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‘It’s just drama’: teen perspectives on conflict and aggression in a networked era

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Contemporary youth conflict often plays out through social media like Facebook and Twitter. ‘Drama’ is an emergent concept describing performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media. Using ethnographic data, this paper examines how American teenagers conceptualize the term drama; the relationship between drama and social media; and the implications drama has for understanding contemporary teenage conflict. The emic use of drama distances teens from practices conceptualized by adults as bullying or relational aggression, while acknowledging the role of the audience in social media interactions. Drama also serves to reinforce the conventional gendered norms of high school, perpetrating the systemic undervaluing of feminine subjects and re-inscribing heteronormativity. Understanding how drama operates helps illuminate how widespread use of social media among teenagers has altered dynamics of aggression and conflict.

Keywords: drama; teenagers; social media; relational aggression; bullying; youth

Introduction

Victoria (15, Nashville): His girlfriend, Brittany, cheated on him and she went and partied really hard and got drunk and cheated. And then it was all over Formspring. A lot of people are like, ‘You can do better than that slut’ and stuff. And people would write on hers, ‘You’re such a cheating whore’ and blah, blah, blah. And so, that was like drama and stuff. And like, I know Brittany Martinez. If I saw her, I’d be like, ‘Hey, what’s up?’ But I don’t know her personally. And so, I wouldn’t go talk to her about it. But I read that and I could know about it. So it was kind of just like drama I could [see] and stuff.

The vast majority of American teenagers (95%) are Internet users, and 85% use social media (Lenhart et al. 2011). The popularity of social media sites like Facebook and Twitter among teenagers has prompted serious concerns about ‘cyberbullying’ (Hinduja and Patchin 2008; Kowalski, Limber, and Agatston 2008) and online harassment (Ybarra and Mitchell 2004) as conflict moves from the schoolyard to online environments. But asking young people about online bullying or harassment often obscures other negative experiences they encounter; in a recent survey, only 19% of teens reported being bullied in the last year, although 88% had witnessed mean or cruel behavior on social media (Lenhart et al. 2011). Meanwhile, qualitative studies have found that teenagers often use

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the term ‘drama’ when asked about aggressive online behavior, typically to describe girls’ online conflict (Allen 2012; Veinot et al. 2011). Drama shares elements with other models of youth aggression and conflict, such as relational and indirect aggression, bullying, cyberbullying, and gossip, but appears distinct from each (Allen, *forthcoming*). To understand the relationship between youth conflict and social media sites, a closer look at drama, and its relationship to related terms, is warranted.

While much of the meanness and cruelty that young people experience online does not fit into the frame of ‘cyberbullying,’ this concept is predominantly used when discussing online conflict (Burgess-Proctor, Patchin, and Hinduja 2010; Livingstone et al. 2011). Rather than simply mapping offline bullying to online spaces, scholars must study how widespread use of social media alters dynamics of aggression and conflict. As Erving Goffman conceptualized a ‘front stage’ and a ‘back stage’ for interpersonal interaction and identity presentation, drama typically takes place on a stage organized around high school (1959). In most American high schools, social media have replaced the street or coffee shop as the ‘place’ where much discussion, interaction, and ‘hanging out’ between teens goes on (boyd 2014). Drama appears to exist both offline and online, and may illuminate the effects of widespread social media use, and its properties of performance, visibility, and participation, on teen sociality.

This paper analyzes unstructured face-to-face interviews with 166 American teenagers in an attempt to deepen theoretical conceptions of the term ‘drama.’ We investigate how teenagers define the term; the relationship between drama and social media; and the implications drama has for understanding teenage conflict online in terms of gender and discourse.

Methods

This paper draws on interviews collected from 2006–2011 across the United States as part of an ongoing ethnographic project to understand American teenage use of social media (boyd 2014; boyd and Marwick 2011). This project consists of two sets of qualitative interviews, two focus groups, and online and offline participant observation. The first set of interviews ($n = 106$) was conducted with teenagers in 14 states during 2006–2009 and focused on general teenage use of social media (boyd, *forthcoming*). The second set of interviews ($n = 60$) was conducted with teenagers in 2010–2011 in five states focusing on privacy. A different protocol was used for each set of interviews, although neither protocol included specific questions about ‘drama.’ Participants in both sets bought up ‘drama’ in the course of the interview, and thus, both sets of interviews produced data relevant to this paper.

Interviews

The corpus includes 166 semi-structured interviews conducted in 17 states with participants ranging in age from 13 to 19 (we use the terms ‘teenagers’ and ‘youth’ interchangeably in this study to refer to participants in this age range). Participants under 18 needed guardian’s permission to participate in the study. Each participant was given information sheets about the study before confirming participation. We worked with community organizations in each location to recruit interview subjects, including after-school programs, public libraries, a youth homeless shelter, and public and private high schools.

Before each interview, subjects signed a consent form and filled out a questionnaire including open-ended demographic questions, household makeup, technology ownership and access, social media services used, and media consumption. Interviews took place in schools, libraries, coffee shops, after-school programs, and participants' homes, and were typically 90 minutes long, although they ranged from 60 minutes to 2 hours. Subjects were compensated \$30 in cash during the first set of interviews and \$40 in cash during the second set for their participation.

