MORAL ORIENTATION AND COPING STRATEGIES FOR TEEN ELECTRONIC SOCIAL AGGRESSION: DEVELOPING THEMES FOR PUBLIC SERVICE MESSAGES AND ADVOCACY GROUPS

Jennifer M. Olsen, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI  
Karen Smreker, Michigan State University, East Lansing, MI

Electronic social aggression, harassment through the use of computers and mobile technologies, and a form of social aggression, is on the rise (David-Ferdon & Feldman Hertz 2007). Tweens and teens use social networking websites, email, and text messaging as tools for bullying and harassing their peers. A recent study suggests that a young adults’ (aged 12) moral sense in the real world may not translate to behaviors in the electronic world (Jackson et al. 2009) and that research is needed to understand moral behavior online.

The effects of victimization include depression and suicide, and since electronic social aggression often occurs in settings away from parents and teachers, with little or no conventional social control, it often produces aggression against others (Klomek et al. 2007; Hay & Evans, 2006). According to the Centers for Disease Control, suicide is the third leading cause of death among 15-24-year olds (12.3% of deaths annually) (2005). To stop the cycle of abuse, it is imperative to offer young people effective tools they will want to use in response to electronic social aggression. Based on Protection Motivation Model (Tanner et al. 1991), a Social-Cognitive approach, victims can better cope with victimization if they are confident in their abilities to use tools that protect against the aggression and that the tools are effective.

Advocacy groups have created intervention strategies for teenagers. For example, ThatsNotCool.com is a website developed by the Ad Council, the Family Violence Prevention Fund, and the Office of Violence Against Women that contains suggestions for a teen’s response to electronic social aggression. However, such resources are scarce, and those that exist have not been evaluated; there is a pressing need for research that examines electronic social aggression and resources for teenagers. The purpose of the proposed study is to develop a framework for the creation and evaluation of non-aggressive electronic social aggression response tools for teenagers and explore the utility of present tools with a focus on moral orientation.

Literature Review

Moral Development and Orientation

When approaching moral development, there are two major theorists that dominate the field: Kohlberg and Gilligan. Kohlberg proposed three general levels of morality and two stages within each level. The first level is called the Preconventional, or Premoral, Level. In this level, the person follows the society’s rules of right and wrong basing their decisions on possible consequences, both positive and negative. The two stages in this level are punishment and obedience orientation and naïve instrumental orientation. In punishment and obedience orientation, the decision of whether an action is good or bad is based on whether the action will receive a reward or a punishment. If the action is likely to be punished, the person will deem the action negative and not complete the action. However, an action need only not be punishable in order for the person to be willing to complete it. The second stage, naïve instrumental orientation, bases actions on reciprocity. Someone will complete an action out of fairness, not out of gratitude or loyalty. The second level is called the Conventional Level. At this level, the person’s moral decisions are based on the expectations of their family, nation, and/or group. They also support and are able to justify the social order of which they are a part. The two stages within the Conventional Level are good-boy, nice-girl orientation and law-and-order orientation. In good-boy, nice-girl orientation, actions are made based on whether the action helps others and whether or not those people approve of the actions. In law-and-order orientation, a person does what is viewed as right because they want to maintain the current social order, or they think it is their duty. The last of Kohlberg’s stages is the Postconventional, Principled, or Autonomous Level. In this level, the person tries to identify what is universally moral. The two stages within the Postconventional, Principled or Autonomous Level are social-contract orientation and universal ethical principle orientation. In social-contract orientation, morals are based on general human rights that are applicable across all societies. This stage believes that opinions and values are relative and different methods are needed to reach consensus. In universal ethical principle orientation, moral decisions are based on universal principles
such as justice, equality, and reciprocity. Rights are determined by the individual based on their own decisions (Thomas, Kohlberg's Moral Development Model, 2005).

