Encountering a surprising response to cyberbullying among an immigrant community

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Lynn Schofield Clark draws on her ethnographic research at a U.S. high school and reflects on the role of digital media in immigrant groups, online harassment and the opportunities provided by strong communities. Lynn is Professor and Chair in the Department of Media, Film, and Journalism Studies at the University of Denver. She is also the author of "The parent app: Understanding families in a digital age", a book also recently reviewed on this blog.

How are digital media becoming embedded in immigrant communities? For the past four years, I have been conducting ethnographic research at a US high school in Denver that has a large English language learners programme for students from immigrant communities. [1] These students' parents worry about the influence of US culture, and many impose more restrictions than US parents – and more restrictions than the young people feel are warranted. At the same time, immigrant teens are seeking to uphold family traditions and norms while adopting some of the practices of their new culture. Digital media are important in these communities. They facilitate the maintenance of relations with extended family members as an important source of family connection, as well as being key to an immigrant family's financial adjustment and stability, as previous research on cell phone use among low-income Jamaican families has shown.

Credit: Lynn Schofield Clark

Here's an example. Through a mutual friend, my research team and I met 17-year-old Josna (a pseudonym), whose family had come to the US from Nepal where, as Muslims, they had been in the religious minority. Josna and her older sister faced strict rules regarding mobile, digital and social media use that Josna explained in relation to her family's cultural and religious background. As she explained, "If the parents did not care about us then we would chat with everyone that we don't know and we would just make friends (and not get schoolwork and cooking tasks completed)."

Josna recalled that someone had once Photoshopped a picture of her and her sister wearing the hijab onto the image of nude bodies, and posted it to her Facebook page. She was mortified. But

I wasn't surprised to hear that Josna and her sister felt harassed about their decision to wear the hijab, and thus visibly enact their Muslim identity. While such instances were unusual in the particular school where I spent time, they're not uncommon for Muslim young people in the US in general. Many Muslim young people are confronting Islamophobia, hostility toward Islam and 'anti-Arab' views among their peers, views that are echoed in some corners of US popular culture and on some Fox news programmes as well.

It was surprising, however, to learn that Josna and her sister shared a Facebook page (and also a mobile phone). It seemed that Josna's family had found a rather ingenious way to make what are usually individualised communication experiences into a more community-minded technological experience. Josna's mother had talked with her daughter about how important it was for the family and community to support one another, and to be wary of those outside the community who might be hostile toward them. Sharing technologies was one way that this family both counteracted discrimination and also reinforced the importance and centrality of family and community life.

Online harassment

The harms of online harassment are often discussed in relation to individual rather than community experiences, but even for those parents who might not want to have siblings sharing a social media site or a cell phone, I think that there are three things that we can learn from this example of harassment:

- Attacks on individuals say more about the attacker and the attacker's prejudices than about the victim. This is an important lesson that parents can convey to their children.
- Even when the youth culture in which children are immersed seems very unfamiliar and strange to parents, parental influence remains important to young people as parents convey their care and concern.
- Parents can use a variety of strategies to encourage resilience in their children in the face of discrimination or harassment – and sometimes the best solutions don't involve direct intervention from parents at all.

I don't mean to imply that parents should leave everything up to the young people, however. All young people, like Josna, are embedded in a family and community culture. This is surprisingly difficult to grasp in the often overly-individualistic culture of the US, where we tend to think primarily of our child's individual development and our responsibility as a singular family, or in many cases, even as a single or primary parent. Yet if we, as parents, want to help our children to develop resilience for life in a world that is sometimes hostile to difference, we may need to look beyond individual approaches, and families from diverse communities can offer good clues on how to do this.

Notes

[1] I co-lead a weekly after-school group in Denver called the Digital Media Club, which has given me an opportunity to get to know about four dozen students very well. Through these students, I've also gotten to know many in their extended friendship circles, some of whom I've interviewed for different research projects. Because teachers and staff know me, my students and I are called on as guest speakers, both in this and in other urban high schools, and we have had opportunities to conduct a variety of formal and informal research projects with the schools as a result.

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