

---

## Understanding and Responding to Adolescent Girls' Online Cruelty Comprendre la cruauté en ligne des adolescentes et y réagir

---

Laura Sokal  
*University of Winnipeg*

---

### ABSTRACT

Many school counsellors have identified “cyber-bullying” among adolescent girls as a growing concern. In order to respond to this issue, this article begins with a new model of cyber-communications from the unique perspective of adolescent girls. Next, it explores the limitations of responding to this model, based on current understandings of cyber-bullying. Finally, based on the current literature, recommendations are made to school counsellors regarding the essential components of programming that show promise in addressing online cruelty among this group.

### RÉSUMÉ

De nombreux conseillers en milieu scolaire ont observé que la « cyberintimidation » chez les adolescentes est un problème croissant. Pour y répondre, cet article aborde un nouveau modèle de cybercommunications du point de vue particulier des adolescentes. On y explore ensuite les limites que comporte notre réaction à ce modèle d'après notre compréhension actuelle de la cyberintimidation. Enfin, en se fondant sur la littérature courante, on formule des recommandations aux conseillers scolaires concernant les composants essentiels de programmation qui semblent prometteurs pour la prise en charge de la cruauté en ligne au sein de ce groupe.

Over the past 20 years, perceptions of school bullying have changed from bullying being a natural part of school settings to it being perceived as a serious societal issue (Campbell, 2005). During that same time, evolving technology, such as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and wikis, has provided a new venue through which bullying may occur. While some school counsellors feel confident in their responses to face-to-face bullying, fewer report being trained and confident in their approaches for dealing with “cyber-bullying” (Zacker, 2009). Cyber-bullying is characterized by situations of perceived unequal power where a bully repeatedly uses cyber-space (e.g., telephones, computers, blogs, text messages) to harm a victim in social-emotional ways (Bhat, 2008).

While relatively little is conclusive in the burgeoning literature on cyber-bullying, Migliore (2003) showed that boys and girls cyber-bully differently. Girls are more likely to use instant messaging, online conversations, and e-mail to cyber-bully, whereas boys are more likely to create webpages that target victims or to use online threats. Cyber-bullying in adolescent girls is of special concern, however, given that girls prefer to use cyber-bullying over other forms of bullying (Nelson,

2003 cited in Li, 2010), incidences of cyber-bullying in school-age children are on the rise (Bhat, 2008), and adolescent girls are increasingly emerging as instigators (Owens, Shute, & Slee, 2000; Shariff, 2009). Moreover, it is during adolescence, a time when many young people are first permitted by their parents to participate in online communities, that young women may be especially vulnerable to this type of interaction. Espelage (2002) showed that adolescence is a developmental point when young women turn to their peers as the main support network through which to discuss problems, feelings, fears, and doubts. It is, therefore, essential that female adolescents receive supports from additional sources when offline friendships are affected by online behaviours such as cyber-bullying.

Despite this need, a number of issues have converged, leading many school counsellors to feel frustration and inadequacy in dealing with cyber-bullying situations. These issues include the lack of a clear definition of cyber-bullying, the inability to determine who is the victim and who is the bully in cyber-bullying situations, uncertainty about whether best practices for addressing face-to-face bullying also apply to cyber-bullying situations, the insidious nature of cyber-bullying and the veil of silence that surrounds it, and confusion about what the laws instruct and allow school counsellors to do in response to allegations of cyber-bullying.

Given the many challenges of addressing cyber-bullying as well as the vulnerability that adolescent girls might exhibit during this stage of development, it is essential that counselling approaches are based on best practice and a firm grounding in empirical support. Despite limitations, the research literature does provide some direction on the programmatic components that are required to effectively address these behaviours.

The discussion will begin with an exploration of a new model for understanding the nature of cyber-bullying from the unique perspective of adolescent girls. It will be followed by a discussion of the challenges counsellors meet when addressing cyber-bullying situations. Finally, recommendations for the essential components of programming intended to address female adolescent online cruelty will be presented.

#### FEMALE ADOLESCENT PERSPECTIVES ON CYBER-BULLYING

The most effective approaches to addressing cyber-bullying and online social cruelty require an understanding of the lived cyber-experiences of those affected by them. Research has shown that young people and adults perceive Internet communications and technology differently from one another (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006; Turnbridge, 1995), making understanding young girls' perceptions of cyber-bullying difficult for the adults who are trying to support these students. Barlow (as cited in Turnbridge, 1995) suggests that younger users, termed "natives," were born into a world where instant and broad-reaching communication technologies are developed on an ongoing basis. To these users, new technologies are anything but "new." In contrast, the older users, termed "immigrants," are those who have

chosen to learn to use technologies that are quite different from the technologies with which they were raised. As a result, immigrants tend to view technologies as tools used to conduct familiar tasks with greater efficiency, whereas natives tend to view technologies as a regular part of daily living where innovation in task and process are constant (Lankshear & Knobel, 2006).

