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# Tweeting, Texting, and Facebook Postings: Stirring the Pot with Social Media to Make Drama - Case Study and Participant Observation

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## Tweeting, Texting, and Facebook Postings: Stirring the Pot with Social Media to Make Drama - Case Study and Participant Observation

### Abstract

This study of adolescent social drama is located at the intersection of research on adolescent peer relationships, group behaviors, youth culture, and mediated communication. An emergent construct, drama has been conceptualized as social interactions characterized by overreaction, exaggeration, excessive emotionality, prolongation, inclusion of extraneous individuals, inflated importance, and temporary relevance. This case study and participant observation involve a 15-year-old, white, middle class female and her mother. The purpose was two-fold: To determine if the events described map on to existing understandings of drama and to develop emergent themes and hypotheses through grounded theory analysis and ethnographic observation that might expand knowledge of drama. Findings suggest that this case reflects current understandings of drama. Emergent themes suggest that drama may also involve highly emotional group experiences and that while drama may be temporary and short-lived, it may also create a backdrop for additional problematic events.

### Keywords

Adolescent Social Drama, Teen Social Drama, Doing Drama, Drama, Texting, Tweeting, Facebook Posting, Case Study

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## **Tweeting, Texting, and Facebook Postings: Stirring the Pot with Social Media to Make Drama – Case Study and Participant Observation<sup>1</sup>**

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While recent attention has focused on problems around bullying in schools, particularly bullying that links cyber, electronic, and mediated forms of aggression to adolescent suicide (Ducharme, 2010; Hinduja & Patchin, 2010; Kim & Leventhal, 2008), references to a phenomenon referred to as drama have appeared in both the main stream media (Hoffman, 2010; Mandel, 2008) and in research literature (Allen, 2012, 2013; boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, accepted with revisions; Veinot, Campbell, Kruger, Grodzinski, & Franzen, 2011; Waldron, 2011). In attempting to increase knowledge of adolescents' understandings of bullying (Allen, 2012, 2013, accepted with revisions), and online privacy and aggression (boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, under review), researchers found that in conversations on these topics, youth spoke frequently of a phenomenon which they referred to as "drama." Previously unmentioned in the literature on bullying, adolescent peer relations, youth culture, or mediated communication, "drama" emerged from two independently conducted research projects as a construct worthy of additional inquiry.

Drama has been initially conceptualized as a phenomenon that overlaps with conflict, aggression, and bullying, yet remains its own distinct construct. The purpose of this study is two-fold. First, it describes a case study and participant observation, and compares the features, and characteristics uncovered during the interviews and observations to current definitions and understandings of drama. Second, this study employs grounded theory analysis to develop emergent themes and hypotheses in order to further extend our

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<sup>1</sup> An earlier version of this paper was presented at the Society for Research in Child Development, Seattle, WA, April 20, 2013.

knowledge of drama and to address gaps in the literature, particularly as it relates to the subject of bullying.

Drama is defined as a series of interactions characterized by overreaction, exaggeration, excessive emotionality, prolongation, inclusion of extraneous individuals, inflated importance, and temporary relevance (Allen, 2012, 2013, accepted with revisions). Marwick and boyd (boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, under review) also discuss drama.

“Drama is a performative set of actions distinct from bullying, gossip, and relational aggression, incorporating them but also operating quite distinctly” (Marwick & boyd, 2011b, p. 2). Marwick and boyd argue that the word “drama” is part of the adolescent lexicon, and that it includes a set of behaviors which often involve the use of social media that are designed to get attention, create involvement in others’ lives, and establish and manipulate public identities and perceptions of themselves (Marwick & boyd, 2011b). They define drama as “performative, interpersonal conflict that takes place in front of an active, engaged audience, often on social media” (Marwick & boyd, under review, p. 14).

Additionally, Marwick and boyd (2011b) posit that “‘drama’ allows teens to distinguish their actions from adult-defined practices like bullying or relational aggression” (p. 2). Whereas definitions of bullying require the assignment of roles, (i.e., perpetrator, victim, bystander) in an imbalanced and one-way set of interactions, ‘drama’ is framed as bidirectional, mutual, and often collaborative. Adolescents can choose whether or not to participate in drama, as opposed to bullying which is unidirectional and one-sided. Additionally, Marwick and boyd (2011a) suggest that one of the reasons that adolescents frame bullying as childish and immature is that acknowledging one’s involvement in bullying requires that one assume a negative label such as “victim” or “bully.” Accepting these identities means that a person admits being weak or being mean, neither of which is compatible with the way most adolescents want to see themselves. Thus framing a painful set of interactions as “drama” is a “protective mechanism” (p. 1).

Marwick and boyd (2011b) have identified five key components to drama. “Drama is social and interpersonal, involves relational conflict, is reciprocal, is gendered, and is often performed for, in, and magnified by *networked publics*” (italics in the original) (p. 5). This study seeks to expand current understandings of drama.

## Investigator Positioning

As a researcher who studies bullying in schools, I have come to realize that the majority of research on this topic reflects an objectivist epistemology and a positivist theoretical perspective. While much has been learned from this research, this approach to studying these issues fails to yield knowledge that reflects the perspectives of participants with regards to the meaning of peer relationships and behaviors in their own context. It was by studying concerns around online privacy and aggression, and participants’ perceptions of bullying that Marwick and boyd, and I, separately found that “drama” was a much-discussed and meaningful construct to our participants within the context of their life experiences, and that it diverged from current understandings of researchers’ conceptualizations of bullying (see Allen 2012, 2013, accepted with revisions). I also work with educators whose job it is to manage problematic social interactions among adolescents, and who find doing so under the current discourse on bullying to be quite challenging. This is so because very often the labels offered via research, policy, or legislation are precise and exact, while the nature of peer interactions and their meanings are subtle, nuanced, imprecise, and fluid, and tend not to fit the language of academia or law.