Gilligan chose to focus on moral orientations more than stages or levels. She did, however, agree with Kohlberg about the existence of three stages in moral development: Preconventional, Conventional, and Postconventional. In Preconventional, Gilligan believed children held a more egocentric view and had little concern as to other’s interests. As children transition into the Conventional stage, they gain responsibility to others and develop more socially based morality becoming self-sacrificing. Finally, as people reach the Postconventional stage, they realize that their own welfare and that of others are equally important and necessary. She felt that males held a more justice view of morality, while females held a more caring view (Thomas, Gilligan's Compassionate Caring, 2005). In a caring orientation, females focus on empathy, interdependence, and how others will respond. In justice or rule based orientation, the reasoning is more autonomous, focusing on independence, rules, and a hierarchy of relationships (Jackson et al. 2009). She felt that because of these societally driven different views males were likely to appear to have higher moral development than females within Kohlberg’s model because it was justice biased (Thomas, Gilligan's Compassionate Caring, 2005). Thus, Gilligan points to gender bias and suggests cautious interpretation of moral development per se if we use Kohlberg's approach.

As children spend more time online interacting in email, social networks, and chat rooms, there is evidence that their offline morality may not translate to the online world. Personality in real life may be vastly different from the Internet personality. The “anonymity, high degree of control, and the ability to find similar others, [the internet] creates a unique protective environment that encourages people to express themselves more freely than they would in a regular interaction” (Amichai–Hamburger 2005, pp. 27). He goes on to say that the internet may be the only place was some people can communicate efficiently because of these variables. In real life, people experiment with alternative attitudes and identities, eventually assuming a single personality. On the internet, contrary to real life, the individual can create a safe environment where s/he can continue to experiment with alternative personalities on a more regular basis versus being forced to choose a singular identity. While a potentially beneficial attribute, the internet can also negatively change personalities because there appears to be no true, immediate consequences. Additionally, group mentality can be more prevalent on the Internet. Group mentality is dangerous because the individuals are no longer thinking in ways they normally would. As a group, the people may go to extreme measures that they would normally not agree with on an individual basis (Amichai–Hamburger 2005).

Another theory posits that people are one type of person in a social setting, yet when online, they are able to bring out unexpressed qualities that they would otherwise feel unable to portray (Bargh et al. 2002). A recent study examined how gender, race, and morality online related to the real world. In the study, 515 children, with an average age of 12, were asked about their beliefs concerning moral behavior both online and in the real world. Specifically, the authors hoped to determine what moral behaviors and beliefs that children held in the real world and what behaviors they felt were acceptable on the Internet. In addition to looking at different moral stages/levels and orientations, race and gender was also taken into account. Additionally, moral behavior in the real world was an accurate prediction of morally questionable behavior on the Internet. Also, if an action was considered morally questionable, but advanced individual goals, this predicted the acceptability of morally questionable behaviors on the Internet. However, the more important good moral character was in the real world, the less likely harmful Internet behavior would be found acceptable. Overall, moral behaviors/attitudes held in the real world were not necessarily the same as those moral behaviors/attitudes used on the Internet (Jackson et al. 2009).

Social Aggression

Over the last two decades, socially manipulative aggression has been given increasing attention by researchers. This form of aggression has been given 3 different names: indirect aggression, relational aggression and social aggression. There is general agreement in the literature that these types of aggression cause harm by spreading rumors, using others, gossiping, ignoring others or excluding them from the group (Archer & Coyne 2005). All three of these terms are similar with regard to the manipulative acts they entail, are considered social strategies, and show sex differentiation in the female direction (Archer 2004). However, the terms do differ slightly in their emphasis and conceptualizations by researchers. Similarly, researchers using each of these labels disagree about which term is most useful when describing this type of aggression. Here, we will discuss these three terms and argue that social aggression is the most useful term to use when describing the manipulative behaviors listed above.

Indirect Aggression. Indirect aggression is the original term used to describe socially manipulative aggression. Indirect aggression has been defined as “a type of behavior in which the perpetrator attempts to inflict pain in such a manner that he or she makes it seem as though there is no intention to hurt at all” (Björkqvist et al. 1992 pp. 118). These types of
behaviors include spreading rumors, embarrassing others in public and excluding others from a group (Archer & Coyne 2005). The “behind-the-back” nature of indirect aggression is the key feature of this type of aggression and one that typically allows the aggressor to remain anonymous to the victim. Indirect aggression is typically defined as a low-cost way of causing harm to others (Björkqvist 1992).

