

Cyber Aggression / Cyber Bullying and the Dark Triad: Effect on Workplace Behavior / Performance

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Abstract—In an increasingly connected world, where speed of communication attempts to match the speed of thought and thus intentions; conflict gets actioned faster using media like the internet and telecommunication technology. This has led to a new form of aggression: “cyber bullying”. The present paper attempts to integrate existing theory on bullying, and the dark triad personality traits in a work environment and extrapolate it to the cyber context.

Keywords—Conflict at Work, Cyber bullying, Dark Triad of Personality, Toxic Employee.

I. INTRODUCTION

DESPITE the wide-spread use of Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) in everyday life, we are only now beginning to understand the effects and influence of the use of internet or cell phones on communication skills and social relationships. Against this backdrop, there are an increasing number of cases relating to the medium being misused for aggressive acts. Despite the endless opportunity and access provided by ICT for learning, communicating and connecting, it has also become a medium for acts of aggression / cyber bullying, a burgeoning form of social aggression.

A. Aggression / Bullying Defined

The construct of bullying / aggression that occurs online has yet to be properly defined. The lack of a clear definition prevents a full understanding of this construct and how it relates to developmental, social and emotional outcomes. It has been termed as online aggression, cyber bullying, internet harassment, virtual harassment and electronic aggression.

The most common definition of bullying is based on [1]’s definition, which states that “. . . a person is being bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons”. Three characteristics are emphasized: (1) a power differential between those who bully and those who are victimized; (2) repeated harm over time; and (3) an intention to harm.

B. Cyber-Bullying Explained

More generally, [2] contends that power in an online environment is not based on the perpetrator’s possession of power, but rather on the victim’s lack of power. Defined as “willful and repeated harm inflicted through the medium of

electronic text” [3], cyber bullying puts targets under attack from a barrage of degrading, threatening, and/or sexually explicit messages and images conveyed using web sites, instant messaging, blogs, chat rooms, cell phones, web sites, e-mail, and personal online profiles.

Emerging theory indicates the need to treat cyber-bullying as a standalone entity without the confounding role that the more traditional concept of bullying plays. Additionally, negative acts using the medium of internet, irrespective of their terminological classifications, were perceived as immoral and anti-social. Cyber bullying emerges most commonly from relationship problems (break-ups, envy, intolerance, and ganging up); resulting in victims experiencing powerfully negative effects (especially on their social well-being).

C. Cyber-Bullying and Anonymity

Cyber bullying is often a deliberate and relentless act, which is psychologically unnerving more so because of the anonymous nature of the assault. The result is that cyber bullying has become the attack mode of choice among young people, who increasingly engage in electronic bullying behavior that threatens and degrades others [3], [4].

This can take the form of posting pictures that later can be dramatically altered and posted on web sites once relationships sour, creating bash boards, or online bulletin boards, that invite others to contribute hateful and malicious remarks or starting text wars, which can result in the target receiving numerous cruel messages every day. Research has shown that cyber bullying victims experience a range of negative emotional effects [3]. Reference [5] found that half of the cyber-victimized youth in their study did not know the identity of their antagonist. This makes cyber bullying more serious than traditional forms of bullying [6].

D. Cyber-Bullying and Empathy

Affective empathy involves a process of neural resonance and adopting the psychological point of view of others’. Social developmental experimental research has shown that face-to-face emotional cues appear to inhibit aggression. The ICT context, with its characteristic paucity of social cues, both non-verbal and paralinguistic, may limit the opportunities for the neural pathways supporting vicarious responses to become activated, and thereby limit opportunities for empathy. Specifically, in this setting, the absence of social cues may limit neural processes of neural resonance [7], impeding affective empathy, and thereby facilitating aggression.

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II. THE DARK TRIAD OF PERSONALITY

The Dark Triad is a group of three personality traits: Narcissism, Machiavellianism and Psychopathy, all of which are interpersonally aversive. These are theoretically distinct but empirically overlapping personality constructs [8]. The term reflects the perception that these three diagnostic categories have at least some common underlying factors:

- The narcissistic personality is characterized by a grandiose self-view, a sense of entitlement, lack of empathy and egotism. Some theories associate it with the protection of a radically weak, shamed, or damaged self.
- The machiavellian personality is characterized by psychological manipulation and exploitation of others with a cynical disregard for morality and a focus on self-interest and deception.
- The psychopathic personality is characterized by impulsive thrill-seeking and in its "primary" form by selfishness, callousness, lack of personal affect, superficial charm, and remorselessness.