The opportunity to interview Vanessa and her mother materialized because I happened to have dinner with Cheryl during the week in February 2012 while the situation discussed in this study was unfolding. During the course of our conversation, I mentioned that I was interested in continuing my research on drama, and she suggested that the current situation with her daughter was undoubtedly “drama,” and that she would willingly participate in an interview, and that if Vanessa were interested, that she would consent to her to being interviewed as well.

Cheryl and I have a professional relationship related to business. I see her once or twice a year during which time we discuss professional matters as well as some issues related to parenting. My interest in drama is similar to Cheryl’s because I have parented a child who engaged in behaviors of a similar nature when she was a teenager. Although my daughter is thirteen years older than Vanessa, when she was an adolescent she “did drama” in much the same fashion that adolescents seem to today, minus cell phones, computers, Twitter, Facebook, and the plethora of other communication tools and platforms currently available to youth.

It is hoped that this study will provoke thought and conversation among researchers who assume that the current conversation about bullying is adequate for studying the problem. It is my premise that the adolescent social context is more complex than is currently explored within the research on bullying. This case study and subsequent participant observation suggests that our study of adolescent social behavior would benefit from a more constructionist approach if we are to address problems like bullying, cyberbullying, sexual harassment, and social-relational aggression, all of which are found in the story of Vanessa.

## Methods

This study is conceptually located at the intersection of research on adolescent peer relationships, group behaviors, youth culture, and mediated communication. Additionally, this paper is informed by a constructionist epistemology and an interpretive, phenomenological theoretical perspective (Crotty, 1998). Phenomenological research seeks to study people’s subjective and everyday experiences (Applebaum, 2012; Crotty, 1998; Englander, 2012). Additionally, it assumes a mode of discovery, not verification, and seeks to explore phenomena as they are “lived by our research participants” (Applebaum, 2012, p. 48).

### Why a Case Study?

A case is an opportunity to study a phenomenon in order to detect and study the common (Stake, 2008). A case study is a functioning specific and a study of the particular which seeks out “emic meanings held by people within the case” (Stake, 1994, pp. 240-241). Stake (1995) also suggests that in a case study, the researcher is “an interpreter in the field... who records objectively what is happening but simultaneously examines its meaning and redirects observation to refine or substantiate those meanings” (pp. 8-9).

The purpose of this study is to understand this particular case in light of preliminary research (Allen, 2012, 2013, accepted with revisions; boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b) that explores the emergent construct of drama. Case study as a method was chosen because it offers a deep, rich, and personal exploration of participants’ feelings, opinions, experiences, and reflections. In this situation, both participants identified the experiences they discuss herein as drama. Interviewing Vanessa and Cheryl offered them a chance to articulate what had happened, how it affected them, and the meaning that they made from it, providing the subjectivity often lacking in other methods. A case study was also chosen as

the method for this study because to this date no one has studied drama through a case study. What is currently known about drama in the research literature is the result of interviews and focus groups with adolescents who have spoken about drama in relatively general terms (Allen, 2012, 2013; boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b). Thus, case study presented an opportunity for confirming, expanding and possibly developing new knowledge about drama through a method that allows a deep exploration of participants' experiences and feelings about them.

### **Participant Observation**

As noted in the title, this study also includes an additional form of ethnographic research, participant observation, although it was not the original plan to do so. "The principal method of ethnographic research is *participant observation* [italics in the original]" (McLeod, 2001), wherein the researcher becomes a participant in what is being studied. Participant observation provides researchers with the opportunity to become an insider and to experience unexpected situational conditions that were not predicted. It is in these fortuitous moments that the researcher becomes part of the story and draws upon "experiential understanding" (Stake, 1995, p. 43) to make interpretations and draw conclusions.

The reason for expanding the methodology of this study was that between the interviews with Vanessa and Cheryl, and then Cheryl alone, Cheryl and Vanessa engaged in a conflict, triggered by the interview process. Not only did the interviewer observe the conflict, but she became a part of what was happening. In the moment, this event did not seem significant, but during memoing and upon reflection and interpretation of what was witnessed and experienced, it became apparent that what transpired fits descriptions and understandings of drama. The researcher became an insider when she was caught up in the drama that the subject of the interview created. Finally, when considering the behaviors Vanessa described during her story and comparing them to her actions during the conflict, parallels emerged suggesting that she is highly skilled in "doing drama."

### **Participants**

I interviewed Vanessa, a 15-year-old white, upper middle class female and her mother, Cheryl, in July, 2012. Cheryl and I are acquaintances and during a brief conversation in February she indicated that her day had involved, a "hysterically crying phone call from Vanessa," conversations with the school principal, and having to deal with the fallout of a flurry of nasty tweets sent by Vanessa and her friends. She identified the events as "drama," and offered to tell her story of *drama*, and include Vanessa if she were willing.

While this research was not conducted under the auspices of a university, the principles and practices adhered to by institutional review boards were followed. I made it clear and explicit to Cheryl and to Vanessa that the purpose of our interview was to expand research on drama. I indicated that I intended to write a research paper describing and discussing the narration that would unfold. I assured them that I would change all of their names and the names of anyone who was involved in these events, and would give no information that would identify them or the school community in which these events took place. Additionally, there were no incentives offered, nor were there any consequences for not participating. Care was taken to assure that both mother and daughter participated freely, and great care has been taken to protect their identities.