An examination of adolescent (native) female perceptions of cyber-bullying conducted through the lens of an immigrant might lose validity in the data analysis stage, given the differing perspectives of these groups. In response, a recent study conducted with 14-to-16-year-old girls in Manitoba (Sokal & Girling, 2010) addressed the distinction between immigrants' and natives' views of technology through its research design. The research team was composed of a native and an immigrant. Participants were young women from a variety of urban and suburban school settings, representing students of mid to high socio-economic status, and ranging from 14 to 16 years of age. The native researcher interviewed the adolescent participants individually, and the participants then completed several online measures of adolescent identity development, sense of belonging, and self-esteem.

Next, the native researcher and the immigrant researcher analyzed the data separately. Through discussion, common themes were developed, and perspectives were cross-informed through this team approach. Participants were contacted to validate the findings and to ensure that it represented their perspectives. The research uncovered insights into young women's perspectives on the lived experiences with cyber-bullying, insights that may be helpful to counsellors in dealing with bullies, victims, and victim-bullies<sup>1</sup> in cyber-bullying situations. From this research, a model was developed that assists in understanding how young women's communication and affect are influenced by online contexts. The three essential theoretical components of this model are decreased empathy of the sender (Gorry, 2009), the receiver's perception of the imaginary audience (Vartanian, 2000), and impression management by the receiver (Krämer, & Winter, 2004).

Sokal and Girling (2010) showed that many of the adolescent girls they interviewed felt disinhibited online and behaved in ways they would not behave offline. For some girls, this meant they were able to overcome their shyness and interact with schoolmates with whom they could not interact in person. For others, it meant posting unkind comments that they would not state in face-to-face conversations. The perceptions of disinhibition expressed by the participants are supported by research by Subrahmanyam and Greenfield (2008), who showed that online social networking could decrease social anxiety.

Furthermore, Gorry (2009) suggests that disinhibition resulting in online cruelty may be a result of a lack of empathy. Empathy, which serves as a social anchor in minimizing the occurrence of such behaviours in face-to-face settings, is not an essential feature of online communications. We must, therefore, be vigilant to ensure that empathy in interactions is not lost with the burgeoning of online relationships.

Receiving a hurtful message online is further exacerbated by the receiver's perceptions that "everyone" can see the posting, especially on public posting sites such as Facebook. Awareness of the public nature of the receiver's humiliation was the most common theme in Sokal and Girling's (2010) research and is consistent with theorizing about adolescent development. Elkind's notion of the "imaginary audience" (see Vartanian, 2000) posits that adolescents believe that an audience is constantly watching them and judging them. During early adolescence, individuals become highly concerned with the perceptions of their peers and use these perceptions as a gauge of whether or not they belong (Urda & Klein, 1998). When postings are not only made but also responded to with additional postings by others, the imaginary audience becomes real and adolescents' hyperawareness of audience is validated. Thus, the posting of harmful messages is precipitated by a lack of empathy by the sender and causes an extreme affective response in the receiver, due to its public nature. Both of these components of the online context are supported by the third component of the model, "impression management."

Krämer and Winter (2008) use the term impression management to describe the choices that virtual networking users make when managing their impressions on others based on the information they post. Through posting pictures and through the types of communications posted, Krämer and Winter argue that online users have greater control over the impressions they make on others than do individuals in face-to-face interactions where they have less control of what information to share and what information to hide (e.g., age, status, appearance). Of particular note is the number of Facebook friends one has, a status symbol indicating popularity and self-efficacy in impression management to some adolescents as well as to some adults (Krämer & Winter, 2008; Sokal & Girling, 2010). Teens further develop their online identities by posting quotations of song lyrics, pictures of themselves at exclusive events with friends, and pictures with sexualized content (Sokal & Girling, 2010). Adolescent girls in Sokal and Girling's (2010) study perceived that they could manage the impression they make on others by representing themselves in these ways.

When one considers the research supporting the presence of disinhibition in adolescent girls' online behaviours, the unique perspectives of the lived experiences of adolescent girls (Sokal & Girling, 2010), and the impression management and imaginary audience that are so important to many girls during adolescence, it becomes evident why cyber-bullying and online cruelty are so distressing to adolescent girls. First, due to lower levels of empathy and higher levels of disinhibition, the online context allows the sender the opportunity to behave in ways she usually would not in face-to-face interactions. Second, the public nature of the hurtful comments accentuates the level of humiliation experienced by the receiver, especially in teens that perceive they are being monitored and judged by others. Finally, the carefully constructed online façade that the teen has managed in order to construct a certain impression comes crashing down in public.

