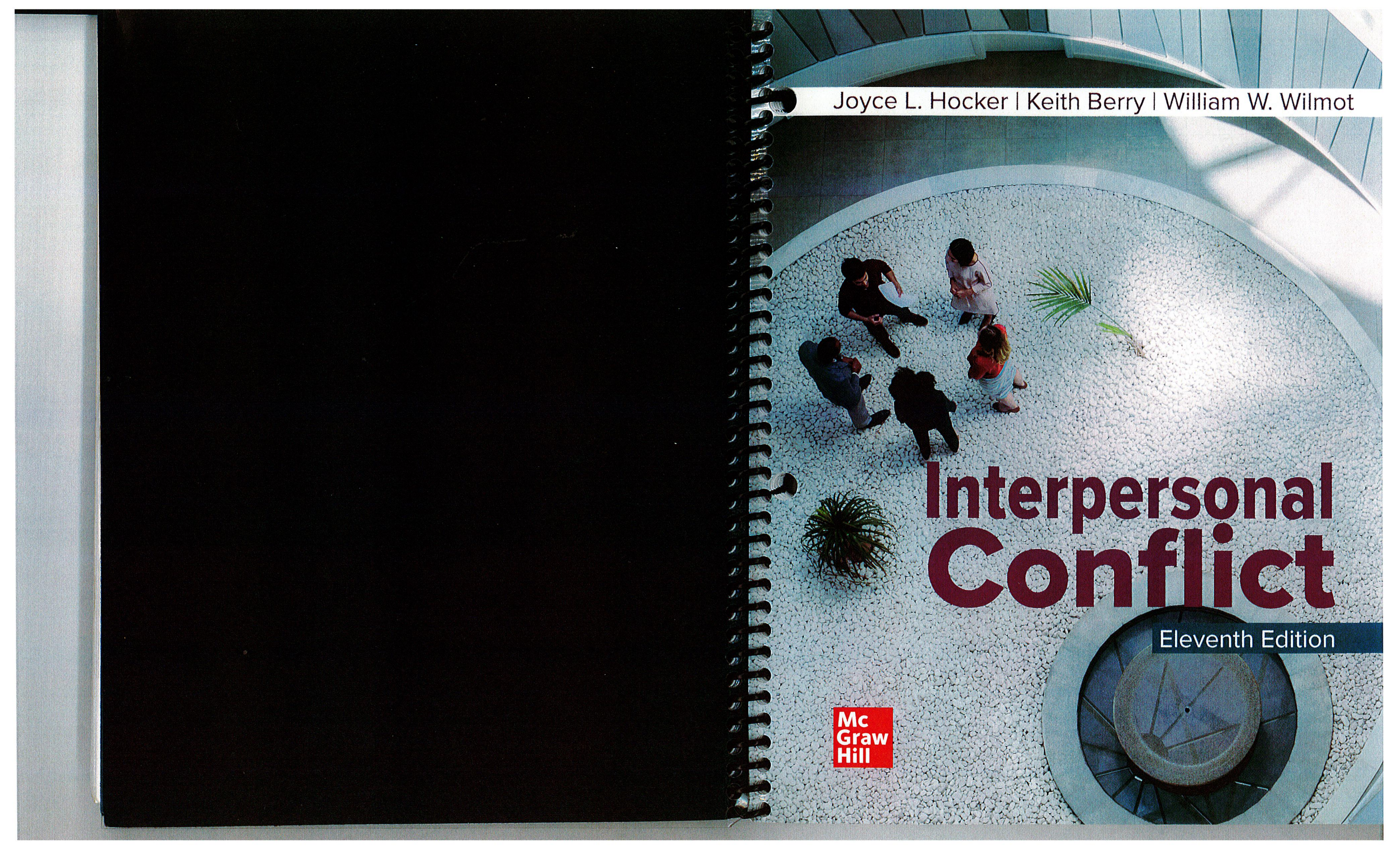


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Interpersonal Conflict

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Bullying

This chapter explores bullying as a mode of interpersonal conflict, the relationship between bullying and communication, and the ways bullying impacts people. Please keep these main ideas in mind as you read the chapter:

1. Bullying is a consistent and significant problem of contemporary lived experience. Most people do not have to look too hard to find examples of this conflict.
2. The symbolic construction of meaning in bullying interactions and relationships comprise the heart of the problem. That is, bullying is inherently communicative. This makes people who study communication *ideal* students of the problem.
3. Bullying commonly seeks to harm the identities of the people who are bullied.
4. Vulnerable and personal stories offer a unique way to understand bullying. This last assumption will matter most in the second half of the chapter.

Our goal is to provide you with a meaningful introduction to bullying and ways of making sense and responding to the problem. Some (many?) ideas will likely be new to you. Others might introduce you to academic concepts or practices that point to parts of bullying that you have already lived. Ultimately, our hope is to stimulate a deeper awareness of bullying and mindful ways of thinking about the problem.¹

What is Bullying?

Bullying is a pervasive societal problem that has captured significant attention for the past 20 years. At the time we wrote this chapter, a Google search using the term “bullying” yielded 312,000,000 results; “bully” led to 60,900,000 results; and “bullying prevention” yielded 110,000,000 results. In addition, popular music artists have brought attention to bullying and related issues concerning difference and inclusion, and have developed reputations as antibullying advocates, including Christina Aguilera, Katy Perry, Justin Bieber, P!nk, and Lady Gaga. Also, well-known films like *Mean Girls* and more recently *Moonlight* focus on bullying. The common thread connecting the story being told about bullying in these different contexts is that bullying continues to be prevalent and it affects people’s lives in problematic ways.

Bullying is present in, and influences people's lives in different ways. Let us pause for a moment to reflect on its connection to your life. How do you answer these questions?

How pervasive is bullying in your life? Have you participated in or witnessed a lot of bullying?

What have you learned about bullying in other college courses? In high school? From your parent/s?

How bad is the problem today?

Share your answers with a group of your fellow students.

Researchers from a diverse number of fields (e.g., Communication, Sociology, Political Science, LGBTQ, and Women's Studies) have studied bullying for three decades. The concept of **bullying** does not have one fixed definition; yet, most of the research literature has tended to include certain dimensions or practices that researchers believe are central to bullying.² According to Olweus (2010), "A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students" (11). Bullying is a purposeful behavior and involves a power imbalance (real or perceived) between aggressors and victims. In other words, bullies deliberately seek to cause harm to their victims, and "the student who is exposed to negative actions has difficulty defending himself or herself" (11; see also Alsaker and Gutzwiller-Helfenfinger 2010). Youth who are victimized in these ways may be unable to defend themselves physically, emotionally, and/or relationally (e.g., people who bully others may have the advantage of larger social groups or cliques, or be dominant physically). Olweus further writes,

We say a student is being bullied when another student or several other students, say mean and hurtful things or make fun of him or her or call him or her mean and hurtful names, completely ignore or exclude him or her from their group of friends or leave him or her out of things on purpose, hit, kick, push, shove around, or lock him or her inside a room, tell lies or spread false rumors about him or her or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike him or her, and other hurtful things like that. (12; emphasis in original.)

When these communicative dimensions persist over time, they constitute bullying. In turn, recurring teasing performed "in a mean and hurtful way" (12) is bullying; yet, this teasing, even if it is unpleasant, is not bullying when performed playfully, or when there is no power imbalance (Nansel et al. 2001).

Much like definitions, such distinctions are imperfect. After all, people's definition of what "playful" is will often vary based on the person. That being said, definitions and concepts are still useful as they provide us with shared ways of learning and talking about bullying.

²Although we describe workplace bullying below, this chapter primarily focuses on youth/school bullying.

Application 8.1

Engaging the Definition

Let us dig deeper into the different components of bullying. First, write out your responses to each of the questions below. Then share your answers with your classmate/s. Rely on the stories you have lived or those you know about to build your answers.

1. What are examples of the *negative actions* in bullying? Try to focus on specific verbal and/or nonverbal communication practices. Also, what makes the actions negative?
2. Why does it matter that these negative actions occur *repeatedly and over time*? Also, just how frequently do actions need to be repeated for them to be considered bullying?
3. What examples can you come up with to illustrate the *power imbalance* that leaves people who are bullied unable to defend themselves?
4. We suggested above that researchers commonly stress the deliberate nature of bullying. We agree with this part of the definition; however, students of communication also tend to assume that "one cannot not communicate"—that is, whether or not we realize it, communicators are always and already immersed in the process of jointly creating and using meaning (Watzlawick et al. 1967). Similarly, we have emphasized in the book that intention *and* impact both matter in conflict. Do people have to be aware of what we are doing, and deliberately want to harm someone, for actions to be bullying?

Cyberbullying

Also known as "cyber aggression" or "electronic aggression," **cyberbullying** is defined as "an aggressive, intentional act carried out by a group or individual, *using electronic forms of contact*, repeatedly and over time against a victim who cannot easily defend him or herself" (Smith et al. 2008, 376, emphasis in original; see also Berry 2016; Davis et al. 2015; Raskauskas and Huynh 2015). Immersion in social media enables youth to bully others to seek revenge, shame, humiliate, apply peer-normative pressure, and create a hostile environment 24 hours a day (Martocci 2015; Rafferty and Vander Ven 2014). Thus, cyberbullying makes bullying more efficient; it is "the new friend of the bully" (Rivers 2011, 15–16).

Cyberbullying affects many people worldwide, especially youth and young adults. The Berkman Center for Internet and Society at Harvard concluded, for example, that online bullying of peers is the number one threat to juveniles using social networking sites (Palfrey et al. 2009). In addition, research suggests approximately 16% have cyberbullied others at some period in their life and approximately 24% of students have been cyberbullied (Patchin and Hinduja 2013). Youth who cyberbully are usually individuals or groups who rely on various technologies, such as email, websites, chatrooms, SMS/text messages, instant messaging, and other social media. In cyberbullying, "a bully can send or post hurtful, humiliating, or even threatening messages and content to a victim, to third parties, or to a public forum or environment that many other online participants visit" (Patchin and Hinduja 2012, viii). Such increased visibility, along with an increased ability for the anonymity of bullies, makes it more difficult for victims to defend themselves and amplifies chances for humiliation and embarrassment.

