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Recognition of Social Pain among Peers: Rethinking the Role of Bystanders in Bullying and Cyberbullying

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ABSTRACT

Antibullying interventions that encourage bystanders to intervene have variable outcomes, some even associated with increased rates of bullying. In this article, I account for these challenges with a reconceptualization of the bystander role within an intersubjective field of traumatic enactment. Bystanders in adolescence and emerging adulthood can learn to play a crucial role in mitigating the traumatic effects of peer aggression by providing recognition of social pain from the unique vantage of peers—a role that parents, teachers, and clinicians must play with younger children. Two case examples demonstrate the need and potential for peers to provide empathic and accountable recognition.

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Introduction

Compassion is an unstable emotion. It needs to be translated into action, or it withers. The question is what to do with the feelings that have been aroused, the knowledge that has been communicated. If one feels that there is nothing “we” can do—but who is that “we”?—and nothing “they” can do either—and who are “they”?—then one starts to get bored, cynical, and apathetic (Sontag, 2003, p. 99).

In Susan Sontag’s (2003) formulation, the emotional experience of compassion is a form of knowledge that must be put to use. Without purpose, Sontag contends, our empathy fails us. Sontag’s attention quickly shifts from compassion itself, to the worried ways people see themselves in groups of “we” and “they.” Without explicitly asking, we search for cues as to what should be done with our compassionate feelings. We might not notice that in doing so we are seeking out direction from each other.

Although Sontag was writing about the dilemmas of witnessing violence in war, her work can also be used to illuminate the experiences of bystanders witnessing more mundane dynamics of aggression between peers, including bullying and cyberbullying. There is consensus among researchers that bullying and cyberbullying are group processes (Atlas & Pepler, 1998; Salmivalli, Voeten, & Poskiparta, 2011), involving those doing the bullying, those being victimized,

and those serving as bystanders. Bystanders are witnesses not only to the aggression itself but also to the “social pain” it can inflict. The concept of “social pain” refers to an individual’s experience of suffering related to exclusion, rejection, and aggression, which can activate the same circuitry in the brain associated with physical injury and suffering (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2004). Many bystanders may feel empathy for the person being targeted but fail to intervene or try to help when they lack social self-efficacy or fear that getting involved might put them at risk of victimization themselves (Gini, Albiero, Benelli, & Altoe, 2008; O’Connell, Pepler, & Craig, 1999).

Witnessing and learning to respond in various ways to peer aggression may take on particular meaning in adolescence and “emerging adulthood.” Developmental theorists have described emerging adulthood as a period of “extended adolescence,” primarily associated with young people in their twenties who attend college in postindustrial societies (Arnett, 2000, 2014). Like children and older people, adolescents and emerging adults are more likely to witness bullying and cyberbullying among peers than to target someone or to be victimized (Bradshaw, Sawher, & O’Brennan, 2007; Chapell et al., 2004). But witnessing peer aggression may have particular implications for social learning in adolescence and emerging adulthood, as young people form and negotiate peer groups, develop social identifications, and experiment with prosocial capacities and ethical demands (Arnett, 2014; Eisenberg & Mussen, 1989; Padilla-Walker, 2015). There may be lasting individual and community implications when empathy itself seems to provide no value or traction. To extend Sontag’s reasoning, empathy may fail without opportunities to experience how it can be productive and useful.

Antibullying intervention programs have often attempted to encourage bystanders to use their empathy to stop bullying themselves or to get help from someone in authority. Among children, when bystanders intervene directly, bullying has been found to stop abruptly—within 10 seconds in 57% of cases (Hawkins, Pepler, & Craig, 2001). However, school-based antibullying programs that focus on bystander intervention have varying outcomes, many with insignificant outcomes or even negative effects—associated with higher rates of bullying (Farrington & Ttofi, 2009; Polanin, Espelage, & Pigott, 2012). Given the larger psychological, philosophical, and educational questions at stake, these efforts at bystander engagement in the context of bullying and cyberbullying cannot simply be abandoned. They seem to turn on a democratizing aim of educational theorists as well as social work clinicians and scholars: to build “community capacity”—enabling a network of people to act together for the benefit and well-being of the community and its members (Chaskin, Brown, Venkatesh, & Vidal, 2001).

