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## **Displaced and fixed affects: Re-thinking the meanings of sexualized cyberbullying among teenagers**

### **Introduction**

In this paper we bring together two diverse projects engaging in a process of joint data analysis; a dual plot analysis. While aware of methodological limitations in bringing together data from diverse studies, we find our joint analysis helpful in reconceptualizing cyber fights as 'events' across time/space/locations in asking: how is affect traversing across differentiated spaces; and how is it simultaneously local and global, so that we understand the singularities of our own research findings and the commonalities across contexts. We invite you into two cases where one study focus on cyberbullying as an analytical focus, the other focus on friendship and conflict in digital peer groups more generally.

Basically bullying concern processes where certain positions are annulled, and derived of intelligibility. Some lives become (temporarily) unlivable, to take up a Butlerian thinking. Teen's lives become unlivable for shorter or longer time due to hate groups on Facebook, fake profiles, daily evaluations of body sizes and body forms, sexual preferences or alleged wrongdoings during school life. These evaluations are lived out on Bebo, a UK social networking site for 10-14 year olds, and the Danish equivalent, Arto. Such cases involve a number of different subjects and a number of different technologies. Here we focus on incidences where sexual subjectification happens via networked communications in school and cyber assemblages.

### **Case 1**

Cecilia and Saad are 7<sup>th</sup> graders and 14 years old. At the Danish social networking site Arto Saad has posted an evaluation of Cecilia. It says:

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“Fuck u, and your bitch ass crew. U bitch, you can put your opinion up your hairy ass. The day we became friends was the worst day of my life now that I realize how fucked up people can be. It was fucking nice to get you out of my life you have been a waste of time. Someone like you shouldn’t be anyone’s friend. You are so ugly, you think that you are perfect and beautiful. Khaba! No way!! You are uglier than ugly”!!!!Die slow!!!!”

Throughout the interview this evaluation on Arto stands out as particularly important. This evaluation is referred to and repeated over and over again and the chain of events started like this: Saad texts Cecilia admitting that he looks at her breasts. The breasts seem to be the point from where things take speed. Cecilia replies that this is perfectly all right. Rania becomes aware of Saad’s gaze at Cecilia’s breasts. She alters between judgements of it being gross and wanting such attention. More girls get involved in the confession. Rania encourages Cecilia to ask Saad whether he checks out Rania’s breasts as well. Cecilia declines but leaves her phone on the table when going to the toilet. Rania and the others girls text Saad and ask him if he fancies Rania’s breasts also; in Cecilia’s name. Saad gets pretty upset. And from then on the messages are exchanged at high speed. The desires and competition and gazing at breasts travel and inform the heightened sexual force of the entire teen school assemblage. Breasts, the preference for them and the desire for desired breasts accelerate after Saad’s first text message and culminate in the evaluation. These sexualized affects seem to travel among the peers, with a range of affects upon more bodies than those immediately involved.

What we also find crucial is what we term a point of fixation, found in the pronouncement of Celia as ‘Khaba’. This term means whore in several Arabic dialects. As we will go on to argue slut and whore are not innocent pronouncements but are affective terms which hold the power to sexually subjectify. Khaba points out and sticks to Cecilia because it leaves no doubt in the minds of her peers that she is the one, due to the local connotation of Khaba

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as Moroccan. Cecilia’s parents have migrated Morocco. Here Khaba is both a gendered/sexualized, and ethnic-racialized subjectification. So we ask: what are the affective effects of this?

## Case 2

In the case of Louise, which stems from Jessica’s study, it is a significant affective event - a virtual fight ostensibly between the two girls Louise (15) and Marie (15). Louise, is socially rejected through the SNS Bebo – she is no one’s top friend, her romantic ‘interest’, Jay, will not formalize their relationship on their Bebo sites, and she is apparently called a ‘fat slag’ online by one of her ‘friends’, Marie, saying Louise goes “round with everyone” and “tries to get with everyone’s exes”. The virtual conflict then erupts into ‘real’ violence the next day, when Louise attacks Marie at school and is then positioned as a violent bully with anger management problems by the school

Louise: An MSN argument... It would just travel down the line and then it will get to my friend and it would be like ‘Oh yeah, I know her’ and then it would just like ..... be like me ... I would be stuck in the middle...We’ve literally been in a fight before because things have been ... said that’s like, one of my mates told me on MSN that she called me a fat slag and everything like that so then I ...waited for her outside before school one day and I said ‘Why are you saying this for?’ and ...