The interview took place in their home. Following an explanation of the research project, Cheryl signed a permission form and Vanessa gave consent to participate. Both signed a consent form indicating that they understood how this information would be used

and that they were participating freely. Both agreed that I could tape record the conversations for purposes of transcription. I assured them that I would be the only person who listened to the tapes, and that no one would have access to the tapes or transcriptions that contained any identifying information. While I spent a short time with Vanessa before her mother arrived, to ensure that she was comfortable, I did not turn the tape recorder on nor begin the formal interview until Cheryl arrived.

Vanessa attends a middle class, suburban high school outside of a mid-sized city in the Northeastern United States. The events described in the case study took place during Vanessa's sophomore year of high school. I spent over one and a half hours with Vanessa and her mother, and then another one and a half hours with Cheryl alone, during which time I not only interviewed them, but became a participant observer in a set of interactions that could be framed as drama.

### **Data Analysis**

To facilitate the data analysis, the data were organized to reflect three distinct periods of time and sets of interactions. This structure was imposed on the data because there were natural breaks in both the narrative, its chronology, and in the meaning assigned to the events, either by the participants or by the researcher. Vanessa identified the events that I have organized as Phase I as a back story to the primary events, which she described in Phase II. Phase III describes my experience as a researcher who became a participant and an observer in a series of interactions that upon reflection, fit the current understandings of drama.

The data were analyzed using grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The interviews were transcribed and then coded using key words that are found in the extant literature on drama as well as additional codes which reflected the meanings found in the data. These codes included words and phrases such as: overreaction, exaggeration, excessive emotionality, prolongation, inclusion of extraneous individuals, inflated importance, temporary relevance, performativity, attention-getting, not letting it go, use of mediated communication, conflict, aggression, harassment, bullying, drama, popularity, status, sex, enforcement of gender stereotypes, enforcement of heterosexual norms, manipulation, baiting, stirring the pot, impulsive, being upset, unsafe, and deception. These codes were then organized into categories and further analyzed using constant comparison to determine if the events described map on to existing information on drama and to develop emergent themes and hypotheses for the purpose of expanding knowledge of drama.

### **A Story of Drama: Part I**

Vanessa is strikingly beautiful and charming. She is articulate, polite, and self-confident. Because her mother was running late, we chatted a bit before the tape recorder was turned on. I explained why I was interested in her story and how I expected to use the information. She mentioned that unlike her friend, Sydney, who couldn't be open with her mother about subjects like sex and drinking, Vanessa could. She assured me that she and her mother have a very open relationship. She indicated that she would be very comfortable telling the story with her mom present and participating.

According to Vanessa, the problematic events of February began around December 20, 2011. Vanessa is one of six girls who consider themselves very best friends. All but one of them, Nicole, is a cheerleader on the varsity squad. The girls are all fans of hockey and regularly attend their school's boys' hockey games, and during the hockey season, Nicole found a twitter account called "puckslutsproblems." Vanessa explained to me that the name

referred to females who were obsessed with hockey and “loved hockey boys.” The six girls identified with the premise of the twitter account and named themselves “puckslutsproblems” but shortened it to the “PSPs.” Another group of girls whom Vanessa describes as “part of our friend group, but girls we’re not best friends with,” and who “like to start drama a lot” took on the identity of “Rink Rats,” and joined the PSPs in a series of tweets which at some point turned hostile. Vanessa couldn’t recall what the tweets said, but she remembers them as being “kind of mocking.” Vanessa told her friends that she thought the PSPs should stop the exchange of nasty tweets with the Rink Rats, but two of them got very angry at her.

Ashley freaked out at me and started yelling at me. This was when we were all together one night... started yelling and screaming... “You have no idea what you’re saying. This is one of my really good friends (the Rink Rat with whom she was exchanging tweets).” So I felt really uncomfortable so I called my sister [to come and get me] and left. Because I was... I don’t want to be a part of this anymore because we’re calling ourselves sluts and we’re getting into fights that aren’t even worth it.

So I left the sleepover and the next day... probably a week later, I still wasn’t really talking to them. It was Christmas day at night when I texted my friend Hayley. I said I think this is ridiculous because the tweeting kept going on between the two groups with only Ashley and Nicole. I said, “I don’t understand this. I don’t even want to be a part of PSP anymore.” So I texted Hayley and she didn’t text me back because they were all together that night and I was at my grandparents. Then when I kind of figured out that they were all together, I said, “Hayley, are you all together?” and she said, “Yes.” I go, “OK. Merry Christmas.”

The estrangement between Vanessa and her five friends continued for the rest of the Christmas break and into the first week of school in January. At some point Vanessa re-tweeted tweets made by her friends to her, to the girls who were in the other group (the Rink Rats) which made Ashley and Nicole even angrier with her and prompted more attacks from them:

These were like my best friends. We’ve been best friends forever and they’re doing this to me when I was just trying to tell them it’s immature to [call ourselves PSPs and fight with the Rink Rats]... and I know I was a hypocrite and I was just going on with my sister because I was really hurt.

Then when school was back I was still in a fight with them... I was ganged up on at school... I was pretty much in a corner with all of them against me saying, ‘you honestly are so immature I can’t believe you’ and then I was kind of being bullied by my own friends. And I was having a really, really tough time then because these were my friends forever and they are doing this to me.

The girls ended their conflict at a party where they told Vanessa they were sorry, and admitted that they had done “a lot of things that were not OK.” I asked Vanessa why she thought they changed their minds and apologized.

I think because they saw that I wasn’t coming back to them and saying, “Can we please be friends?” I was keeping my distance because I was like “if you



are going to do this to me I'm not going to be friends with you." And then I started hanging out with my other friends like ... that I was friends with before, like a year ago that I hadn't really seen in awhile. It was like... "awright. You're going to do this to me, I'm going to hang out with other people." I think they saw that and they realized that they had really hurt me, so they were going to say they were sorry. So I didn't want the drama so I forgave them.