This new model of understanding social media communications, from the perspectives of adolescent girls, is further enhanced by other findings in Sokal

and Girling's (2010) study. These researchers found that there was no association between time spent online and psychosocial development in girls. However, they found a negative correlation between the frequency of status updates posted and the self-esteem of the adolescent girls. Thus, girls with low self-esteem posted status changes more frequently than girls with higher self-esteem. These frequent postings, which could be viewed as opportunities for affiliation and/or a plea for belonging, were met with disdain by the other girls, in turn making the more vulnerable girls less accepted by their peers.

The research clearly shows how these types of online interactions have the potential to be destructive to young girls' identity, relationships, and psychosocial development. Awareness of the potential damage of online cruelty to young women should serve as a motivator for counsellors to develop empirically supported programming that promotes healthier types of online interactions and responds to violations of these practices by using best practices. Unfortunately, addressing this challenge presents a plethora of issues.

#### COUNSELLORS' CHALLENGES IN ADDRESSING CYBER-BULLYING

##### *Problems with Defining Cyber-Bullying*

Bhat (2008) defines cyber-bullying as sharing three characteristics with face-to-face bullying: (a) the bully harms the victim in social-emotional, verbal, or physical ways; (b) the harmful actions are repeated over time; and (c) there is a perceived power imbalance between the victim and the bully. Although there is no universally agreed-upon definition of bullying, most definitions of face-to-face bullying include these three aspects (Zacker, 2009).

In addition to the three features of face-to-face bullying, the definition of cyber-bullying also includes a fourth criterion (Bhat, 2008): the use of cyber-space, be it through mobile phones, computers, text messaging, blogs, or digital files. In addition, Shariff (2005) adds that cyber-bullying easily allows anonymity for the bully and participation of an undefined audience. Raskauskas and Stoltz (2007) define cyber-bullying as an indirect and relational form of aggression, whereas Chibbaro (2007) claims cyber-bullying can be either direct or indirect. Chibbaro classifies online threats and harassment as direct cyber-bullying, whereas she classifies hostile and insulting interactions between Internet users, called "flaming," as indirect cyber-bullying.

Shariff (2008, 2009) argues, from a legal perspective, that definitions of bullying are often too simplistic, failing to recognize the complexities of this phenomenon. From a counselling perspective, disagreement about the definition of cyber-bullying makes it difficult for school counsellors to determine whether conflictual incidents involving cyber-space actually constitute cyber-bullying *per se*. Furthermore, students and school administration are often in disagreement about whether cyber-bullying between school friends meets the definition of cyber-bullying or whether it is simply a form of expression (Shariff, 2008). For example, if two adolescent girls were in positions of equal power at school and one

of the girls was being unkind in her postings to the other girl, was cyber-bullying taking place? This situation would not constitute cyber-bullying, according to Bhat (2008), because it does not demonstrate all four essential components—the unequal power balance is missing. Shariff (2008, 2009), however, argues that online disagreements between friends with equal power are anything but equal, given that 30% of the audience tends to side with and support the perpetrator more often than the victim (Salmivalli, 2001). Although the students initially involved in the online exchange may hold equal power, the audience contributes to an imbalance when all the players are considered.

Shariff (2008, 2009) recognizes covert, anonymous behaviours as well as overt, non-anonymous behaviours as legally constituting cyber-bullying and suggests that nuanced intervention be available for both types of cyber-bullying. If a clearer definition of cyber-bullying were developed, then more targeted evidence-based practices could also be developed, and counsellors would benefit from having a set of validated tools to address these issues with their students.

Willard (2007a, 2007b) uses the term “online social cruelty” to describe the harmful interactions occurring online that may or may not meet the typical definitions of cyber-bullying, but that are problematic for children, youths, school counsellors, and families. This distinction is useful to school counsellors who may experience confusion about the differences between best practices for addressing bullying in general and best practices for addressing cyber-bullying. Online social cruelty is a broader term that encompasses many of the most common issues presented to school counsellors. The term avoids the conundrum presented when the definition of cyber-bullying does not fit, yet the counsellor is faced with supporting adolescents who are distressed by online interactions.

#### *Challenges of Identifying Bullies and Victims*

Counselling interventions for traditional bullying situations differentiate between the behaviours, intents, and counselling needs of bullies and victims and often suggest separate counselling groups for victims, bullies, and parents (Johnson, 2009). The distinction between these roles is less clear, however, in the case of cyber-bullying. The literature suggests that the prevalence of students who identify as both victims and bullies has been increasing (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), making it difficult for counsellors to feel confident that they are providing appropriate services to students involved in these situations. These bully-victims are often students who become bullies after being victims of bullying by others (Li, 2006). Although this difficulty is also common in face-to-face bullying situations, there is a lack of research on how school counsellors might best address the bully-victim students when cyber-space is involved (Campbell, 2005).