**Relational Aggression.** The term relational aggression was introduced in 1995 by Crick and Grotpeter and has been defined as “behaviors that harm others through damage (or the threat of damage) to relationships or feelings of acceptance friendship, or group inclusion” (Crick et al. 1999 p. 77). Like indirect aggression, most forms of relational aggression can be considered “behind-the-back,” however, it can also be overt. The defining feature of relational aggression is on the intention to harm group membership or a relationship (Archer & Coyne 2005). The items used to measure both relational and indirect aggression are almost identical, leading some researchers to argue that relational aggression is simply a new name for indirect aggression (Björkqvist 2001).

**Aggression in Dyadic Relationships.** Previous definitions of relational aggression have considered manipulation in a dyadic relationship. This type of manipulation has been termed relational manipulation (Crick et al. 1999; French, Jansen & Pidada 2002), although this type of manipulation is not commonly found in more contemporary definitions of relational aggression (Archer & Coyne 2005). Similarly, social aggression researchers have referred to manipulative actions in a dyadic relationship as direct relational aggression. This is defined as “behaviors that damage another child’s friendship or feelings of inclusion by the peer group” (Xie et al. 2002 pp. 206). The distinction between aggression performed within a social group and within a dyad is important. However, the key component to defining an act as socially aggression lies with intent, regardless of the number of people involved.

**Social Aggression.** Social aggression is defined as being “directed toward damaging another’s self-esteem, social status, or both, and may take such direct forms as verbal rejection, negative facial expression or body movement, or more indirect forms such as slanderous rumors or social exclusion” (Galen & Underwood 1997 pp. 589). Social aggression includes all of the behaviors used to describe indirect and relational aggression (Archer & Coyne 2005). This is the only term that includes both overt and covert forms of social manipulation and also includes damaging nonverbal behaviors (Underwood 2003). For this reason, we find this term to be the most inclusive and useful when defining nonverbal aggression that occurs between individuals with intent to negatively affect both interpersonal and group relationships. For the purposes of this research, we define social aggression as an overt or covert act intended to socially harm a person or persons, including manipulating or disrupting relationships or damaging another’s social standing.

**Cyberbullying.**

Cyberbullying is on the rise, with over 80% of teenagers having access to at least one form of new media technology, i.e. cell phone, computer, etc. (David-Ferdon & Feldman Hertz 2007). Cyberbullying can include the sending or posting of malicious messages or images through the internet, using means such as social networking websites and emails, and/or digital devices, such as text messaging through cell phones. The behaviors can be considered harassment, stalking, exclusion, bullying, and threats. These forms of electronic social aggression mean that children can be bullied at anytime and bullying is no longer restricted to mainly encounters at school (Feinberg & Robey 2008).

There are six major types of cyberbullying: denigration, exclusion, flaming, harassment, threats and stalking; impersonation, and outing and trickery. Denigration is the posting or sending of gossip/rumors about a person with the intention of hurting his/her friendships and/or reputation. In exclusion, the victim is intentionally not included in online activities. Flaming is a fight that occurs online or through digital devices that uses angry and inappropriate language. Harassment/threats/stalking occurs when the victim is sent vicious, threatening, and inappropriate messages on multiple occasions. Impersonation is when the attacker uses another person’s online user name or cell phone to either send the victim harmful messages or create harmful or embarrassing circumstances for the victim by pretending to be someone else. Lastly, outing/trickery takes place when the attacker engages in an electronic conversation with the victim and successfully tricks the victim into revealing sensitive information. The attacker then forwards the information on to other people (Feinberg & Robey 2008).