## **A Story of Drama: Part II**

On February 3, 2012, a series of events began which quickly escalated and triggered attacks against the six girls. The bulk of the hostilities occurred through mediated communication and involved a number of students at their high school. Vanessa begins this portion of the story by stating that her friend Sydney (one of the six) had had sex for the first time with her boyfriend, Ian, in January, and while they were not dating on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, Sydney and Ian were friends on February 3<sup>rd</sup>, and Sydney did not regret "losing her virginity to Ian."

On that morning, around second period, "Jake... told us that when Sydney and Ian were still together, like the end of January, Ian had sex with a girl named Samantha."

He told us that the entire grade, even all of our friends knew, but the whole grade had made a pact not to tell us six. We're in school. It's fourth period and me and Danielle are like, "What are we going to do?" We didn't tell any of our other friends at that point. So we go to the counselor. We go, "Let's just talk to her about it, whatever." And she's telling us that we shouldn't tell her in school... that we should tell her after school and everything. But at that point Sydney knew that Danielle had to tell her something because we were like 'we need to tell you something.' Danielle is almost in tears. She's like I just don't know what to do. Sydney was like, "Tell me, tell me, tell me." And we were like, "No... we'll tell you after school."

So Sydney already knew that something was up. And she knew it was about Ian. So it's now the end of fourth period. So I texted all of my friends saying what happened. "We need to talk to Sydney. I can't do this." So they're going crazy... "Are you kidding; that's ridiculous." All this stuff.

[At the end of fourth period] we brought her into the bathroom and then the bell rings and it's like the beginning of fifth period and we're going to skip fifth period because we're all going to tell her this. And so we're sitting in the bathroom and Danielle was the one to tell her, but at this point Nicole isn't in the bathroom. She's still in class because we told her but we didn't... she was never there. And Danielle told her straight up.

She said, "When you and Ian were still together Ian had sex with Samantha." Sydney just bursted out crying, crying her eyes out. She was honestly a mess. She was not in a state to go to class that entire day, and so we're all crying. When we see one of our friends cry, we're just so emotional that we start crying, because we've seen one of our friends be so hurt. And so we're all

crying in the bathroom and then we're like, "What are we gonna do? We can't go back to our classes. That's not even a possibility." And so we call all of our parents... and we're, "Can someone pick us up? We just need to go home. We need to go to someone's house and talk about things. We just need to be out of school."

So we're trying to figure out everything, who's picking us up. Who's calling us in sick... all these things. So then Hayley calls in for Sydney [pretends she's Sydney's mother]. And she technically got away with it because her mom wasn't answering. So that was one mistake.

At this point, the principal is suspicious and concerned that six girls who are all friends are leaving school at the same time with one mother, so he calls all six parents to confirm that they have given permission to leave school with Hayley's mother. This process provoked a great deal of angst and frustration on the part of the girls who became upset with the principal. When the calls have all been made, the girls go to Hayley's house, and Hayley's mother goes back to work, leaving them all alone.

So it's only us six at Hayley's house. And we're at the table eating and we're just kind of talking about everything. We're talking about how annoyed we are about everything, how sad we are... we're just explaining all of our emotions. And so then we get our phones out and we're like, "Let's tweet. Let's just put our emotions right in writing." And so... we're tweeting really mean things about Samantha. There's about 200 people each following each of our tweets. Some of us aren't private so anybody random can look at our tweets. It's kids in our class and throughout the whole school [who can read their tweets]. Mostly our class but other classes too.

Then EVERYONE started tweeting us back, saying 'you guys are disgusting. I can't believe... you call each other PSPs.' Just really mean things. Like we got back ten times worse than what we did in just those tweets in the last twenty minutes. So I was the one who was like, "Erase all of your tweets. They're not worth it. We need to erase them right now." So we all go on our phone and we erase it. And so then we're still getting tweets and it's like an hour later and people were still tweeting at us such mean things. And so... I was like, "I'm going to delete my Twitter. I'm done. I can't read these." It hurt. It physically and mentally hurt me to read these.

So I went on the computer and I deleted my account and then everyone followed me and deleted their account. So at that point we had no Twitter. We still had Facebook then. We ... we were even crying because so many people were saying things. I don't even remember it because there were so many people saying things. So after that, pretty much our entire school hated us.

The girls go back to school for cheerleading practice at 2:15 PM, but before they do, Hayley sends a text to Samantha telling her they were sorry, that they regretted what they had said, and that they hoped she would forgive them. Samantha responded that she hadn't read the tweets yet, that she had heard that they were hurtful, and that she wasn't going to look at them. Vanessa states that "we didn't text her back. We did what we could. Now it was in her hands to forgive us or not."

While Vanessa is relating this portion of the story to me, Cheryl brings out an 8½” X 11” paper with a message on it, and eight slips of paper. The papers had arrived in an envelope three days following the events of February 3<sup>rd</sup>. Four of the six girls had received identical envelopes, as had the cheerleading coach, the athletic director, and the principal. The large sheet of paper contained this message:

Looks like their plan to bully  
and threaten Samantha didn't work,  
now they just look like white  
trash, mean girl, bullies. When  
you refer to yourself as a PUCK  
SLUT and post messages that  
you want to have sex with the  
whole hockey team what do  
you expect will happen to  
you????? Victims my ass.  
PSP Forever :)

The seven slips of paper were photocopies of screen shots of tweets that had been sent out by four of the six girls when they were at Hayley's house:

- Ashley: I heard those morning after pills don't work most of the time... I hope your pregnant #dumbbitch
- Ashley & RT Nicole & RT Vanessa: You is slutty, you is skanky, you is allergic to latex, you is a #dumbbitch
- Vanessa: Hurt my friend, I hurt you. #dumbbitch
- Nicole: Nothing like staying home and eating/crying and bonding. I've never loved anyone as much as I love my friends #foreverandalways
- Nicole: Teen mom: PHS edition #fuckingslut
- Nicole: EVER DO THAT TO MY FRIEND AGAIN AND I WILL KILL SOMEONE
- Sydney: I hope you get pregnant you dumb bitch

Vanessa had sent the one, "Hurt my friend, I hurt you. #dumbbitch" and she admitted that she had re-tweeted the second tweet as had Nicole.

