 2009; Lorenz, 2008), where there has been a tangible growth of interest in recent years related to the guiding principles of social pedagogy for professionals working in social support and pastoral care settings.

Kyriacou (2009) identified five dimensions of a social pedagogy of pastoral care in schools: Care and Welfare; Inclusion; Socialisation; Academic Support; and Social Education. These five dimensions may provide a useful framework to consider how a social pedagogy of pastoral care in schools could help the education community to better understand and avert the moral disengagement which often underpins cyberbullying. The contribution of social pedagogy in offering a guide to practice in schools in dealing with cyberbullying lies not in advocating a list of practical measures *per se,* but rather in shaping practical measures such that they are implemented in accordance with the key purpose of social pedagogy, viz., to educate and empower pupils in adopting prosocial behaviour.

● **Care and Welfare**

This dimension refers to the health and social care of pupils and their physical and mental well-being. A key feature of this dimension involves addressing the needs of all pupils. As such, the school is concerned with the care and welfare needs for both the victim and the cyberbully. Teachers and other professionals need to be alert to any signs of aggressive behaviour, anxiety or distress by pupils, and any signs or information that cyberbullying may be occurring, and which pupils may be involved as either the cyberbully or the victim, or involved in the sharing of the demeaning messages or images. A period of face-to-face mentoring between a teacher or other professional in the role of a social pedagogue with the cyberbully or the victim may be helpful here.

 The success of the teacher`s intervention may depend on the pupil’s respect for the teacher. The development of a relationship with an adult who acts as a positive role model may have a positive impact on improving the pupil’s social self. The teacher as a role model needs to viewed by the cyberbully as an adult with whom it is possible to talk about the meaning of the social networks in the pupil’s life, the use of social networks in socially acceptable ways, an understanding of the notion of moral engagement and empathy, and how there are better ways to cope with the problems they face which avoid the desire to cyberbully. In the case of the victim, the emphasis may usefully focus on strategies to avoid and deal with cyberbullying. The teacher’s authority may become increasingly respected by cyberbullies and victims as they come to realize that this adult is really interested in understanding their situation, discussing their attitudes, feelings, fears and worries, and offering solutions.

● **Inclusion**

This dimension refers to ensuring that all pupils feel included within the mainstream of the school and the wider community. One of the common concerns of both cyberbullies and victims is feeling marginalised. A key motive for some cyberbullies is to get one’s actions noticed by others in order to enhance one’s sense of social importance and to offset feelings of marginalisation. A common effect for victims of cyberbullying is a feeling that they been singled out from the rest of the community. Victims of cyberbullying often prefer not share this with teachers and parents in part because being singled out as a target of cyberbullying may be embarrassing and demeaning, and because they may fear their access to social media could be curtailed as a form of protection.

 In the case of cyberbullies, the key task is for the teacher to explore the cyberbully’s anxieties, and their reasons for cyberbullying, so that they can together explore other ways of being included. In the case of victims, the main task is for the teacher to enhance the pupil’s self-esteem and feeling of being included, and empower them to take appropriate action. Having your needs heard by a trusted, caring and respected adult may do much to enhance a pupil’s sense of self-worth. Knowing that being a victim of cyberbullying is very common may also reassure victims that there is no need for them to feel marginalised.

 In addressing the misuse of digital culture, it is very important to promote empathy between users. Teachers and other educators may find it helpful to discuss with all pupils what it means to feel included in the virtual environment, and the consequences of inclusive behaviour, rather than behaviour which marginalises others, for the school and wider community. When cases of cyberbullying need to be dealt with, the teacher may, in appropriate circumstances, act as a mediator between cyberbullies, victims and bystanders, as a means of bring them together in order to promote inclusive behaviour.

● **Socialisation**

This dimension refers to enabling pupils to behave in accordance with what society as a whole has deemed to be desirable social norms and expectations regarding attitudes, values and behaviour. A key aspect of socialisation promoted by social pedagogy involves the development of a school climate which helps pupils to resist peer pressure to engage in antisocial behaviour, such as cyberbullying.

 In order to create this environment, schools may usefully arrange an open discussion with pupils about why cyberbullying has increased and why it should be dealt with. This may include understanding the motives for cyberbullying, why it causes so much distress to victims, and why victims find it hard to seek help from others. A discussion of the reasons why posting degrading comments and images on social networks is anti-social behaviour, can provide a platform to discuss why pupils should refrain from sharing such material with each other.

**● Academic Support**

This dimension refers to offering support concerning the knowledge, understanding and skills content of the academic curriculum to pupils who are at risk of failing to attain the minimal levels of competence in literacy and numeracy to participate adequately in adult life. The internet can play a powerful role in promoting academic learning, and digital literacy is widely regarded as an important aspect of supporting academic development. Academic sessions in schools which promote digital literacy may usefully include a discussion of cyberbullying, so that, pupils are encouraged to think about how acceptable social relationships are expressed through digital communication.

● **Social Education**

This dimension refers to the progress of pupils concerning the knowledge, understanding and skills content of the pastoral curriculum. A key task of social education is to promote an anti-cyberbullying cultural environment based on enhancing pupils’ moral engagement. Small group discussion and role play scenarios of cyberbullying may provide powerful messages to promote prosocial behaviour.

 Promoting face-to-face encounters between cyberbullies and victims may also help create a cultural climate that can guide the cyberbully to reflect on and be aware of the suffering cyberbullying may cause to others. Promoting such encounters, which could usefully be mediated by teachers and other education professionals, may enhance the cyberbully’s self-criticism and moral engagement.

**Conclusion**

Cyberbullying by pupils which targets their peers and their teachers is a major source of concern for educators. The frequency of cyberbullying is on the increase, and many of these offensive comments and images are now posted on publically accessible social networking sites. Moreover, the level of aggressiveness evident in some of the comments and images posted seems to be fuelled by the desire of some cyberbullies to attract as large an audience as possible for the material they have put into circulation.

Cyberbullying requires us to rethink the nature of social relationships in digital culture. In dealing with cyberbullying, it may be helpful to develop a better understanding of the different forms that cyberbullying can take, the motives of cyberbullies for their behaviour, and what action can be taken to reduce or prevent cyberbullying by pupils. A consideration of the role of moral disengagement in underpinning cyberbullying appears to be particularly helpful in contributing to an understanding of cyberbullying. The theoretical and methodological assumptions underpinning a social pedagogy of pastoral care in schools may offer a useful framework within which to guide our practice in reducing or preventing cyberbullying, by focusing on the role of mentoring by a trusted and caring adult in promoting pupils’ prosocial behaviour.

It may also be useful to pay greater attention in schools to how a positive prosocial school community can be established and maintained, so that pupils do not see cyberbullying as an acceptable way of generating fun, and that peers with whom the cyberbully shares such material do not wish to socially reinforce such behaviour by commenting favourably on the material, or wish to forward it to other peers. Developing prosocial norms within schools regarding the unacceptability of cyberbullying material may also be enhanced by promoting discussion of the issues involved in cyberbullying and the importance of moral engagement in underpinning prosocial behaviour.

Finally, it may be helpful to view the challenges posed by cyberbullying as an inherently educational task, which involves reforming the cyberbully, enabling other pupils to understand why any denigrating material they are sent to share should not be received positively or passed on to others, and supporting the victims of cyberbullying to consider how they can adopt practices that will safeguard them from being targeted in future.

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