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Bullying as True Drama

By DANAH BOYD and ALICE MARWICK

THE suicide of Jamey Rodemeyer, the 14-year-old boy from western New York who killed himself last Sunday after being tormented by his classmates for being gay, is appalling. His story is a classic case of bullying: he was aggressively and repeatedly victimized. Horrific episodes like this have sparked conversations about cyberbullying and created immense pressure on regulators and educators to do something, anything, to make it stop. Yet in the rush to find a solution, adults are failing to recognize how their conversations about bullying are often misaligned with youth narratives. Adults need to start paying attention to the language of youth if they want antibullying interventions to succeed.

Jamey recognized that he was being bullied and asked explicitly for help, but this is not always the case. Many teenagers who are bullied can't emotionally afford to identify as victims, and young people who bully others rarely see themselves as perpetrators. For a teenager to recognize herself or himself in the adult language of bullying carries social and psychological costs. It requires acknowledging oneself as either powerless or abusive.

In our research over a number of years, we have interviewed and observed teenagers across the United States. Given the public interest in cyberbullying, we asked young people about it, only to be continually rebuffed. Teenagers repeatedly told us that bullying was something that happened only in elementary or middle school. "There's no bullying at this school" was a regular refrain.

This didn't mesh with our observations, so we struggled to understand the disconnect. While teenagers denounced bullying, they — especially girls — would describe a host of interpersonal conflicts playing out in their lives as "drama."

At first, we thought drama was simply an umbrella term, referring to varying forms of bullying, joking around, minor skirmishes between friends, breakups and makeups, and gossip. We thought teenagers viewed bullying as a form of drama. But we realized the two are quite distinct. Drama was not a show for us, but rather a protective mechanism for them.

Teenagers say drama when they want to diminish the importance of something. Repeatedly, teenagers would refer to something as "just stupid drama," "something girls do," or "so high school." We learned that drama can be fun and entertaining; it can be serious or totally ridiculous; it can be a way to get attention or feel validated. But mostly we learned that young people use the term drama because it is empowering.

Dismissing a conflict that's really hurting their feelings as drama lets teenagers demonstrate that they don't care about such petty concerns. They can save face while feeling superior to those tormenting them by dismissing them as desperate for attention. Or, if they're the instigators, the word drama lets teenagers feel that they're participating in something innocuous or even funny, rather than having to admit that they've hurt someone's feelings. Drama allows them to distance themselves from painful situations.

Adults want to help teenagers recognize the hurt that is taking place, which often means owning up to victimhood. But this can have serious consequences. To recognize oneself as a victim — or perpetrator — requires serious emotional, psychological and social support, an infrastructure unavailable to many teenagers. And when teenagers like Jamey do ask for help, they're often let down. Not only are many adults ill-equipped to help teenagers do the psychological work necessary, but teenagers' social position often requires them to continue facing the same social scene day after day.

Like Jamey, there are young people who identify as victims of bullying. But many youths engaged in practices that adults label bullying do not name them as such. Teenagers want to see themselves as in control of their own lives; their reputations are important. Admitting that they're being bullied, or worse, that they are bullies, slots them into a narrative that's disempowering and makes them feel weak and childish.

Antibullying efforts cannot be successful if they make teenagers feel victimized without providing them the support to go from a position of victimization to one of empowerment. When teenagers acknowledge that they're being bullied, adults need to provide programs similar to those that help victims of abuse. And they must recognize that emotional recovery is a long and difficult process.

But if the goal is to intervene at the moment of victimization, the focus should be to work within teenagers' cultural frame, encourage empathy and help young people understand when and where drama has serious consequences. Interventions must focus on positive concepts like healthy relationships and digital citizenship rather than starting with the negative framing of bullying. The key is to help young people feel independently strong, confident and capable without first requiring them to see themselves as either an oppressed person or an oppressor.

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