Today more teens are emailing, texting, and using social networking websites than ever before. While these technologies allow for easier communication, they also put teens at greater risk for becoming a victim of cyberbullying. In a study by Wolak and colleagues, they discovered that from the years 2000-2005, the number of youth who were harassed online increased by 50%. In another study, it was determined that most cyberbullying was done via rude comments versus threatening comments or rumors. Other findings indicated that most students who were cyberbullied did not experience the
same type of harassment at school. In fact, only 23% of those cyberbullied were also bullied at school. In addition, several studies showed that there was a significant relationship between cyberbullying and emotional distress, sexual solicitation, carrying a weapon at school, school conduct problems, and even low caregiver-youth connectivity. Therefore, cyberbullying has the potential to be just as detrimental to students as traditional bullying, possibly even more since more youth are at risk of being a victim (David-Ferdon & Feldman Hertz 2007).

In one study, 148 middle school and high school students were interviewed in focus groups. Two 45 minutes focus groups took place at the middle school and two more took place at the high school with students separated by gender. The experimenters hoped to understand the impact that cyberbullying had on students. The findings showed that the majority of students had access to the Internet in their home and had their own cell phones. The girls indicated that they believed cyberbullying was indeed a problem at their school, while boys were less likely to view cyberbullying as a problem. The students went on to say for the most part cyberbullying took place outside of school. The exception to this statement was cyberbullying via text messages. Most students sent text messages throughout the school day, despite rules stating that students cannot have cell phones during school hours. Since it is against school policy to text message during school hours, most students admitted they were not likely to report cyberbullying to the faculty. Students indicated that they were more likely to report cyberbullying to a parent than faculty member. However, most victims do not report the cyberbullying to their parent for fear that they will lose their Internet privileges. Students suggested that to cope with cyberbullying, the victim should block or ignore the attacker rather than retaliate (Agatston et al. 2007).

Another study continued to look at the extent of cyberbullying and the repercussions it can have on the victim. The study stated that 90% of adolescents ages 12 through 17 use computers and by age 10, they are more likely to use the Internet than adults. They cited that Pew Internet and American Life Project conducted a phone survey in 2000 talking to 754 youth between the ages of 12 and 17 and found that 73% they use the Internet regularly. This 73% equates to about 17 million teenagers, while 29% of those younger than 12 also go online regularly. Among the older children, 89% of boys/95% of girls send or receive emails, 74% use instant messaging to talk to friends with 46% saying they instant messaged for 30 to 60 minutes per session. Additionally, 69% stated they used instant messaging several times a week. When asked, 37% of the respondents stated that they used electronic communication to say something they would not have said in person, 57% had blocked a message from someone, and 64% had refused to respond to a message. The authors also mentioned that, as of 2001, 43% of people whom text message were ages 12 to 17. In their study, the authors also asked youth about their experiences and views of cyberbullying. They conducted a survey with 384 respondents under the age of 18, out of a total 571 respondents. The average age of the participants was 14.1 and 70% were between grades 2-12. On the survey, online bullying was defined to the participants as “as behavior that can include bothering someone online, teasing in a mean way, calling someone hurtful names, intentionally leaving persons out of things, threatening someone, and saying unwanted, sexually related things to someone” (Patchin et al. 2006 pp. 12). Around 29% had been bullied online, over 47% had witnessed cyberbullying, and 11% admitted they had cyberbullied someone else. In terms of cyberbullying, 50% of the participants stated that they had been disrespected by others, 30% had been called names, 60% had been ignored, 21.4% percent had been threatened, 18.8% had rumors spread about them, 19.8% were picked on, and lastly, 19.3% were made fun of. The survey found that chat rooms were the most likely place for cyberbullying to occur, with text messages being second, and emails being third. The frequency at which the students were cyberbullied varied greatly among the victims. While 83 students stated that they had been cyberbullying 3.36 times in the last 30 days, another had been cyberbullied on 50 occasions in the same time period. Probably most significantly, the experimenters questioned the participants about how cyberbullying made them feel and how they responded to the bullying. The top three emotional responses to cyberbullying were frustration, anger, and sadness with scores of 42.5%, 40%, and 27% respectively. While about a fourth was affected at home, almost a third was affected at school. Less than a fourth claimed not to be bothered by the bullying, and 44% claimed that they were not at all affected by the bullying. When asked how they responded to being attacked, 20% stayed offline by force while 32% removed themselves from the situation somehow. It also appeared that victims where much less likely to inform an adult of problems than to inform an online friend, 9% to 56.6%. In a rather telling discovery, it seems that 75% of online bullies have at some point been a victim of online bullying themselves (Patchin, Hinduja, & Sameer 2006).