My aim in this article is to offer a reconceptualization of the role of bystanders in bullying and cyberbullying that can better account for the limitations of some antibullying bystander intervention programs. In my

dissertation study on this topic (Byers, 2016), I asked college students who reported trying to help peers being targeted with bullying and cyberbullying why and how they decided to help in some cases and not in others. Using a constructivist grounded theory method (Charmaz, 2006; Glaser & Strauss, 1967/2009) in sampling and analysis of interviews with 31 college students at seven colleges and universities in the Northeastern United States, I examined contextual and developmental factors in moral reasoning, as well as actions participants undertook to try to help targeted peers. Bystanders' reasoning was based on their idealization of college, friendship with the targeted person, identification with the targeted person based on social identities (especially race, gender identity, and sexual orientation), and/or past personal experiences of being targeted. Participants used these factors to justify helping and not helping. While some also said they helped targeted peers due to their beliefs in social and community justice, they tended to use this principled reasoning to justify helping only after witnessing a friend or someone they identified with being targeted (Byers, 2016). Challenging the ethical assumptions of many bystander intervention programs, many participants suggested it felt risky to try to help strangers or people across social identity differences, as well as potentially inappropriate or ethically wrong. These findings are based on college students, with whom peer aggression is often minimized and surprisingly underresearched given widespread interdisciplinary interest in the developmental work of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2014). These qualitative findings should not simply be generalized to other age groups or settings, but they provide data-rich hypotheses that can be further assessed with reference to other contexts to consider their local viability and usefulness.

The aim of this article is not to report on these findings but rather to pick up where this and other empirical scholarship has left off, offering a theoretical reconceptualization of the role of bystanders in the context of a traumatized (and traumatizing) intersubjective field, where participants are caught in projected and enacted victim, victimizer, and bystander dynamics (Basham, 2016). Public health analyses measuring the efficacy rates of school-based antibullying interventions provide helpful data points but can also obscure the subjective experiences of individuals and groups. The trauma framework helps to make sense of the helplessness many bystanders may feel when witnessing peer aggression. It also allows for a critical pivot away from expecting bystanders in adolescence and emerging adulthood to stop bullying and cyberbullying through confrontation or by seeking help from people in authority. In taking a trauma-informed approach, I am also suggesting that we reorient the goals of antibullying bystander intervention programs to focus less directly on curbing overall rates of peer aggression and more on disrupting the cyclical dynamics of traumatic interaction within peer groups.

While the ultimate goal is to stop and prevent peer aggression, I will argue that charging bystanders with the task of stopping bullying and cyberbullying may actually contribute to anxiety and frustration among bystanders and to a failure of empathy through moral disengagement (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura 1999), particularly in the context of trauma. Bystanders can be better prepared to interrupt traumatic processes not through heroic altruistic actions but rather through the more basic work of empathic and accountable recognition of another's social pain. Given the heightened importance of peer associations and identifications in adolescence and emerging adulthood in particular, bystanders in these age groups may be in a unique position to lessen traumatic impacts on victimized peers. Ultimately, recognition that holds empathy and accountability may foster recovery and resilience for victimized and bullying peers, as well as bystanders themselves. To integrate empathy with accountability means acknowledging complicity, when appropriate, or otherwise conveying credible investment in the targeted peer's well-being. Empathy and accountability may be requisite for further action.

Bullying, cyberbullying, and trauma in an intersubjective field

Intersubjectivity theories in social work, psychology, psychoanalysis, neurobiology, philosophy, sociology, and anthropology build on the idea that human consciousness is coconstructed (Stolorow, Brandchaft, & Atwood, 1987) and provide crucial insight into group dynamics of bullying and cyberbullying. Theories of intersubjectivity are an intervention in what Stolorow and Atwood (1992/2014) have famously called the “the myth of the isolated individual mind” (p. 7), which they assert remains pervasive in contemporary Western thought and society. In clinical psychoanalytic theory, their foundational work was also advanced by Orange (1995), who emphasized the role of shared affective experience in intersubjectivity. Others have emphasized the implicit sociality and interdependence of human brain processes, including some types of cognition, affect coregulation, and implicit enactive learning in dyads and groups (Cozolino, 2014; Lyons-Ruth, 1999; Miehl & Applegate, 2014; Montgomery, 2013).