#### *Extrapolations from Traditional Bullying Literature*

The lack of understanding on how the appropriate supports for bully-victims involved in cyber-space situations might be the same or different from those for bully-victims involved in traditional bullying situations is indicative of a larger



problem in the literature. Mishna, Saini, and Solomon (2009) suggest that cyber-bullying is a quickly evolving phenomenon and that researchers must attempt to keep up with this ever-changing challenge. Given the dearth of literature specific to cyber-bullying interventions, some researchers suggest that an extrapolation of the research on traditional bullying should be made (e.g., Campbell, 2005; O'Neil, 2008). Willard (2007b), however, cautions that this extrapolation may not always be appropriate. She suggests that school-based anti-bullying programs that are based on authoritarian interventions by adults will likely be ineffective in addressing cyber-bullying. This warning not only highlights the responsibility of school counsellors to be skeptical about simply importing traditional anti-bullying programs for use in cyber-bullying situations, but it also points out the responsibility of authors not to recommend programs without having validated them within the specific context for which they are recommending them. "Cyber-bullying must be understood in the specific paradigmatic context in which it is presented" (Shariff, 2009, p. 40).

A relatively clear example of when research on traditional bullying differs from the research on cyber-bullying is the case of gender differences. In traditional bullying research, it has been shown that males tend to bully directly while females use more indirect or relational bullying (Crick, Grotpeter, & Bigbee, 2002). Furthermore, research shows that there is a higher prevalence of male bullies than female bullies in traditional face-to-face bullying (Kyriakides, Kaloyirou, & Lindsay, 2006).

The research on gender differences specific to cyber-bullying, however, is far from conclusive. Kowalski et al. (2005) showed that while 17% of girls bullied others online, only 10% of boys did so, an inverse of the trends seen in traditional bullying. Li (2006) failed to replicate these results, however, and showed that while 12% of females were cyber-bullies, over 22% of males were cyber-bullies. Thus, Li's research on the prevalence of bullies by gender in cyber-bullying situations supports Kyriakides et al.'s (2006) research on prevalence of bullies by gender in traditional bullying situations. Furthermore, while Kowalski et al. (2005) showed that girls (25%) are more likely to be cyber-bullied than are boys (18%), Li (2006) found that boys and girls were equally likely to be cyber-bullied (around 25%).

Overall, it appears that gender is one example where the literature on traditional face-to-face bullying and the literature on cyber-bullying diverge, in that gender differences in cyber-bullying are inconclusive. This example calls into question the assumed appropriateness of extrapolation of face-to-face bullying literature to application in cyber-bullying situations. Counsellors are advised to be cautious when assuming that programming shown to be effective in traditional bullying situations will be equally suitable in cyber-bullying situations.

#### *Reporting and Perceived Responses*

One of the main issues that make it difficult for counsellors to respond to cyber-bullying is the overwhelming research that suggests students are reluctant to report it to school personnel (Agatston, Kowalski, & Limber, 2007; Campbell, 2005; Li,

2006; Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Petersen & Rigby, 1999; Rigby, 1997). This is especially troublesome given that, unlike traditional bullying, cyber-bullying can go undetected unless someone reports it (Bhat, 2008). Perhaps students' reluctance to report cyber-bullying stems from their belief that adults in schools do not take action when cyber-bullying is reported (Li, 2006). Petersen and Rigby (1999) and Agatston et al. (2007) found that some students do not report being cyber-bullied because they do not believe that adults are equipped to assist them and that the adult intervention may make the situation worse. Furthermore, students fear that they will be forbidden to use their phones or computers as a result of reporting incidents of cyber-bullying (Mishna et al., 2009).

Some students may be too humiliated or embarrassed to report cyber-bullying to an adult (Campbell, 2005). Students are much more likely to tell an online friend (56.6%) or a real friend (25.7%) about cyber-bullying situations than they are to tell a parent (19.5%) or teacher (25%) (Patchin & Hinduja, 2006; Rigby, 1997). A 2002 study by the National Children's Home showed that 30% of children who were victims of cyber-bullying told no one (Campbell, 2005). When one considers the covert nature of cyber-bullying, as well as the reluctance of both victims and bullies to report its incidence, it becomes clear that detection is the first challenge if counsellors are to be responsive to cyber-bullying in their schools.

### *Legal Considerations*

A final obstacle to effective programming for cyber-bullying is confusion over what school counsellors are permitted to do and what they are obligated to do in response to reported or suspected cyber-bullying. The American School Counselor Association's (ASCA) position statement on student safety affirms that counsellors have a professional responsibility to protect students from potential dangers related to technology and to promote healthy student development (ASCA, 2000). In Canada, under Section 1 of the Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, "When there is a danger to safety and learning of students, then the infringement of student privacy rights can be reasonable justified" (Shariff, 2009, p. 121). However, the parameters under which school counsellors and other school personnel work are less clear on how this directive is translated into practice.