Sexual Assault and Harassment

Sexual assault and harassment have received heightened attention in recent years, such as through the “Me, Too” movement. This response is crucial as this violence brutally cuts to the core of the bodies and beings of those who are assaulted or harassed. For the purposes of this book’s study of conflict, several principals apply:

- Sexual assault is a crime of power, with coercive sex as the weapon.
- Men and women must recognize, discuss, and learn the elements of consent, when no means no, and when the potential victim must be seen as competent and incompetent to give consent (extreme use of alcohol and physical incapacity render consent meaningless).
- Sexual assault grows in a climate of disrespect for women, of homophobia, and when men are encouraged by peers to engage in power over behavior, and when adult administrators, coaches, and friends think the problem is not a big issue.
- Sexual violence affects people who live with same-sex desire and attraction, especially men, who are both bullied and assaulted.
- Bystanders can make an important difference in the outcomes of assault and harassment.

Thus, assault and harassment are a community problem, not individual problems.

Harassment is shaming, demeaning, hostile teasing, using bullying statements, drawing unwelcome attention to a person’s body whether verbal or physical, and making discriminatory statements based on a person’s gender expression. While laws exist to provide remedies for workplace harassment or the creation of a hostile work environment, these cases have historically been difficult to prosecute.

For more research on the ways in which sexual violence and harassment inform bullying, see Espelage and Low (2013) and Felix and Greif Green (2010).

Application 8.3

My Experiences with Harassment and Assault

Write a short paper or personal essay about your own experiences with bullying, assault, or harassment. You may have been, in varying situations, a recipient (victim), perpetrator, or bystander. For each situation, answer the following questions:

- What happened—describe without evaluating or labeling?
- What were your emotions and, so far as you know, the emotions of others?
- What strategies did you use to deal with the situation? How effective were these?
- What effects can you identify for each of these situations?

Discuss any of the above situations that you are willing to share with a small group in class. After the discussion, answer this question: What did I learn from listening and sharing these experiences of bullying, assault, or harassment?

Why Study Bullying?

Three main reasons make the study of bullying important: (1) the relational and identity dimensions of bullying; (2) the rate of prevalence through which bullying happens; and (3) the mindless nature to bullying. In the next section, we provide an overview of each reason. The ideas we share will likely be of interest to various audiences, such as students who have been bullied, or bullied someone else, in their youth.

Relating/Being

As we mentioned above, bullying is an inherently communicative process that shapes, and is shaped by, interaction and relationship (see Berry 2016; O’Connell et al. 1999; Pörhöla et al. 2006; West and Beck 2018). Bullying would not exist without communicators and communication. People who participate in bullying are enacting a *systematic process*, or interrelated phases that may or may not have clear starting or ending points. They create, use, and interpret *messages*, direct (physical or verbal attacks) and indirect (gossip, social exclusion), that have a primary audience (youth who are bullied), and often secondary *audiences* (peers of those who bully or are victimized). The *conversation partners* often have some sort of an existing interpersonal relationship (friendships, school peers), though sometimes they are strangers. Further, bullying entails *goals* (harm, defend, attack, cope, humiliate, self-protection) that participants may or may not acknowledge, discuss, or understand. In turn, social constraints, such as power, shape the goals. The links between communication and bullying go even deeper.

Bullying is a relational problem and a subset of aggression (Smorti, Menesini, and Smith 2003), which involves communicators who perform different roles. Researchers generally speak to the categories of “bullies” (aggressors), “victims” (the victimized), “bully-victims” (victims who bully others as a consequence of being bullied), and “bystanders” (witnesses to the bullying, e.g., friends, teachers, family). Bystanders who speak up against bullying are identified in some antibullying campaigns as “upstanders” (e.g., The Bully Project 2015). Salmivalli et al. (1996) orient to bullying as a *group* process that entails specific roles—for example, the categories of “reinforcer” (of the bully), “assistant” (of the bully), and “defender” (of the victim).

The relational nature of bullying makes the problem intrinsically connected to issues of identities. The definition of “**identity**” is subject to debate, but, at the very least, it tends to refer to who persons understand themselves and others to be. The interconnectedness of bullying and identity happens in two main ways. On one level, conversation partners “bring” our identities to contexts of bullying and perform ourselves within communication. Our identities influence how we interact. On another level, the actual process of being bullied, and bullying others, or observing bullying, constitutes (makes and remakes) our identities. While the first level speaks to the ways identities inform bullying, the second level speaks to the ways participants in bullying form identities *within bullying experiences*. In essence, identities are “locatable” in, and shaped and reshaped through bullying.

Issues of social difference and stigmatization dwell at the heart of bullying (Berry 2016). As we will show below, who the characters of this story are, and what people deem their value to be, are vital. Difference concerning ability status, class, education level, ethnicity and race, religion, sexuality, sex/gender, socioeconomic status, just for starters, serve as tantalizing targets for people who bully. Difference also often makes life on the social margins for those who live with difference uncertain and uncomfortable.

Certain characteristics distinguish cyberbullying from traditional bullying. For instance, cyberbullying creates physical distance between aggressors and victims; can take place at any time during the day and week (vs. only at school); allows youth who enact this violence to easily spread and amplify derogatory materials from one location to another; and creates a context in which there is less chance for interpersonal feedback that might reveal to aggressors the impact of her/his actions (see Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer 2015).

Why people cyberbully or are cyberbullied remains somewhat of a mystery (Rivers and Duncan 2013), but there are plausible reasons that are worth considering. One motivation is cyber sanctioning—hostile pressure for victims to change their behaviors. A kind of vigilante justice seems to motivate some victimizers.

Another common motivation relates to dating behavior, with hostile messages from ex-partners being common. As one woman reported, “A girl was upset that I was dating her ex-boyfriend . . . she started posting between her and her friend bad things about me and said my boyfriend was cheating. This went on for a good six months” (Rafferty and Vander Ven 2014, 369). Insults comprised most of this kind of sanctioning.

Another motivation is an attempt to struggle over power. Threats of violence and shaming, often also having to do with dating relationships, predominate. One man reported, “This guy that I stole a girlfriend from years ago. Started telling me I was going to die . . .” (Rafferty and Vender Ven 2014, 372). Recipients must decide whether the threat is credible, or whether the motivation is creating fear, and shaming the victim. Support and conversation of friends tend to help such assessment.

A third motivation for electronic aggression was hostile entertainment—*trolling* to hurt, humiliate, annoy, or provoke, to get a response from the victim. This is a kind of indirect power struggle—“If I can get a response, I’m powerful.” Anonymity gives the perpetrator a sense of power over the other person.

This kind of vicious bullying has been linked to suicidal thoughts and actual suicide, especially when it pertains to younger teens. As a parent or friend of bullying victims, you may also feel helpless to know how to intervene or provide support. Youth who employ problem-focused coping with bullying, such as taking steps to change the stressful situation by asking for help from others and taking effective steps themselves suffer fewer negative, long-lasting effects of their victimization than do youth who try to deal with the problem by internalizing, externalizing, or avoiding. Internalizing leads to a negative view of oneself; externalizing can lead to ineffective cycles of revenge and retaliation. Avoiding can lead youth and young adults to effective action, such as blocking messages, changing one’s use of social media, or taking a break from all involvement in social media. The most effective coping strategies change a young person from a low-power victim to a higher-power advocate for oneself. Self-efficacy, doing something that works, leads to much less stress and negative impact on oneself (Fitzpatrick and Bussey 2014).

Application 8.2

Cyberbullying and Conflict Goals

Cyberbullying is commonplace in today’s bullying and works in ways that bring to life the central concepts, practices, and theories discussed in the earlier chapters of the book.

(continued)

Application 8.2

Cyberbullying and Conflict Goals

1. Use the definition of conflict we discussed in Chapter 1 to analyze cyberbullying. Try to apply each of the definition’s components (e.g., expressed struggle, incompatible goals).
2. The TRIP model discussed in Chapter 3 helps us to understand the goals people have in conflict. Think of an example of cyberbullying, then apply each of the four types of goals (topic, relationship, identity/facework, process) to your example. In essence, what were the goals of the cyberbullying?

Share your answers with fellow students seated around you, or in a fuller class discussion.

We will discuss examples of bullying, cyberbullying, and the impact this violence has on youth below.

Bullying in the Workplace

Workplace bullying is generally similar to definitions of bullying in general—“overt, unwanted, negative attention that continues despite a clear request for cessation” (Desrayaud et al. 2018, 81; see also Tye-Williams 2018)—and is a prevalent problem for many people. For instance, one study of over 1,000 respondents showed that 23% of the respondents had experienced bullying in a university setting (Keashly and Neuman 2008). When counting victims and witnesses to bullying, a full 45% of the survey respondents experienced bullying. In addition, in a random survey of 7,000 individuals that focused on the United States as a whole, 37% reported a direct experience with bullying (Workplace Bullying Institute and Zogby International 2007). Such bullying is four times more prevalent than illegal forms of “harassment.” Also, most of the professionals doing the bullying are bosses (72%) and women are affected by this bullying more than men. Further, while we hear about the United States being “lawsuit happy,” only 3% of those affected by workplace bullying filed lawsuits. Those targeted are the ones who are most vulnerable and may lose their jobs.

Workplace bullying shapes people’s lives in troubling ways. For instance, Leymann (1990) links the bullying to psychological and occupational decline, as well as a family functioning decline. In addition, this violence can lead to job performance slips and the damaging of an organization’s reputation (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006).