Through this lens, bystander responses of inaction to peer aggression must be understood with reference to biological, psychological, and social processes. In instances of traumatic bullying and cyberbullying, bystander inaction may suggest a preconscious group enactment, relying on procedural social memory and reinforced by sociocognitive processes of group appraisal for norms and “bystander effect”—where bystanders become less and less likely to intervene as the perceived group of bystanders grows larger (Dovidio, 1984; Fischer et al., 2011; Piliavin, Dovidio, Gaertner, & Clark, 1981). Unconscious aversive racism and homophobia may also play a role in bystander effect (Byers, 2013; Dovidio & Gaertner, 1981; Kunstman & Plant, 2008). Appreciating bystanders within this

intersubjective terrain can help to explain why direct bystander intervention is so uncommon.

Twemlow and colleagues (2004) describe bystanders as integral to the “social architecture” of school violence (p. 3). Atlas and Pepler (1998) observed that bystanders were present for 85% of bullying episodes in an elementary school. Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) identified bystander presence in 87% of episodes. These studies only accounted for bystanders able to directly observe and react to incidents, but even indirect bystanders—those who learn about bullying through others—can likely play a critical role in ongoing bullying and cyberbullying group dynamics. Following Twemlow and colleagues’ (2004) conceptualization, bullying is a humiliating performance of dominant power that requires an audience, or at least the potential for one. Bystander dynamics have just begun to be studied in online settings, but the role of cyberbystanders as complicit audience members may be even stronger than with traditional bullying given the pervasive reach of digital technologies and social media (Allison & Bussey, 2016; Byers, 2013; Holfeld, 2014).

Although passive bystanders may feel a range of emotional responses—including empathy for a targeted peer (Gini et al., 2008)—their inaction makes them ready receptacles for projections and projective identifications. Other bystanders as well as peers who are bullying others or being victimized can misinterpret their inaction as implicit approval of the aggression. Salmivalli and colleagues (1996) identified different types of bystanders, including a small minority actively encouraging the aggression and a large majority passively observing. Following a classic theory in social psychology referred to as “false consensus effect” (Ross, Greene, & House, 1977), the actions of a few probullying bystanders can be misattributed to the entire group. Moreover, these projections can be mutually reinforcing for everyone involved—those involved in bullying, those being victimized, and those observing can feel affirmed in their positions by their general appraisals of the group and can come to identify with their appraisals.

The potential for bullying and cyberbullying to be traumatic should also be understood within an intersubjective field. Classic trauma theory suggests that in the setting of a trauma, we come to see ourselves and others as victims, victimizers, and bystanders (Basham, 2016). An individual’s perceptions can come to affirm the projections and can lead to identification with them. Attuned mirroring and validation of pain from someone seen as credible can potentially interrupt traumatic projections and prevent or lessen continuing or worsening traumatic responses. For example, Mishna (2007) and Mishna and Sawyer (2011) have offered that children who are bullied may be less likely to develop lasting symptoms of trauma if their caregivers, teachers, and/or clinicians take bullying seriously and recognize and validate their pain and other feelings associated with being bullied.

This critical role of adult intervention with children also makes sense when considering the neurobiology of bullying, social pain, and trauma at younger

ages. Being bullied can lead to changes in allostatic load—accumulated stress responses. These changes can alter the regulatory functioning of the limbic system, in particular reactions between the hypothalamus and the pituitary and adrenal glands (the hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal axis), associated with escalating stress response (Gunnar & Quevedo, 2007; Hansen et al., 2006) and the dorsal anterior cingulate cortex, insula, and frontal cortex, associated with registering social and physical pain (Knack, Gomez, & Jensen-Campbell, 2011). Bullying seems to be associated with high (Booth, Granger, & Shirtcliff, 2008) and low levels of the stress hormone cortisol (Dienstbier, 1989; Vaillancourt et al., 2010). A higher-than-typical level of cortisol is referred to as hypercortisolism, and a lower-than-typical level is referred to as hypocortisolism. Brief and acute victimization may be associated with hypercortisolism, which could indicate an adaptive and appropriate bodily stress response to being targeted over a period of time if it can then be regulated down once the danger has passed. However, chronic and long-term victimization may be associated with a process of “cortisol burnout” (Carney et al., 2013) and, therefore, lower stress hormone levels. For one example in the research literature, Kliewer (2004) found that African American children (age 11) being bullied and living in high violence and lower socioeconomic status areas had lower-than-typical levels of cortisol, suggestive of more dissociative responses to violence.