Cyber-bullying can be addressed under civil or criminal law in Canada (Media Awareness Network, 2010). Under civil law, three laws come into play. First, a cyber-bully is engaged in *defamation* when he or she spreads false information that harms another person's reputation when this information is heard or seen by third parties. If the comments are not permanent, such as words spoken during a conversation, the act is called slander. If the comments are permanent, such as on a Facebook page, the act is considered libel. Second, cyber-bullying may contribute to an *unsafe environment*. School personnel, including counsellors, have a responsibility to ensure that schools are safe places for students. The target of the cyber-bullying can sue school personnel who fail to provide such an environment. Third, cyber-bullies are responsible for the outcomes of their behaviours that they can *reasonably predict*. For example, a cyber-bully who



suggests his or her target kill him or herself knowing the target has attempted suicide in the past could be viewed as having a reasonable expectation of the outcome of his or her comments.

Under criminal law, cyber-bullies can be charged with *harassment*, a situation where the victim fears for his or her safety or the safety of others. Interestingly, there is no responsibility on the part of the accuser to demonstrate that the cyber-bully intended to harass the victim. Instead, harassment laws in Canada require only that the victim feels threatened in order for charges to be laid (Media Awareness Network, 2010).

Although the laws clearly support addressing cyber-bullying and place an explicit onus on school personnel to ensure a safe environment, victims are still reluctant to move forward in taking legal action. For example, a person accused of libel for posting negative comments on a Facebook page could reasonably defend himself or herself by showing that the statement was true and that it was a fair comment, or that the posting was simply a cut-and-pasted comment by someone else that the accused did not understand (Media Awareness Network, 2010). In addition to the expense and stress of taking legal action without certainty of the outcome, there is the question of whether an educational remedy might be more effective than a legal route for resolving a cyber-bullying situation.

Teachers, administrators, and counsellors are unsure about whether they can take legal action when the cyber-bullying does not take place on school grounds or using school computers. Many students also believe that school officials have no power to address cyber-bullying initiated off school property (Mishna et al., 2009). Research has shown, however, that while cyber-bullying is often initiated off school property, it eventually affects school environments (Sokal & Girling, 2010; Zacker, 2009). The civil law in Canada clearly states that school personnel have an obligation to provide a safe school environment, and that includes addressing offsite cyber-bullying that fosters students feeling unsafe while at school.

Counsellors would benefit from a much clearer understanding of current provincial and federal laws as they relate to the actions that are permitted, forbidden, and obligated in their efforts to address cyber-bullying and online social cruelty. This information should be conveyed to counsellors in language that they understand, and should be explained not only as legislation and laws, but also in terms of how these translate into actions. Furthermore, this understanding should be shared widely within the school community: in addition to the school counsellors, to students, parents, and administrators. Shariff (2009) states this sentiment concisely: "Before we can teach kids what those legal boundaries are, we need to understand them ourselves" (p. 61).

#### COMPONENTS OF SUCCESSFUL INTERVENTION AND PREVENTION PROGRAMS

Although "there is little empirical work focused specifically on the psychosocial impact on victims of cyber-bullying" (Bhat, 2008, p. 55), the research literature does offer promising findings that may result in effective programming

by school counsellors. Because each intervention program must be tailored to the specific school contexts in which online cruelty is having an effect, school counsellors must be aware of and select from those components that are shown to be most effective.

#### *Awareness and Identification*

The first step to addressing cyber-bullying is identifying its prevalence and nature. Willard (2007b) has designed a 30-item survey called *Cyberbullying and Cyberthreats: The Student Needs Assessment Survey*. This survey collects information about students' perceptions of the prevalence of cyber-bullying, their view on the effectiveness of school responses, their knowledge about appropriate student responses, and their comfort levels in reporting cyber-bullying. Another survey called the *Cyberbully Quiz* can be found online at [wiredkids.org](http://wiredkids.org). This survey is designed to help students determine whether they are victims of cyber-bullying. Once issues of cyber-bullying have been identified, school personnel can begin to focus on intervention as well as prevention approaches.

#### *Prevention Approaches*

Once counsellors, teachers, and administrators have a better understanding of how their students may be experiencing cyber-bullying within their student population, they can begin to address it. Although the components of a program developed by a specific school will depend on the information gained from the needs assessment survey, building on a division-wide approach has shown promise (Diamanduros, Downs, & Jenkins, 2008). This approach allows students to receive consistent messages as they progress through grades and change schools. Diamanduros et al. (2008) propose that each school form a knowledgeable committee of members that work together to develop a proactive program. The program should include definitions, impact, and legal implications of cyber-bullying; orientation to school policy; and strategies that encourage students to stand up against cyber-bullying, report it, and use appropriate online safety behaviours and "netiquette" (online practices of civility).