The first set of interviews focused on general teenage use of social media. The second set of interviews consisted of concept-driven data collection (Corbin and Strauss 2007, 145–149) to focus on two themes that emerged from the first set: bullying and privacy. While the interview protocol for the second set of interviews asked specific questions about these issues, all interviews used a semi-structured interview method (Wengraf 2001) to ask about a range of topics including interests, friends, and technology use. Neither protocol included questions about drama; we asked about drama in response to the language our participants had used. For example, we asked one participant 'How would you describe the kids at [your high school]?' She answered, 'I think they all like to start unnecessary drama.' The interviewer followed up with 'You said you feel like kids at [your high school] like to cause unnecessary drama. What causes drama?' This use of participants' emic terms follows an ethnographic approach to interviewing, in that we listened to how teenagers explained and conceptualized their lives rather than attempting to determine the veracity of their statements. We focused on cultural meaning-making, language use, description, and experience (Spradley 1979).

During interviews, we asked participants to clarify with concrete examples and took screenshots of their Facebook, MySpace, Twitter, and Formspring profiles. The interviewers digitally recorded each interview. A transcription company transcribed all recordings, and a research assistant double-checked the transcripts for accuracy.

Finally, each author conducted one focus group focused on drama with a convenience sample of three female participants in the Boston area in 2011. Because drama was not the focus of previous interviews, we used these group discussions as theoretical sampling to clarify ideas about drama that arose during data analysis (Corbin and Strauss 2007, 145–149). The all-female focus groups allowed for explicit discussion of drama and gender.

Participants were not compensated for these discussions, which were digitally recorded by interviewers and transcribed by a transcription company. Although any discussion of peer conflict raises questions of values, morals, and ethics, no notable issues emerged during the interviews conducted for this study. For more information on the ethics procedures used for this study, see *boyd* (forthcoming).

Participants

We recruited a diverse sample by visiting a variety of communities and working with organizations that served differing demographics. To give a sampling of the diversity of our interview subjects, out of the 166 interviews, 94 were female and 72 were male. Racially, 86 identified as White; 39 as Black, African-American, or biracial Black/White; 22 as Hispanic, Chicano, Latino, or biracial Hispanic/White; 13 as Asian, Indian, or Pakistani descent; 3 as Native American; and 3 as Middle Eastern or Egyptian. The ages of our participants ranged from 13 to 19 with an average age of 16. Forty-five teens had at least one parent with a graduate or professional degree, 50 teens had at least one parent

with a BA or some college, and the parents of 35 teens only had a high school diploma or less; 36 reported that they didn't know their parents' education level. This sample thus reflects a variety of experiences and backgrounds. All names and identifying information have been changed to protect the privacy of our informants.

Data analysis

In the field, 'drama' was frequently mentioned when asking about privacy or online conflict. Our theory of drama was formulated throughout data collection and analysis in an iterative approach. After finishing fieldwork, both authors read through the corpus line-by-line. The first author coded for instances of drama using the qualitative data analysis program Atlas.ti; a passage was coded for drama only when the term 'drama' was used by a participant. The second author wrote ethnographic memos of particular incidents that demonstrated emergent themes. As our understanding of 'drama' deepened, the first author returned to the corpus and coded for related concepts, specifically 'gossip' and 'bullying.' As before, a passage was coded for 'gossip' or 'bullying' only if the term was used by a participant. Due to the iterative nature of coding and analysis, coding was ongoing.

Drawing on experiences in the field and the coded interview data, the authors began formulating a theoretical understanding of 'drama' through discussions and perusal of previous research on related topics. During the writing process, our understanding of 'drama' developed based on findings that problematized our original theories. We incorporated different perspectives from informants into our findings, such as acknowledging that our interviewees had a diverse array of definitions for drama. Once we had formulated a basic theory of 'drama,' we held two focus groups. These functioned as concept-driven data collection to validate our thoughts on drama and explore the strengths and weaknesses of our argument.

Limitations

This study is specific to American youth. Understandings of 'bullying,' for instance, are culturally situated, and may be experienced quite differently elsewhere. Future studies could focus on other cultural and national contexts. Moreover, studying social media is always a moving target. Since this research took place, new forms of social media, such as Tumblr, Snapchat, and Instagram have grown in popularity. The differences between social network sites like MySpace and Facebook and mobile, visual, or ephemeral social media sites should be taken into account by other scholars.

We begin by defining 'drama' and its many components, and compare it to extant concepts in the literature, namely bullying, relational aggression, and gossip. We discuss two implications for future research and policy: the relationship between drama and more prevalent conceptions of young people's online aggression; and the ways in which 'drama' reproduces normative conceptions of gender and aggression.