Bullying at work can take many forms—supervisors victimizing their employees, peers of the same level in the organization tormenting each other, and a group of workers assembling to bully someone (Einarsen 1999; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik, and Alberts 2006). When asked about their experiences, recipients of bullying tend to feel vulnerable and tortured, that the aggression is a “fixed fight” (Tracy et al. 2006). In addition, targets of bullying suffer long-term, sometimes permanent, damage (Arseneault, Bowes, and Shakoor 2010; Einarsen and Mikkelsen 2003; Leymann 1990). Workplace bullying has evolved to become a central dimension to some people’s everyday professional lives.

Bystanders who are not directly involved in the conflict can help, as long as they avoid being bullied themselves. This means that bystanders or observers in friend groups, at school, and at work take on a sense of responsibility beyond themselves, for their peers. Conversation among friends can help bystanders make effective choices to intervene. This strategy will become especially important as we discuss sexual assault and harassment.

People *negotiate* identities (see Bardhan and Orbe 2012; Berry 2016, 2012; Durham 2014; Jackson 2002). **Identity negotiation** is a complicated process that is informed, and sometimes governed, by social constraints (e.g., issues of power, stigma). People negotiate who they are with and for others. There are “gains” and “losses” in this process. Consequently, how we perform ourselves is rarely, if ever, only a matter of who we might understand ourselves to be. Instead, it can entail being others’ versions of ourselves.

Statistics on Bullying

Studies vary in terms of what they report on the prevalence of bullying. For instance,

- Approximately 30% of youth males and females, especially those in sixth through eighth grade, report moderate or frequent participation in bullying (Nansel et al. 2001; see also Juvonen et al. 2003).
- In contrast Glover et al. (2010) contend that between 40% and 80% of youth are bullied, and 7% of youth experience more severe bullying.
- One in three American school children between grades 6 through 10 are affected by bullying (The Bully Project 2013). Six out of ten teenagers say they witness bullying in school once a day. Sixty-four percent of children who were bullied did not report it. Ten percent of students who drop out of school do so as a result of repeated bullying. Nearly 70% of students think schools respond poorly to bullying.

Generally, although statistics on bullying vary from study to study, research suggests that bullying continues to be a significant problem with which youth must contend.

Researchers have also examined the prevalence of bullying specifically as it pertains to hostile school climates. For instance, Kosciw et al. (2014) national study with the Gay, Lesbian & Straight Education Network (GLSEN) surveyed 7,898 students between the ages of 13 and 21, and demonstrated additional and distressing conditions of bullying. For instance:

- Fifty-six percent of students felt unsafe at school due to sexual orientation, and 38% due to their gender expression, leading many to miss school and skip attending school events.
- Seventy-one percent of LGBT students heard “gay” used in a derogatory way.
- Fifty-six percent experienced negative remarks about gender expression.
- Over 51% had received homophobic and negative remarks about gender expression from teachers and school staff.
- While 74% of students were verbally harassed in the past year due to their sexual orientation, and 55% because of their gender expression, a significant number of students were physically harassed in the last year (74% LGBT, 36% due to gender expression).
- Climate issues significantly affect transgendered students: 42% reported being prevented from using their preferred names, 59% were made to use only the bathroom or locker room of their legal sex, and 32% were prevented from “inappropriate” clothes based on their legal sex.

See Espelage and Low (2013) and Rivers (2011) for further discussions of homophobic bullying.

The above statistics demonstrate worrisome conditions for youth based on sexuality and gender expression, circumstances that have amplified since the 2016 Presidential Election in the United States (see Berry 2018). Youth of difference, especially those who live with difference in terms of sex/gender and sexuality, must endure these harmful climates. Also, it is worth noting that these statistics only represent *reported* experiences with bullying. Youth who have been harmed, or who harm others, but who have not come forward out of fear of judgment, shame, or punishment are not included in these data. In the end, while statistics are helpful in showing the scope of the bullying problem, even if only one youth is harmed as a result of being bullied, that makes learning more about bullying crucial.

Sometimes youth feel as though they are the only one who must deal with and survive bullying. This is the storyline only *they* are living. Knowing that many others relate and share in their story can be helpful in their efforts to cope and heal.

Mindless/Mindful Responses

Earlier in the book, we discussed how mindfulness is a way to boost emotional intelligence in contexts of interpersonal conflict. Similarly, mindfulness provides an added reason for why studying bullying is important.

In review, mindfulness is the deliberate practice of being aware and living in the present moment, being open and paying attention to all the present moment offers, and doing so with gentleness, patience, nonjudgment, and even humor. Being mindful involves working to engage with pain and suffering as universal conditions of human life, and relating to people as fundamentally interconnected beings who shape each other’s lives in loving and harmful ways. In these ways, communicating with mindfulness not only helps people perform competently, but also more ethically and compassionately.

Bullying undermines the virtues of mindfulness and immerses youth in situations of *mindless* communication. Granted, mindlessness is a common factor that shapes most people’s everyday lives, and an important part of learning how to be mindful; but bullying is especially mindless in flagrant ways. Bullying seizes on people’s vulnerabilities, capitalizes on the opportunity to amplify others’ difference, and disregards others’ right to live in peace and free of harm. As the antithesis of mindfulness, bullying advocates cruelty and violence, rather than care, respect, and love, or at the very least a tolerance for others.

Okay, it is time again for us to pause, reflect, and discuss on the reasons to study bullying we just discussed. What do you think and feel about bullying? Is there one form of bullying that stands out as more important to others? If given the chance, what would you like to add? Is there one that resonates with your lived experienced with bullying? That is, which resonate with *your bullying story*?

The Characters of Bullying

Age and *sex/gender* are important focuses in bullying research. Youth who bully typically are 7–16 years old. While their bullying tends to decrease as they get older, these youth often find themselves in trouble with the law later as adults (Olweus 1993). In addition, research has demonstrated differences between how bullying is performed by boys and girls. Boys have been known to participate in bullying more frequently than girls (Olweus 1993) and are often understood to be more aggressive (Coie and Dodge 1998). However, over the last two decades, research has focused on the ways in which girls perform bullying through a distinct mode of violence: *relational aggression*. As Crick and Bigbee (1998) write,

Relational aggression harms others through hurtful manipulation of their peer relationships or friendships (e.g., retaliating against a peer by purposefully excluding her from one's social group), whereas overt aggression harms others through physical damage or the threat of such damage (e.g., threatening to beat up a peer unless she complies with a request). (337)

Relational aggression, also known as indirect victimization, entails telling lies or spreading rumors about victims and/or bullying through the withdrawal of friendships (Crick and Bigbee 1998). Relational aggression can be difficult to identify. Still, this mode of bullying is usually enacted by girls, and comprises a majority of the bullying experienced by girls today.

There is no one type of youth who is bullied or who bullies others. However, research has suggested shared characteristics for both of these social locations (Cook et al. 2010). On one level, youth who are bullied are: prone to suffer from personal issues, including anxiety and insecurity; frequently guarded, sensitive, and soft spoken; susceptible to deep emotional responses and withdrawal; have low self-esteem and self-images; and may feel isolated at school and without significant friends (Olweus 1993). These youth commonly become targets of bullying because they do not conform to "mainstream" norms and values (Davis et al. 2015; Thornberg and Knutsen 2011). As mentioned above, they live with difference.

On another level, youth who bully others: commonly exhibit dominant and assertive personalities; have a positive orientation to violence; are known for being impulsive and needing to dominate others; have little to no empathy concerning their victims, and, contrary to popular belief, show little anxiety and insecurity, and do not lack self-esteem (Olweus 1993). In addition, they are inclined to victimize others out of a need for power and control because they enjoy others' harm and suffering and/or because they want things from the victims (money, cigarettes, beer, etc.) (Olweus et al. 2007). Research further suggests these youth victimize others due to inner flaws and to improve their social status (Thornberg and Knutsen 2011).

Because we do not know the exact reasons for why youth bully or are bullied (Rivers and Duncan 2013), this chapter focuses primarily on *how bullying happens* and *what it means* for those who are involved. Remember what we have already discussed: bullying happens through communication, and bullying experiences mean a lot to the people's life story and the ways we are able to live.

The specific ways in which we talk about youth who bully others and are bullied matter. The personal and emotional nature of bullying, and the violence it enacts on vulnerable others, creates the conditions for us to characterize bullying, especially its main characters, in one-dimensional ways.

"Brian is a big ole' bully . . . and nothing else."

"There is no 'good side' to Andi . . . she's all bully and all bad."

"Poor Alex . . . the perpetual victim."

While there is truth to these kinds of statements, they are also simplistic and essentialize identity. They do not tell the full identity story. Granted, the sensational headlines that often announce cable television news stories, and stories posted on social media like Facebook and Twitter, have some responsibility for building such a perspective and way of speaking. Also, the violence perpetrated against people who are vulnerable and unable to defend themselves rightfully angers many people. It would make sense that people do not consider

and speak to the multiple sides to people in their first response or ever. Nevertheless, it is important to stay mindful of the reality that human beings are multidimensional and perform multiple selves or ways of understanding who we are (and are not) within interactions, including bullying communication (Berry 2018).

In this way, youth are more than just "victims" and "bullies." Considering this might lead youth who are victimized to understand themselves in fuller ways than just "victim," this might bring them hope. Also, talking about youth who experience bullying in additional ways other than just their victimizer identity could provide us with a deeper understand of the person and their troubling actions, and perhaps even a sense of generosity in perspective and empathy.

Our book has emphasized the symbolic power of words in conflict. The above discussion about labeling the participants of bullying provides yet another example of this power.

Aftermath of Bullying

Researchers have studied a range of negative consequences that result from bullying. For instance, bullying has been shown to undercut victims' capacity to trust others (Cowie 2013), enhance feelings of loneliness and/or social isolation or marginalization (Cowie 2013; Glover et al. 2010; Juvonen et al. 2003), and undermine victims' senses of self (Glover et al. 2010). In addition, youth who are bullied are more prone to depression (Bond et al. 2001; Hawker and Boulton 2000; Juvonen et al. 2003) and they tend to suffer increased risks of self-harm, such as suicide and suicidal ideation (Bowes et al. 2014; Rigby and Slee 1999). For instance, Lines (2007) observed that "53% of participants reported having contemplated self-harm as a result of bullying at school, while 40% said they had attempted at least once, and 30% more than once" (187). Also, bully-victims are prone to high levels of school and relationship problems (Juvonen et al. 2003).

