Commentary:

THE MULTI-FACETED ISSUE OF CYBERBULLYING

Marylie W. Gerson, Ph.D.
California Lutheran University, USA

Abstract

Considerable research has demonstrated the harmful impact of bullying on the social, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the broader society; identifying the predictors of bullying is important for social change. Matt (2017; see this present issue of JISS) hypothesized that Machiavellianism, social media integration, and hostility would significantly predict cyberbullying among university students, but did not find support for his hypotheses. In discussing the issues, he suggested that such social psychological phenomena as deindividuation and disinhibition may be at play in cyberbullying; the present paper concurs with this assessment. While most research to date has addressed traditional, face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying is unique in a number of ways that may benefit from attending to a variety of social psychological phenomena. The present paper suggests future avenues of research that address such phenomena as deindividuation, disinhibition, social contagion, conformity, obedience to authority (or lack thereof), bystander effects, social cognition and person perception, roles, stereotyping, and attitude change, as well as building resilience in future victims.

Keywords: Bullying, cyberbullying, interpersonal aggression, group processes, resilience

AUTHOR NOTE: Please address all correspondence to Dr. Marylie W. Gerson, California Lutheran University, Department of Psychology, 60 West Olsen Rd. #3800, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360, USA. Email: mgerson@callutheran.edu

COMMENTARY

Matt's (2017; see this present issue of JISS) article is important in that it deals with an urgent problem, acknowledges the issue's complexity, and addresses his unexpected findings in a thoughtful manner. It also appeals to my dual roles as both clinical and experimental social psychologist and confirms for me the value of incorporating both personality and situational factors in researching such topics.

Bullying is an important topic that is gaining increasing attention, both across disciplines and internationally. Although difficult to define (Kowalski, Giumetti, Schroeder, & Lattanner, 2014; Smith, Cowie, Olafsson, & Liefooghe, 2002; Tokunaga, 2010), bullying is usually understood to be repeated and unjustified or unprovoked aggression (Smith et al., 2002), that involves intentional harm to those who are in lower positions of power (Smith & Brain, 2000; Zych, Ortega-Ruiz, & Del Rey, 2015) and who cannot defend themselves. It first came to the forefront in the 1970s with concerns about its impact on children in schools (Zych et al., 2015), but is now recognized as a problem that encompasses all ages and contexts (Trépanier, Fernet, Austin, & Boudrias, 2016; Van den Brande, Baillien, De Witte, Vander Else, & Godderis, 2016). Research typically distinguishes between bullies, victims, bully/victims (who are both perpetrators and targets), and bystanders.

Meta-analyses demonstrate that childhood bullying predicts many significant and long-lasting harms, including depression (Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Willoughby, Mills-Koonce, Gottfredson, & Wagner, 2014), loneliness (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), generalized and social anxiety (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), poor self-esteem (Hawker & Boulton, 2000), headaches (Gini, Pozzoli, Lenzi, & Vieno, 2014), poor academic performance (Juvonen, Wang, & Espinoza, 2011; Nakamoto & Schwartz, 2010), suicide or suicidal ideation (Holt et al., 2015; Klomek, Sourander, & Gould, 2010; van Geel, Vedder, & Tanilon, 2014), later violence (Ttofi, Farrington, & Lösel, 2012; Ttofi, Farrington, Lösel, & Loeber, 2011), later psychosis (Cunningham, Hoy, & Shannon, 2015; van Dam et al., 2012), and even longterm DNA damage (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2013; Shalev et al., 2013).

In an effort to identify at-risk youth, studies have searched for predictors. As children, bullies have been found to display good cognitive empathy (Caravita, Di Blasio, & Salmivalli, 2009) and social cognition (Gini, 2006), but low affective empathy (Caravita et al., 2009; Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015); low agreeableness and conscientiousness (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015); externalizing behaviors, such as undercontrolled aggression (Cook, Williams, Guerra, Kim, & Sadek, 2010); detrimental other-related cognitions, such as poor perspective-taking or negative beliefs about others (Cook et al., 2010); and negative peer influence and community factors (Cook et al., 2010). Predictors of victimization include neuroticism (Mitsopoulou & Giovazolias, 2015); internalizing behaviors, such as withdrawal or depression (Cook et al., 2010); low peer status (Cook et al., 2010); maladaptive or unsupportive parenting (Lereya, Samara, & Wolke, 2013); and unhelpful school climate (Cook et al., 2010). Bully/victims have a slightly different profile,

which includes self-related cognitions, such as low self-respect or self-esteem, and low social competence and peer status (Cook et al., 2010). Research searching for mediators and moderators is showing complex interactions among personal and contextual variables, as well.

Bullying affects the social, emotional, and physical well-being of individuals, families, communities, and the broader society. As such, its relevance spans many disciplines, including psychology, sociology, political science, business, education, public health, and medicine. While research to date has largely focused on North America and Northern European countries, bullying is recognized as a universal phenomenon (Craig et al., 2009) and its prevalence may be even higher in some other parts of the world (Zych et al., 2015). Bullying is an interpersonal process (Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996), that takes place within a social-ecological framework (Cross et al., 2015); it undoubtedly involves complex combinations of direct and mediating/moderating, personal and contextual factors.