Findings: defining drama

Defining drama is not easy, as its conceptual slipperiness is part of its appeal. To the teens we talked with, drama was like Justice Potter Stewart's definition of obscenity: you know it when you see it. When asked to define drama, teens typically gave examples. For instance, Seong, 17, from Los Angeles, said, 'They would be bad mouthing someone

[online] and then they would see it and then people would fight and take sides and stuff like that, a lot of bad comments coming back and forth.’ Jenna, 17, from North Carolina, said, ‘One time a boy wrote something where it didn’t say her name but it said enough that everyone in the school knew they were talking about her and all of the senior girls didn’t like her. So they all started liking it. So there was 50 likes on a comment a boy said about this one girl.’ These examples ranged widely and included posting what teenagers often refer to as ‘inappropriate’ videos and photos on social media and the resulting fallout; conflicts that escalated into public standoffs; cries for attention; relationship breakups, makeups, and jealousies; jokes; and a vast array of aggressive or passive-aggressive interactions between friends, enemies, or ‘frenemies.’¹ After consolidating responses, we define drama as ‘*performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media.*’

Drama is social and *interpersonal*, about other people and relationships, and intrinsically involves *conflict*. This takes various forms, from moral evaluation of other people’s behavior to minor disagreements that escalate. Drama is *performative*, in that participants are aware that they are in front of others, and often strategically act to appeal to their peers. Drama thus involves an *active, engaged audience*. As Carmen (18, Boston) said, ‘You can’t have drama by yourself.’ Other teens talked about the involvement of other people ‘with no lives’ who jumped into arguments ‘where they didn’t belong.’ This is consistent with Allen’s findings, who argues that ‘drama often moves beyond the original individuals to include others who may have little stake in the original situation’ (2012, 110). *Social media* plays a critical role in how drama is constructed in contemporary teen life. Several young people mentioned that the visibility of social media compounds interpersonal conflict. Cachi (18, Iowa), said, ‘I don’t like to comment that much. Everybody can see that and it’s just annoying because what if there’s something private to one of your guy friends and he has a girlfriend. What’s gonna happen? The girlfriend is gonna go to the guy’s page and she’s gonna, ‘Oh, who was that girl leaving you comments and like that?’ It’s just drama.’ Furthermore, social media allows additional opportunities for participation, including adding comments and ‘liking’ status updates, illustrating the blend of online and offline that exists in many teenagers’ lives.

While investigating bullying, Kathleen Allen found that ‘drama’ emerged as a prevalent concept from focus groups and interviews. She states that it ‘seemed to be distinct from conflict and bullying, yet it was related to these themes because of overlapping features’ (forthcoming, 12). Allen defines drama as social interaction with the following attributes: (1) conflict; (2) excessive emotionality; (3) excessive time and attention; and (4) practices that overlap with bullying, gossip, and aggression (2012, 109–110). We concur with Allen’s definition that it involves conflict and practices that overlap with bullying, gossip, and aggression, but we believe that the ‘excessive emotionality’ and ‘excessive time and attention’ imply normative judgments. Some teenagers may judge others’ involvement as excessive, but others may not. The indication of ‘excessive emotionality’ may have a gendered component, as ‘drama’ is often conceptualized by teenagers as a female behavior (boyd and Marwick 2011).

Other components of drama differ across communities. Rashna, a 16-year-old from Chicago, gave us her perspective:

The definition varies from friend group, like where the school is. I think each community has its own sense of drama. Like her [*Naila, another girl in the room*] sense of what is drama, like the fact that fights go on, that doesn’t happen at my school. And I think that drama will

vary based on where it is, like the suburb or city, like geographically, maybe how much money the school has, and how much people they have in school. So I don't know if you'll ever be able to pin [it] down.

In a group interview, Rashna, Naila, and Carmen agreed that drama differed between their schools. In Naila's school, drama included physical aggression, while Carmen and Rashna saw fighting and drama as distinct. We also found definitional differences within schools, suggesting that young people view drama differently depending on their social status and friend group norms. Our definition of drama attempts to bring clarity to something that is not necessarily clear to teenagers.

What drama is not

Drama resembles other social processes like gossip, bullying, and relational aggression. While researchers conceptualize these three terms separately, the teenagers we talked with often struggled to differentiate one from another. Drama functions as an umbrella term that can encompass elements of all three but is seen by teenagers as different from each.

Bullying

One commonly used definition of bullying defines it as aggressive behavior that is (1) unwanted; (2) repeated over time; (3) intentional; and (4) unbalanced in power (Olweus 1994, 2011). Bullying is repeated while other forms of aggression can be singular; bullying implies a power imbalance whereas other aggressive forms can take place between two persons of equal power (Dooley, Pyzalski, and Cross 2009). Most scholars conceptualize bullying similarly (Nansel et al. 2001; Salmivalli et al. 1996).

None of the teenagers we spoke with conflated drama and bullying; they viewed them as separate concepts. Carmen distinguishes drama from bullying by defining drama as involving active, agented subjects:

Drama is more there's two sides fighting back. I guess the second you fight back, it's—you're not allowed to call it bullying because you're defending yourself, I guess. But like, for example, my gay friend, these people spit tobacco in his locker. And I would consider that bullying, not drama, because like these are people who don't have a beef with him. Like they don't know him. They just know he's gay, and [think] 'I'm going to spit tobacco in his locker.'

For Carmen, drama is bidirectional, while bullying is directed with an aspect of differential power. The tobacco-spitting kids are targeting her friend to demonstrate that he is 'other.' The *participatory* aspects of drama appear to differentiate it from the unidirectional model of bullying, which involves a bully and a victim.

