

An Overview of Cyberbullying in Higher Education

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Abstract: Bullying is a social problem. The proliferation of electronic technology has provided a new forum for bullies to harm victims. That is, bullies can transmit harmful text messages, photos, or video over the Internet and other digital communication devices to victims. This malpractice of technology-oriented phenomenon known as cyberbullying has become a social problem. College students who have been cyberbullied have committed suicide, dropped out, or endured torment while in school. This article provides an overview of cyberbullying among adults in higher education and an examination of the current status of state and federal laws that may serve as deterrents to cyberbullying.

Keywords: cyberbullying, higher education, bullying

“ELECTRONIC MEDIA PROVIDE PEOPLE A NEW ENVIRONMENT TO MISUSE TECHNOLOGY AND ANONYMOUSLY BULLY OTHERS, ANYWHERE, AND AT ALL TIMES.”

Bullying is a social problem (Misawa, 2010) and has been defined as the “[r]epeated intimidation, over time, of a physical, verbal, and psychological nature of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons” (Slee, 1996, p. 64). Bullying has occurred in elementary, middle, and high school and higher education and has

caused individuals to be uncomfortable in the school environment and suffer from anxiety and depression, and ultimately some individuals have quit their job or committed suicide to avoid being bullied (Misawa, 2010; Namie & Namie, 2009). Research has uncovered that bullying has become not just a childhood behavior but, in some cases, continues into higher education and perhaps for life (Misawa, 2011). “Bullying in adulthood has reached an epidemic in American workplaces” with one in four adults experiencing bullying at work (Misawa, 2010, p. 8). As a result, for many bullying becomes a life-long challenge.

While physical bullying appears to continue, the proliferation of the use of computers, the Internet, and mobile technology has provided additional mechanisms for bullies to reach victims (Walker, Sockman, & Koehn, 2011). Mobile technologies such

as wireless telephones, tablet devices, and personal computers accessing the Internet and communications systems provide the bully with the ability to contact the victim without having a face-to-face encounter. This phenomenon is referred to as cyberbullying (Patchin & Hinduja, 2010). Differing from bullying, as defined above, cyberbullying has been defined as “[s]ending or

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posting harmful or cruel text or [false] images using the Internet or other digital communication devices” to harm a victim (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010, p. 2004).

Three recent incidents that occurred within the last 5 years underscore the need for awareness of cyberbullying in higher education. One incident involved a White female student at Duke University. In May 2010, this female student developed a fake senior thesis as a PowerPoint presentation that described her sexual exploits with 13 male students at Duke University. In her fake thesis, she utilized each student’s real name and picture which, in some cases, showed the male student in his university athletic uniform. The female student emailed the fake thesis to three people she considered close friends, and the thesis was forwarded to others undoubtedly due to the salacious nature of the thesis (Seelye & Roberts, 2010). Eventually, the thesis ended up in the public domain on the blog Deadspin.com, YouTube, and other social media sites much to the embarrassment of the males and scorn of the student (Hill, 2010).

Another incident involved a freshman Rutgers University student. On September 19, 2011, the student asked his roommate for use of their dorm room for a visit with a male guest. The student’s roommate set up his computer webcam, so he could use the Internet to view the student’s activities from a room across the hall. The roommate further shared this information on Twitter for others to view the streaming video of the student having an intimate encounter with a man. On September 21, 2011, the student again asked his roommate for use of the room, and the roommate again set up his computer webcam and viewed the student from another room. The student learned that he had been watched, and because of that, on September 22, 2011, the student jumped off New York City’s George Washington Bridge killing himself (Foderaro, 2010). In less than a week from the initial incident, the student was dead.

The third cyberbullying incident involved providing false information to harm a victim referred to as catfishing. Catfishing involves creating a false identity or pretending to be someone that they are not using the Internet (Carmanica, 2013). A false identity can be created by including information on a social media site, such as Facebook, that is not completely accurate. For

example, the displayed picture may not actually be a picture of the page owner, the page owner may not use his or her real name or be truthful in describing physical attributes, interests, or marital status. This catfishing incident involved a Notre Dame football player who was also a Heisman Trophy finalist. The Notre Dame student purportedly had an approximately 3-year online relationship with a woman he later admitted he never met. They communicated via social media and telephone. In January 2013, it was revealed the woman the student was having an online relationship with did not exist (Eder, 2013); a male individual fabricated the woman. The student admitted to the university that, in December 2012, he learned the woman did not exist and a male individual was behind the scam. Forced to make a statement about the incident, university representatives indicated they supported the student.