A child who experiences brief, though deeply threatening, bullying or cyberbullying may experience the beginnings of a traumatic response, including affect dysregulation and perceptions of the social environment as generally dangerous and unpredictable. A caregiver or another adult the child finds credible can mirror and normalize the escalated response, helping the child to make sense of associated feelings. Their warmth, care, and validation become a counterprojection, interrupting projections of general environmental hostility and persecution. However, a child with prolonged and unnoticed or unacknowledged social pain, who has developed dissociative numbness to it, may be much harder to mirror and effectively provide any counter for projective expectations of general environmental hostility and persecution.

For adolescents and emerging adults, moreover, I am suggesting that caregivers and clinicians may not be able to provide an adequately persuasive counterprojection demonstrating that the world is not entirely unpredictable, hostile, and persecutory. This is especially true for young people in one or more marginalized and structurally oppressed groups, in particular young People of Color and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender young people. Formal and informal social and institutional structures are, in fact, often violently persecutory toward young people in marginalized and oppressed groups, and clinicians are often too unaware of these real dangers to be credible counters (Carter & Forsyth, 2010). Moreover, the link between bullying and self-reported trauma symptoms has been found to be significantly moderated by social isolation in

male and female undergraduate students ($N = 853$, mean age 19.1) (Newman, Holden, & Delville, 2005). In a study by Heinrichs and colleagues (2003), 37 male participants (mean age 23) in a laboratory scenario stress test were found to show lower autonomic stress responses in the presence of their best friends or with intranasal introduction of oxytocin (a hormone associated with attachment behaviors), or both. These studies are a subset within a larger and compelling literature on social support as a moderator for the effects of stress (for examples, see Lepore, Allen, & Evans, 1993; Peters, Riksen-Walraven, Cillessen, & de Weerth, 2011). Adults who do seem credible still matter to adolescents and emerging adults for conscious and unconscious reassurance, but in these developmental periods—so focused on peer associations and identifications—they may also need their peers.

Empathic and accountable recognition between peers

If our reasoning and behaviors are biologically, psychologically, and socially mediated and prescribed in contextually meaningful ways, how can we as individuals be ethically accountable to targeted peers? Philosopher Judith Butler (2005) contends that while individuals cannot be separated from the moral norms that constitute them, they are not left without personal ethical agency and responsibility. Ethical responsibility as individuals is possible through constant critique of oneself and the social environmental norms that constitute the individual. For Butler, these strategies enable people to be “deliberating subjects” (Butler, 2005, p. 8). The deliberating subject is an artifact of contextual moral norms but also a participant to the extent that the subject has agency through critical reflexivity. However, for Butler, the deliberating subject does not get to resolve what constitutes individual agency or responsibility—or individual thoughts or feelings, for that matter—as distinguishable from the group. It is only through constant critique of ourselves in our environments, in interaction with others, that we can hope to catch glimpses of our ethical selves in action. Ethical engagement could, therefore, be understood as a commitment to ongoing critical reflexivity and dialogue.

Bystander intervention programs that presume a principled stance among adolescents and emerging adults (e.g., that people should help others) may fail to take into account developmental and contextual dynamics, as well as the group experience of witnessing and participating in traumatic acts. The assumption before open inquiry that bystanders “should” intervene may actually make some less likely to intervene, contributing to what Bandura (Bandura et al., 1996; Bandura, 1999) has called “moral disengagement”—in which bystanders dissociate from a moral dilemma to avoid emotional discomfort related to a sense of conflict. A dialogic approach—presuming no ethical truth but instead engaging participants as Butlerian deliberating subjects—might make continued

critical and empathic engagement thinkable, even in the setting of traumatic aggression.

Bystanders who do not directly confront peers engaged in bullying and cyberbullying or seek help from people in authority may instead reach out directly to peers who are victimized (Byers, 2016). In my research, bystanders most frequently took this approach of contacting victimized peers directly—they sent emails and text messages, wrote to them on social media sites, and invited them to lunch or to go shopping (Byers, 2016).

The restorative potential in this type of engagement may in a few ways resemble what Benjamin (1988/2013) has termed “recognition.” Referring primarily to a caregiver and infant, Benjamin describes two individual, cocreated subjectivities that can at moments appreciate—or recognize—the other’s subjectivity, in developmentally contingent ways. As with Butler’s analysis, recognition also requires ongoing space for deliberating and dialogic effort. It entails a capacity to reflect on the relatedness between people from the outside, referred to by Benjamin and others as a “third” space. The capacity for recognition of another’s needs is, for Benjamin, what also gives individuals the potential for moral reasoning within the intersubjective field—what she calls the “moral third.”