One of the leaders in this area is i-SAFE ([i-SAFE.org](http://i-SAFE.org)). This organization offers age-appropriate, student-centred lessons for school-aged children and incorporates a mentor role in its programming. The Media Awareness Network (2010) also suggests incorporating student mentors who teach appropriate behaviours while developing their leadership skills. The programming provided by i-SAFE includes a pre- and post-intervention online survey. By collecting these data, i-SAFE remains current in its understanding of the ever-changing issues related to the Internet and is able to gauge the effectiveness of its programming.

Because the seeds of becoming a cyber-bully are sometimes planted at home, it is important to involve parents in program development. Some parents are reluctant to become involved because they believe bullying is a natural part of childhood and that children will build their character by dealing with the situation without parent assistance (McNamee & Mercurio, 2008). It is important that

school counsellors reach out to these parents to provide education and offer tools so that parents might assist their children in navigating cyber-bullying situations. Parents who have a difficult time understanding the typical adolescents' use of the Internet can also receive information and assistance from a variety of readily available websites that offer parenting advice. Willard (2007a) has also developed a comprehensive website (<http://csriu.org/cyberbully/>) that includes information for parents, school leaders, and counsellors.

### *Responsive Approaches*

Despite the utility of proactive programs to minimize cyber-bullying, most schools will still find themselves having to deal with cyber-bullying situations (Sokal & Girling, 2010). Young people do not always make the best choices, and being prepared with appropriate responses to cyber-bullying is necessary (Bhat, 2008).

Despite the widely held perception that cyber-bullies are usually unknown to their victims, Sokal and Girling (2010) and Mishna et al. (2009) found that anonymity is not an essential part of cyber-bullying. Participants' comments in Sokal and Girling's (2010) study showed that cyber-bullying is more often associated with individuals who maintain relationships both online and offline. Shariff (2009) recognizes these behaviours as cyber-bullying, while Willard (2007a, 2007b) suggests that online social cruelty might be a more appropriate term. Regardless of its label, this issue is relevant to school counsellors in two ways. First, if the online bullies and victims are schoolmates, it is likely the conflict will overflow into school settings (Sokal & Girling, 2010). Second, the issue of being bullied by a person who was, at one time, considered a friend is especially troubling during early adolescence. According to Espelage (2002), adolescence is a developmental point when young women turn to their peers as the main support network. When offline friendships are threatened by online cruelty, young women need alternative resources for discussing and working through these challenges. School counsellors can be one such resource.

One area where promising results have been found is in the research on empathy training. Ang and Goh (2010) recently conducted a study that examined the effects of cognitive and affective empathy on cyber-bullying. Affective empathy is the ability to experience and share the feelings of others, while cognitive empathy refers to the ability to understand the feelings of others. Ang and Goh found that at low levels of affective empathy, girls with low cognitive empathy cyber-bullied more than girls with high levels of cognitive empathy. Furthermore, they found that at high levels of affective empathy, there were no differences in the level of cyber-bullying between girls with high and low cognitive empathy. The authors suggest that affective empathy training may be a key component of responsive interventions for cyber-bullying by girls. International studies have indicated that this type of training is effective in decreasing bullying behaviour (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Kaukiainen, 2000; Derzon, Wilson, & Cunningham, 1999; Ttofi, Farrington, & Baldry, 2008).

Chessor (2008), citing the long-term destructive effects of relational bullying on adolescent girls, examined the effects of a school-based group intervention. Chessor's intervention with Grade 8 girls involved group discussions of the problems each member experienced as well as possible solutions to these problems. As a result of the intervention, the girls perceived themselves as having greater ability to deal with conflict as well as developing pro-social skills, empathy, and effective conflict resolution skills. The group process was useful in generating both well-being and resilience within the participants. In addition, approaches that address the dysfunctional nature of the interactions taking place and then work to create better communication and higher levels of empathy negate the need to identify and separate bullies and victims for role-based intervention (Johnson, 2009) and fit well with the interactive model proposed by Sokal and Girling (2010). Interventions similar to those of Chessor (2008) could be used proactively and/or responsively to address the challenges of online conflicts that are now normative in many young girls' lives.

Approaches specific to each school's needs must be designed to not only address the negative outcomes of cyber-bullying but also to replace these interactions with healthier ways of communicating. Rather than taking a highly punitive or even a legal stance on dealing with cyber-bullying, it might be more effective for school counsellors to take an educational stance that helps young women understand the unique challenges of the online context as well as the relational and emotional consequences of their involvement in cyber-bullying.

#### CONCLUSIONS

An examination of the lived experiences of adolescent girls has provided school counsellors with a new and valid model through which to understand and address the needs of female students who are involved in cyber-bullying situations. This model, constructed and analyzed through the native perspective, offers school counsellors insights through which to support students in both proactive and responsive ways. Although there are many challenges to addressing the needs of online cruelty victims, bullies, and victim-bullies, several promising approaches have been implemented and validated. These approaches include strategies for identifying that cyber-bullying is occurring, developing school-wide programming, involving parents, offering affective empathy training, and counselling victims, bullies, and victim-bullies in joint group sessions.