Many teenagers told us that bullying had declined as they grow older, 'more of a middle school kind of thing' that they had 'grown out of.' Caleb (17, North Carolina) said, 'Once you get to high school is when the bullying really just like stops.' When we asked Aarti, a 17-year-old from North Carolina, why this was, she remarked: 'People don't care anymore.' Caleb concurred: 'It just stops because people realize that there's no point. If we're not gonna be friends, we're not gonna be friends and there's no point of getting all into it.' However, only one teenager we talked to claimed that drama was a 'middle school' thing. The others agreed that in high school, drama was ever-present. Indeed, scholarly research suggests that bullying peaks during middle school years before

declining (Wang, Iannotti, and Nansel 2009), even though meanness and cruelty in online settings do not appear to decline in high school (Lenhart et al. 2011).

Even when drama might meet the scholarly definition of bullying, teenagers eschewed it as a descriptive category.

Author: How big an issue is bullying at your school?

Chloe (15, Atlanta): Not big, because we're a Christian school, so our teachers always tell us to be nice to each other and stuff, and no one's ever mean to anyone. Or unless someone says something rude to someone on accident. They're, like, 'Oh, I'm so sorry,' and you know.

Author: Is there ever issues with rumors spreading?

Chloe: Oh, yeah, all the time.

Author: How does that play out?

Chloe: Well, someone starts a rumor and then someone else finds out and they're like—and they, everyone just changes the story around. And once it gets around to the person that it's about, they hate this person. It's just ...

Vicki (15, Atlanta): Whoever started it.

Chloe: A bunch of gossip, yeah.

While Vicki and Chloe defended their school from bullying or 'mean' behavior, they admitted it was full of rumors, gossip, and drama.

Relational aggression

Relational aggression is defined by Crick and Grotpeter as 'harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships' (1995, 710) and has been extensively investigated by researchers (Björkqvist, Lagerspetz, and Kaukiainen 1992; Card et al. 2008). According to scholars, girls engage in relational aggression because it is socially and contextually unacceptable for them to engage in physical aggression. Because women and girls are judged harshly for anger and aggression, their use of teasing, gossip, and ostracization allows them to express these feelings in a socially condoned way (Ness 2010). However, a meta-analysis of scholarly studies did not find support for the increased incidence of relational aggression in girls or direct aggression in boys (Card et al. 2008). This suggests that relational aggression is viewed as a female practice regardless of the genders of actual practitioners.

While both drama and relational and indirect aggression are considered 'female' and involve the interpersonal, they are distinct. Indirect aggression, which Björkqvist et al. define 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 has been no intention to hurt at all' through means including gossip, 'backbiting' and social manipulation (1992, 118), implies aggression with an unknown perpetrator, but the visible, participatory nature of drama makes this impossible. However, many examples of drama illustrated that participants in drama manipulate social ties, popularity, and status, just as those engaging in relational aggression do. For example, Wolf (18, Iowa) described the drama caused by MySpace:

My sister and her friends, when they get angry at each other, they'll try to post the most provocative pictures they can, the ones that will make their friends the most angry. And that's what they do back and forth, and when it gets bad, they'll comment to each other and it's almost as bad as instant messaging. By the end of the day, they're ready to tear each other to bits.

The fact that drama takes place in front of an audience often means that, like relational aggression, it involves the manipulation of interpersonal relationships.

While it is tempting to categorize drama as simply a form of relational aggression, other examples were quite different. Naila (18, Boston)'s story illustrates this point:

There's this one girl, she posted a picture on Facebook. And she has two different groups of friends. She has her really like hoity-toity white friends. And then she has her school friends. And so she had like new Jordans on. So her really like hoity-toity friend was like, 'Oh, it's a cute picture, but what the hell is on your feet?' And this one girl from school who's a really good friend of hers was like, 'Clearly, they're Jordans. And they're like that expensive, and they're like this and that.' And this other girl, her white friend was like, 'Excuse me, who invited you into this conversation? I was clearly commenting on X-Y-Z, my best friend's photo, and where I come from, Jordans are ghetto.' And they just kept going for like—it got to like 53 comments.

In this case, an inoffensive picture posted to Facebook sparked drama between two groups of teens with different norms. To Naila's school friends, expensive sneakers were recognized as a status symbol. But to the 'white girls' from the other side of town, they were tacky and racially marked. The use of the word 'ghetto' incited both class and racial tension in the comments section. This example shows that drama does not necessarily involve close friends or even acquaintances. Naila's friends were acting aggressively, but not using peer relationships to do so.

In other instances, drama was not intrinsically aggressive. Many participants characterized drama as fun or entertaining. Samantha (18, Seattle), explained that social media 'is fun to use when you're bored. It's a way to start drama because people use it to check up on other people.' Camille (15, North Carolina), explained further:

Camille: Everybody will use a quote that somebody said, and then they'll be like, that's so stupid or something, who is she, and then another person will say it, and then they'll respond to something else, and kind of making fun of them indirectly, fighting.

Author: So why do you think someone would do that?

Camille: I don't know, it's drama, kind of entertaining.

To Camille, actively participating in drama is a form of entertainment. This suggests that the stakes in this drama are relatively low, even for the instigators.

Gossip

Gossip was often mentioned as an element of drama.

Author: And for you, are you seeing drama?