It should also be noted that bullying has not always been seen as undesirable. Recognizing the need for intervention should not be taken for granted, and still may not be universally accepted. In fact, the Merriam-Webster dictionary instructs us that the term "bully" is derived from "sweetheart" (Bully, n.d.). In the 1700s, the term often meant "good fellow" and only later evolved to mean "paid ruffian." Studies also show developmental shifts in how interpersonal aggression is perceived. Although not liked during childhood, bullies often become popular and admired in early adolescence (Guerra, Williams, & Sadek, 2011; Pellegrini, Roseth, Van Ryzin, & Solberg, 2011); bullying can become a way to gain social status (Caravita & Cillessen, 2012) and approval by peers (Werner & Hill, 2010). Context, culture, and even developmental issues must be considered in understanding the issues (Zych et al., 2015).

Initially, researchers assumed that cyberbullying was merely bullying by way of electronic devices (Li, 2007), but current analyses show that differences between bullying and cyberbullying are far more complex. While cyberbullying shares many characteristics with traditional bullying, it is also unique in a number of ways. Online venues may share similarities with online video games, where people can take on other personas or Avatars. A person's identity can be hidden from others and even shift in the player's own mind; fantasy and reality can easily blur. In some cases, interactions can be completely anonymous, shifting imbalances of power. Victims who would never confront others face-to-face can often act anonymously; in fact, most cyber-participants are neither bullies nor victims, but rather fall into the bully/victim category (Slonje et al., 2013). Anonymity also reduces potential consequences from authority figures; supervision, role modeling, and consequences by outside authority figures may be limited or nonexistent. And, as in road rage, bullies and victims may not even know each other. Misinterpretation of responses may be fueled by an absence of facial and body language cues. Consider the comment, "That was a brilliant thing to do!" coming from either a dear friend, an enemy, or someone

you don't know; interpretations are made within a context of history and body language, both of which may be absent online. Facial responses that also might elicit empathy for another's pain are usually absent. Interactions are often done alone, without either supportive or inhibitory social input from others. Cyberbullies can traumatize their victims by sending a single message, which then "goes viral" by being repeatedly uploaded or distributed by bystanders (Slonje, Smith, & Frisen, 2013); the definitional assumption that a bully engages in repeated aggression may no longer apply and the role of bystander in cyberbullying may differ from that in traditional bullying. Responses are often immediate, without delays that might allow a person to reflect or "cool off" before reacting impulsively. People can engage each other at all hours of the day and night, without the benefit of sleep and often with greater access to substances, further fueling poor judgment. The audience is limitless, and since information transmitted through the internet cannot be retrieved, the emotional and interpersonal harm can become repetitive and unlimited in time, potentially harming job opportunities years later. Finally, use of the internet is so intertwined with daily activities, avoiding exposure to potentially harmful information is very difficult. As noted by Matt, various platforms differ in many of these variables, such as degree of anonymity and presence of potential authority figures, further complicating research.

Identifying the predictors of cyberbullying is an important step toward developing strategies to prevent and control its incidence. And although face-to-face bullying may lessen with age, my observations suggest that social media use, with its opportunities for cyberbullying, is strong into adulthood. Matt sought to clarify the relative strengths of three possible predictors of cyberbullying in young adults: Machiavellianism, social media use integration, and hostility. He also attempted to separate Machiavellianism from hostility in the relationship. Machiavellianism involves a tendency to manipulate others (Goodboy & Martin, 2015); although research findings regarding its role in interpersonal aggression have been mixed (e.g., Berger, 2016; Craker & March, 2016), a number of studies have found Machiavellianism, along with other Dark Triad factors, to predict bullying (Baughman, Dearing, Giammarco, & Vernon, 2012; Goodboy & Martin, 2015; Pabian, De Backer, & Vandebosch, 2015; van Geel, Goemans, Toprak, & Vedder, 2017). As noted by Matt, more research is needed to examine the potentially complex relationship between such personality constructs as Machiavellianism and cyberbullying. He posited, for example, that people high in Machiavellianism may spend more time on the Internet, thereby exposing them to an online disinhibition effect. Also, while Machiavellianism has been found to correlate with hostility (Jones & Neria, 2005), the two variables may differ in their effects. Matt hypothesized that Machiavellianism, emotional investment in social media use, and hostility would all be significant predictors of cyberbullying behavior, and that Machiavellianism would be a stronger predictor than hostility. He did not find support for his hypotheses, noting a restricted sample, little variation in the data, and limitations in measures. As is often the case with research, self-report can pose problems, especially

when asking about attitudes or behaviors that are socially undesirable. College students may be reluctant to admit to harassing others or may misremember, and those who are Machiavellian may be especially prone to deception on questionnaires. As noted by Matt, future research could include observational measures as well as a measure of concern over social desirability.