In addition to the mailing, the entire cheerleading squad had been booed and heckled by the student body while performing at a basketball game, and all of the girls were experiencing verbal harassment in the halls at school to the point where they were fearful for their safety. Student Facebook accounts contained multiple hostile comments to and about the girls. An anonymous call was made to the cheerleading coach complaining that these girls had bullied their daughter who is a junior varsity cheerleader as well. A group photo of the cheerleading squad that was hanging in the main foyer of the school was defaced. Vanessa had not been present for the photo, but the faces of two of the other four cheerleaders from the group were scratched out.

Additionally, the girls believed that Samantha's father wanted the school to punish them for the tweets that they had sent out. The policy on this type of infraction required a warning first before suspension, so unless the girls did something hostile or aggressive in addition to the tweets directed at Samantha, the school would not punish them. Several of the

parents, in spite of the public and multiple ways the girls were harassed and humiliated, punished them through grounding or by restricting their use of cell phones and computers.

On the evening of the initial set of events described above, Vanessa reopened her twitter account to see what students were saying about them.

I reopened my twitter to just look at the things that people were saying because we found out right after cheerleading that someone told the school. Someone showed our tweets to the school... all of the tweets. And so we wanted to get proof that, "Yes we were the ones that said things first and we did bring these things upon ourselves." So we took pictures. I probably had 300 pictures of tweets of people who wrote us back. So I took pictures of every one of those tweets that... to say, "Yes we did tweet this, but we were not the only ones that did this. People also tweeted things that they shouldn't have. If we're going to get in trouble, I do want to know who actually did things back to us." At that point, we thought... I literally thought I was going to get suspended from school, even though what we said happened outside of school. I thought we were going to [be suspended] because of how bad it was. And so I was like, let me take pictures of everything everyone else ... what they said.

Listening to both mother and daughter speculate about who made the anonymous complaint and who sent the envelopes with the letter and the tweets in them, it becomes apparent that this is not a problem that is resolved for Vanessa, although both Cheryl and Vanessa admit that it pretty much ended about a week after the February 3<sup>rd</sup> incidents. Cheryl indicates that one of her major concerns was that someone was trying to provoke the girls into another round of aggression so that they would get suspended. She commented that at first, the parents were going to try to keep the girls from finding out about the mailing because of a fear that they would "overreact," but Nicole had already opened the envelope herself, so all the girls knew about it. Not knowing who sent the envelope, who made the complaint, and who defaced the picture is a source of stress and anxiety for Vanessa. She believes it could have been a JV or junior varsity cheerleader and she is angry that her mother won't call the girl's mother and ask if she was responsible for sending the letter and tweets. Vanessa is also afraid that a friend of theirs could have sent it because Hayley's and Danielle's tweets were not included in the mailing, nor were their faces scratched out in the cheerleading photograph. In our conversation by ourselves, Cheryl expressed concern that Vanessa can't let it go, and seems to be unconcerned about restarting the 'drama,' by trying to find out who was responsible for sending the letter and copies of the tweets.

When we are alone, Cheryl speaks openly and frankly about her daughter. Vanessa likes attention and has the power to get people to follow her. She is also good at playing the victim, lying, and manipulating her peers as well as adults. During this part of the interview we discuss a serious contradiction in the versions of the story told by Cheryl and by Vanessa. When Cheryl first got the call from Vanessa to ask to be let out of school with Hayley's mom, Cheryl recalls that the reason the girls wanted to leave was that they needed to get to computers to close down their twitter and Facebook accounts. The impression that Cheryl had was that they had sent the tweets while in the bathroom in school. She felt that the hysteria she heard in Vanessa's voice was due to her realization of how wrong it had been to send those tweets, and the need to get to a computer so they could get them off line. Vanessa flatly denies this version of the story, saying the tweets were sent later from Hayley's house. Cheryl is not sure what the truth is because Vanessa has a history of lying and she doesn't trust her to tell the truth.

### **A Story of Drama: Part III**

The previous section might by itself, be the end of the case study if I hadn't become caught up in drama during the actual interview. This part of the story is recounted because it exemplifies the way mediated communication is used among this group of girls and their parents, and this situation, by itself is an example of drama.

It is 12:45 PM and Cheryl has to pick up Hayley and Danielle at their respective homes, and along with Vanessa take them to cheerleading practice that starts at 1:15 PM. In what I believe is in the interest of time, Cheryl invites me to ride along with them, so that we can continue our interview after the girls have been dropped off. As Cheryl and I are walking to the car, Vanessa is in the house texting Cheryl. At first I thought Cheryl was doing work email, but after we got into the car, she started reading Vanessa's texts to me. The transcript of our conversation is as follows:

- Cheryl (C): She's afraid that Danielle and Hayley are going to feel awkward.
- Interviewer-Author (K): We won't say anything to them [about any of this]. Is this upsetting her?
- C: Yes.
- K: Are you OK with that?
- C: Yes. Will you wait here [at their house]? She feels she's putting Hayley and Danielle in a very awkward position. She told them who you were. She's afraid of them being in the car with you. She's feeling that I'm putting her friends in an awkward position. She agreed to this, not them. That's what she texted me. She's feeling that you being in the car...
- K: So you want me to stay here?
- C: Do you mind?
- K: Oh no.