The third in this sense is not only a vantage for seeing the relationship but also for imagining how it should be—an “intention to connect” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 26), which is imbued with a larger principle of interdependence and necessity. Ethical engagement for Benjamin is then a “surrender” into a process of thirdness in the context of inevitable mutual enactments. In the context of an impasse in clinical work, rather than distinguishing “doer” and “done to,” ethical engagement is “letting go of our determination to make our reality operative” and finding “a different way to regulate ourselves, one in which we accept loss, failure, mistakes, our own vulnerability” (Benjamin, 2004, p. 32).

Butler and Benjamin are referring to the challenge of finding moments of mutuality in asymmetrical relationships—as, for example, between caregiver and child or between clinician and client. Butler’s conception of asymmetrical ethical responsibility draws more broadly from the work of Emmanuel Levinas (1969/2013), who believed all people become absolutely, asymmetricaly accountable for another human life at a preverbal level on encountering that person’s face—owing the other everything. The ethical obligation to the other does not stem from an expectation of anything in return. But peer relations are more commonly understood as symmetrical, premised on equality of standing and mutuality. The philosopher Jacques Derrida (1988) warned that conceiving of one’s ethical relations in these symmetrical terms (of friendship) has historically been associated with an ideal of fraternity, inevitably premised on exclusion and oppression. He suggested that truly democratic engagement depends on new models of friendship within and across difference. Recognition between peers in symmetrical relationships

requires more than the ability to mirror and validate social pain as between caregivers and children. Between peers, it also requires reflexive social accountability.

To provide empathic and accountable recognition in adolescence and emerging adulthood is to be a witness who is credible, or believable, in part because of the ability to hold a sense of responsibility for what happened or evident investment in the wellbeing of the targeted peer. It is to join in mutual recognition, as a peer, a process that can interrupt the alienation of traumatic experience by providing a persuasive counterprojection and a source of coregulation.

Two case examples

In this section, I provide two case examples of cyberbullying in the group context, bringing particular attention to the ways the individuals being targeted seemed to scan the group of bystanders, online and in person, for recognition. While very different examples, both cases demonstrate and help to further elaborate on the theoretical points I have discussed and point to future directions for practice and research on this important topic.

Case example 1: Tyler Clementi

The first example is the widely reported Tyler Clementi case at Rutgers University in 2010, which I have discussed previously and more extensively with attention to bystander effect, homophobia, and the tendency for bystanders to scapegoat the person or people most identified with the aggression (Byers, 2013). Clementi was an 18-year-old, White and male-identified first-year student at Rutgers University, who died by suicide 2 days after his roommate, Dharun Ravi, and his friend, Molly Wei, used a Web cam to capture Clementi in a sexual encounter with another man. Ravi used the social media sites Twitter and Facebook to tell hundreds of people what they had seen. Clementi was socially isolated on campus, particularly in the first-year residence hall where he lived, but others would later tell *The New York Times* that Ravi's Twitter "tweets" and Facebook posts about Clementi were a focus of intensive gossip among first-year students (Foderaro, 2010).

Clementi was also aware of what was happening, although he apparently did not acknowledge this to Ravi or others, even as Ravi planned a "viewing party" for Clementi's planned second encounter with the man, inviting hundreds of peers to watch. During this critical period before Clementi's suicide, it is clear that he sought help in three specific ways—the first two were conscious attempts to get help, and the third a likely unconscious scanning for help from bystanders:

- (1) Clementi reported what was happening to a person in authority—his resident advisor (RA), who was an adult and who seems to have taken the incident seriously. The RA invited Clementi to sleep on an extra bed in his room that evening and encouraged him to file a report about what had happened. Clementi declined the offer to sleep in his RA's room but used an online link to report the incident.
- (2) Clementi sought direct help from a gay-oriented social networking website. He had been an active participant in this online discussion forum during his sophomore year of high school, posting 60 times in ongoing discussion threads on a range of topics, including computers and technology, health, sexuality, coming out, anatomy, and cooking. He had only recently become active again in these online discussions in the summer before starting at Rutgers. After Ravi's tweets, Clementi started his own discussion thread with the title, "College roommate spying." Within his larger message, Clementi wrote the following:

Other people have commented on [Ravi's] profile with things like, "how did you manage to go back in there?" "are you ok?" and the fact that the people he was with saw my making out with a guy as the scandal whereas I mean come on ... he was SPYING ON ME ... do they see nothing wrong with this? (Just Us Boys, 2010, formatting retained from the original)

Clementi received a wide range of responses on the discussion forum, including empathic concern and outrage, as well as advice to report what had happened, to ignore it, and to confront his roommate. He engaged in ongoing discussion with others online, responding to feedback appreciatively, and updating the group about what was happening with six more posts on this discussion thread before his suicide.