These three incidents underscore the importance of higher education institutions in contemporary society knowing about cyberbullying and the impact of cyberbullying on college students. This article provides an overview of traditional bullying which may predicate cyberbullying, cyberbullying in higher education, cyberbullying and the law, and recommendations and implications for adult learning.

Traditional Bullying May Predicate Cyberbullying

Literature has focused on bullying and victimization that historically occurred in a K-12 school setting where the victim often knew the bully, and they found themselves involved in a verbal or physical confrontation (Wang, Iannotti, & Nansel, 2009). Although distressing, this encounter provided the victim an opportunity to confront the bully, to stand up for self, and take evasive measures or defeat the bully. Cyberbullying does not provide the victim with the same opportunities to confront the bully face-to-face because cyberbullies often hide behind the cover of anonymity (Menesini, Nocentini, & Calussi, 2011). For example, cyberbullies may send insults, rude text messages, or photos and videos such that the victim is unable to identify the message sender (Menesini et al., 2011).

The reduction in face-to-face encounters and growth in technology use, such as computers and mobile devices, have contributed to increased use of social

networking sites, such as Facebook and Twitter, as another way to communicate and connect with others without having a face-to-face encounter. Electronic media provide people a new environment to misuse technology and anonymously bully others, anywhere, and at all times (Manuel, 2011; Patchin & Hinduja, 2010; Walker et al., 2011). Social media are evolving into another mechanism for communicating and reaching individuals that appears to be popular among students (Ivester, 2011). As this use expands, the potential exists for expanded cyberbullying on college campuses.

The social dominance theory (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999), which evolved from the Bandura's (1977) social learning theory, may offer a framework for understanding cyberbullying. In social dominance theory, those who are more aggressive and have higher rank, status, or power victimize others perceived as having lower rank, status, or power to maintain their social hierarchy within the group structure (Sidanius & Pratto, 1999). Social dominance theory explains how factors such as age, power, and gender classify social groups (Walker et al., 2011). The dominant groups can create ideologies of behavior or myths using social dominance theory to discriminate against and/or bully those believed to be less powerful. Legitimizing these myths of behaviors can support an environment where cyberbullying can flourish. For example, a student may legitimize myths by accepting undesirable actions performed online. Social hierarchies in cyberbullying situations may not fit neatly within social dominance theory because individuals may create their own identities using the Internet (Bauman, Cross, & Wilks, 2013). Thus, an individual in a lower social group may present himself or herself as someone of a higher social status and act in accordance with social dominance theory principles to cyberbully others they perceive as having a lower social status (Bauman et al., 2013). The next section reviews recent examples of cyberbullying in higher education.

Cyberbullying in Higher Education

Cyberbullying does not end after high school, and recent incidents reflect it continues in college. As mentioned above, cyberbullying incidents, such as a university student taking his life after others viewed him over the Internet having sex with a same-sex

partner and a university student falling prey to an Internet dating hoax, have garnered the attention of university officials and the media (Barrett, Karasov, & O'Rourke, 2012; Hill, 2010; Watkins, 2013). Due to such tragic incidents and the growing problems of cyberbullying and electronic technology use on college campuses, institutions are scrambling to understand the impact of cyberbullying on college students.

In a survey of college students at a Midwestern university by Walker et al. (2011), 54% of students indicated they knew someone who had been cyberbullied and received undesirable and/or obsessive communication through computers or other electronic means. Education and awareness of the problem of cyberbullying in college is needed (Englander, Mills, & McCoy, 2009). Higher education institutions need policies and procedures against harassment, bullying, and cyberbullying, but they may not be in place. The following section examines studies and examples of cyberbullying in higher education.

Englander et al. (2009) researched the frequency and nature of online interactions of college students including bullying and harassing behaviors. Their survey on bullying and cyberbullying included 283 undergraduate college students from Bridgewater State College, a public college in Southeastern Massachusetts. They found 8% of respondents reported being cyberbullied via instant messaging in college, and 3% of respondents reported cyberbullying others in college. In this survey, cyberbullies were slightly more likely to be male than female. In addition, 50% of the college cyberbullies reported being victims in college. Their reasons for cyberbullying in college included anger, as a joke, for revenge, or for no reason at all.