When Cheryl returned about forty minutes later, she reported that Vanessa had cried all the way to Danielle's house. While I was not present for the conversation, Cheryl said that Vanessa was upset because all of the parents "talk behind the girls' backs," and she claims that they have done things that have hurt the girls. She wants Cheryl to find out who sent the envelope. She told Cheryl, "I can't live not knowing who sent this letter." Cheryl said, "The secret's killing her. It eats her up when she has a secret. That's why she couldn't keep the secret from Sydney."

### **Issues of Reliability and Internal Validity**

This case study and its analysis is the work of a single researcher. Therefore, in order to address concerns regarding reliability and validity an early draft of this manuscript was provided to Cheryl who concurred that the narrative accurately reflected her understanding of the events upon which this analysis is based. Additionally, several researchers from fields as diverse as media studies, philosophy, adolescent development, and social aggression have read this manuscript. While these individuals did not have access to the data, they have concurred that this analysis is consistent with standard qualitative data analysis practices and consider the findings to be plausible based on the extensive quotations included in the narrative.

Additionally, Stake (1995) suggests that it is the researcher's responsibility to promote understanding using description, taking the story apart and putting it back together in enough detail that it makes sense to the reader who also engages in interpretation. The tenets of constructivism suggest that if the researcher has done his or her job well in capturing and communicating the essence of participants' realities, then the reader will ultimately be the judge of the strength of the research through the process of constructing meaning.

## **Results**

While drama is an emergent construct in research literature, it seems to be a commonly used and understood term among adolescents (boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, under review; Veinot et al., 2011). A grounded theory analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008; Charmaz, 2004) suggests that this case study contains most elements of drama as defined in work by Allen (2012, 2013, accepted with revisions) and Marwick and boyd (boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, under review). Below is a discussion of the ways that this case study reflects the features of drama as described in the literature, including a discussion of the roles that tweeting, texting and Facebook played in this situation, and a discussion of emergent themes and hypotheses.

### **How is this Drama?**

Phase I of this case study, which involves conflict using tweets between the "Puck Sluts" and the "Rink Rats" suggests that this is an example of drama. The use of terms like "Puck Slut" and "Rink Rat" in public ways, indicate a desire to draw attention to one's self. As Vanessa explains, they all have rather large followings on their Twitter accounts, so a large audience, suggesting that the girls want this kind of attention, observes their conversation with the Rink Rats.

In drama, innocuous comments are not ignored and elicit a response. This seems to be a form of overreaction. The subsequent reciprocal responses that are tweeted exaggerate the seriousness of the conflict and make "mountains out of molehills" (Mandel, 2008). Friends of friends cannot ignore the exchanges and become involved adding "fuel to the fire," pulling in extraneous people. When one person (Vanessa) tries to stop the momentum, it seems as if the interactions have taken on a life of their own, and her friends get angry at her. While Vanessa wants to let it die, there is resistance and an effort to prolong the situation. There appears to be excessive emotionality around something that is trivial. For Vanessa, the problem escalates to where she is ostracized from her friendship group and harassed by two of them to the point where she says she felt bullied by her friends. At this point, the drama has taken on the characteristics of bullying and she frames it that way. Bullying is generally defined as a behavior which is intended to be harmful, is experienced as harm, is usually repeated, and exploits a power imbalance (Furlong, Sharkey, Felix, Tanigawa, & Green, 2010; Swearer, Siebecker, Johnsen-Frerichs, & Wang, 2010).

In hindsight the girls would likely say that their conflict with the Rink Rats, as well as their temporary estrangement from Vanessa was trivial and stupid. They would minimize the importance of what happened, and would likely downplay the painfulness of the experience and the meanness enacted, yet in the moment it seemed justifiable to behave as they did.

Phase II of this case study might be framed as "high drama," given the seriousness of what happened and the extremely public way that the situation unfolded. The events surrounding Ian cheating on Sydney were examples of private information becoming public. Many of the behaviors... the tweeting and re-tweeting, the comments posted on Facebook... were examples of networked spaces being used to engage in public performance, not just for

the six girls, but for everyone who subsequently participated. The original drama that started with Sydney, Ian, and Samantha quickly engulfed dozens of students once the six girls became involved. By tweeting their contempt for Samantha, they opened the door to involvement by many “extraneous others.”

The narrative around feelings, particularly those regarding Sydney’s betrayal seem to suggest overreaction and excessive emotionality on the part of the six girls. While a response to this situation would be expected, the hysterical nature of Vanessa’s behaviors seems out of proportion, and the fact that all of the girls adopted this disposition, also seems disproportionate. There is a sense that they want to be highly emotional, need to be highly emotional, and can’t picture a modulated response that would include less crying and more self-control. They are “doing drama,” and until the mean tweets start coming in, none of them seems to be concerned that they have publicly displayed their pain and anger to most of the student population of their school.

The events which follow (i.e., hateful tweets, hostile Facebook postings, the letter and tweets sent in the mailing, the verbal harassment at school, and the defacing of the cheerleading photo) meet the definition of bullying and social-relational aggression but they are also drama. Crick and Grotpeter (1994) define relational aggression as “harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of their peer relationships” (p. 117). Galen and Underwood (1997) and Underwood (2003) define social aggression as a class of behaviors that together serve to hurt another person by doing harm to self-concept or social standing. These include behaviors such as rumor spreading, dirty looks, and ostracism. Relational aggression and social aggression can be direct or indirect).