The challenge of future research is to merge the various perspectives—educational, psychological, legal, and developmental—in continuing to develop effective strategies for responding to adolescent girls' online cruelty. Furthermore, strategies proposed for use in cyber-bullying situations must either avoid or address the limitations of the current body of literature that make it difficult for counsellors to feel confident in their approaches. Specifically, interventions proposed to address cyber-bullying must (a) be responsive to the perceptions and lived experiences of adolescent girls during this crucial stage of development, (b) be validated as effec-

tive in situations that involve cyber-bullying specifically, (c) facilitate counsellors and other school personnel in meeting their obligation to provide safe school environments, and (d) be in alignment with the current laws of Canada.

#### *Acknowledgement*

This research was supported by the University of Winnipeg.

#### *Note*

- 1 Victim-bullies are aggressive victims (Mouttapa, Valente, Gallaher, Rohrbach, & Unger, 2004), those students identifying as both victims and bullies (Raskauskas & Stoltz, 2007), or students who become bullies after being victimized (Li, 2006).

#### *References*

- Agatston, P., Kowalski, R., & Limber, S. (2007). Students' perceptions of cyber bullying. *Journal of Adolescent Health, 41*, 59–60.
- American School Counselor Association. (2000, rev. 2006). *The professional school counselor and student safety on the internet*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- Ang, R., & Goh, D. (2010). Cyberbullying among adolescents: The role of affective and cognitive empathy and gender. *Child Psychiatry and Human Development, 41*, 387–397.
- Bhat, C. (2008). Cyber bullying: Overview and strategies for school counselors, guidance officers, and all school personnel. *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counseling, 18*(1), 53–66.
- Bjorkqvist, K., Osterman, K., & Kaukiainen, A. (2000). Social intelligence – empathy = aggression? *Aggression and Violent Behavior, 5*, 191–200.
- Campbell, M. (2005). Cyber bullying: An old problem in a new guise? *Australian Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 15*(1), 68–76.
- Chessor, D. (2008). Developing student wellbeing and resilience using a group process. *Educational and Child Psychology, 25*(2), 82–90.
- Chibbaro, J. (2007). School counselors and the cyberbully: Interventions and implications. *Professional School Counseling, 11*, 65–68.
- Crick, N., Grotpeter, J., & Bigbee, M. (2002). Relationally and physically aggressive children's intent attributions and feelings of distress for relational and instrumental peer provocations. *Child Development, 73*(4), 1134–1142.
- Derzon, J., Wilson, S., & Cunningham, C. (1999). *The effectiveness of school-based interventions for preventing and reducing violence*. Nashville, TN: Vanderbilt Institute of Public Policy Studies.
- Diamanduros, T., Downs, E., & Jenkins, S. (2008). The role of school psychologists in the assessment, prevention and intervention of cyberbullying. *Psychology in the Schools, 45*(8), 693–704. doi:10.1002/pits.20335
- Espelage, D. L. (2002). Bullying in early adolescence: The role of the peer group. Retrieved from <http://www.ericdigests.org/2003-4/bullying.html>
- Gorry, A. (2009). Empathy in the virtual world. *Chronicle of Higher Education, 56*(2), B10–B12.
- Johnson, J. (2009, March). *The impact of cyber bullying: A new type of relational aggression*. Paper presented at the annual conference of the American Counseling Association, Charlotte, NC.
- Kowalski, R., Limber, S., Scheck, A., Redfearn, M., Allen, J., Calloway, A. ... Vernon, L. (2005, August). *Electronic bullying among school-aged children and youth*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Psychological Association, Washington, DC.
- Krämer, N., & Winter, S. (2008). Impression management 2.0: The relationship of self-esteem, extraversion, self-efficacy, and self-presentation within social networking sites. *Journal of Media Psychology: Theories, Methods, and Applications, 20*(3), 1864–1105.
- Kyriakides, L., Kaloyirou, C., & Lindsay, G. (2006). An analysis of the Revised Olweus Bully/Victim Questionnaire using the Rasch Measurement Model. *British Journal of Educational Psychology, 76*, 781–801.