The problem of cyberbullying in a college setting continues to grow. MacDonald and Roberts-Pittman (2010) studied 439 college students from a mid-sized Midwestern university. They found 38% of students reported knowing someone who had been cyberbullied, 22% reported having been cyberbullied, and about 9% reported cyberbullying someone else. The sources used to cyberbully included social networking sites (25%), text messages (21.2%), email messages (16.1%), instant messages (13.2%), writing in a chat room (9.9%) and posting on a website (6.8%; MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010). The growing

problem of cyberbullying in higher education warrants additional study.

Published 1 year later, Walker et al. (2011) studied 120 undergraduate students at a Midwestern university using a 27-item survey. They found 54% students knew someone who had been cyberbullied. Cyberbullying via undesirable and obsessive communication through computers or other electronic means was described as “sending tokens of affection (33%); sending excessively ‘needy’ or demanding messages (30%); pretending to be someone he or she wasn’t (34%); and ‘friending’ in order to obtain personal information (31%)” (p. 35). While more than 30% of respondents indicated they had received an undesirable and obsessive communication, only 11% indicated they had been cyberbullied. The researchers surmised these types of undesirable and/or obsessive communication might be considered accepted behaviors in an online social environment causing students to not consider them cyberbullying. The researchers referred to accepting undesirable and/or obsessive online communication as “legitimizing myths” (p. 36), defined as the ideologies shared by society that permits discrimination. Dominant groups may create ideologies of behavior or myths to discriminate and/or bully those believed to be less powerful. Legitimizing these myths of behaviors can support an environment where cyberbullying can flourish. According to the researchers, technology allows the power struggle based on the legitimizing myths to thrive in the absence of an educator or other adult. The researchers determined it was important to understand cyberbullying as affordable technology, such as inexpensive cellphones, could increase bullying which has been linked to school shootings, and a focus on cyberbullying may provide insight on how to plan for the safety and welfare of college students.

Gilroy (2013) reported a recent study from Indiana State University indicated 22% of college students recounted being cyberbullied. Cyberbullying has been described as more devastating than traditional bullying because the harmful or false information shared online can be communicated to a wider audience, and the sender of the information may be anonymous.

Further, Washington (2014) studied cyberbullying and determined the characteristics, prevalence, and impact on undergraduate students at an urban research university. One-hundred forty undergraduate students

responded to an anonymous questionnaire: 12% indicated they were cyberbullied, and 6% indicated they were not sure whether they had been cyberbullied. In addition, the respondents indicated forms used to cyberbully included gossiping online, making fun of others online, and calling people mean names online. Facebook, Twitter, cellphone, and texting were used to cyberbully, mostly likely occurring based on one’s sexual orientation or race. Finally, victims indicated cyberbullying made them feel angry and hurt, made them consider dropping out of college, or made it harder for them to concentrate on their studies. Cyberbullying is a problem in higher education that cannot be ignored.

Cyberbullying and the Law

States have endeavored to enact laws against cyberbullying. To date, 18 states have laws to address cyberbullying, compared with 49 states, all except Montana, having laws to address bullying (Hinduja & Patchin, 2013). State laws primarily focus on cyberbullying that occurs on K-12 campuses, and each state requires school district to have policies against bullying. Typically, states do not address off-campus bullying and cyberbullying incidents at the K-12 level or higher education. In a K-12 environment, cyberbullying that occurs off campus has been relegated to the purview of parents. However, K-12 students often fail to inform their parents of cyberbullying incidents for fear of losing access to the Internet or mobile devices (Wegman, 2013). In a higher education setting, as many students are above 18 and considered adults, the role of parents may be diminished, and parents may not be a helpful support system for students who have been cyberbullied.