Chelsea (15, Nashville): Yes. It seems like when one person doesn't like somebody else then they have their whole group of friends not liking that one person. And they'll all talk about what that person did two days ago, yesterday or what they were wearing or what they looked like. Just basically gossip and talking about the other person.

This distinction seemed blurry, but many participants defined them differently:

Carmen: I like to think of gossip as more like passive-aggressive. Drama is like it's happening now, and it's like, 'Oh, my god, it's explosions!' And gossip, I think more like,

‘Oh, my gosh! Did you hear about this?’ It’s not like, ‘I’m going to go fight that person now, because they did this, this, and this.’ And you gossip about drama.

Naila: Or in my case, gossip is more removed from yourself. Like someone will be like, ‘Oh, my gosh! Do you have any gossip?’ And it’ll be like, ‘So-and-So broke up with So-and-So.’ But it’s not something that’s happening drama towards you, I guess. It’s not like, well, gossip is more like, ‘Oh, you know that perfect couple that isn’t in my group that’s kind of over there, they broke up.’

Anthropologist Gary Fine writes that gossip is a ‘form of discourse between persons discussing the behavior, character, situation, or attributes of absent others’ (1997, 422). In other words, gossip requires its subjects to be elsewhere (Ayim 1994) and typically takes place in tiny, intimate groups (Altman and Taylor 1973), thus serving to strengthen social bonds and affection between group members (Ben-Ze’ev 1994). Similarly, Carmen, Naila, and Abigail distinguish drama from gossip based on participation. Gossip is detached, whereas Carmen’s description of drama as ‘explosions’ shows the importance and closeness of drama.

Folami (18, Tennessee) and Mei Xing (17, Tennessee) reveal another element of participation in their discussion of relationships online:

Folami: Facebook is fun when there’s Facebook drama on somebody’s Facebook status. That’s like, I don’t know, it makes it even more fun when people start acting ridiculous on Facebook and everyone can see it.

Author: So what’s an example of Facebook drama?

Folami: I think like when people have statuses there about someone or their boyfriends.

Mei Xing: About relationships.

Folami: In relationships. And you can’t really—even though they don’t put names on it you know who they’re talking about and everyone sees it.

Mei Xing: I love seeing the little hearts on Facebook because it’s always like someone just got in a relationship or someone just broke up.

To these girls, information that a relationship began or ended is typical gossip. Once people post veiled, negative status messages about relationships, these comments become public drama and involve others. In such situations, the *performative* and *audience* involvement of drama become salient when distinguishing it from gossip.

Drama and social media

Drama is a performative set of actions undertaken to involve an audience. By *performative*, we mean the heightened dramaturgical awareness caused by digital media users’ ‘need to deliberately write self into being, an activity that requires both technical skills and reflexivity about what is required to enact embodiment’ (Markham 2013). Thus, the integration of social media into teenage interaction enhances the performative aspect of interpersonal conflict (Van House 2011). Due to social media’s ubiquity, teenagers know that an audience of peers is watching, and use the technical affordances of social media to appeal to them (Papacharissi 2009). The publicity enabled by sites like Facebook or Twitter affects how conflict plays out in teenage social groups.

In virtually every town where we conducted fieldwork, it was typical for teens to ‘friend’ everyone in their class or school. This results in large potential audiences for Facebook messages that can involve people far beyond the original participants. Thus, when teens interact using social media, conflicts often take place in front of a highly

distributed networked audience of classmates and acquaintances, who can participate in situations they were not originally a part of, fostering drama. Amira (15, Tennessee), related an example of drama:

There was this girl and she put up a picture [on Facebook] and I guess it was like she was making a Botox face like where your eyes are like this [*half-closed*] and you like try to make your lips look bigger. And so this girl commented to her and she's like, 'Botox much?' And then the other girl comments on it and then they just start cussing each other out. And then the next thing you know everyone jumps in and they're like cussing each other and it's all this is really funny because like in person they'll just walk past each other and they won't do anything.

Audience members make their presence known by commenting on the argument in progress on Facebook. Similarly, Ashley (14, North Carolina) says:

I see people post—I don't know—as their status like 'I don't know what blah, blah, blah is talking', 'I don't know what she,' they won't even say a name. They'll say like, 'People need to mind their own business what I do with blah, blah, blah, isn't any of yours.' And I'm just like, not everybody needs to see this. This is a personal thing so don't make it public. Some people want to cause drama.

Ashley explains that such thinly veiled messages are intended for a public audience. In another interview, Heather (16, Iowa) offered the story of her friends Erin and Anya, who were fighting over a boy. Erin argued with Anya on her Facebook wall so that 'everyone [would] back her up.' Heather sighed, 'I guess things are just more dramatic if they're on the wall, and Anya wants everyone to see how unfairly she's being treated.' Many teenagers take arguments to Facebook to make them visible and accrue support for their point of view.

Moreover, several teenagers we interviewed gave us examples of drama that involved the participatory properties of social media.

Author: How does it [drama] come out on Facebook?

Alicia (17, North Carolina): Well, there's a girl from [high school] that got in an argument with a girl from [high school] and they were at a party. So then when I looked on Facebook the next day there were all of these comments on [there] like 'I love you, I don't think you're a—' whatever the girl called her. So it's all really immature and they'll put statuses up like 'oh my gosh I'm so over this.' So that's how drama gets on Facebook.