All three characteristics involve a callous-manipulative interpersonal style, and are considered aversive. Reference [9] carried out a factor analysis and found *agreeableness* strongly dissociated with all dark triad personality types, but other factors (neuroticism, lack of conscientiousness) were associated only with some members of the triad. However, more recent evidence suggests that agreeableness has nothing to do with the core of the Dark Triad. Instead the common variance is accounted for by callousness and manipulation [10]. In other words, once callousness and manipulation are accounted for, the Dark Triad characteristics are unrelated to each other.

III. PARTICIPANT ROLES AND CYBER BULLYING

While six participant roles have been identified in bullying research, these roles are often condensed into three broader categories: bullies, victims, and bystanders. Reports of online victimization were not distinguishable from perpetration underlining the likelihood of victims also engaging in bullying [4], [5].

The increased likelihood of retaliating online as compared to offline is consistent with research showing that individuals are more comfortable saying things online than offline. Moreover, these findings are consistent with that of traditional bullying situations, where the aggressive act is usually planned and intentional [11], whereas, for online bullying, adolescents report the primary motivations for engaging in aggressive behavior is spontaneous retaliation [12].

Current ICT media permit young people to interact with their social network at the time and place of one's choosing. Unfortunately, this prevalence of ICT media in their lives has led to a potential for "non-stop bullying" [6].

IV. TYPES OF AGGRESSION

Research has identified two broad subtypes of aggression that may lead to different types of bullying. *Direct aggression* is characterized by openly confrontational behaviors in an

attempt to directly harm the victim. Conversely, *indirect aggression* refers to the use of non-confrontational methods to harm or damage another's peer relationships. With indirect aggression, the perpetrator cannot always easily be identified, which provides a sense of anonymity and security. This suggests that bullies use various methods to aggress against others. Cyber bullying would typically fall in the ambit of indirect aggression.

Another distinction is between *hostile* (cf., reactive, impulsive) and *instrumental* (cf., proactive, premeditated) aggression. Hostile or reactive aggression is thought to arise in reaction to frustration, including in the face of perceived provocation, and especially with the inference that the "agent of frustration" acted on purpose. Instrumental aggression is thought to be planned behavior aimed at the utilization of aggression to achieve an end goal, and is often described as cold-blooded, implying a dominance of reasoned cognition over affect-driven processing. Many acts of aggression fuse both hostile and instrumental components [13].

Some acts of cyber-aggression were predicted better by reactive motives (e.g., sending aggressive text messages; posting embarrassing photos) and others by proactive motives (e.g., developing a website to attack someone). This suggests that distinct opportunities for aggressing online may be available that serve distinct motives for aggression.

Further, public scenarios of cyber-bullying were perceived as worse than private ones, and that anonymous scenarios were perceived as worse than not anonymous ones. Cyber scenarios generally were perceived as worse than traditional ones, although effect sizes were found to be small. These results suggest that the role of medium is secondary to the role of publicity and anonymity when it comes to evaluating bullying severity. Therefore, cyber bullying is not a priori perceived as worse than traditional bullying [14].

V. A FRAMEWORK TO STUDY CYBER-AGGRESSION / CYBER BULLYING

Reference [15] systematically addressed how young people might process social information online differently from face-to-face communication, due to the distinct structural and functional features of ICT. Guided by [11]'s social information processing (SIP) model, they examined how features of contemporary ICT might operate to influence processing at each SIP step, including cue encoding, cue interpretation, the recruitment of social goals, and the generation, evaluation and execution of responses. For each step, they examined the affordances (i.e., opportunities for action provided within a particular environment) for cyber-aggression and victimization that result from the functions and features of ICT contexts. Reference [16] proposed a model of cyber-social information processing to consider four distinct types of aggression, based on the motive for aggressing and the self-control brought to bear on the execution of aggression. He called this the Quadripartite Violence Typology (QVT). He mapped the impulsivity of aggression with the affective valence of aggression motive to come up with four typologies of aggression: Impulsive-Appetitive Aggression; Impulsive-

Reactive Aggression; Controlled-Appetitive Aggression; Controlled-Reactive Aggression [16]. This explains how acts of aggression motivated by revenge are fundamentally different from acts motivated by expectations of positive rewards, and different again from acts motivated by the thrill of aggression itself.

