FACEBOOK, GENDER AND CONFLICT ONLINE: TEENAGE GIRLS‘ UNDERSTANDINGS AND EXPERIENCES OF CYBERBULLYING IN AN IRISH SECOND-LEVEL SCHOOL

Dr. Debbie Ging and Dr. James O’Higgins-Norman, Dublin City University Anti-Bullying Centre
Cyberbullying has become the subject of intense media focus, with a number of teenage suicides – almost all of them female - alleged to have been caused by online aggression.
I CAN RUIN UR LIFE
NO 1 LIKES YOU!
LOSER!
I HATE YOU!!!! I HATE YOU!!!!
• What is the relationship between gender and cyberbullying?

• As in the sexualisation debates, there are strong elements of both gender-blindness and gender essentialism underpinning both research and policy
• Questionnaires (116) and individual depth interviews with students (26) and teachers

• To explore the girls’ internet use, the nature of their friendships off- and online and their discursive constructions of and approaches to conflict.
• Conflicting accounts in the literature re. the extent to which and the ways in which girls and boys perpetrate and experience cyberbullying differently
  - How cyberbullying is defined in questionnaires
  - How boys and girls conceive of / report their behaviours due to conditioning
  - Online space may facilitate different behaviours
• Much research on the differences between (cyber)bullying among boys and girls fails to take the wider social construction of gender into account.
• Boys – direct aggression
• Girls – indirect, relational or social aggression
• Doesn’t acknowledge that these behaviours are socially constructed

• Also, boys’ direct aggression is normalised (+ even part of acceptable masculinity), while girls’ aggression is viewed as an aberration (both from their ‘natural’ niceness and from normative, neutral, direct male aggression) [Ringrose (2006)]
SUGAR AND SPICE AND EVERYTHING NICE
THAT'S WHAT LITTLE GIRLS ARE MADE OF

FROGS & SNAILS AND PUPPY-DOGS' TAILS. THAT'S WHAT LITTLE BOYS ARE MADE OF.
• Developmental psychology – it is girls’ caring ‘nature’ and reliance on friendship which, paradoxically, forces them to repress aggression. When unleashed, this aggression is nasty, indirect, bitchy = the ‘mean girl’ (Ringrose, 2006)

• Girls are understood as operating on a spectrum of nice – mean

• Not unlike the way in which girls in the sexualisation debates are seen as operating on a spectrum of pure – slutty / sexually dangerous
Emma Renold (2002, 2006) - female primary-school children who did not conform to dominant heterosexual and feminine identities were most likely to be positioned as outsiders and bullied. For boys, being macho, tough and/or physically violent was a normative way to achieve hegemonic, heteronormative, masculinity.
• Strong link between the sexualisation of girls and (cyber)bullying
• Sexualisation of girls is deeply embedded in the everyday construction of acceptable gender identity and behaviour

= we cannot address either the sexualisation of children or bullying divorced from wider cultural contexts, which continue to stereotype women as hypersexualised, submissive, non-violent and emotionally complex and men as aggressive, violent and emotionally straightforward.
Findings

• Girls rarely used the term cyberbullying.
• While very clear about terminology and definitions relating to bullying, their accounts of online conflict were less clear-cut.
• The insults that the girls reported (delivered both by boys and other girls) were always related to physical appearance (fat, ugly, ginger), sexual morals (slut, whore, slapper) or self-harm (‘everybody hates you’, ‘go and kill yourself’, ‘go and cut yourself with glass’).
• Phone-based abuse was considered to be more severe. Most of the serious incidents reported involved anonymous prank calls or nasty texts (‘you have no friends’ / ‘all your friends are bitches’).
• The most commonly reported online conflicts - often described as ‘messing’ or ‘bitchy’ fights rather than bullying - occurred on Facebook
  - Spreading rumours
  - Strategies of exclusion (photos)
  - Ambiguous or enigmatic comments, tags
  - Public rows
3 main themes

• Internalisation of gender norms
• Online-offline conflict
• Responses to conflict / abuse
Internalisation of gender norms

• Likes and ‘selfies’
• Facebook as image management and indicator of popularity
• Rebecca: I don’t think boys really care as much about Facebook to be honest, as much as girls. I think girls use it as a kind of...I don’t know...how cool they are and this is their appearance all on one page...they should express themselves and how they think everyone else sees them through this page and even though it could be just a photo and a status it’s not really them... It can be good if you get good comments but it’s also bad if you get bad comments.
• I think boys have a different approach to Facebook than girls do. As I said I think girls use it as kind of their profile but I think boys could have their profile picture of a car and it wouldn’t make a difference.
• ‘Everyone gets along’ / ‘Girls are naturally bitchy’

Conflicting discourses of girlhood:
- Girls as naturally bitchy and competitive about physical appearance
- Girls as congenial, placatory and easily managed
• Taboo on direct conflict and aggression – may make online hostility more appealing and manageable (Wade and Beran, 2011)
• Cyberbullying among girls tends to be relationship focussed and is often resolved – permits scapegoating or venting without necessarily severing the friendship
Offline-online conflict

• Easy to assume that online conflict is necessarily a form of indirect aggression
• But taboo on any sort of face-to-face conflict in the classroom / playground
• Fights on Facebook tended to start, play out and be resolved on Facebook (public rows, not anonymous)
• = arguably more direct than what happens face-to-face
• Seen as a relatively innocuous, even useful, way of dissipating aggression
• May explain why they were so reluctant to identify such behaviours as cyberbullying
• Conflicts were dismissed as just messing’ or ‘slagging’
• Emoticons used to indicate messing
Responses to conflict / abuse

Avoid, ignore, block, delete
- Allegations impossible to prove
- Spats irrelevant – not worth reporting
- Getting involved would make things worse
- Don’t get involved – they sort it out themselves

= Understandable strategies for managing conflict and staying out of trouble
• Girls deleted or ignored comments, blocked numbers, unfriended people or shut down accounts, i.e. changed their behaviour to avoid victimization

• Serious cases (threatening, anonymous calls) were brought to attention of a parent, then a teacher and then resolved but the girls didn’t know how
• Remarkable similarities with the sexualisation discourse:
  - attention, pressure and expectation to modify behaviour falls on girls
  - adults do not listen to their account of what things in their world (clothes, language, etc.) mean to them
• The girls in our study displayed high levels of social media literacy, a strong awareness of its public nature and sophisticated skills at managing their privacy.
• For many of them, the internet was a positive and empowering space.
• Overt confrontation or conflict online was not always equitable with cyberbullying, e.g. Emily’s ‘shipping wars’ provided an opportunity to vent, opine and communicate passionately in ways that are generally not approved of in face-to-face contexts among girls.
To conclude…

• Key problem is not with social media literacy or lack of awareness of the dangers of online communication but rather with girls’ difficulty in conceiving of female identity and of ways of negotiating conflict outside of the gender norms which currently dominate their offline and online worlds.
• Girls are neither ‘naturally’ nice nor mean but rather young people who respond as best they can to contradictory messages about femininity (niceness / meanness, submissiveness / girl power, hypersexualisation / slut-shaming)

• (Cyber)bullying initiatives must be neither gender-blind nor gender-essentialist, therefore, but instead acknowledge the wider social construction of gender, and thus empower students by showing them that behaviours are not inevitable and can be changed.
• This will only happen if schools and policy makers are willing to address and proactively challenge gender stereotyping by starting with the lived cultural experiences of students (off- and online), listening to their perspectives and helping them to make sense of their experiences in the much broader contexts of (in)equality, power and gender relations.