Beyond Sheer Malice: Motive, Moral Engagement, and Context in the Perpetration of Aggression & Bullying

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The Stubborn Social Problem of Child & Youth Bullying

Despite international intervention and prevention efforts, no effective methods currently exist for working with youth engaged in frequent or severe bullying to help them stop bullying.

To date, one of the chief challenges has been stopping bullying at the source: the young people who engage in frequent or severe bullying. 
In this talk, I would like to sketch my beliefs about why efforts at tackling bullying at the source has faltered.

We have not adequately accounted for the joint functions of the child’s motives for bullying (from their own perspective), their moral engagement with their actions, and the contexts in which the behaviour is occurring.
Beyond Sheer Malice: Why Bully?

Bullying as a functional social behaviour

Serves some social or psychological need or goal

But what is its function? And what are the goals?
Functions of Aggression (and Bullying)

Two primary pathways are commonly discussed

- Reactive
- Defensive
- Affective
- Impulsive
- Hostile
- Proactive
- Offensive
- Predatory
- Controlled
- Instrumental
Research on Bullying Motives

The traditional view focused on bullies as socially incompetent individuals.

Emphasizes low self-control and hostility.

The newer view focuses on bullies as socially competent ‘ringleaders’ of groups of supporters and bystanders, aimed at enhancing their reputation within their group.
Why Do Youth Engage in Bullying?

*Not all students who bully others are motivated by the same things*

Some bullying is carried out in the pursuit of some instrumental reward, including social status.

Other bullying that is in retaliation to being bullied, or perceived as being bullied or provoked by others.
Unpacking Reactive vs. Proactive Aggression

Provoked vs. Unprovoked

Impulsive vs. Planned
Self Control and Motive in Aggression

- Rage
- Revenge
- Recreation
- Reward

Provoked vs. Unprovoked
Impulsive vs. Planned

From Rick Howard (2011)
Whither “Beyond” Sheer Malice?

Image from http://www.kidpower.org/blog/best-friends-are-bullying/
"I never made a mistake in my life; at least, never one that I couldn't explain away afterwards."

Rudyard Kipling, *Under The Deodars*

Put up your hand if you are a terrible driver.

Put up your hand if – while driving - you have had someone honk at you angrily.

Likewise … How many evil people in the world would self-identify as “evil”?

Image from  http://www.kidpower.org/blog/best-friends-are-bullying/
Bandura’s Model of Moral Disengagement

All of us develop an identity including a sense of morals within our cultural context.

But we can selectively switch off this moral compass to avoid shame & guilt.

Bandura called this *Moral Disengagement*. 
Mechanisms of Moral Disengagement

Reconstruct the Behaviour
- Provide a Moral Justification
- Give a Euphemistic Label
- Make an Advantageous Comparison

Reduce Personal Agency
- Displace of responsibility
- Diffuse of responsibility

Reframe the Victim
- Dehumanise
- Blame

Reframe the Consequences
- Disregard
- Distort
Co-Action of Motive and Moral Disengagement in Reactive Bullying

Motives

Underlying Cognitions

Moral Disengagement

Behavioural

Rage

Revenge

Perception of Provocation

Victim Blame

Aggress / Bully
# Co-Action of Motive and Moral Disengagement in Bullying

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Co-Action of Motive and Moral Disengagement in Bullying

**Motive**

**Underlying Cognitions**
- Thrill & Fun Seeking
- Euphemistic Labelling
- Salience of Peer Audience
- Minimisation of Consequences

**Moral Disengagement**

**Behavioural Result**
- Agress / Bully

Recreation ("Joking")
Whither “Context”? Cybercommunication in Bullying & Aggression
In 1964, Canadian cultural theorist Marshall McLuhan wrote that “the personal and social consequences of any medium . . . result from the new scale that is introduced into our affairs by . . . new technology” (pp. 7) because the “medium . . . shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (pp. 9).
How Online Communication Facilitates Cyber-Aggression


Implications of Online Social Cue Paucity for Retaliatory Cyber-Aggression
Cyber-Communication: A Paucity of Emotional Information
(Friedman & Currall, 2003)

Face-to-face
Social cues include non-verbal and paralinguistic (e.g., intonation) cues

Online
Absence of such cues introduces a structural ambiguity

http://4.bp.blogspot.com/_alNWu3oWAU4/Sr2V3_hliZI/AAAAAAAAAAs/IVaWtefqZ4Y/s1600-h/feelings.jpg
Hostile Attribution Bias Online: Seeing Attack Where None was Intended

Some people tend to think other people are intentionally hostile to them, even when the evidence doesn’t warrant.

- This *hostile attribution of intent* is linked to “flying off the handle” aggression offline
- Given the lack of nonverbal and paralinguistic cues online, it may be more common online
Moral Disengagement via Blame may be facilitated online, especially in reaction to perceived harm

*Culpable control theory* (Alicke, 2000) posits that anger elicited as a result of perceived personal harm activates spontaneous, unconscious processes of blame via a process of a biased search for evidence of culpable control (i.e., intent or negligence that played a causal role in the harm).
In cyber-communication, the absence of face-to-face and paralinguistic cues limits opportunities to see what your behaviour does to others. In this way, the social costs of cyber-aggression may be minimized, and only benefits remain.
Empathy research has mapped out 2 distinct pathways: affective mirroring and cognitive perspective taking.

But the ‘neural resonance’ / affective mirroring likely requires witnessing non-verbal or paralinguistic social information.
Implications of Online Audience for Thrill-Seeking Cyber-Aggression
The Writing on the Wall: Permanence & Audience

Face-to-face
Social cues are, generally, fleeting, with only the immediate audience as witnesses
Sharing things on SNS is socially normative social act, not a transgressive social violation

Online
Information is permanent, and the audience is unknown but potentially large
There is a big audience for these shares
Spreading of victimization easy to share at any time with G3 phones (Hinduja & Patchin, 2008).

And public acts of bullying & aggression are perceived as more severe than private acts (Sticca & Perren, 2013).
Cyber Aggression as Thoughtless Fun-Seeking

The presence of an audience and the lack of feedback from the target may present a tempting setting for bored kids looking for a laugh who may not realize the implications of their “jokes”
“It was just a joke!”

The recreational primacy of cyberspace could create a norm of ‘entertainment’ that leads to acts aimed at ‘entertaining’, not at ‘harming’ (Pornari & Wood, 2010)

Thrill-seeking aggression might arise from thoughtless comments and acts that seemed funny (i.e., to the aggressor) in the moment.

Most aggressive online messaging is intended not to harm, but as “jokes” (Shapka, 2011)
Puberty-linked neurotransmitter-based changes are thought to increase sensitivity to social rewards in adolescence (Albert & Steinberg, 2011)

Thrill seeking is peaking in early adolescence, as impulsivity is slowly declining with development of the prefrontal cortex (Steinberg et al., 2008)

Peer contexts not only increase risk taking for teens, but peers
Sternberg and his colleagues set up a driving-simulation video game, where points are won for speed, and lost if you crash into a wall.

Participants were:
- Young Adolescents
- Young Adults
- Adults

What do you think happened?
Responsive Planning for Bullying Intervention
Beyond Bullying: Working with Kids who Bully

Change is possible for young people who bully if they are appropriately supported, if their social motivations for bullying are listened to, and considered carefully, and if they are treated with the respect that we want to see them treat others