Reference [17] extended this and applied it to a cyber context. He focused on how key individual and developmental differences in psychological processing are likely to give rise to and influence each type of aggression based on the features, functions, and affordances of ICT-mediated communication. In differentiating cyber-aggressive acts that arise spontaneously via automatic processes from those that are self-controlled behaviors, this model focused on how different aspects of online communication tools may influence psychological processes involved in the production of aggressive cyber-activity. By building on the framework for considering the role of the ICT medium on adolescents' processing of social information [15], and integrating [16]'s ideas about motive and self-control, [17]'s framework aimed to address the diversity in the concept of youth aggression in a cyber context.

A. Reactive Aggression

Reactive aggression is motivated by a reaction to aversive emotions such as anger and a concomitant desire for vengeance.

1. Impulsive-Reactive Aggression

Impulsive-reactive aggression maps most closely to the frustration-aggression model. Hostile aggression is thought to arise in reaction to perceived provocation, where a goal is blocked or otherwise a threat to the self is perceived. Attributions of hostile intent to other social agents, especially under conditions of situational ambiguity, have long been recognized as a contributor to hostile, reactive aggressive behavior in children and youth [18].

A core feature of ICT mediated communication, as reviewed by [15] is the paucity of semantic cues due to the reliance on text-only communication. Text-only communication—common to email, text messaging, writing on Facebook walls, and tweeting (i.e., Twitter)—provides neither nonverbal nor paralinguistic cues from which authorial intention can be discerned [4], [15]. This paucity of social cues may heighten perceived aggression thereby initiating aggressogenic processes. It appears common for adolescents, when they are behaving aggressively online, to report that they were reacting to another's provocation [12].

This leads to the following proposition:

P1: In an impulsive reactive context, actors are involved in reciprocal, spontaneous acts of aggression (Unplanned, immediate and reciprocal). Thus, in organizations individuals may perceive the tone of a message (e-mails or other online communication from colleagues) as hostile and show reactive cyber-aggression (venting online). This may lead to a trail of communication while also vitiating

the atmosphere, affecting work relationships as well as performance.

2. Controlled-Reactive Aggression

Not all instances of reactive aggression erupt; some simmer. Controlled-reactive aggression is considered vengeful in its motivation, aimed at rectifying a grievance or getting even over a perceived provocation. Its primary difference from impulsive-reactive aggression appears to be the exercise of effortful control processes and the elicitation of anger rumination.

A core feature of the online media is the permanence of digital data. The structural permanence of online social cues may provide fuel for anger-rumination [15], increasing the likelihood of controlled-reactive aggressive responses and augmenting the risk of cyber-aggression.

This leads us to the next proposition:

P2: In a controlled reactive context, cyber bullying may be used to intimidate or humiliate the victim at an opportune moment. This may form the basis of undermining and politically motivated behavior to take revenge for a perceived wrong in the past.

B. Appetitive / Instrumental / Proactive Aggression

Appetitive types of aggression are motivated by the positive reward, including positive effect, arising either directly with the act of aggression, or indirectly through material or social rewards achieved and desires attained consequent to the aggression. Instrumental / proactive aggression involves self-serving, reward-motivated, deliberate, planned behavior aimed at achieving those rewards [17]. It is linked with a lack of remorse and empathy, suggesting an absence of a key inhibitor of aggression.

1. Impulsive-Appetitive Aggression

In this case aggression is motivated by the immediate attendant exhilaration and thrill of violence and transgression. In the past few years, the role of sensation seeking in a range of antisocial risk behaviors, especially during adolescence, has become clear. Many young people seek to excuse their cyber-aggression by claiming they were just joking. Reference [19] has noted that most aggressive online messaging is not intended to harm, but only considered as kidding around by the aggressor. This may not be perceived as such by the target. But in a context that may be marked by an absence of cues to trigger empathic responses, and shifts in social norms online toward a more abrasive, less polite style of interaction, the likelihood of genuinely unintended aggression arises. A failure to foresee the consequences of one's behaviors does not mitigate responsibility for one's actions. In such cases, the role of thrill-seeking in appetitively motivated acts leaves open the possibility that unintended aggression does account for some incidents that get referred to as bullying.

P3: In an impulsive appetitive context, actors involved engage in cyber bullying for the thrill of getting after a victim. This may be seen in actions of ganging-up or systematic victimization of an individual perceived as a threat to the work-group (Unplanned, dysfunctional)

2. Controlled-Appetitive Aggression

The Theory of Planned Behavior (TPB) may productively inform the study of controlled-appetitive aggression [20]. This theory aims to account for why intentions do or do not result in actualized behaviors, and emphasizes the role of (a) attitudes toward the behavior; (b) subjective norms, or the perceived acceptability of the action in a particular context or setting; and (c) perceived behavioral control, or self-efficacy, for the behavior. Proactive aggression, in particular, is linked to beliefs justifying aggression.