Federal laws do not directly address cyberbullying; however, a number of federal statutes address certain aspects of cyberbullying (Wegman, 2013). For example, federal statute 18 USC §875(c) makes it a federal crime to transmit in interstate (i.e., between states) commerce communications that include threats to kidnap or injure another person (Crimes and Criminal Procedures Act, 2013a). Cyberbullying victims could use this statute if they receive a threat and know who was threatening them, which may not be true for cyberbullying victims. In addition, federal statute 47 USC §223 makes it a federal crime to use the telephone

or telecommunications device to annoy, abuse, or threaten another person (Telecommunications Act, 2013). Cyberbullying victims can use this statute if annoyed or threatened by another; however, it does not address the posting of public messages that harm a victim. Still another federal statute 18 USC §2425 makes it a federal crime to use interstate commerce to knowingly communicate with any person with intent to solicit or entice a child into unlawful sexual activity (Crimes and Criminal Procedures Act, 2013b). This statute addresses harassment that includes sexual activity, but does not address harassment in situations not involving sexual activity. While each of these federal statutes potentially address an aspect of cyberbullying, none of them fully address all aspects of cyberbullying when it involves “[s]ending or posting harmful or cruel text or [false] images using the Internet or other digital communication devices” to harm a victim (MacDonald & Roberts-Pittman, 2010, p. 2004).

A Congresswoman from California introduced the Megan Meier Cyberbullying Prevention Act in 2009, making it a felony to transmit in interstate or foreign commerce communications with intent to harass, coerce, intimidate, or cause emotional distress to a person using an electronic means (Wegman, 2013). This Act, however, failed to receive the necessary support in the U.S. Senate or House of Representatives and thus, at the time of this article, a federal law against cyberbullying does not exist.

Recommendations and Implications for Adult Learning

In the absence of federal and state laws to address cyberbullying, higher education institutions should develop training, policies, and procedures to address cyberbullying that occurs on campus. A statement regarding expected behavior and unacceptable behavior should be outlined in the institution’s student handbook or code of conduct. When students are involved, a department in student affairs, such as office of judicial affairs, should be tasked with enforcing the institution’s policies against cyberbullying. Faculty and administrative staff who violate the policies should be referred to the institution’s department of human resources for review and appropriate disciplinary action. If the conduct rises to a criminal level, the

institution and/or municipal police services may need to become involved to initiate criminal proceedings.

As pointed out in this article, cyberbullying is occurring among adults. This article informs adult educators of cyberbullying that occurs at college campuses. Cyberbullying has tragically impacted college students causing them to withdraw from school or commit suicide. College administrators should take action to deter cyberbullying on college campuses. The information presented in this article informs adult educators about cyberbullying so they can develop policies and procedures, such as anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying policies, that may deter cyberbullying and assist with planning for adult students’ safety and welfare.

Many adults are returning to college as students, and some choose to take courses online. This research has implications for teaching in online environments. For example, in an online environment, professors have the ability to set expectations regarding appropriate online interactions. Professors, faculty, and staff need training to recognize and respond to cyberbullying. In addition, professors can utilize the syllabus to direct students regarding computer use and acceptable and unacceptable online behaviors. Further, professors should monitor online behavior and take actions if students display bullying and/or cyberbullying behaviors. Administrators should develop anti-bullying and anti-cyberbullying policies to deter cyberbullying on campus, including definitions and examples, explaining appropriate online behavior, describing potential disciplinary actions if policies are violated, and providing confidential reporting of those who violate such policies.

Conclusion

This article provided an overview of cyberbullying in higher education. Traditional bullying has continued in children and adults. Bullying in adulthood has reached the workplace and higher education. Cyberbullying once thought to be a middle school or high school problem continues in college and impacts adults.

The expansion and use of communications technology, such as mobile and tablet devices, has allowed the bully to transform and follow his or her victim almost anywhere, at any time. This form of

bullying, known as cyberbullying, involves using communications technology to send or post harmful, cruel, or false text messages or images using the Internet to harm a victim. The use of communications technology, helpful in research and teaching activities and prevalent on college campuses, is now being used to bully others in school.

State and federal laws have not kept pace with changes in technology. State laws primarily address cyberbullying in a K-12 school environment, and federal laws do not exist to address cyberbullying. Future research should study ways of deterring cyberbullying and higher education institutions' policies and procedures, to determine if they have kept pace with evolving state and federal laws or, in the absence of laws, if institutions have crafted them to prevent or reduce the likelihood of cyberbullying incidents. In the absence of laws directly addressing cyberbullying, law enforcement officials must piece together various statutes to support legal action against cyberbullies. As the problem of cyberbullying grows at higher education institutions, administrators, researchers, faculty, and law enforcement should work with legislators to provide research and data to support the development of training, laws, and policies that prohibit cyberbullying.

Conflict of Interest

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