**Protection Motivation Theory**

The Protection Motivation Model (PMT) is a model that has been developed to discuss how people deal with threats. The model posits that an individual's likelihood of taking protective actions against threats is dependent on threat and coping appraisals. Threat appraisals are based on 1) how severe the threat is 2) how likely the threat is to occur, and coping...
appraisals are based on 1) the ability the person has to cope with the threat (also called coping response efficacy), and 2) whether the person believes they can carry out the coping behavior (also called self-efficacy) (Tanner et al. 1991).

First, fear will occur after the threat is appraised if the threat and likelihood of occurrence are both high. These would be the first two steps in PMT. If both the threat and likelihood are high, the person will continued along the ordered means. If fear occurs, the person will then appraise whether or not they have the ability to cope with the threat. While some researchers suggest that fear is not necessary for this next step to occur, others suggest that if fear is present, the likelihood that the person will begin to appraise their coping response efficacy also increases. It is also possible that through maladaptive coping responses, the person can reduce their fear level, but not reduce the danger. Also, people may use their pertinent information from their environment to help assist in their appraisal of their coping response efficacy (Tanner et al. 1991).

Current Electronic Social Aggression Resources

There are a growing number of resources available to victims of cyberbullying, ranging from electronic response cards, called Callout Cards (ThatsNotCool.com 2009), and message boards to phone hotlines and books, articles and websites giving advice to victims. Because the Ad Council has been the leading producer of Public Service Announcements since 1942, we will describe the responses their campaigns suggest for dealing with forms of cyberbullying, including electronic teen dating violence.

Cyberbullying Prevention Campaign

The Ad Council’s Cyberbullying Prevention Campaign is sponsored by the National Crime Prevention Council and the U.S. Department of Justice. The campaign defines cyberbullying as “using the Internet or mobile devices to send or post harmful or cruel text or images” (Ad Council 2007). This initiative encourages teens to visit www.ncpc.com/cyberbullying to learn more about cyberbullying. On this website, teens can find advice on how to deal with bullies, which includes deleting cyberbullying messages, blocking communication with cyberbullies and speaking with other students, teachers and school administrators to develop rules against cyberbullies (National Crime Prevention Council 2007). The forms of response suggested on this website encourage victims to avoid directly responding to the bully, which we believe could result in unresolved emotional impacts.

Teen Dating Violence Prevention Campaign

The Ad Council’s other current campaign dealing with electronic social aggression does give teens tools for direct response with their bullies. This campaign deals mainly with teen dating violence and is sponsored by The Family Violence Prevention Fund and the Office on Violence Against Women. According to the Ad Council’s website, 1 in 4 teens in a dating relationship say they have been harassed, put down or called names by their partner through texting or cell phones. They claim that the Internet and cell phones are prime environments for exhibiting controlling behavior in relationships, such as pressuring for nude pictures or sending unwanted text messages, which can lead to relationship violence (Ad Council 2009). The PSAs in this campaign provide teens with tools to initiate conversation around this issue and encourage them to visit www.ThatsNotCool.com, where teens can find information on teen dating violence and message boards for discussing textual harassment, privacy problems, communicating clearly and more. This website also offers Callout Cards as a tool for victims of cyberbullying, textual harassment and electronic teen dating violence. These cards feature humorous phrases such as “Congrats! With that last text you’ve achieved stalker status.” and “It was so satisfying spending the last 12 hours IM-ing” (ThatsNotCool.com 2009). The Callout Cards provide victims with a tool for directly responding to victims; however, we question the perceived usefulness of these cards in the minds of teen victims of electronic social aggression.