Within the narrative there are overreactions, exaggerations, and extreme expressions of emotion from a variety of individuals. While the girls do not respond to the harassment publicly, they desperately want to, suggesting that this could easily become reciprocal as opposed to unidirectional. It is only fear of being suspended that keeps them from reacting aggressively. In fact, there is a sense that they are being baited, and if they react to the bait, this will all still be “drama,” not bullying. They try to maintain a clean billing as “victims,” but as the letter says, their role in the earlier PSP events make them culpable. They have attacked Samantha for being a “slut” while they themselves adopted the slut identity willingly and then engaged in a public conflict with the Rink Rats. Drama can blur the roles of who is a victim and who is a perpetrator, and this blurring begins when the six girls send out their mean tweets. They initially frame themselves as having been victimized (via their association with Sydney and her victimization), then become aggressors (when they send nasty tweets), and then quickly become victims again (when they are attacked by many students), and only with a great deal of self-control, do they refrain from engaging in aggression by responding to the harassment directed at them.

Phase III, the final episode of drama which involved Cheryl, Vanessa, and me during the actual interview experience itself, is an example of overreaction, excessive emotionality, and the unnecessary involvement of others. Although minor and short-lived the exchange that took place between Vanessa and her mother constitutes drama. Vanessa’s concerns about having me in the car could have been resolved by a frank, unemotional, direct conversation, but instead it involved circuitous communication, strong emotion, and the embarrassment of her mother. Additionally, if Vanessa had not told her friends about being interviewed, there would have been no reason for Hayley or Danielle to be uncomfortable in my presence. Also, Vanessa’s hysterical crying in the car seems overreactive and excessively emotional. In the few moments that it took for this event to occur, Vanessa seemed to manipulate her mother and have little concern for her feelings.

Additionally, as a participant in this incident, I experienced a number of emotions during this portion of our time together. I was embarrassed by my lack of understanding of

what was happening, and then I was appalled at how much power Vanessa had over the situation. I felt manipulated and somewhat deceived by her apparent warmth and friendliness. Later as her mother described in detail what it is like being Vanessa's mother, I could strongly identify with her sentiments because I had experienced Vanessa's machinations first hand. Being caught up in adolescent social drama when one is not the "lead actor" can feel very disempowering, even to an adult.

Sexual attention, behaviors, and norms are thematically woven throughout the events that Vanessa and her mother relate. Marwick and boyd (boyd, 2009; Marwick & boyd, 2011a, 2011b, under review) have indicated that there is a gendered nature to drama which manifests itself in who does drama and what it is about. While only a single case, this narrative primarily involves females. Only two male students were overtly involved in the events related here, although Facebook postings and face-to-face verbal harassment in school involved male students. Marwick and boyd also found that drama was often about romantic relationships, sexual encounters, or sexual reputations, and that drama "reproduces normative conceptions of gender and aggression" (Marwick & boyd, under review, p. 13). At the core of this story is Ian's infidelity to Sydney. Interestingly, Sydney and the five girls did not attack Ian's sexual reputation in the tweets, although Sydney did hit Ian and screamed at him in the hallway before she left school with Hayley's mother. (Interestingly, as one would expect based on dominant norms, Ian did not strike her back.) The enforcement of heterosexual norms and gender stereotypes dictates that Samantha, not Ian, be held responsible for their sexual transgressions and that Ian not strike Sydney in response to her physical attack on him.

Along these same lines is the way drama often involves sharing too much information with people who shouldn't be in possession of this knowledge, which then results in the inclusion of people who have no business being involved. If Sydney hadn't told everyone that she lost her virginity to Ian, no drama could have ensued. If Samantha and Ian hadn't told anyone that they had sex while Ian was dating Sydney, no drama would have resulted. Because secrets were told and spread around in very public ways what might have been, and arguably should have been private matters, became commonly known information. Drama is about knowing private information and being involved in other people's private business.

This case study has been labeled as drama by Vanessa, by her mother, and by me. The similarities to drama performed in a theater cannot be overlooked. The storyline itself contains components of any successful theatrical performance: sex, romance, intrigue, deception, betrayal, and reconciliation. There have been a few laughs and many tears. The performance, enacted in some parts in face-to-face interactions, but also through tweeting, texting, and Facebook postings, has involved major and minor actors who have been observed by an invisible and large audience. Some of the scenes in the 'play' have met the definition of bullying, some of harassment, and some of social-relational aggression, but taken together those inside the story and those watching from the audience would very likely describe this story in its totality as drama.

### **The Role of Tweeting, Texting, and Facebook in Drama**

Tweets are short messages, 140 characters or less, that are sent to everyone who follows a particular Twitter account. Tweets are a public way of sharing a thought, opinion, or observation. Tweets are Internet based and can be sent or received on a computer or a smart phone. Text messaging is a cell phone based technology that is heavily used by adolescents (Lenhart, Ling, Campbell, & Purcell, 2010). It makes use of cell phone numbers. Like tweets, texts can be forwarded on to others. Facebook is a social media platform that makes use of email addresses. Users collect 'friends' who can access each other's Facebook



pages and post comments on them as well as photos, and send them messages. If the privacy settings are not restrictive, anyone can see a person's Facebook page. (I was able to access Vanessa's Facebook page the day after our interview and I am not her "friend.") These three forms of electronically mediated communication were instrumental in both the narrative offered above and in making this series of interactions 'drama.' Without these tools, this still would have been drama, but on a much smaller scale.

What is apparent from Vanessa's description, and from observing her behavior during the interview, is that mediated communication has been woven, almost seamlessly into the lives and interactions of these girls. They communicate by tweeting and texting, using their smart phones as if they are appendages of themselves. Depending on whom they need to communicate with, what they need to say, and where the parties are physically located, they choose the appropriate mechanism, often combining it with face-to-face interactions in a single interpersonal encounter. The exchange between Vanessa and her mother as we are leaving to go to cheerleading practice during the interview process is an example. Occasionally they use their phones to talk, but mostly they text. They communicate frequently with each other and their mothers, and their mothers stay in touch with each other by texting as well. Tweeting tends to be used with a chosen public; texting is more private but it can involve more than one person at a time, and texts can also be forwarded or "re-tweeted." All of these messages, created and sent via mediated forms of communication, can live on in someone else's phone or computer, even if the person who created them has deleted them, and the permanent existence of these tweets, texts, and postings means they can be re-sent and used to create more drama or restart old drama. There are multiple ways that the pot can be stirred up again, and again. Thus, while the events themselves are over, there is some anxiety that the drama could be resurrected and reignited.