- (3) Clementi looked at Ravi's Twitter messages 38 times over the two days between Ravi's initial Twitter message and Clementi's death. This intensive and repetitive checking suggests that Clementi was at once looking to confirm his own fears about his peers at Rutgers and unconsciously making himself available to them for help, scanning for any sign of recognition. Many wrote to express homophobic disgust, and no one wrote to express concern for Clementi or to tell Ravi to stop. According to available records, no one sent messages to Clementi privately, or knocked on his door, to express concern for him, to acknowledge that they knew what was happening, or otherwise to engage him socially.

In the first instance, going to his RA, Clementi was of course not seeking peer-based recognition. He was doing what many social workers and teachers might hope for—he went to someone in authority, not someone in the same social position. His RA was apparently responsive and caring, but his

response alone may not have been persuasive enough to counter Clementi's overwhelming sense of hostility from bystanders on campus. It may be particularly challenging for an authority figure engaging with people who have been targets of bullying and cyberbullying in adolescence and emerging adulthood. Their responses may seem perfunctory and impersonal and less relevant than responses from peers.

In the second instance, Clementi received many empathic responses from people on the website. However, it may be that they could not serve as adequate counterprojections because he only interacted with them online. Three factors may be operative here: First, many of the people who responded to Clementi were significantly older. He might not have experienced them as peers or as people who would understand his situation as a first-year student in college. Second, the people he interacted with online were anonymous. Even though they used consistent screennames, anonymity may interfere with credibility. Third, because Clementi did not know any of his online peers offline as well as online, their care and interest in him could be readily compartmentalized. These three points may represent a challenge to the argument that the Internet provides adequate community resources for marginalized and isolated young people, with little other access to affirming community resources offline (Haag & Chang, 1998; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). While Internet-based communities may certainly provide some of the benefits reported, people with one or more marginalized identities who can only reach others they identify with online may not view those resources of support as relevant to experiences in offline spaces.

Peer bystanders at Rutgers may have been in a unique position to make an impact in this case. Clementi's own online post, quoted here, suggests the urgency with which he was searching for recognition from people around him on campus and not finding it. The majority of bystanders clicked away from Ravi's posts and tweets rather than overtly endorsing them, but it is clear from Clementi's posts that he perceived of the whole group as supportive of the aggression. It seems likely, based on his posts online, that he experienced periodic escalations in affect over 2 days, with no one to provide a credible reference point for calibrating his social pain and distress. Ravi likely also perceived of passive bystanders as supportive of the aggression, though they would come to blame Ravi after Clementi's suicide, still refusing accountability. Short of challenging Ravi directly, another student could have simply approached Clementi to express concern, online or offline. This would have been a movement out of the projective trauma enactment and might have made a difference for Clementi, as well as Ravi and the rest of the traumatized group.

Case example 2: Anna

The second case example relates to racist aggression targeting an 18-year-old, Black, and female-identified first-year student attending a university in the Northeastern United States. This woman is referred to in this article using the pseudonym Anna. She and four peer bystanders of the aggression generously agreed to be interviewed for my dissertation research in the recent aftermath of the experience (Byers, 2016), and this case example is derived from those interviews.

To summarize briefly, Anna wrote a response to a message posted to a campus-wide Facebook page by a White male student. The male student had written to warn others that his partner was recently mugged by a Black man wearing a hoody. Anna responded to the posting that the general description fit so many students it would not be helpful, and moreover that the general description would place all Black male students in danger from campus police or peers. Many students responded to the Facebook posts, but the conversation then migrated to an app called Yik Yak, where people within a local area can post anonymously, as well as vote for (“upvote”) or against (“downvote”) other posts.

On Yik Yak, Anna was targeted directly with racist and misogynistic slurs and threats of violence. In the following quotes, she describes how this online aggression destabilized her sense of self, belonging, and safety among her peers.