- Lankshear, C., & Knobel, R. (2006). *New literacies: Everyday practices and classroom learning*. Berkshire, UK: Open University Press.
- Li, Q. (2006). Cyber-bullying in schools: A research of gender differences. *School Psychology International*, 27(2), 157–170. doi:10.1177/01430343060
- Li, Q. (2010). Cyberbullying in high schools: A study of students' behaviors and beliefs about this new phenomenon. *Journal of Aggression, Maltreatment, and Trauma*, 19(4), 372–392.
- McNamee, A., & Mercurio, M. (2008). School-wide intervention in the childhood bullying triangle. *Childhood Education*, 84, 370–378.
- Media Awareness Network. (2010). *Cyber-bullying and the law fact sheet*. Retrieved from [http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching\\_backgrounders/cyberbullying/cyberbullying\\_law2\\_h4.cfm](http://www.media-awareness.ca/english/resources/educational/teaching_backgrounders/cyberbullying/cyberbullying_law2_h4.cfm)
- Migliore, E. (2003). Eliminate bullying in your classroom. *Intervention in School and Clinic*, 38(3), 172–176.
- Mishna, F., Saini, M., & Solomon, S. (2009). Ongoing and online: Children and youth's perceptions of cyber bullying. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 31, 1222–1228.
- Moultapa, M., Valente, T., Gallaher, P., Rohrbach, L. A., & Unger, J. B. (2004). Social network predictors of bullying and victimization. *Adolescence*, 39(154), 315–335.
- O'Neil, S. (2008). *Bullying by tween and teen girls: A literature, policy and resource review*. Kookaburra Consulting Inc. Retrieved from [www.sacsc.ca/Literature%20Review\\_finalSON.pdf](http://www.sacsc.ca/Literature%20Review_finalSON.pdf)
- Owens, L., Shute, R., & Slee, P. (2000). "Guess what I just heard?": Indirect aggression among teenage girls in Australia. *Aggressive Behavior*, 26, 67–83.
- Patchin, J., & Hinduja, S. (2006). Bullies move beyond the school yard: A preliminary look at cyber bullying. *Youth Violence and Juvenile Justice*, 4(2), 148–169.
- Petersen, L., & Rigby, K. (1999). Countering bullying at the Australian secondary school with students as helpers. *Journal of Adolescence*, 22, 481–492.
- Raskauskas, J., & Stoltz, A. (2007). Involvement in traditional and electronic bullying among adolescents. *Developmental Psychology*, 43, 564–575.
- Rigby, K. (1997). What children tell us about bullying in schools. *Children Australia*, 22(2), 28–34.
- Salmivalli, C. (2001). Group view on victimization: Empirical findings and their implications. In J. Juvenon & S. Graham (Eds.), *Peer harassment in the school: The plight of the vulnerable and victimized* (pp. 398–419). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Shariff, S. (2005). Cyber-dilemmas in the new millennium: School obligations to provide student safety in a virtual school environment. *McGill Journal of Education*, 40(3), 457–477.
- Shariff, S. (2008). *Cyber-bullying: Issues and solutions for the school, the classroom, and the home*. London, UK: Routledge.
- Shariff, S. (2009). *Confronting cyber-bullying: What schools need to know to control misconduct and avoid legal consequences*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Sokal, L., & Girling, L. (2010). Social networking: Relationship to adolescent girls' identity development, self-esteem and sense of belonging. *Manitoba Journal of Counselling*, 36(2), 14–24.
- Subrahmanyam, K., & Greenfield, P. (2008). Online communication and adolescent relationships. *The Future of Children*, 18(1), 119–146.
- Trofi, M., Farrington, D., & Baldry, A. (2008). *Effectiveness of programs to reduce school bullying: A systematic review*. Stockholm, Sweden: Swedish Council of Crime Prevention.
- Turnbridge, N. (1995). The cyberspace cowboy. *Australian Personal Computer*, September, 2–4.
- Urdu, T., & Klein, S. (1998). *Early adolescence: A review of the literature*. Retrieved from <http://www.mprinc.com/products/search.aspx?pubID=105>
- Vartanian, L. (2000). Revisiting the imaginary audience and personal fable constructs of adolescent egocentrism: A conceptual review. *Adolescence*, 35(140), 639–691.
- Willard, N. (2007a). *Centre for safe and responsible internet use: Student needs assessment*. Retrieved from <http://csriu.org/cyberbully/appendix/appE.pdf>



- Willard, N. (2007b). *Educator's guide to cyberbullying: Addressing the harm caused by online social cruelty*. Retrieved from [http://www.asdk12.org/MiddleLink/AVB/bully\\_topics/Educators-Guide\\_Cyberbullying.pdf](http://www.asdk12.org/MiddleLink/AVB/bully_topics/Educators-Guide_Cyberbullying.pdf)
- Zacker, E. (2009). *School counselor perspectives on bullying behavior in urban middle school settings* (Unpublished master's thesis). Smith College School for Social Work, Northampton, MA.

*About the Author*

Laura Sokal is a professor of education at the University of Winnipeg. Her main research interests include the psychosocial development of children as it pertains to schooling, and teacher education to enhance the skills and competencies of inclusive educators.

Address correspondence to Laura Sokal, Faculty of Education, University of Winnipeg, 515 Portage Avenue, Winnipeg, MB R3B 2E9; <[lj.sokal@uwinnipeg.ca](mailto:lj.sokal@uwinnipeg.ca)>