As a clinical psychologist, I am drawn to Matt's interest in identifying dispositional predictors. Do cyberbullies evolve because of a desire to manipulate others, hunger for power, or aggressive urges? Research findings regarding dispositional predictors of bullying have been complex; Matt's lack of findings for a relationship between either Machiavellianism or hostility and cyberbullying is not surprising. And I believe this finding is important.

As a social psychologist as well, I am inclined to think in terms of situational factors. Rather than searching for individual differences or psychopathology to explain behaviors, the social psychological perspective focuses on how most people can be expected to act under certain circumstances. This perspective is especially fruitful for public policy and other social engineering concerns. Working with one individual at a time or impacting personality development is very expensive, both in terms of time and resources. By planning out situations that facilitate desired behaviors, we can impact large groups of people at once—what factors in a situation may induce people to act with (or without) callousness or cruelty? And here we see a possible divergence between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying. Such variables as deindividuation, disinhibition, social contagion, conformity, obedience to authority (or lack thereof), bystander effects, social cognition and person perception, roles, stereotyping, attitude change, etc. are all strikingly relevant for cyberbullying.

Although he did not measure it in the present study, Matt noted the potential impact of an online disinhibition effect. A search for peer-reviewed social science research involving disinhibition in cyberbullying reveals only a handful of publications to date (i.e., Behm-Morawitz & Schipper, 2016; Lowry, Zhang, Wang, & Mikko, 2016; Pieper, 2017) and an opportunity for a fruitful path.

Not all internet platforms involve anonymity or lack of authority figure presence; perhaps research could identify internet variables which could be modified to induce more responsible actions. Future avenues of research could explore, for example, the impact of such factors as requiring that participants' identities not be anonymous, building in response delays (and "cooling off" periods), including a visible presence of respected authorities and positive role models, increasing the range of available emojis (as surrogate facial cues), and such technological changes as ways to prevent material from "going viral" and allowing material to be removed from "the cloud."

But, outcomes of programs that address only social factors have also been mixed in their success. The social psychological perspective addresses averages, not individual people. Merely increasing students' awareness of bullying, instituting zero tolerance for

fighting, or isolating bullies, requiring their participation in group therapy (Baldry & Farrington, 2007; Monks & Coyne, 2011), or talking to their parents (Rubin, Bowker, McDonald, & Menzer, 2013) have all had dismal results. Overall school climate has been found to interact with self-esteem such that high self-esteem adolescents are often bullies in hostile environments but not in climates where learning and cooperation are encouraged (Gendron, Williams, & Guerra, 2011). Efforts to change the entire school culture have been reported to be promising in England (Cross et al., 2015), Norway and Finland (Kärnä et al., 2011), and the U.S. (Allen, 2010; Limber, 2011), but findings may be more reliable if greater focus were placed on how social factors may interact with dispositional and developmental variables. One person who views an aggressive model may become emboldened, whereas another may become cautious. My hunch is that it is important to consider both individual and social factors, as well as how they interact. I agree with Matt's statement that "there is limited research into how personality interacts with the online environment in order to facilitate or possibly limit the online disinhibition effect" (p. 35).

As a clinician, I am also frequently struck by how different people are and the diversity of their paths. Bertalanffy, a 1940s biologist, described the concept of equifinality in systems (Drack, 2009); a single outcome may result from many paths. People engage in bullying—or are protected from its impact—within a relationship and a complex system of factors, including various personal and environmental characteristics. Some variables may be sufficient, but not necessary causal factors, and others may be necessary, but not sufficient. I look forward to future research that goes beyond identifying the strongest predictors for most people, and also considers identifying multiple possible pathways through such approaches as cluster analyses. It is important to continue to consider mediating and moderating factors for both undesired and desired outcomes as well. How may personal and contextual variables interact to predict when bullying or cyberbullying will and will not occur? What combinations of variables may protect victims from short-term and long-term harm? An interactionist, multi-level approach makes sense in guiding future research (Samnani & Singh, 2016).

Finally, some current studies are focusing on identifying and building protective factors in the face of bullying. For example, Raskaukas and Hunyh (2015) have carried out a systematic review of research regarding coping strategies that may increase resilience in victims and Van den Brande et al. (2016) have developed a model that considers the interplay among various coping strategies, coping resources, and work stressors on victim well-being for traditional bullying the workplace. Given the additional complexities involved in controlling cyberbullying, focusing efforts on limiting its harmful effects may be important for the immediate future.

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AUTHOR INFORMATION:

Marylie W. Gerson, Ph.D. is a Professor of Psychology at California Lutheran University. She is both a licensed clinical psychologist and an experimental social psychologist. Her current research interests include identity development, resilience, and thriving. Address: Dr. Marylie W. Gerson, Department of Psychology, California Lutheran University, 60 West Olsen Road #3800, Thousand Oaks, CA 91360, USA. Email: mgerson@callutheran.edu