Youth who are bullied are not the only ones who are impacted by bullying. For instance, youth who bully are prone to more serious violent behavior (Nansel et al. 2001), issues with mental health (Kumpulainen and Räsänen 2000), school problems, conduct disorders, and substance use (Hinduja and Patchin 2008), and, as mentioned above, issues with the law later in life (Olweus 1993). Since bullying is rooted in aggression and the use of power over others, there is a greater chance bullies will not be able to develop prosocial relational skills that assist in developing healthy relationships (Cowie 2013).

Bullying also impacts its observers. For instance, witnessing bullying can create risks to mental health, which, incidentally, can exceed the level of risks associated with being bullied or bullying someone, whether or not these observers were victims of bullying themselves (Rivers et al. 2009). Also, Jeffrey et al.'s (2001) research with bystanders, or "secondary victims" (143), suggests that exposure to bullying leads youth to feel indifferent toward bullying, less sympathetic to the distress of victims, and less inclined to intercede on behalf of victims.

Cyberbullying often impacts youth in palpable and personal ways. Cyber victims are prone to emotional and psychological distress, including depression, anxiety, and paranoia (Schultze-Krumbholz and Scheithauer 2015). Research also suggests youth who face cyberbullying, as well as traditional bullying, are more prone to suicidal ideation than those who are not bullied (Hinduja and Patchin 2010). Additionally, youth who cyberbully may feel less remorse than traditional bullies (Slonje et al. 2012).

We further illustrate the diverse number of ways bullying impacts youth below.

In summary, bullying is at once impressive and problematic. Looking closely at the ways in which bullying happens through social interactions and relationships, and leaves an imprint on identity, shows the *resourcefulness* of communication. Bullying communication works and is effective. The symbolic meanings created, interpreted, and used in bullying interactions and relationships are powerful. Yet, such a perspective matters very little when we stop to think about how and why this communication is used. The different types of bullying, and the different ways bullying operates, stress and underscore this reality: bullying is wrong, it changes lives, and requires us to better understand the process so as to try to prevent it from happening.

Personal Stories and Bullying Research

Human beings are *homo narrans* (Fisher 1984). We tend to understand communication and make choices when communicating with others narratively; put differently, we interact through the framework of a story (see also Bochner and Ellis 2016). Stories influence what we assume about and expect from others and ourselves, often tacitly, outside our awareness. Except for moments in which people engage in analysis or self-examination, or practice mindfulness, we are often too busy living to be able to analyze *how* we are living. Therefore, it is important to examine the stories we live and the ways they shape our communication, including interactions within conflict. Yet, how do we enact this learning? Here, again, we turn to the power of stories.

In the remainder of the chapter, we discuss the benefits of using **autoethnography** to investigate bullying. First, we provide an overview of what the method is, how this method works, and why it is helpful. Then we demonstrate four central ideas about bullying that result from studying bullying through stories.

As you read, consider the stories you have lived with respect to being bullied, bullying someone, and/or witnessing bullying. We assume that most readers have *some* story to tell about bullying. Some readers will quickly be able to identify and explore the story, or stories, they have lived. Maybe this ease is because the bullying occurred recently, or perhaps because the bullying was so bad and impactful, the story is hard to forget. Yet, some readers might struggle to identify a story from their lived experience. Perhaps the bullying happened so long ago that it is not easy to remember or maybe the bullying is too painful to remember with any clarity. For all readers, we believe that personal stories provide a way to recall, re-visit, and better understand the bullying through which we have lived.

Whichever way you “enter” or engage with the story of bullying and the uses of bullying stories, remember the importance of practicing mindfulness. Challenge yourself to think about and feel through your experiences with bullying. Try to do so directly and by “leaning into” the challenge. Being uncomfortable need not only be a bad thing. However, only engage with stories, others’ and your own, in ways that allow you to feel safe. Extending compassion to yourself concerning bullying stories, conflict, and lived experience, generally, is vital.

What is Autoethnography?

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing in which researchers draw on the unique vantage point of our lived experience to describe, interpret, and sometimes critique cultural issues. More specifically, Ellis and Bochner (2000) define autoethnography as

an autobiographical genre of writing and research that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal, the cultural, back and forth, autoethnographers zoom in through an ethnographic wide-angle lens, focusing outward on social and cultural aspects of their personal experience, then they look inward, exposing a vulnerable self that is moved by and may move through, reflect, and resist cultural imperatives. As they zoom backward and forward, inward and outward, distinctions between the personal and cultural become blurred, sometimes beyond recognition. (p. 39)

Researchers perform this process to call into question the status quo, using storytelling to trouble and re-imagine taken-for-granted assumptions and expectations that inform, and sometimes govern, social life (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). Autoethnographers’ personal stories and identities are at the heart of the method (Berry 2021). Autoethnographies often focus on untold stories that “mainstream” social scientific research has overlooked or ignored. In this way, autoethnography creates a space for marginalized, or excluded, stories and storytellers, and affirms without apology that such accounts and beings are valuable and, thus, desire greater inclusion and care.

Known for their openness to the focus of stories and the ways stories are told (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011; Ellis and Bochner 2000), autoethnographies tend to focus on cultural issues of hardship. They demonstrate characters living through life-shaping cultural topics and issues, including but not limited to ableism (Scott 2018), classism (Boylorn 2013; Dunn 2018), “coming out” as gay (Adams 2011), death, grief, and loss (Ellis 2018; Hocker 2018; Paxton 2018), LGBTQ cultures and identities (Berry, Gillotti, and Adams 2020), motherhood (Faulkner 2012, 2014), racism (Calafell 2016), and transphobia (Nordmarken 2014). Autoethnography is so open that it is hard to imagine a cultural topic or issue that would *not* find a home in this beautiful world of stories. In addition, autoethnographers convey their stories by relying on a heightened attention to experimentation, creativity, emotion, and vulnerability, and usually by using first-person voice. These accounts take various forms including poetry, fiction, personal essays, journals, and layered writing (see Bochner and Ellis 2016; Ellis 2004). Overall, the openness of autoethnography allows researchers to share stories they feel need to be told, and to be themselves in the process, making the method a refreshing and unique way of studying culture, including the ways conflict shapes cultural lives and identities.

Self-affirming and Resonating Stories

Autoethnography is a *subjective* research method, meaning researchers engage with, and rely on, our *biases* to convey and explore our stories (Ellis 2004). The common emphasis in research and teaching on the pursuit of *objectivity* (i.e., bias-free interpretation) might make it surprising for you to learn about research that *purposefully* uses biases. Yet, such a focus dwells at the heart of autoethnography and is beneficial in at least two main ways.

First, using one’s personal stories allows autoethnographers to re-call and re-visit past experiences in meaningful ways. For sure, re-visiting the past risks re-living difficult situations, problems, or relationships (Ellis 2004), which can be traumatizing. Autoethnographers tend to keep these risks in mind (and heart) when determining whether to write a particularly challenging story. Yet, for the stories that *do* get written, the process is often affirming for many autoethnographers, because it creates the conditions for the possibility of new and helpful ways of making sense of pain and suffering. In these ways, while autoethnography is *not* therapy, the therapeutic dimension is a major benefit to using the method.

Second, when done well, autoethnography is always and already an offering to others. Autoethnographers aim to write stories that spark a thoughtful and emotional response in readers. The goal is to evoke verisimilitude, or “a feeling that the experience described is lifelike, believable, and possible, a feeling that what has been represented could be true” (Ellis, Adams, and Bochner 2011). Put differently, the aim is to convey stories that resonate, or create the conditions for readers to identify *their* stories in *ours* (Bochner and Ellis 2016; Berry and Patti 2015; Holman Jones, Adams, and Ellis 2013). In these ways, autoethnography operates as a relational or communicative process.

Have you ever left a movie theatre thinking the story conveyed in the film you just watched “told my story” or “told a story I know”? Felt validated by seeing a story on the news in which someone is living through a similar problem to one of yours? Felt your pain in someone else’s? If so, then you have an understanding of the usefulness of resonance in storytelling.

Autoethnography and Bullying

For the past 11 years, Keith (co-author of this book) has conducted research and written on youth bullying. His work primarily uses ethnography—the descriptive study of people’s production, use, and interpretation of culture and cultural lives—and autoethnography. His research typically focuses on the ways bullying functions, or operates, in terms of communication, and the ways bullying shapes, and is shaped by, issues concerning identity.

We next explore the four main and interrelated dimensions to bullying. More specifically, we discuss the ways in which bullying is: (a) communicative, (b) emotional, (c) relational, and (d) transformative. We use the stories from Keith’s book *Bullied: Tales of Torment, Identity, and Youth* (hereafter: *Bullied*) (Berry 2016) to illustrate each dimension.

Bullied uses autoethnography to examine youth bullying from relational and identity perspectives. The symbolical interactions, relationships, and identities within bullying are its primary focus. The basis for the book is a research study Keith conducted in collaboration with the students who were enrolled in two sections of a past interpersonal communication course at Keith’s university, the University of South Florida.³ The stories students wrote for their final course projects, and Keith’s own stories, serve as the primary focus of the investigation. The students’ stories all come from women. The book as a whole is also an autoethnography, which begins on the first day of class, shows Keith working with his students to create their stories, and ends on the last day of class.