At first I presumed that it was maybe one or two people posting all of these tweets, all of these Yik Yaks, because they were in rapid succession, and they were all very similar, so I wasn't worried that it was a hundred people posting. But Yik Yaks only stay up if they're upvoted. Like, you can downvote a Yik Yak off of the app—I'm sure you're familiar with this. But these had like 4, to 8, to 10 upvotes on them ... Meaning that the net total voting, that's including the people who downvoted it, meaning that, like, there were people who were actively supporting this. So that was what really startled me.

Anna's attention to the mechanics of the app is important to note, as she used this analysis in her appraisal of risk and support from other students on campus. Similar to Clementi in the first case example, Anna reported looking back at the app repetitively throughout the day and night. She explained:

Because my initial response was far from graceful. I was very defeated by this. And I was furious and I was—I was just enraged that this happened at this place with these beautiful buildings and all of these things that you imagine it to be, that this was what I was facing, and that is just my first year here, so that was so much for me to feel all at once.

In particular, Anna explained that the anonymity of the posts led her to question everyone around her. She described looking around in her classes and social spaces, wondering what her peers would say given anonymity.

As with the first case example, Anna sought help in three ways:

- (1) She went to a college administrator with responsibility for her residence hall. As in the previous example, the administrator seems to have been caring and responsive. She recommended Anna report what was happening to campus police and invited her to stay at her home. Anna declined both options, explaining that while it was helpful that the administrator was caring, she ultimately did not feel she needed these forms of support.
- (2) Anna sought direct support online from the larger group of bystanders on campus. She decided to copy and paste the anonymous posts from Yik Yak back to Facebook, where her peers would need to comment with their names attached. Her action led to many encouraging responses from peers—private messages and public posts from acquaintances and closer friends.
- (3) Finally, Anna sought and received support from peers she already knew well, especially other students involved in antiracism activism on campus. She explained: “Offline, that was the, like, the strongest support system—just them holding me and being like, it’s okay.”

As with the first case, a clear show of concern and a list of options from a person with institutional authority were important for Anna. A responsive person in authority was not enough, though. She also specifically needed something from her peers.

When Anna reposted the racist messages to Facebook, she seems to have been insisting it be openly acknowledged rather than hidden. Her activism in this regard may have helped her to regain her sense of agency in the social environment, using the community to move with tremendous resilience away from classic victim, victimizer, bystander dynamics. At the same time, Anna described mixed feelings about many of the responses she received. She said that some comments felt reassuring—even from strangers—including when peers would reach out to say things like “you know what, keep doing you.” She continued, “I got a lot of that, people not shoving it in my face, but being like—I acknowledge that that happened.” Other responses felt intrusive or insincere, especially from White students she did not already know. She explained, “I couldn’t tell if that was a manifestation of White guilt, or whether they knew something that I didn’t know and felt the need to reach out.” She also said that the student government issued a statement about the incident, condemning bullying, but that their statement seemed to minimize the ways racism is structurally, institutionally, and socially pervasive. She reflected that it would have felt more meaningful to her if anyone who had posted racist comments, or upvoted or ignored them, had contacted her to actually acknowledge their sense of responsibility.

For Anna, the support she received that seemed most useful was from people able to credibly convey a sense of personal and meaningful investment

in what they were witnessing—what I have described in this article as empathic and accountable recognition. From a neurobiological perspective, being seen by peers may offer coregulation, as well as a calibration of the limbic system to recognize and appreciate social pain. But to be effective, peer recognition must be believable. Anna explained,

It was very clear which support was sincere, and that spoke louder than any of the other stuff, just because it created a sense of solidarity and a network of support on this campus that I guess I didn't even see the breadth of until this happened.

This support was so loud and convincing it allowed Anna to feel more confident in her community, more hopeful, than she had felt before the traumatic experience. Such experiences are described in the literature as post-traumatic growth (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004).

Implications for research and practice

Sontag's (2003) claim—referenced at the start of this article—is that compassionate feelings need to be translated into action, or they dissipate. In a traumatized field, sharing recognition that is empathic and accountable can itself be a form of action. The action may be primarily between bystanders themselves, through public witnessing to acknowledge the aggression they see. Or bystanders can directly approach peers being targeted. To use empathy in an accountable way can sometimes mean acknowledging complicity in the aggression, or expressing a sense of identification, investment, and responsibility for another's wellbeing among peers.

Antibullying intervention programs may be strengthened by better accounting for the trauma dynamics of peer aggression in groups, which play out in developmentally and contextually meaningful ways. Bystander intervention models tend to privilege exchanges between bystanders and peers engaged in bullying and cyberbullying or between bystanders and authority figures. In this article, I have attempted to call attention to the potential for exchanges between bystanders and targeted peers directly, specifically in adolescence and emerging adulthood.