Direct Bully Response

Much of the advice given to victims of electronic social aggression, including the advice from the Cyberbullying Prevention Campaign, encourage avoiding directly responding to bullies. Dr. Susan Lipkins, a psychologist, author and leading authority in campus conflict and violence in schools, suggests that it is actually more useful to respond directly to bullies. “We know that, 50 percent of the time, if you just say no to the bully, they’ll stop,” she says (Winfrey 2009). Dr. Lipkins says that telling victims to ignore bullies is the worst advice to give to a child and instead recommends teaching
victims to stand up to their bullies using both words and body language. “We have to help the children to have a stand, to have a voice to express themselves... We have to teach the kids how to protect their space and how to be firm and not a victim” (Winfrey 2009).

This advice from Dr. Lipkins is in direct conflict with the “no response” methods suggested by the Cyberbullying Prevention Campaign, but seems to support the Callout Cards offered by www.ThatsNotCool.com. Our current research serves to investigate the perceived effectiveness of this method of directly responding to bullies of electronic social aggression.

Research Agenda

The present research is designed to explore the possible connection between victim moral orientation and electronic social aggression response method choice.

H1: Electronic social aggression victims are more likely to choose response methods with the same moral orientation as their own.

Phase I: Interviews

Ten face-to-face interviews will be conducted with teens. The goal of these interviews will be to establish new response methods to electronic social aggression. Before the interview, each participant will fill out The Child Survey (Jackson et al. 2009) to assess moral behavior and attitudes in both the real and virtual worlds, as well as moral orientation. At the beginning of each interview, participants will be asked to think back to a time when they were involved in, or heard of an instance of a peer being involved in, any form of electronic social aggression, which will be defined by the interviewer. Each participant will be asked the same questions, which will be structured to investigate what responses the teens think will be useful and effective in dealing with electronic bullies.

Using the information discovered by interviewers, we will create three to four response methods that will be evaluated during Phase II. Based on the results of The Child Survey (Jackson et al. 2009), each response method will also be classified as being preferred by participants with either a care or justice moral orientation.

Phase II: Focus Groups

We will conduct four one-hour long focus groups in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the alternative response methods developed during the interview portion of our research. Participants will be asked to complete The Child Survey (Jackson et al. 2009) online before the focus group. Using the results of this survey, we will assign participants to a focus group with other teens that share their same moral orientation. We will conduct two care orientation focus groups and two justice orientation focus groups, with six participants each. At the beginning of each focus group, participants will be asked to think back to a time when they were involved in, or heard of an instance of a peer being involved in, any form of electronic social aggression, which will be defined by the moderator. Participants will then be shown all of the response methods we created and will be asked to look over the options, talk about the advantages and disadvantages, discuss what they do and do not like and select the one(s) they like the best.

In addition to selecting their preferred alternatives, participants will also be asked to offer reasons for why they chose these options. The focus group moderator will ask participants to evaluate how effective they think each response method would be in terms of ending electronic social aggression and whether or not they would be comfortable using each alternative. Again, participants will be asked to discuss their reasons for their responses.

The focus group will be designed to evaluate the perceived effectiveness and usefulness of each response method, as well as whether or not we correctly classified each as being appropriate for either a care or justice moral orientation. If it is necessary, we will alter the response methods based on participant feedback to ensure that we offer response methods that are appropriate for each moral orientation.

Phase III: Survey

We will conduct a survey of teens to discover the effectiveness and usefulness of each of the electronic social aggression response methods we created, as well as the Callout Cards on www.ThatsNotCool.com, based on moral orientation. The questionnaire will begin with The Child Survey (Jackson et al 2009) to assess the moral orientation of each participant. The teens will then be asked to rate how useful and effective they perceive a response method to be through a
series of Likert scale items. Through analysis of survey results, we hope to discover which response methods teens of each moral orientation will be most likely to use, in terms of believing they have the ability to use it and trusting the response method will be effective in ending the electronic social aggression.

**Next Steps**

The results of this research will offer a foundation for further examination of electronic social aggression, moral orientation, and the development of recommendations for intervention strategies, policy, and the framing of public service announcements themes. Understanding the possible connection between moral orientation and electronic social aggression response method will allow for the creation of useful and effective tools for teen victims.

**References**