Marie: She punched me in my back.

Louise: I punched her in the back, she razed in my face, she tried walking away, I grabbed her, punched her again, everything right, because all these things that people say to ... wind people up ....she sits there and cries their eyes out, right and I beg to differ that I will never, ever do it again and I promise ...

Marie: *Because you love me!*

Louise: I love you! But the things that people say they don’t realise what, how much trouble it can actually cause.

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The interview actually describes the affective flow underway - rumour flows through friend networks vis-a-vis SNSs and instant messaging. The fight is described through spatial dynamics like gossip 'travelling', girls 'being stuck in the middle', and the meanings of interactions getting 'twisted' via the virtual flow of communication. Meanings and attributions of affect like blame are shifting around through descriptions of the lying that passes back and forth. Bodily responses of punching and crying are described. And affective states such as like, hate, love, despair are being continuously negotiated.

As with the first data set, sexualized affect forms the fabric of these events, where desires for inclusion and mechanisms of exclusion circulate and produce insecurity that moves amongst the peer group with various effects. What we find crucial about this description, however, is again a point of fixation. Louise is accused of going 'round with everyone and trying to 'get with everyone's exes''. Louise's sexuality is in a sense rendered unviable, 'fat slag' is pointing at her and fixes her unwieldy desires, as the overweight and therefore unjustifiably desired and desiring teen in their peer group. This subjectification also marks out the classed feminine body although we do not have time to explore this further here.

### **Initial analysis**

These local histories of these particular teenagers are loaded with meaning which is presented to us as 'what matters'. Or to put in in a Deleuzian terminology, we start in the 'middle', where events and meanings take speed (Fuglsang & Sorensen 2006:6)).

So what is going on in these 'middles' of speed? If these negotiations are more than pinning 'positions to a grid' as Brian Massumi put it (Massumi 2002), then what is at stake? In classical work on bullying (Olweus) three subject positions are identified: that of the *bully*, the *victim* and the so-called *passive bystanders* (for a critique, see Ringrose, 2008; Kofoed & Søndergaard 2009; Schott 2009). This

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perspective misses the affective fabric, the speed, the temporalities and movement involved in the affective life of school conflicts we are analyzing in this paper. We focus on the micro complexities of the conflicts, and the affective tenor and suggest that we need to re-think the meanings of sexualised cyberbullying among teenagers and propose that we think in terms of *travelling affects*. Our point is that affectivity is *in becoming* with variable effects, it moves, at points it does become ‘frozen/arrested’ in what we call points of fixation, but these have specific sexualized contents.

What we are pointing at in this analysis is how affects recognized as envy, mistrust and fear is not merely claimed by Cecilia or Louise who in the storylines presented here seems to be at the core of the events. Envy, unease, bodily sensations of fear and mistrust seem to travel in and between Cecilia, mobile phones, Louise, SNS through instant messaging, and Saad (and here, and in the following, we don’t distinguish between the two sets of data, but pinpoint analytical aspects across the two cases). Affects travel and they intersect with social categories like gender, racialised ethnicity, and sexualisation, shaping processes of inclusion and exclusion among these teenagers. What we want to suggest is that we might understand bullying as when affects both travel and stick in ways that make lives unlivable (at least temporarily).

### **Theoretical assistance**

We seek assistance in Deleuze and Butler in trying to map out some of these affective complexities that shape what is recognized as sexualised cyberbullying events. And by doing so perhaps we better understand the missing links in the tales from the youngsters which among grownups are often seen as misleading, incomprehensible, untrue, or not a big deal.

We assume that the viability of the subjects involved in the analysis is dependant not only on themselves individually, but on each other and on the social norms that reign in the settings in which they find themselves. What seems to be shared by the subjects is the experience of being “threatened with unviability” (Butler

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2004: 3). Butler reminds us that “Some lives are grievable, others are not. The differential allocation of grievability that decides what kind of subject is and must be grieved and which kind of subject must not, operates to produce and maintain certain exclusionary conceptions of who is normatively human: what counts as a livable life and a grievable death?” (Butler 2004). Her approach helps us in an analysis of bullying in school life if we ask which life is viable, which conflicts grievable?