TPB suggests that intentions are more likely to arise and to be actualized as behaviors when those behaviors are perceived to be normative. There is reason to believe that online communications are marked by a different set of social norms than traditional modes of communication [15]. Reference [21] have argued that norms around politeness are attenuated by the paucity of social cues, and ICT-communicators are consequently less likely to “make positive responses to each other, refrain from blunt criticisms of each other [or] to listen attentively to each other”.

Based on the above, the following is proposed in an organizational setting:

P4: In a controlled appetitive context, cyber bullying may be used as a planned outcome of perceived wrongs to discredit and undermine the victim systematically using the online medium especially if no organizational norms or sanctions exist to control such acts (Anonymous, planned and less accountability for action).

VI. PERSONALITY AND AGGRESSION

A number of factors may influence which participant role an individual assumes. For instance, research has examined how environmental and interpersonal factors such as social status and schools and the internet contribute to participant roles. Theories of cognitive and social empathy have also been used to explain why some bullies score well on tests of social intelligence, but display antisocial behaviors during observation. These studies have spurred interest into the investigation of bullies' personality traits. The present study aims to provide further understanding of the personality traits of bullies by examining a specific group of traits—the Dark Triad—that has been linked to aggression.

A body of research exists on school and adolescent bullying and its detrimental effects on their mental health leading to undesirable behavior and lowered self-esteem but *similar studies in a workplace situation are hard to come by*. The present paper attempts to fill this gap by trying to connect available research on cyber-bullying in a primarily educational context to aggressive online acts in a work situation.

Reference [22] proposed that bullying behavior is relatively stable from childhood to adulthood. Results demonstrated that highly aggressive children continue to be highly aggressive as adults. Results of their study also suggest that less aggressive individuals may grow out of their aggression by the age of 19—yet, if an individual continues to be aggressive after the age of 19, they are more likely to continue these aggressive

tendencies into adulthood. Based on this analysis, this article proposes to extend available literature to aggression acts by adults in a work environment.

VII. THE DARK TRIAD AND THE TOXIC EMPLOYEE

The illusions of grandeur, power, and the “satisfaction” of trouncing an opponent (or, humiliating a colleague) derive from a fragmented, false sense of self, or an egoist fixation, which is the root cause of toxic behavior [23]. Such toxic behavior has been described as psychological, a self-centered disconnect from our humanity, and a subsequent severing of empathic ties to other people.

Recent years have seen a growing body of research on destructive, abusive, or toxic employees. In particular, research has focused on how traits like narcissism, psychopathy, and Machiavellianism – the Dark Triad [8] – adversely affect numerous workplace outcomes. Narcissism has been linked to unethical behavior in CEOs [24] and a need for power [25]. Corporate psychopaths have diminished levels of corporate responsibility and can adversely affect productivity [26]. Machiavellianism is associated with diminished organizational, supervisor, and team commitment [27], along with a tendency to be perceived as abusive by subordinates [28] and to focus on maintaining power and using manipulative behaviors [29].

A. Machiavellianism

Machiavellianism refers to the tendency to manipulate and deceive others in social situations for personal gain. Those who score high on Machiavellianism also tend to score higher on measures of cognitive empathy [30], suggesting that the ability to manipulate others in social situations is related to the ability to predict and describe the behaviors of others. Thus, it appears that some bullies use this cognitive ability to engage in successful acts of manipulation in social groups.

P5: Machiavellianism should map well with Controlled-Appetitive Aggression.

B. Narcissism

Narcissism involves feelings of grandiosity, a sense of entitlement, and vanity. While these individuals appear egocentric, it is often the case that they truly possess a relatively low self-esteem. In what has been termed the Theory of Threatened Egoism, it is proposed that narcissism directly contributes to aggression and may be a defense mechanism to protect a fragile self-esteem. Reference [31] found that aggression occurs only when a Narcissistic Injury—a psychological injury to one's self esteem occurs. These narcissistic behaviors include, but are not limited to, practices of employee monitoring, micromanagement, and politically motivated performance appraisals.

Threatened Egoism has been used to explain why some individuals with seemingly high self-esteem aggress against others. Individuals high in narcissism did participate more frequently in indirect bullying than in physical direct bullying. Narcissistic individuals may perceive the costs of being directly aggressive as higher than the benefits of responding in

a more socially desirable way in order to maintain their social standing.

P6a: Narcissism should map well with Controlled-Reactive Aggression.