Alicia's story shows how the technical affordances of Facebook can be used to demonstrate public support for one side of a conflict. The status update 'oh my gosh I'm so over this,' is intended to elicit attention from friends and classmates. In the example given previously by Jenna, the audience 'weighed in' on one side of an argument by 'liking' a comment. Twitter's 'retweet' feature and Tumblr's 'reblog' feature are other technical affordances that let audiences take sides in a dramatic incident.

Drama also illustrates the incorporation of social media into all aspects of teenage life, revealing the inadequacy of an 'online/offline' dichotomy (Baym 2009). In Alicia's earlier anecdote, drama began at a party and moved to Facebook, becoming visible to a larger audience. In Amira's story, drama started in the comments on a Facebook photo, but the participants ignored each other in person. Other dramas may turn into offline confrontations, as Brandy (16, Washington, DC) explains:

Author: How does Facebook play a role in drama?

Brandi: I mean, like if somebody makes a comment on their status, or have a status and if somebody comments it, and another person, like, 'Why would you say that?' Then that starts something. Then somebody's going to say somebody's name, and that's going to roll, and then somebody's going to comment on that. And then that's going to go back to school or back to the streets.

While Facebook is sometimes thought of as a separate, distinct environment, social media sites more frequently serve as extensions to unmediated spaces like school and parties.

Rashna: There's no removal from what happens at school. Cause it can always continue on Facebook, and you have access to that at your home. Which previously was considered somewhere where you don't have to deal with everything that's going on in school.

Rumors, gossip, and drama circulate on Facebook and Twitter while moving back and forth between the school corridor and instant messenger, texts, and written notes. Drama exists beyond a single media into what Haythornthwaite (2001) calls a multiplexity of communicative methods.

Because social media has the property of persistence, it can serve as an archive of interactions and comments that can be used in conflict. Most examples of drama given involved social media in one way or another. Jared (17, Tennessee) explains:

All of this drama ... It's not that it takes place in person. It's just that technology didn't really influence it other than making communication possible. I mean, without [people] stalking around Facebook – or them sifting through the text messages – then there wouldn't be a written record for them to go through and look at.

To Jared, the persistent property of social media increases the likelihood of drama. This integration suggests that models of youth aggression must incorporate the prevalence of social media to understand how it changes and modifies aggressive behavior.

Discussion

The cultural work of drama

Beyond its practical manifestation, the use of 'drama' does significant cultural work for teenagers. It allows teens to blur the boundaries between real conflict and jokes, and hurt and entertainment. This makes it possible for young people to frame their own engagement with social conflict in ways distinct from the perpetrator/victim subjectivities of bullying narratives, which are often set and defined by adults. This serves as an empowerment strategy for teens who can dismiss a hurtful joke by labeling it as 'drama.' While none of the teenagers we interviewed explained this cultural work in their own narratives, analyzing their anecdotes and explanations makes it clear that 'drama' has a function beyond a popular slang term.

By using the term 'drama' rather than gossip, bullying, or any related practice, teens can disengage with adult models of peer aggression and create and participate in their own narratives. As mentioned previously, some forms of drama involve acts that adults may identify as bullying or relational aggression, suggesting that they are synonymous. Instead, by using the language of drama to refer to an array of different practices – some emotionally devastating, others lightweight and fun – many teenagers we spoke with

attempted to protect themselves from the social and psychological harm involved in drama.

The public rhetoric surrounding bullying suggests there are ‘bullies’ and ‘bullied,’ which can be problematic. Some scholars argue that the bully-victim dyad does not reflect the realities of peer participation in bullying (Hawkins, Pepler, and Craig 2001), while others have criticized this binarism (Davies 1998; Farrell 1999). Many examples of drama lacked a clear perpetrator and victim or an obvious power or status imbalance. We found that teens gain little by identifying as a ‘bully’ or ‘victim.’ The emphasis on status in youth culture discourages teens from identifying themselves as weak, while others are unwilling to admit that they purposefully hurt others. While some teenagers talked about being bullied in the past, few young people in our sample admitted to currently being bullied, or called someone else out as a bully. The teens we interviewed and observed who were least likely to admit being bullied were those most likely to lose social status from being labeled as weak: street-smart, inner-city boys (Ness 2010; Pascoe 2007). Even youths who might admit privately to being bullies or victims appeared unlikely to publicly engage with an anti-bullying program. The few teens who acknowledged currently being bullied were socially marginalized, clearly lower on the popularity spectrum in their schools. Since teenagers position bullying as ‘immature’ or childish, teens who identify with it as perpetrator or victim risk framing themselves as juvenile.

In North Carolina, we met Morgan, a 16-year-old target of extensive aggression by a female classmate, Cathy. Cathy’s boyfriend had pursued Morgan and lied to Cathy about it. Jealous and angry, Cathy began tormenting Morgan, blaming her instead of her boyfriend. Morgan explained:

I have these kids that I don’t really know and they come up to me and they’re like ‘Yeah, I heard about you.’ And I’m like ‘I don’t even know you. How’d you hear about me?’ I told her that I don’t want drama and I don’t want her to talk about me and I’m not going to talk about her. But she continues to say things about me. I’m trying to leave it alone but it’s kind of hard. She’ll text one of my friends and say ‘Morgan’s a skank,’ and I’ll be like ‘What? What’d I do.’ And then they’ll show me the text message and I’ll confront her back, and she’ll be like ‘No, I never said that.’ And then she’ll stick stuff on Facebook.