For us this theoretical approach can intersect in interesting ways with a Deleuze and Guattarian approach to vitality and affirmative desire. Deleuze and Guattari’s geo-philosophy suggests the need for mapping the life-affirming and life destroying momentum of energy in assemblages. Deleuze’s approach reminds us that we need to explore and queere these dynamics of livability, grievability, affirmation and destruction empirically and to do so in ways that do not merely take local explanations for granted.

### **Further analysis: Intensity**

The most striking commonality in the two sets of data is heightened intensity and the sexualised content of the name-calling. This heightened intensity is expressed throughout the interviews in an ongoing negotiation of who is to blame and in sexualized name calling: fat slag, whore, bitch, khaba.

In both data sets reflections throughout the interviews are characterized by high speed and high emotional pitch. Reading through both transcripts you get the picture of a whirlpool of sexualised drama and affectivity. The affects aroused seem to be anger, hatred, disapproval, disappointment, fear, envy, blame confidence, bravery, and desire. All of it rife with the contradictions of living sex and gender in the temporality of teenage life.

We also see the intimate unbroken flow between virtually mediated communications and online affect. The displacement of the affective rush and drama of the altercations are also described through the narrative as shifting among a wider group as Louise talks about what “people were saying to me”

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and “people were saying to her”. We find the so-called ‘unending public’ that witnesses the evaluations in cyber. There is generalized uncertainty and instability about the knowledge being passed via the electronic circuits, so Louise repeatedly refers to as “lying” and what Cecilia refers to as an ‘unknowing’ about the origin or end point of the words circulating about you. We see a generalized sense of anxiety and unease at the insecurity of whom and how many witnesses the exchanges include.

Our examples illustrate, in addition, the explicitly sexualized content of the affective flows. Identifying this sexualized content helps us to move past both the rhetoric of fixed positionings of singular, generalized subjects in Olweus’s classical definitions of bully, victim, by-stander. Conflicts move through and are mobilized via a larger assemblage than the limited number of individuals involved in the eventual exchange, *and* affects are charged with meaning and content. It is the sexualized charge that circulates through the teens, and it is sexualized ‘order words’ (Cole, 2010) ‘Khaba’ and ‘fat slag’ that are introduced into the flow and which work to re-fix and harden an injurious and regulatory sense of possible sexual abjectness. The effects of the sexualized order words are both fixity and further displacement, particularly an anxiety again for the girls in the peer groups about where these signifiers might land next time they are deployed in the assemblage. Deleuze understands affect as “the passage from one state to another, as an intensity characterized by an increase or decrease in power” (quoted in Hemings 551). Worries about arguments ‘travelling down the line’ illustrates the affective flows through cyber technology, with concrete bodily risks and effects, demonstrated in how some subjects are being fixed and shamed in a sexualized way. Khaba and fat slag manifest as destructive lines in the assemblages of online and school life that limit the girls in question (and potentially others) as viable sexed subjects.

### **Concluding remarks**

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In our brief analysis here, we have attempted to show how rather than the singularities of either bullier, victim or by-stander, we find conflict dispersing via ‘travelling affects’. Desires are displaced, dispersed, moved around and technology mediates desires, blurring the ownership and accelerates the circulations of desires within a community that apparently has no outer border, as Conley puts it (Conley 2009). We find in-determinate positionings where there are simultaneously positions that are shifting and changing more rapidly (Kofoed 2009; Schott 2009) but also points of fixation, like sexual subjectifications of whore and slag, where affect seems to stop and settle onto gendered bodies. Deleuze and Guattari’s rich geo-political concepts of flows of affect help us question the current understandings of stable and binary positionings in cyber-bullying, but also insist we map the life affirming or destructive affects of desire flows. Paired with Butler’s theories that question what makes up ‘livable lives’, we can understand the pain of injurious sexual subjectification that make some lives less livable for girls in our research accounts. When Louise is called a ‘fat slag’ and Cecilia a ‘khaba’ online these force pejorative affects onto and into their bodies but also spread through the assemblage. In the larger paper we also explore how subjects negotiate such fixity, with surprising effects, in some cases disrupting the destructive force of sexually regulative signifiers, like slut and whore. Indeed the approach we’ve outlined continues to challenge us to map the rich complexities of how affects travels across temporalities, between bodies, through in/significant evaluations, body parts and technologies. We believe mapping this movement of affect helps us understand desire, conflict and the multiple permutations of becoming in school life in more nuanced ways.