P6b: Individuals with a proclivity to Narcissism would resort more to cyber tactics due to the medium providing anonymity.

C. Psychopathy and Aggression

Three clusters of traits have been identified within the construct of psychopathy: impulsivity, callous-unemotional (CU) traits, and narcissism. Impulsivity is a multi-faceted construct, which has been defined as an increased response to provoked attacks and disinhibition of social restraints. CU traits reflect interpersonal coldness, such as a lack of empathy or guilt. Both impulsivity and CU traits have been linked to aggression, and CU traits in particular correlate positively with proactive and reactive aggression [32].

P7: Psychopathy should map well with Impulsive-Appetitive Aggression and moderately with Impulsive-Reactive Aggression.

VIII. THE DARK TRIAD AND BULLYING

Psychopathy was the most strongly related to bullying, followed by Machiavellianism, and Narcissism. Males scored higher on all facets of the Dark Triad. Males also reported participating in bullying more frequently than females, particularly in direct forms of bullying [33].

IX. CONFLICT AT WORK

Interpersonal conflict at work is behavior involving people imposing their will on others and victimizing them through extra-ordinary behavior; this can include argumentativeness, yelling, other elements of abusive supervision and bullying. This is associated with decreased team working efficiency and lower organizational productivity. Job insecurity, workload, frequency of conflict, social support from colleagues and leadership are all related to bullying. Bullying, as one pernicious form of conflict, may result from destructive organizational cultures [34]. A higher workload, the frequency of conflict and the existence of abusive forms of leadership have also all been related to the presence of Corporate Psychopaths. Corporate Psychopaths may be the biggest single contributor to conflict and bullying in any organizational setting [35].

According to social learning theory people learn vicariously by observing others' behavior especially when observing influential role models who are credible to the observer [36]. This implies that when unethical managers are present then toxic behavior such as rudeness, conflict and bullying will be magnified as it is learnt, repeated and copied throughout the organization. This may especially be the case when subordinates perceived benefits to bullying such as increased control, ability to manipulate and the gaining of power; but no costs or consequences of bullying such as organizational disciplinary proceeding.

Workplace incivility, expressed in such measures as rudeness, is associated with workplace performance and decreases levels of employee helpfulness. Workplace conflict is also associated with stress in the workplace. Workplace incivility has the potential to spiral into increasingly aggressive behavior, thus establishing the important link between uncivil behavior like yelling and arguments and outright conflict. One form of conflict, bullying has also been associated with the intention to leave an organization, increasing organizational costs.

A few deviant employees (whether leaders or managers or the line) can affect an entire business; making this worthy of further investigation. Since aggression / bullying in a work environment while a deviant behavior may also lead to deviant behavior from others or negative organizational outcomes, this paper also attempts to bring out the implications of cyber bullying in a work environment.

Counterproductive work behavior is the deliberate jeopardizing of workplace outcomes and normal functioning and has well-established connections with productivity and efficiency. Conflict is associated with high levels of counterproductive work behavior including sabotage and production deviance [35].

Conflict creates the conditions in which employees seek revenge on the perceived perpetrators of the conflict, such as company managers, in line with social exchange theory. Social exchange theory helps explain how and why people create unspecified reciprocal relationships with others and, at their discretion [37], repay in kind those who have helped (or hindered) them. Revenge is thus an element of reciprocity enacted by employees engaging in counterproductive work behavior towards the company [38]. Employees who engage in such behavior (e.g. sabotage) may, therefore, be seeking revenge against the company for the perceived wrongful actions of their managers viewed as agents of the corporation.

X. DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The behavior that employees exhibit is a product of the individuals' characteristics and the environment that they are immersed in. The above brings out the fact that individuals who use bullying as a tactic resort to various means to achieve a desired goal. Acts of aggression in the workplace serve to manipulate individuals and situations for personal gain. This has a direct impact for studies on politics and power-play within organizations. *The above discussion is seminal in that it attempts to study the link between the complex constructs of aggression/bullying behavior at the workplace with the dark triad personality traits and analyze how these associations apply to a cyber context.*

In a cyber connected world, newer avenues to aggress are available. This has direct implications on productivity at the workplace and the organizational climate. The above paper attempts to draw attention to this area which is growing in concern as incidents of cyber aggression increase in numbers and impact.

Though most of the research draws on studies on children and adolescents, it can be extrapolated to adults and merits

further study. The construct discussed is complex and relatively little work has been done on it; making it a green-field area for research. Due to lack of time, the above discussion is not backed by empirical data. Future research may try and attempt to fill this gap.

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