Morgan told us she was doing nothing to further the drama, which escalated as Cathy sought support from her peers. Cathy’s ongoing text messages, Facebook updates, and rumors about Morgan might be defined by adults as ‘bullying,’ but Morgan used the term ‘drama.’ When recounting what was happening, she attempted to save face by minimizing the conflict’s impact, while framing Cathy as immature and desperate for attention. Still, this did not diminish the situation’s seriousness, as Morgan was so disturbed that she contemplated leaving school. Despite her face-saving to us and her peers, it was clear that this situation was taking a serious psychological toll.

Similarly, young people who others identify as ‘bullies’ rarely see themselves as aggressors. Ashley, a ninth grader, has gotten into trouble at school for bullying others. In our interview, she expressed strong disapproval of people trying to get attention, of teens drinking and partying, and of classmates acting ‘ghetto.’ Her sister Abigail – who we also interviewed – described Ashley as judgmental toward friends, acquaintances, and classmates alike. When Ashley recounted an incident on Facebook, we saw this judgmental attitude in action.

I think it's kind of annoying when people dye their hair so much. You'll see on Facebook 'I just dyed my hair' and you'll see pictures and stuff. Can't you just make it simple, just leave it as it is. Because I know just like I think they kind of do it for attention. I know girls who cut their hair every two weeks or something and they're like, 'Look at my new bangs,' 'Look at this, look at this.' And it's kind of like stick with something. Have that be your something.

Ashley dismisses her older sister's claims that she is a bully, but uses gossip and aggression as tools to enforce her own moral code. This has caused tensions between the two sisters, as Abigail has tried to intervene with little success. Meanwhile, Ashley continues to engage with others in ways she sees fit, ignoring both her sister and her parents. Instead, Ashley argues that she is unfairly treated by others and is justified in her attitude and actions. She describes others' reactions to her interactions as baseless. 'Some people want to cause drama,' she explains.

'Drama' allows for a kind of blurriness and liminality in teen practice that is not afforded by the terms 'bullying,' 'relational aggression,' or 'gossip.' Drama incorporates a spectrum of seriousness, which includes joking, 'talking trash,' and serious anger. The very fact that drama constitutes a wide variety of different practices – and the ambiguity of their meaning – is central to what makes drama a valuable concept for teens. By lumping these different interactions into the single category of drama, teens can discursively minimize the pain they feel from being left out or made fun of. Furthermore, by intentionally downplaying its significance, teens use drama to distance themselves both from entertaining situations and events that cause serious emotional pain. The slipperiness of drama lets teens frame the social dynamics and emotional impact of conflict as unimportant, letting them save face as an alternative to feeling like a victim – or a bully themselves.

The gendered work of drama

Drama is *gendered*. Regardless of the actual participants in a dramatic situation, 'drama' in the abstract is conceptualized, dismissively, as a 'girl thing.' Alicia said, 'Drama? Just it's mostly between girls. Guys' drama is not really.' Mark (15, Seattle), explained, '[Girls] always take it more seriously.' Luke (15, Washington DC) said, 'Girls are just drama' (we heard this sentiment from several other boys). When asked why his peers would respond to mean questions on Formspring, Matthew, a 17-year-old from North Carolina, explains:

The people who do it it's the attention [they] crave, for sure. It's the only way I can say it. The girls who do that are the girls who watch 'Gilmore Girls' or 'Gossip Girl' better yet. So it's like those girls who love a little drama in their life or something.

This is concurrent with Allen's finding that drama is considered a feminine practice (Allen, [forthcoming](#)).

Drama is often dismissed as unimportant because it is about traditionally feminine subjects like dating, gossip, and friendships, which scholars have argued tend to be viewed publicly as frivolous or insignificant (Jones 1980; Lorber 1994). Christopher (15, Iowa) concurs, dismissively:

Author: Does dating create much drama?

Christopher: Amongst the girls it does but not the dudes.

Author: In what kind of ways does it create drama for the girls?

Christopher: Like, 'Oh my gosh, this happened' and like they cry a lot.

Author: And the dudes are like eh?

Christopher: Yeah, whatever.

The implication of ‘drama’ captured by Allen, that drama includes *excessive* emotion and reaction, serves to underplay the seriousness of girls’ concerns. While young people characterize girls as the ones who *do* drama, boys are often the cause of drama, following the script of high school popularity which pins a girl’s popularity on her relationships and desirability (Brown 2005). Thus, the expression and perpetration of drama crystallizes conventional sex roles that police teen behavior along heteronormative gender lines.

The majority of teenagers we talked with saw participating in drama as un-masculine. Several girls told us that if two boys had an argument, they would physically fight or forget it within a few days, whereas drama between girls could drag on. In practice, we witnessed situations in which boys had long-term conflicts with each other; in some inner-city schools, we heard about ‘beefs’ between boys, which could last years and be based on a real or perceived insult. Dylan (18, Nashville) and Amira unpack these differences in their discussion:

Dylan: Like, I’ve never gone [on Facebook] and been like oh what’s this going on? What’s this drama going on?