In the context of traumatic projections and enactments in groups, bystanders told to save their peers from victimization may find themselves feeling even more helpless. Their attention may turn to their own bodily responses—their muscles tensing but not moving. The narcissism of guilt is a turn away from empathy and accountability. Bystanders may then rationalize their inaction and waning empathy with reasoning informed by traumatic introjects (e.g., as a victim: I could be targeted next if I get involved; as a victimizer: the peer being targeted did something to deserve the aggression; and as a bystander: this has nothing to do with me, or there is nothing I can do, or I hardly notice anyway). Bystanders stop feeling empathic or

accountable. But connecting with targeted peers—or in some cases with each other about what they see—can represent action that can sustain empathy.

The similarities and differences between the two cases discussed in this article point to areas for practice development and future research. In the first case example, Clementi was very isolated and therefore critically disconnected from potential resources of resilience. As Newman, Holden, and Delville (2005) have pointed out, clinicians and educators may need to focus at least as much attention on the problem of social isolation as on bullying and cyberbullying.

The issue was compounded in Clementi's case because he identified as gay online but not on campus. His social identifications were compartmentalized rather than integrated, and he was only accessing support from an anonymous online resource. For this and other reasons noted, people in his online community may have been unable to credibly or accountably respond to him as peers, even though they expressed care and concern. This point needs further study. It remains unclear to what extent, if at all, community capacity can be developed exclusively online, especially when participants are anonymous.

Unlike Clementi, Anna had a robust and diverse network of support on campus, where she felt seen and acknowledged for her social identities, as well as for the racist aggression she faced. While bystanders in Clementi's case could continue to deny what was happening (e.g., there's no homophobia here) or later deny their involvement by scapegoating Ravi, Anna had the resources to refuse her community's indifference. She was able to access peers who could serve as counterprojections and sources of identification and coregulation.

It is unclear whether bystanders can provide meaningful empathic and accountable recognition to targeted peers they do not know well or identify with or who seem isolated or unreceptive. I suggest that bystanders can learn to reach out to targeted peers, even when they do not yet know them. Making empathic and accountable contact with a targeted peer may in fact be especially impactful if the targeted person is isolated and only an acquaintance. Further research is needed to test this assertion and to explore its implications for bystanders and socially marginalized adolescents and emerging adults in various types of settings—in schools and universities, as well as occupational settings, youth shelters, clinical milieu services, and community centers.

Interactions between bystanders and targeted peers may be awkward, uncomfortable, and idiosyncratic. In my research, bystander actions with targeted peers sometimes involved discussions—by text or in person—to acknowledge what happened, to express care and concern, and to listen and offer support. In other cases, bystanders invited the person to a movie with other friends, or asked the person to go for lunch. Sometimes

bystanders offered apologies for their own involvement in the aggression, or formed “circles of protection” with other bystanders—especially bystanders with shared social identities—and strategized about how to take action together as a group (Byers, 2016). As these interventions are peer based and contextually meaningful, they can take many forms.

Clinicians, educators, and all other adult staff in schools continue to have integral roles—demonstrating with clarity and seriousness that they consider bullying and cyberbullying to be painful and destructive for individuals and communities. Clear and consistent administrative policies in response to bullying and cyberbullying are crucial for establishing norms and expectations, as well as transparent processes for restorative justice. Recognizing and encouraging the work of adolescents and emerging adults engaging as peers will likely support these efforts, fostering awareness and discussion of community-oriented values.

Clinicians and educators can provide specific nonjudgmental guidance about how to support targeted peers, attending to the difficulty of recognizing peer aggression with empathy and accountability and with awareness of aversive/withdrawal responses to witnessing peer aggression. They can provide guidance in recognizing defensive rationalizations for disengagement. They can convey deep value for peer relations based on shared social identities and shared struggles against oppressions. In some settings, this might take the form of well-integrated curricula and programming related to intergroup and intragroup dialogue to promote social identity development, connection, and resilience (Ford & Malaney, 2012). In the simplest form, clinicians and educators can simply ask groups of adolescents and emerging adults on a regular basis to reflect on online and offline peer aggression they have recently noticed, how they have responded, and why. In doing so, we can recognize the complex intersubjective dynamics young people navigate, engaging and empowering them through deliberation as ethical subjects with agency.

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