Cyberbullying as a boundary crossing behaviour: The proliferation of harm through time and space

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Abstract

In this study, we examine cyberbullying as a boundary crossing behaviour.

Three semi-structured focus groups and nine interviews were conducted with youth as well as school and professional service personnel in Saskatchewan, Canada. The transcripts were coded firstly for boundary crossings and subsequently for spatial, verbal, and temporal markers.

Analysis suggests that cyberbullying crosses boundaries of location, time, embodiment, age groups, cultural groups, technological platforms, and supervisory structures.

The results suggest that digital technologies hasten cyberbullying through the ambiguation of boundaries.

Introduction

Outside the use of electronic communications technologies, current definitions of cyberbullying fail to elucidate the differences between bullying and cyberbullying. In this study, we examine cyberbullying as a boundary crossing behaviour. According to Wenger (1998) explicit markers of membership demarcate boundaries between communities of practice. Boundaries connect and separate communities in time and space; digital technologies (apps, social software, and websites) enable swift, sometimes invisible crossings between communities. As digital technologies increase the ambiguity of boundaries, the intent to harm more easily permeates heretofore separate social contexts, sometimes without expression of explicit power differentials and/or intentional repetition.

Through a socio-materialist lens, we explore:

1. Why cyberbullying is so pervasive;
2. What boundaries cyberbullying crosses; and
3. Why cyberbullying is resistant to interventions.

Spatial patterns

Based on the work of Mol and Law (1994) and informed by the work of Sørensen (2009), we used the metaphor of spatial relations to refer to situated patterns of social transactions performed through relations.

> "The three spatial metaphors form different spatial imaginaries of the materials. The metaphor of **network** indicates the connectedness; **fluid**, the varying character of the ways in which components are related; and **region**, the grouping of elements in containers" (Sørensen, 2009, p. 27). **(Figure 1.)**

The messages—regardless of the modality—function as **boundary objects**; they are "shared spaces where here and there are confounded . . . the stuff of action" (Star, 2010, p. 4).

Methods and Materials

Participants

- 2 youth focus groups
- 1 adult focus group (teachers and school counsellors)
- 9 adults: principals, police, counsellors, and teachers.

Interviews

- Between June 2015 and May 2018, a trained graduate student conducted in-person and telephone interviews. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended and probing questions.

Analysis

- *Phase 1:* Thematic, inductive coding for evidence of technology as related to boundary crossing.
- *Phase 2:* Refinement of codes and re-coding for **types** of crossings.

Results

Eleven types of boundary crossings emerged through the coding process. Examples:

Temporal: *"I think on the summer break because you have more time to cyberbully and you're not going to get in trouble by a teacher because the person you're bullying to is probably going to forget to tell on you."*

Identity: *"So even the discussion around what is private, protection, where do I end and where does somebody else begin, all of those, whether that's personal or that's social development, privacy, once it's out there, it's out there."*

Physical Location: *"Well, we had a graduate of our school and then a current student that were fighting and the current student basically sent a reply. . . Then the graduate's parents went to our student's [workplace]."*

Digital Location: *"It's like a pillow that's filled with feathers; once you open it, and you fly all the feathers and all the words and all the feathers are gone – feathers being a metaphor for the words – they're gone!"*