Amira: Well, you’re a guy.

Dylan: I mean yeah, but that’s like the difference, I guess, between the sexes. Like girls they constantly are on Facebook. I’ll get on after school just to see what’s going on with me but I don’t go and be like going on about, oh who does Tara like? Or who does Abby like?

Despite these disavowals, Dylan then discussed a lengthy dramatic incident between two boys:

Like this guy Matt, he ... [and David] were arguing about who is a better football team. And Matt was ‘Vanderbilt sucks.’ And then David was like ‘No they don’t. Tennessee has six national championships,’ or something like that, I don’t know. And then Matt got off what it was supposed to be about and started attacking David’s ex-girlfriend Taylor. Matt was like, ‘The reason that she left you was because you weren’t good enough for her and that you were too ugly.’ Everybody found out ... We looked up exactly the comments on the wall post and saw every single one of them.

This account exemplifies the ways in which boys engage in their own forms of social conflict and gossip. Given that boys and girls engage in relational aggression at fairly similar rates – but the practice is overwhelmingly female-gendered (Card et al. 2008) – the perception of drama as a ‘girl thing’ may not match up to the reality of practice.

When we talked with boys about conflict, we more frequently heard them talk about ‘pranking’ and ‘punking’ where they used social media to play jokes on each other. Debby Phillips argues that ‘punking’ is synonymous with bullying and is used to police masculine norms and maintain status hierarchies (2007). Like drama, we found that ‘punking’ or ‘pranking’ were often used by boys as liminal terms that encompassed both serious aggression and light-hearted jokes. Matthew, who actively dismisses the kinds of dramas that girls engage in, doesn’t recognize that the pranks he and his friends play on one another have a similar valence.

So my friend took my phone and my phone has Facebook on it. So he goes on there and he makes an incredibly realistic status, like, 'Just got suspended for five days because I—' real mature, but he's like, 'I have a boner and I was walking in class and I turned to the left and I knocked some kid's book off the table,' or something like that, something that was really funny. But now I'd say literally five weeks later, I'm at work with my coworker, who I don't know at all, but she's like, 'I saw on your Facebook that you got suspended. Is that true?' I was like, 'Oh no! Not true at all.'

Although this particular incident of being 'punked' caused only a small amount of social embarrassment for Matthew, other pranks are more harmful. As with girls' drama, boys' acts of punking and pranking blur the line between what is hurtful and what is simply funny (see also Phillips 2007). Although the intention behind the prank is often what makes the difference, this can be difficult to determine.

High school is an environment in which appropriate gender policing is taken very seriously; the casual homophobia among teenage boys is a way to delineate clear markers between acceptable and unacceptable ways of enacting masculinity (Pascoe 2007). Drama is a way to encapsulate and define a host of behaviors – including gossiping, romance, and relational aggression – as things that boys do not engage in. Given that gender is a social construct (Kessler and McKenna 1978), the hyper-conformist gender environment of high school is brought into being through such types of classification. But despite these seemingly solid boundaries, it is clear that many boys do involve themselves in drama, at least as spectators and sometimes as participants. Labeling drama as 'girl stuff' is a way for boys to distance themselves from behavior they see as feminine and simultaneously diminish the concerns of their female classmates as unimportant. Girls and boys have different rules regulating the language that they believe to be appropriate for navigating social conflicts, revealing how gendered norms are reproduced and solidified through arguments and quarrels. These strict gender norms explain why many models of youth aggression are gendered, including relational aggression and bullying. This suggests that addressing the underlying gender dynamics is a necessary component of combating youth conflict.

Conclusion

Stan (18, Iowa): You'd actually be surprised how little things change. I'm guessing a lot of the drama is still the same, it's just the format is a little different. It's just changing the font and changing the background color really.

While teen conflict will never disappear, social media has changed how it operates. 'Drama' is a messy process, full of contradictions and blurred boundaries, but it opens up spaces for teens. While the lack of definitional clarity around 'bullying' or 'cyberbullying' may be academically problematic, we found the lack of clarity of 'drama' illuminating. As a concept, drama lets teens theorize and understand how their social dynamics have changed with the emergence of social media. The persistence and involvement of audiences in environments like Facebook engender a performative, participatory model of youth aggression. We present our definition and explanation of drama as an additional model of youth conflict which uses young people's own vocabulary to theorize the effects of the prevalence of social media on American teenage life.

Understanding how ‘drama’ operates is necessary to recognize teens’ own defenses against the realities of aggression, gossip, and bullying in social media. Drama allows teens to carve out agented identities for themselves even when embroiled in social conflict. They use a strict gender dichotomy to understand aggression, even when it does not map to the realities of practice. Social media increases the visibility of young people’s conflict, heightening public awareness and prompting public anxieties about teen bullying. Yet, we are concerned that the focus on ‘bullying’ may ignore the very real hurt caused by drama. To support youth as they navigate aggression and conflict in a networked society, adults must begin by understanding teenage realities from teenage perspectives.

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Note

1. A ‘frenemy’ is someone who appears to be a friend but with whom there is distrust and uncertainty about the relationship.

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