The stories in *Bullied* are personal narratives and each story conveys several “episodes” or scenes that come directly from the writer’s unique lived experience. In addition, each chapter includes his analysis of the given story rooted in issues of relational communication and identity. He primarily focuses the analyses on the ways in which the women’s stories

³ The Institutional Review Board (IRB) at University of South Florida (USF) approved this study (Pro00014179). All of the names listed in the book and the current chapter are pseudonyms, chosen by each of the women. I solicited participation for this study after I formally submitted grades for the course. USF’s IRB does not consider autoethnography “human subjects research” largely because the research does not seek generalizable findings; thus, research that uses the method is typically exempted from needing institutional approval. However, the study that led to the publication of *Bullied* required IRB approval because I was utilizing former students’ stories.

speak to stigma (Goffman 1963) and stigmatizing communication, and how living with stigmatized identities led storytellers to perform.

Bullying is Communicative

As suggested above, bullying is a fundamentally **communicative process**. In other words, communication makes bullying possible. The communication that comprises bullying, much like interpersonal or relational communication generally, involves conversation partners co-constituting (i.e., making and remaking) symbolic messages, verbal (linguistic) and nonverbal (embodied), which convey meanings about or ways of understanding ourselves, interactions, and relationships. In addition, other dimensions of communication inform bullying, including culture, listening, perception, and the mood or tone of interactions (i.e., the communication climate). Overall, bullying would not happen and matter without communication.

Iman’s story in *Bullied* helps us to understand the power of verbal messages in bullying. Iman is a Black American young woman who grew up in a largely all-white gated community. Her story provides a stirring account of race-based bullying, which she endured from a group of peers at school and her family at home. She writes:

Most of my harassment started in middle school. I was constantly picked on for being a “white Black girl,” or for talking “too white.” When the ridiculing first started I thought nothing of it, until it got the point where I started noticing that kids of my own race started rejecting me. I was picked on for not being “Black enough.” I wasn’t accepted in the Black community, and I never felt welcomed among a group of Black people. Being bullied by kids of my own race, a group of people with whom I should share commonalities and bonds, was so confusing. (Berry 2016, 28)

To critics, she was insufficiently Black, and they repeatedly let her know of this “shortcoming.” Their bullying messages evaluated and demeaned her. In turn, they demanded she be someone whom she was not. In essence, they bullied her for simply trying to be herself.

Iman’s main bully was “Destroyer” (the name Iman gave her in her story). Destroyer’s bullying typically took place in the school locker room:

I can recall everyday walking into the locker room hoping she didn’t approach me or say anything to me; I constantly had to look over my shoulder to make sure I was aware of my surroundings. I needed to be aware and ready for her . . . She always stared at, and taunted, me, trying to get me to react. I always tried to not give in. As I did with others, I tried my normal trick of blocking out, shutting out the constant name calling and harassment. I tried to ignore Destroyer, but it didn’t always work. Across the locker room she would constantly shout at me these off-the-wall things, like asking me “why am I so ‘bougie’?” or “why do I talk like a ‘white girl’?” The intimidation was constant. There wasn’t a day that went by when she had something nice to say to me. She yelled at me whatever she could think of that was negative and hurtful. (Berry 2016, 30)

Her words taunted and intimidated Iman at deep levels. They called out her identity—what Destroyer thought to be her identity—in ways that hurt her feelings. Her taunting rattled Iman and naturally made it difficult for her to relax and be at ease with herself and school.

The ridicule Iman felt from members of her own family confounded the problems she endured in her youth. As she writes, “My family is close and dear to my heart. But they played a significant role in my bullying and depression. I would get bullied at school, then I would come home and hear some of the same comments” (Berry 2016, 29). Most of the ridicule she endured at larger family events, socials or get-togethers, gatherings she wished would have been about eating, laughing, bonding, and catching up on the good things that were going on in their lives. However, she repeatedly felt harassed, which usually went unnoticed by everyone except Iman.

I don’t think there was anything “off limits” when it came to bullying me. From my voice, to the clothes I wore, to the majority of white friends I had. I was constantly being picked on for just being who I was. They were always on me, commenting on what I did or didn’t wear, or what I did or didn’t do, and always in ways that critiqued me for “acting white.” It felt like they wanted to make sure I didn’t forget I was Black. (Berry 2016, 29)

You will probably not be surprised to learn that these family experiences had a lasting effect on Iman. In her words, “Throughout my whole life, I have never been comfortable in my own skin” (Berry 2016, 29). Their aggression made her feel like she did not belong and that she was doing something wrong.

One way in which Iman’s story is unique relates to her writing about the aggression she faced in terms of bullying. Aggression that occurs in the family context is often not considered to be bullying, per say, but abuse, or when it pertains to siblings, sibling rivalry (Berry 2016; Berry and Adams 2016). We do not try to settle this debate as to whether or not family aggression illustrates family bullying or bullies in this chapter, but it is worth careful reflection.

What do you think—is there family bullying?

What bullying from family members have you maybe endured?

Is repeated and harmful aggression within families that different from bullying that takes place at school?

In the end, we are not sure how productive it is to quibble too much on this matter.

While definitions are important and have their place in learning, it is also true that if Iman and other storytellers believe they are living, or have lived through bullying, using the term, then it is worth engaging and affirming their experiences on their own terms.

The bullying Iman endured was so bad that it led her to experience suicidal ideation. Her story reveals that she questioned how worthy she was to continue living, given how she had been bullied, and how she feared she would continue to be bullied. Thankfully, Iman did not kill herself; but she did practice self-harm. We will further discuss her actions below.

Lauren’s story in *Bullied* provides an additional example of the power of messages. She focuses primarily on experiences that took place in 7th grade, when peers bullied her based

on her physical appearance. Physical appearance, attractiveness, and issues concerning bodies and embodiment are key components in all of the stories in the book. They emphasize the vicious ways youth tend to judge others concerning the bodies they have, or do not have. Lauren’s bullying focused on the blonde highlights in her hair. Her peers seized on the highlights, made them into something negative, and created a poem about Lauren, *Highlight Girl*, which they posted on social media for others to see. The poem ridiculed her based her appearance and intelligence, and stressed that no boy would like her based on these characteristics of her identity.

It first appeared in her school’s “burn book.” Such books became popular through the hit motion picture *Mean Girls*, a movie about bullying, girls, and high school. They are notebooks that students fill with demeaning gossip. Handwritten and/or pasted images typically appear on their pages, and bullies design each page to humiliate a specific target of their bullying. Students secretly circulate the book around the school for students to review and for their amusement. Lauren was “featured” in her school’s book in 7th grade, and the poem appeared in the section about her.

The verbal messages in *Highlight Girl* “othered,” or isolated, Lauren. Those who bullied her felt she was different in objectionable ways and used their communication to amplify the difference. Even more, the words evaluated and demeaned Lauren. Their bullying terrorized her to the point that she stayed home from school for a week because she felt so bad and did not want others to see her.

Lauren made a change in her appearance to try to alleviate the bullying she faced and to feel better. She writes:

To no longer be considered “highlight girl” I dyed my hair back to its natural color, getting rid of all highlights. I figured it would be smart to take away one of the main attributes they tormented me about, especially since it was such an easy fix. I told my mom I was tired of the highlights, so she gladly took me to the hair salon. I remember that day vividly. Sitting in the stylist’s chair, I closed my eyes as she put the chemicals in my hair. My scalp burned, but I told myself the sting was nothing compared to the ways I would feel once my hurt was gone. Once she was done, the stylist let me look in the mirror, and the person I saw staring back at me was overwhelmingly soothing to me. I felt like a different person. The stylist had cut my hair differently, and now my simple brunette hair brushed stylishly against my shoulders. As I ran my hands through it, I got a little choked up. I assured my mom I was happy with how it turned out. Yet, I knew the true reason for my happiness: I was a new girl. I was untouchable. (Berry 2016, 106)

Changing one’s physical appearance and enduring a burning scalp to feel better, and stronger, speak to the power of messages, and, in this case, messages about physical appearance and idealized beauty.

Lauren’s story also demonstrates some of the ways in which messages that youth use in response to bullying are significant. Her mother encouraged her to “kill others with kindness.” This meant she should respond to bullying with a kind reaction, or by thinking positive and self-affirming thoughts. The hope was that emphasizing kindness and positivity would enable her to feel less bothered or hurt when bullied. She *tried* to live in this way.

When they would say passive aggressive things to me at lunch, or mumble something under their breath, I would smile and try to compliment myself in my head to counteract their words. If they said I was a “nerd” for getting something right, I would tell myself that being intelligent is something very admirable. However, even though my mom’s advice came from her heart, and she meant well, it didn’t really play out in the ways she explained. They never let up; if anything, the duo increased their bullying to get the negative reaction from me, which they so badly desired. If I ignored their negative comments in class, they would be quiet for a second and then find something else about which to nag on me. (Berry 2016, 103–104)

Understandably, it became nearly impossible for her to hide how hurt she felt by the ways others treated her. The positivity fell short as a strategy, and actually further escalated the bullying. Also, Lauren grew tired of the response, as she writes, “There are only so many times that I could hear negativity and look for the positivity in it!” (Berry 2016, 104). In this way, her story speaks to the taxing nature of bullying, which often keeps youth from being able to defend themselves. Sometimes words fail.

Iman’s story expands on the ways in which bodies are expressive within bullying, that is, how bodies and embodiment create meanings that shape interactions and identities. Although she did not take her life, she did resort to the self-harm practice of cutting to feel better. She recalls her first night of cutting with clear and precise detail.

I looked all over the house for the right blade, and I knew right where to look: my dad works on houses, and so he had all sorts of blades and construction tools. While looking for his tools I stumbled across a very sharp paper opener, or maybe it was an envelope opener—I’m not sure the correct terminology for the device. The blade was sharp, and so after that night, the opener became my tool of relief. My stomach was the spot on my body where I chose to cut. I wanted an area where no one could see any marks, unless I showed them. (Berry 2016, 32)

Cutting allowed Iman to feel better.