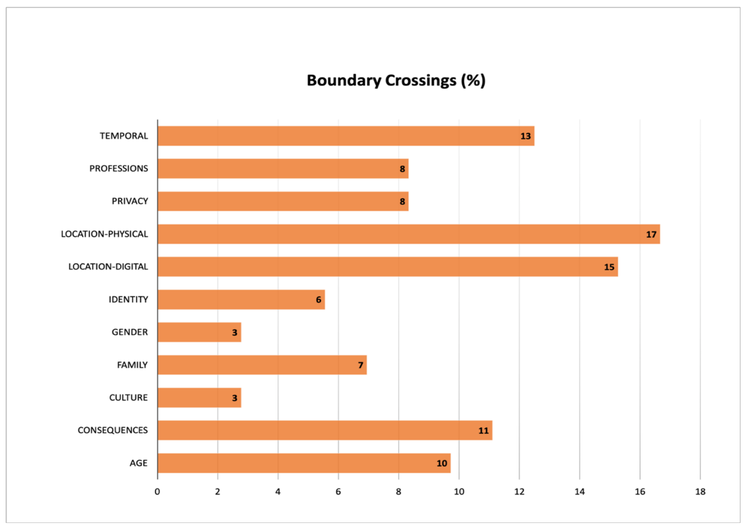

Figure 3. Locations of boundary crossing

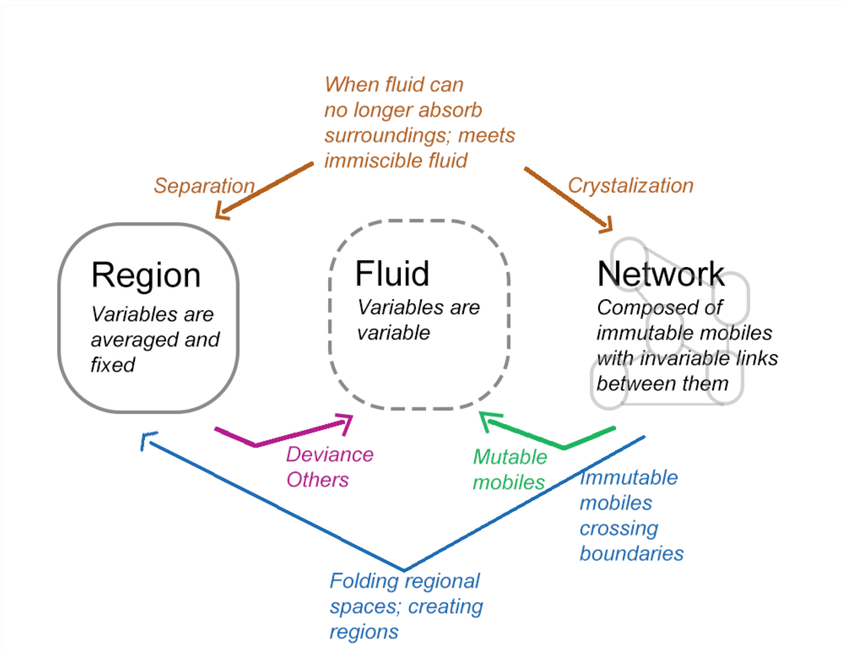

Figure 1. Spatial patterns of relations

Discussion

Although existing simultaneously, the social patterns of relations as per Figure 1 can be analyzed separately.

Networks are brittle. If an element is removed from the configuration, the network ceases to function and becomes fluid. If the network maintains its structure, it can move (*fold*) to a new region and continue functioning.

A **region** is strong so long as its boundary remains impermeable. If something (such as a person or digital message) enters, the region can mutate and become fluid.

Fluids are resilient. They thrive on constant movement and new members. Yet, given certain circumstances, fluids can separate or crystalize.

Social application: Summer Break

- De-configuration of the **network** nodes (i.e., teachers are missing) → freedom to cyberbully.
- Classroom-**region** boundary is not in force → more time to engage in sending messages.

Social application: School ⇄ workplace

- As the message (boundary object) travels, the **regions** of school and workplace become permeated.
- The **network** nodes lose configuration (i.e., student roles, parent roles).
- Membership shifts becoming increasingly **fluid**.

Conclusions

Digital-message-boundary-objects confound here and there. If networks break down and regional boundaries become permeable, social activity becomes fluid. Fluid social activity continually reshapes itself to conform to the contours of its environment. The fluidity of cyberbullying makes its boundaries and configuration difficult to 'locate' and, thus, highly resistant to interventions.

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