It’s weird to think that self-inflicting pain can be an escape from the pain that you endure from your problems. However, it was my escape. Though I was hurting myself I didn’t feel the pain. I felt the pain, but the pain felt like a release. Each time I cut myself I felt like the pain of hating myself took pause for those brief moments. (Berry 2016, 32)

The cuts were meaningful in at least two main ways. On one level, they allowed Iman to feel a sense of peace that helped her to suffer a bit less. Cutting led her to feel a sort of relief that was not possible with other coping techniques she tried. On another level, her admission, “I wanted an area where no one could see any marks, unless I showed them,” illustrates the often-secretive nature to cutting and, in turn, the depths of suffering some youth feel when being victimized. If others, including her parents, saw the cuts, the message would be clear: Iman needs help. But maybe she was not ready for that help.

The stories in *Bullied* offer other evidence of the role of nonverbal or embodied messages in bullying. For instance, Jezebel’s story conveys the bullying she endured over the course of three consecutive days in an all-too common site for bullying: the school lunchroom. She describes how nervous she felt with being in that space in detail:

I never quite understood the anxiety that comes from hearing the ring of the lunch bell. Upon each ring, I think, “Great, it’s that time again to scramble and find the nearest friend to stand in the lunch line with so I don’t look like a weird loner.” Unfortunately today, I couldn’t find a single friend, so I ended up standing in the lunch line alone for what seemed like hours. Getting a chicken patty like you do every day shouldn’t be this arduous and grueling, right? (Berry 2016, 74)

Her nerves at lunch at least in part involved who she felt she was in relationship to others.

I feel like a puppy at an aquarium. I knew very well that the other kids thought I was a complete “weirdo,” someone who doesn’t fit their archetype of “preppy,” “popular,” “Aeropostale brand clothes-wearing” socialites. I knew it from the judgmental glares, the random IMs I would receive on AOL: “You’re fucking weird, nobody likes you.” I knew how they felt about me from the muffled giggling in the hallway that would scratch away at my ear. (Berry 2016, 75)

Others have hurt her in the past, and she assumes and fears they will do so again in the future.

The bullying Jezebel lived through further explains the ways nonverbal messages and uses of the body tend to shape bullying. For instance, her story shows how “Cruella,” the peer who bullied her, deliberately used her body to crowd Jezebel while they were standing in the lunch line. Her prose in the story is evocative, including when she tells readers that Cruella was so close to her in line that she could feel her breath making contact with the hairs on the back of her neck. In addition, Cruella imposed her body on Jezebel to demand she move out of the seat at the lunch table where Jezebel was sitting. She wanted (and deserved) to sit there. This embodiment communicated power and force to instigate fear in Jezebel. In this sense, the lunch line interaction allowed Cruella to express *I am here. Do not make a wrong move. I control you.* The interaction at the table expresses *I own this table and you. Get up or else you will face the consequences. I am everything. You are nothing.* Nonverbal messages, much like all messages, are subject to multiple interpretations.

Let us pause and reflect again. How would *you* interpret Cruella’s actions? What leads you to assign these meanings to the situation? What other meanings are possible, or important?

Another dimension to Jezebel’s story further illustrates the presence and meaning of bodies and embodiment in bullying. She typically wore a “Naruto” headband around her neck each day of school. Naruto is anime, a “magna” (comic) series created in Japan that centers on the ninja monk character, Naruto Uzamaki. She religiously wore the headband to feel better about so often feeling alone. She writes with pride about the headband and what it represented: “It takes a lot of guts to parade around like an open book, trying to be unashamed of the things I like. The headband is a metal plate, with a leaf insignia encrusted into it. It acts as a sort of armor” (Berry 2016, 75). At the same time, wearing it was risky. “Ironically, this armor only seems to attract more attackers. I know that because I don’t always have a buddy around, [so] I am an open target” (Berry 2016, 75).

Jezebel’s uses of, and relationship to, her headband speak to the ways in which bullying entails an imbalance in power and the likelihood that the persons being bullied are less able to defend themselves. She knew Cruella, and maybe others, would come after and try to hurt her. Why else would she speak about the headband in terms of “armor”? It helped her

to feel more powerful. Yet, wearing the headband was also complicated given that, as she wrote, it made her a target for more bullying. Being a target jeopardizes one's power. Still, she cherished that headband and would always wear it.

Application 8.4

Deconstructing *Communicative*

Let us apply some of the key concepts from Chapter 1 of our book to the idea that bullying is communicative. Use the passages from Iman's, Lauren's, and Jezebel's stories to support your answer.

1. In what ways do the stories from Iman, Lauren, Jezebel demonstrate the *expressed struggle* that is part of the definition of conflict?
2. How do you feel they showed the *interdependence* that shapes communication and conflict?
3. What would you say are the *perceived incompatible goals* and *perceived scarce resources* in bullying?
4. How is *interference* present in these accounts of bullying?

As with all applications in the chapter and our book, there is no one "correct" answer.

Bullying is Emotional

Emotions play a significant role in conflict (see Chapter 6). The above passages from *Bullied* point to the relevance of emotions in bullying. Let us return to Iman's story to understand this connection even more.

Iman writes about the depths of the pain and suffering she felt because she was bullied.

I think most people would say, "So what you were picked on, but you knew who you were . . . you were Black!" Others might say, "People will say all types of things, you just have to be strong." Though both of the statements might be true, they don't come close to explaining my pain. Every day I would walk around hating myself, not understanding why I wasn't good enough for certain people, wondering why people would constantly judge me, wondering why they were quick to put me down the moment they met me. It might be easy for those same people to say, "be yourself. . . be confident, and don't listen to them," but when *even your own family* picks at these same painful wounds, and those actions are allowed to continue, what is a young person to think? I was a child who hated myself, and saw no other way out. (Berry 2016, 33)

Growing up requires youth to experiment with, and try to learn, what it means to feel, including feelings about oneself. This process is not easy. The harm bullying seeks to enact on others entails emotional harm; thus, youth who face bullying face an even trickier process in this area of maturing. We see an example of this in Iman's story, when she admitted that she lived as "a child who hated myself." Also, remember these other words from Iman's: "Throughout my whole life, I have never been comfortable in my own skin." These are difficult emotions, which must have made living so challenging for Iman.

At the same time, positive and affirming emotions can result from bullying. Take, for instance, what Iman writes at the end of her story about the ways her attending an all-Black college changed how she felt about herself:

The 14 year old, self-hating, "white Black girl" is now 22 years old, and a woman of self-love. After high school I entered college and started experiencing things for myself. I still suffer from constant thinking. But I don't let other voices be as influential in how I think and feel as they were before. My first year of college, I went to an all-Black university, and there I found self-love. Attending a majority Black college helped me embrace my Black identity. For once I wasn't a minority, I was a majority. I am a Black woman who has found her identity despite all the years in which I felt like it was being withheld from me. I am a survivor of the bullying epidemic. (Berry 2016, 34)

Granted, it probably would have been nice for the people who bullied her to treat her with greater respect and care, so that she would feel better about herself. Still, her story highlights the ways that life changes, such as in attending her university, can create the conditions for better self-care and self-love. Regardless, Iman's story speaks to one's process of developing emotional awareness and emotional intelligence, and her ability to live more mindfully with compassion.

Jezebel's story further demonstrates emotionality in bullying. In another scene, she tells readers about a food fight she and Cruella had while sitting across from each other at a lunch table. In short, Cruella picked out a tomato from the salad she was eating, threw it across the table at Jezebel, and yelled "take that . . . you piece of TRASH!" (Berry 2016, 79, emphasis in original). Although our young warrior had successfully resisted the temptation to retaliate in past encounters, Cruella's treating her like a garbage can represent a new low. As a result, she decided to take a different approach.

I took the tomato out of my lap and rapidly set it in front of my tray. They took it and threw it back at me. I placed it to the right of me. They took it and threw it back at me. I placed it to the left of me. They took it and threw it back at me.

What was I doing? Why didn't I just throw it on the floor? I was so rattled I couldn't make any logical movements at this point . . . It was time to put this to an end. Without even looking I smashed the tomato down to the right of me, as far away as possible. Yet, I had made another grave mistake . . . (Berry 2016, 76)

Her retaliation only increased Cruella's wrath. In response, Cruella picked up a smashed up tomato that had ketchup all over it from her plate and hurled it at Jezebel, landing on her white shirt and leaving a stain. She writes:

Laughter thundered throughout the lunch room. The tomato rolled off excruciatingly slow, like the clock's leisurely hands, leaving a bright red stain. I stared at the stain and everything it represented to me: shame, grief, and sorrow. At that moment, I wanted to be anyone but the person residing in my skin. These were all emotions I tried so hard to hide. Yet, here the feelings emerged in the form of an extremely noticeable and gaudy red blemish. Red like my face. Red like my bleeding heart. Red like my anger and frustration. Red like the traffic signal that shrieks "STOP. STOP. STOP. STOP." (Berry 2016, 80, emphasis in original)

Jezebel ran to the gym locker room to change her clothes. She felt humiliated and weakened and was at her breaking point.

When I went home that afternoon, I collapsed to my knees. I clasped my hands together and prayed to God: “Dear Lord, I love you so much. Please, please I beg you to make her leave me alone. Please make her leave me alone, I don’t know what I’ll do if this continues. Please make her go away, or I swear I’ll get violent. I don’t want to be violent again; I don’t ever want to be violent again, please.” (Berry 2016, 80)

Her account reminds us about the range of emotions that bullying typically entails and the depths of the toll bullying often takes on youth who are victimized in this way, especially but not limited to shame and humiliation (Martocci 2015).

Application 8.5 Deconstructing *Emotional*

Use the passages from Iman and Jezebel above to answer the questions below about emotions and bullying. Turn back to the Feelings Inventory in Chapter 6 to help support your answers.

1. What emotions are relevant to their stories? Think first about the feelings explicitly mentioned by the two women. Next, based on what the women shared, can you identify other emotions that are at play?
2. Do you consider Iman and Jezebel to be emotionally aware and intelligent young women? How about the other women we highlight in this chapter?
3. What would you say is the most powerful emotion related to bullying? Why this?
4. How have you navigated feelings within the bullying that you experienced in your life?
5. What is an effective way to feel within bullying, as the person bullying, being bullied, or someone who is a bystander to bullying?

Bullying is Relational

To approach bullying as a **relational process** entails focusing on the ways in which people live interdependently. As we have discussed earlier in this book, conversation partners interact with each other based on the unique vantage point of our lived experience, and our particular interests, wants, and needs, and assumptions and expectations concerning how communication operates and what it means shape our interactions. Partners have their own unique personal histories that inform communication and conflict (see Chapter 2). In turn, each partner’s choices when communicating effectively shape, and reshape, the given interaction and the relationship people maintain. In these ways, a relational approach entails reflecting on what occurs when conversation partners *come together*, by examining the ways partners symbolically co-create and use meaning together *within communication*. This *between-ness*, so to speak, is crucial when attempting to understand conflict and bullying (Gergen 2009; Shotter 1993; Schrag 2003).

The relating that comprises bullying is inherently violent in verbal and nonverbal ways. After all, the very purpose of bullying is to cause harm, a mode of communicative violence. Some aspect about the person who is victimized, commonly something about that person’s

identity, again, often difference, is objectionable or obnoxious to the person doing the bullying. At the very least, that aspect of difference is understood to be something that can be focused on, seized, and attacked. In these ways, bullying functions as a power-based act of control and domination. Rooted in highly competitive styles of orienting to conflict, bullying says *You are weaker than I, worth less than I, and as such, I will let you know (and remind you frequently) about your status, without any regard for your well-being*. Bullying effectively emphasizes that one life is more precious than the other. This way of orienting in interaction, as well as its emphasis on disregard for another person, provides yet another demonstration of the mindless and unethical nature of bullying.

Interactions in which bystanders (e.g., teachers, peers, guidance counselors, parents) choose to step in and assist youth who are bullied also demonstrate the relational nature of bullying. Rooted at least in part in an important spirit of social justice and care, these conversation partners relate differently. When confronting youth who bully, they relate in ways that seek to halt the violence being perpetuated, in ways that suggest *These actions are wrong, harmful, and need to stop*. The hope in these interactions is that the bullying will cease, and perhaps that the youth doing the bullying will listen and start to understand the wrongness of the bullying, and have a change of heart and mind. At the very least, making these confrontations so the violence ends, for real, is a helpful start.

At the same time, the messages are often quite different when bystanders confront the youth who are bullied. These conversation partners engage wounded beings and at least seek an end to the pain and suffering stemming from the violence. Their messages express *You are being treated in harmful ways. Such violence is wrong in every way. You deserve to find peace and safety. You do not deserve to be bullied and hurt. Hang in there*. Such relating acknowledges the pain and offers care, support, and opportunities for hope and healing to begin.

The relational nature of bullying also concerns the role of interpersonal relationships and how bullying shapes, and is shaped by, the bonds we negotiate with others. The prevalence of relational bonds in bullying appears consistently across the stories told in *Bullied*. For instance, Rose is a main character in Jezebel’s story. As best friends, the two were inseparable and helped each other to manage and survive the lunchroom each school day. For instance, Jezebel writes about the relief she felt when she saw Rose walk into the lunchroom one day:

“Rose!” There Rose was, stumbling around like a lost puppy, someone I identified with. I instinctively waved her over in a reeling sort of motion with my hands; I needed her help. I could feel the dark fog, the grimacing stares around me clear away as I realized I was not alone. With a bright smile that almost creased all the way to her eyebrows, her shoes turned into pogo sticks as she gleefully bounced over to me and joined me in the line. Safe, I was finally safe. I could breathe a sigh of relief as the loneliness and worry evaporated away from me. (Berry 2016, 75)

Jezebel and Rose were kindred spirits connected by the comfort each friend gave to the other. When she was with Rose, Jezebel felt less lonely, and could relax. When Cruella escalated her bullying, Rose was there to make Jezebel feel better and to convince her to not take action that would anger Cruella.

Rose was not only Jezebel’s friend but her safe haven. “My oasis was at the lunch table with Rose. There, I never had to deal with snarky, nasty mannered girls who pinched and scraped away at my self-confidence” (Berry 2016, 77). Jezebel might have felt unwell in the

lunchroom, but when Rose was around, she felt better and safer than the times when she was alone. Rose was there for her, that is, until the time when she was not.

When Jezebel conveys the altercation about the hurled tomatoes from above, she also mentions Rose's involvement. Rose is normally present and defends Jezebel. This time she was silent. Jezebel writes:

She was a first-hand witness, and she made no effort to actively ease the situation. It was almost as if she was trying to embody a stranger, a bystander, someone who isn't expected to step in. Her own fear stifled her from being a hero to a close friend. In that moment she was a cold stranger to me. (Berry 2016, 80)

She counted on Rose being there for her. That is what oasis-friends do for each other; they show reciprocal support. Rose's absence made her feel alone and stranded, which only intensified the hurt she felt from being bullied. She writes, "This bothered me deeply. I was so frustrated that Rose had absolutely no desire to defend me. I felt betrayed for the longest time. I could see my safety net snap right before my eyes" (Berry 2016, 81). Because she was humiliated by that moment with Cruella and did not want to re-live it, Jezebel never confronted Rose about her lack of support. However, she did concede in her story that Rose likely was simply trying to take care of herself and could not in that situation care for both her *and* Jezebel.

Other moments in the women's stories in *Bullied* speak to the importance of close friendships in bullying. For instance, Lauren's story shows the positive effect that can stem from supportive friendships. Her peers bullied Lauren well into her 8th grade year. Yet, by this time she had learned more effective ways of responding. Crucial in the learning was her small group of friends, other students who were loyal to her, stayed by her side, and helped keep up Lauren's morale. One of the most influential friends was Susanne, a new 8th grader to the school, who did not have many friends. Lauren saw something special in her.

Susanne had recently moved from South Africa and was living with her mom and new husband. Her family had a lot of issues, which mostly dealt with her biological father. Susanne never had a good relationship with him, because he abused her mother while she was growing up. Her dad also had a "bully" role in her life . . . When we were placed in the same homeroom, I reached out to befriend her. (Berry 2016, 105)

Lauren loved how warm and kind her new friend was. Also, Susanne had lived through struggle, much like Lauren had. They quickly became best friends.

In ways that are reminiscent of Jezebel and Rose, Lauren and Susanne trusted and supported each other and were an enriching influence on each other's life. Susanne and her friends spent quality time with Lauren, reminding her of her good characteristics, sometimes even writing a list of good things about Lauren in her planner for her to see the next day. Lauren had found in her friend a new way to cope. She was able to ignore others' jabs more easily, which she describes as being like "mentally dodging them like knives" (Berry 2016, 106).

Jessi focused her story in *Bullied* on the bullying that occurred within her friendship circle. The story is quite complicated and definitely "teen like." In short, a girl named Amber bullied Jessi, and Jessi relied on her best friend Maria to get through the bullying. Both Amber and Jessi found one of their peers, Mike, attractive. This factor fueled Amber's bullying. As it turned out, Jessi learned that Maria was not protecting her from Amber, but actually

bad-mouthing her to Amber behind her back. While she *believed* Maria was trustable, she was actually betraying her. The betrayal demoralized Jessi, especially given she was an only child. She writes, "They were the closest things to siblings. At home I didn't have anyone my age going through the same things as I" (Berry 2016, 50). We will return to Jessi's story below.

Application 8.6

Deconstructing *Relational*

Draw on the passages from Lauren's, Jezebel's, and Jessi's stories to answer the following questions.

1. Using the TRIP model in Chapter 3, what would you say are the *relational* goals demonstrated in the storyteller's passages?
2. Would you say that there were *overlapping* goals shown in these passages?
3. Recall our discussion on *conflict styles* (from Chapter 5). Which style is mainly used in these accounts? Who are participants concerned with: *self* and/or *others*?

Bullying is Transformative

We have discussed some of the key ways that bullying implicates, or calls attention to, youth identities. Youth who live with stigmatized identities, or social difference, are typically the ones who are bullied. Yet, recall that the experience of bullying also changes identities; in other words, bullying is **transformative**. For instance, Iman's journey to better self-love that we shared above is no doubt a journey centered on identity, and Jezebel's story centers on the extent to which she can live up to her warrior nature. There are additional stories in *Bullied* that speak to this process.

Jessi's story on cyberbullying also provides an example of the transformative nature of bullying. The account details her experiences with being bullied, and then bullying in return, via online messages Amber sent to her. But the struggle actually began with this exchange between Maria and Jessi:

Maria: I NEED TO TALK TO YOU ABOUT AMBER!!!

Jessi: Now what?

Maria: She IM-ed me today and was talking shit about you again...

Jessi: What did she say?

Maria: She said you're a bitch, and that she doesn't know what he sees in you anyways.

Jessi: Seriously?

Jessi: And what did you say? What's Amber's screen name?

(Maria disappeared from IM.) (Berry 2016, 51, emphasis in original)

Jessi's story explains her response. Simply put, she was mad and could feel the anger building up inside of her with each breath. Who did Amber think she was? *Nobody* talks about Jessi to her friends. She felt she had to confront her, so she got Amber's screen name from another friend and messaged her.

Jessi: Hey this is Jessi...Maria told me you called me a bitch?

Amber: Yeah...I did...and you are one.

Jessi: You're kidding, right? I'm nice to everyone, and all you do is sit in class and complain about everyone around you. You're always miserable.

Amber: Maybe. But you're not even that pretty, I told Maria that I didn't know what Mike saw in you and it's true. He likes me better, plus I have a better body than you. (Berry 2016, 51)

The last line of Amber's message bothered Jessi. She writes:

Until that moment, I never gave much thought into what I looked like. I looked like your average 15 year old: I'm 5'3", weigh 115 pounds, and have Hollister and American Eagle shirts hanging in my closet. My morning "get-ready routine" consisted of brushing my hair and applying some silver eye shadow, which all of my friends also wore with me. I never considered having a "body image." Now when I looked into the mirror, I saw that Amber was right. (Berry 2016, 52)

Amber's message hit Jessi hard and brought to life powerful insecurities for her concerning her appearance. Her feelings about self-image would stay with her throughout high school, and linger even today as an adult. *Was she ugly? Did she have a terrible body? Should she change?* "My body was nothing compared to hers. I couldn't compete!" (Berry 2016, 52)

Jessi's story also demonstrates how some bullied youth emerge from the process taking on the role of someone who bullies others, or a bully-victim. Here is how that happened: The conflict between Jessi, Amber, and Maria escalated, and also involved traditional bullying when the girls were at school. For instance, Amber and Maria passed a note around their classroom that included more nasty things about Jessi's physical appearance. Yet, the most intense bullying, the focus on which Jessi emphasizes in her story, began later that night.

The moment Jessi got home from school, she raced upstairs to the family's computer room, shut the door, and prepared for a fight.

Once again I waited for Amber to log on, like she always did. This time I was ready for her. I was going to end this, and I was going to win. I was a force that could not be stopped, with my fingers typing words I barely understood, just to impress and upset her. By the time she logged on, I had pre-typed what I needed to say to her. The message was foul and something I'm ashamed of ever doing. My words were as hateful as the note that was passed to me earlier that afternoon. I called her every name I could imagine, and might have slipped in a few suggestions for her to end her miserable life, because nobody liked her. Of course, I sent a similar message to Maria. (Berry 2016, 54)

The former friends, now enemies, feverishly messaged back and forth, and held no punches. "We called each other every name that 15-year-old freshmen could think of, and used every insult we could, no matter how terrible" (Berry 2016, 54). Their electronic violence continued for the entire month.

Every night after school, we logged into IM and went back and forth about how awful the other person was. I'm not sure how any of us came up with new material over such a long period of time, but we did. Over time it really wasn't even about Mike liking me more, Amber being a bitch, or Maria betraying me. Now we were fighting for pure evil

entertainment. I was living for the battle. The bullying had sparked a fire inside of me that I couldn't extinguish. I wanted to have the last word. I needed to "one-up" them. (Berry 2016, 54).

Jessi sat at her computer and awaited their responses, and believed the girls must have kept similar practices. Their words hurt Jessi and she figured her words hurt them. Yet, she felt she needed to defend herself. Their reciprocal bullying varied in nature.

Sometimes I would initiate the bullying, and at other times I would be the recipient. Either way, it didn't matter at this point . . . I wasn't going to go down without a fight! And if I did go down, so would these girls. I had a point to prove and so did they. None of us backed down. (Berry 2016, 54)

Jessi's parents eventually intervened to end the girls' endless volleys of bullying.

Jessi emerged from bullying as a bully. This transformation is common and problematic, at least because it escalates the conflict between conversation partners. It demonstrates a concrete instantiation of the existential changes that can, and usually do, happen within the bullying process. The idea of a "bully-victim" is curious and worth further reflection.

Why do you think people bully others in response to being bullied?

Have you ever been, or known, a bully-victim?

How do you distinguish between defending oneself and bullying?

The shifts in identity as related to bullying does not only occur in the actual bullying experiences. Rather, the process of writing and sharing autoethnographic stories, such as the ones we have explored in this chapter, also speaks to the impact bullying has on identity. As we mentioned above, the last chapter of *Bullied* takes place on the last day of the interpersonal communication class in which these bullying stories were written. During that class meeting, Keith and the students discussed the personal ways that writing their stories impacted students. The students were quick to respond with interesting answers. For instance, Lauren's response:

I want this class to know that my story has helped me to gain the confidence I was missing in the past. I will be talking about my story in other classes. That feels a little weird to say, but I've embraced and feel close it, so I'm good with feeling that way. (Berry 2016, 162)

Also, Jezebel's response:

This conversation today is helping me realize that telling my story doesn't take power away from me, say, by making me vulnerable to those who may try to use the information against me. I'll admit I thought it might as I was writing the story. However, writing that story has actually put power back into my hands. I finally opened up about the bullying I endured. It's a victory that I went through something so . . . non-fabulous like bullying, but became a more FABULOUS person as a result! (Berry 2016, 162, emphasis in original)

Additionally, Keith likes to tell the story about Iman's writing process. At the beginning of the semester of the interpersonal class, Iman met with Keith during office hours to discuss her concerns about writing a bullying story for her final project. She was worried that she

did not even have a story to tell. A bit later in the semester, Iman, again, met with Keith, only this time she had a story to tell, but didn't feel comfortable telling it. Over time and with some help, she decided to write it one episode at a time to see if she could do it. After all of the concern, she emerged from the class with a compelling and well-written account. Through the process she became a storyteller who firmly believed in the power of story to respond to injustice of violence such as bullying.

Overall, the task of reflecting on, and writing about, their bullying experiences may have been difficult for the students, and the process certainly does not provide all the answers and complete support and relief for writers. Nonetheless, the process enabled Lauren and Jezebel, and other storytellers like them, to be more open, vulnerable, and confident.

Also, many of the students who were in the two classes, including the women who shared their stories for the book, emerged from the semester expressing to Keith that they understand bullying and its aftermath in fuller ways. Many mentioned that they would continue to reflect on and advocate against bullying with their family and friends. Many students continued to follow up with Keith, asking him about the status of *Bullied* before it was published. In a way, the process enabled the students to become bullying prevention advocates.

Take, for example, these perspectives conveyed by Iman and Jessi. They speak to what bullying meant to them, and offer commentary on the problem that is focused, stronger, and unwavering.

From Iman:

Bullying is a disgusting disease and should never be put on others, because it can inflict so much pain and hardship. I know this pain because I felt it. Yet, although for the majority of my youth I was depressed, and even might have lost myself, I can now say that these experiences have shaped me for the better. I have learned so much over the years from having to battle with such difficulties that I have recently turned all the negatives to positives. Being so hurt and alone as a kid has helped teach me how to love and care. I often look back at the times when I've been hurt, and think about how I would never wish that pain on another individual. My pain has helped me be a more compassionate person. It's kind of ironic when you think about it; feeling so hurt and alone over the years has given me a hunger for love and affection. I have become a giving and compassionate person, and I seek people in my life who are similar in those ways. (Berry 2016, 33–34)

From Jessi:

It was just so easy to say horrible words online without consequences. None of us ever had the guts to say anything to each other in person. We threatened each other physically online, but none of us said those same words to each other at school. Online you forget there is a person on the other side. You don't see their emotions, or their physical reactions. It's easy to forget your humanity, and to decipher right from wrong, especially when you are young and still learning, especially when you aren't face to face to see the impact of your choices . . .

If you were to have asked me back in high school if I considered myself a bully, or if I ever have been bullied, I would have vehemently responded “no” to both questions. Maybe at the time I didn't really know what a bully was, and maybe I didn't want to

admit that I could be a bully. I imagined a bully to be a lonely jerk who gave “wedgies” to shy wimpy kids, and stole their lunch money. I wasn't either of those in high school so clearly I couldn't be a bully, or the victim. I now believe a bully is someone who deliberately inflicts pain on someone (whether it be physical or mental) for any number of reasons—entertainment, reassurance, etc. With Maria and Amber, I recognize I was a bully, and a victim of bullying. I wrote mean and hateful messages to amuse myself, as well as to protect my pride. Most importantly, I didn't care if they hurt the receivers of those messages. I bet Amber and Maria didn't care either. (Berry 2016, 55–56)

Their perspectives were just the tip of the big iceberg in terms of the transformative effect that came from engaging with autoethnography to tell of the violence with which they have lived.

We are better for their stories.

Application 8.7

Deconstructing *Transformative*

This last application asks you to think more deeply about the ways bullying impacts identity. Draw on Jessi's, Jezebel's, Iman's story passages above to answer the following questions:

1. Power is complicated. Were you surprised by the power that characters in these stories had over other characters?
2. Are there specific ways of increasing one's power within bullying?
3. All of the stories demonstrated in this second section of the chapter speak to the ways in which bullying changes or *transforms* people's identities. How did the women change? How do you think or feel about their changes?
4. The “transformation” within bullying need not only be positive changes. Which of these transformations do you see in the stories?
5. What advice would you give to youth who are victimized by bullying? As we discussed above, these are typically youth who live with difference.

Summary

This chapter introduced you to the academic study of bullying as a mode of interpersonal conflict. The story we have told emphasized the pervasiveness of bullying, what bullying is, who commonly bullies, how bullying happens, including cyberbullying, and the impact (the “aftermath”) it has on youth. We have focused on the ways in which bullying is communicative, relational, emotional, and transformative. In addition, we have explored the ways

autoethnographic stories provide an invaluable response to bullying. Stories give us a powerful process in which to use intimate, vulnerable, and first-hand accounts to better understand and respond to a problem that is so often impersonal and harmful. Overall, we have demonstrated the ways in which bullying is fundamentally communicative and related to the identities of the persons who participate in this violence.

Key Terms

bullying	256	identity	261	communicative process	269
cyberbullying	257	identity negotiation	262	cutting	272
workplace bullying	259	relational aggression	263	emotions	274
sexual assault and harassment	260	homo narrans	266	relational process	276
		autoethnography	266	transformative	279

Review Questions

1. Define bullying.
2. Define cyberbullying.
3. Why are the motivations that inform cyberbullying?
4. How is sexual violence related to bullying?
5. What is workplace bullying?
6. What are the main reasons to study bullying?
7. How are youth bullied in response to the ways they perform gender, sexuality, and other types of social difference?
8. How does bullying shape the lives of those who participate in this mode of violence?
9. What is autoethnography and how does it help us study bullying, in particular, and conflict, in general?
10. How is bullying communicative? Emotional? Relational? Transformative?
11. How does self-harm (e.g., suicidal ideation, suicide, cutting) inform bullying?
12. Why are people's stories about bullying important?