Of significance is that this series of events was very public and carried a performative element because of the use of mediated communication. Even though the six girls may not have thought about the implications of their nasty tweets appearing in a public forum, their previous behaviors suggest that they live their lives and display their emotions in public ways. They like attention. There is an element of celebrity-ism to their behaviors. They know they are popular and they seem to relish the power that they get from being high profile, high-status students. They know that by being highly emotional, they will garner attention, particularly from their parents and school personnel, but also from their peers. Drama enables them to wield power, and what they are doing is not necessarily social-relational aggression or bullying, and in some instances it isn't conflict either. It is something else; it is using conflict to make drama.

## **Emergent Themes**

Grounded theory analysis (Charmaz, 2006; Corbin & Strauss, 2008) was used to analyze the interview transcripts and interviewer memoing. The goal of grounded theory is "to construct abstract theoretical explanations of social processes" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 5). The grounded theory approach is a systematic method of collecting and analyzing qualitative data that involves several levels of coding, the organization of codes into categories, and the exploration of emergent themes. An initial set of codes were developed prior to the data analysis process using the existing definitions and understandings of drama. The purpose of this was to determine if the events in the case study mapped on to what is currently known about bullying. In addition to the original codes generated from extant research, more codes were generated during the coding of the transcripts and interviewer memoing. This was done to further explore the data in anticipation of the development of new themes and hypotheses.

Following initial coding, the codes were analyzed for the purpose of developing categories and emergent themes. This involved constant comparison, a process involving the making of comparisons between “data and data, data and codes... codes and categories, and categories and concepts... [for the purpose of] articulating conjectures” (Charmaz, 2006, pp. 72-73). Three categories emerged from the analysis of the original coding: (a) Intense emotionality in pivotal moments akin to the “feeding off of each other,” (b) Expressivity and performance in the service of garnering control and power, and (c) Lingering emotional irritants and ‘unfinished business.’

The final phase of analysis involved returning to the data and exploring the codes and categories in an effort to develop emergent themes that might suggest further hypotheses in support of the study of drama. Two themes emerged: Group Emotions and Bonding, and Furthering Drama: Stirring the Pot and Baiting.

### **Group emotions and bonding**

Within this case there are two discrete events, which are similar. They are the meeting of the girls in the bathroom at school and the meeting at Hayley’s house. During both situations the girls are not in the presence of adults, and there is commiseration, high emotionality, and crying. In one of her tweets, Nicole refers to the time at Hayley’s house as “bonding.” While psychologists have studied rumination and co-rumination (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008; Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007; Smith & Rose, 2011), there is little research on this construct as it may manifest itself in a group. Yet, it seems that what happens in the bathroom and at Hayley’s house includes many of the features of rumination and co-rumination such as the prolonging of negative emotions and thoughts, self-disclosure, closeness, and empathic distress (Ray, Wilhelm, & Gross, 2008; Rose, 2002; Rose, Carlson, & Waller, 2007; Smith & Rose, 2011). Additionally, these girls are self-proclaimed “very best friends,” and co-rumination is found in some close interpersonal relationships. These observations suggest that an additional feature of drama may be group rumination, a process similar to co-rumination, yet different because it takes place in a group. Further study is warranted to test this hypothesis.

### **Furthering drama: stirring the pot and baiting**

One idea associated with drama is “stirring the pot.” Stirring the pot seems to mean that individuals can engage in behaviors, which prolong, resurrect, or reignite an incident of drama. In this case, Cheryl described how she feared that Vanessa would resurrect the drama five months after the original events. She explained that Vanessa was obsessed with finding out who sent the letter and tweets in the postal mailing. She indicated that Vanessa could “not let go of it,” and in spite of the serious negative outcomes of the entire series of events, Vanessa was willing to re-engage if it meant finding out who was responsible for the anonymous mailing. Vanessa claimed that she was sure she had figured out who had sent the materials and she was insistent that her mother call that person’s mother and ask if this person had done it.

Also figuring prominently in the data were indications that the high-profile and massive response to the girls’ first tweets was an effort to ‘bait’ them and get them to engage in aggressive retaliation, hence increasing the likelihood that they would get suspended from school. While the girls wanted to engage with those who were attacking them, their parents warned them that if they gave in and responded in kind, they would likely get suspended from school. While it cannot be known if getting them suspended was the objective of those who attacked the girls, it cannot be ruled out.

The indications of “stirring the pot” and “baiting” in this case raise the question of whether or not these features are found in other situations that meet current understandings of drama. While current knowledge of drama suggests that it is short-lived and temporary, it may be that past situations of drama may lie dormant and can be resurrected to create additional drama. Further study is warranted to explore this hypothesis.

## Discussion

### Putting One’s Self Out There

Adolescence is a time when youth establish an identity (Banaji & Prentice, 1994; Carmichael, Tsai, Smith, Caprariello, & Reis, 2007; Simon, 2004; Steinberg & Morris, 2001; Swanson, 2010; Swanson, Spencer, & Petersen, 1998), and much of this work is done in and through social experiences with peers. Both Vanessa and her mother understand that the six girls involved in this drama are popular and attractive. They are well known by the student body at their high school. Additionally, Vanessa offers examples of how she isn’t afraid to spontaneously call attention to herself in a large public venue. She describes a time when another cheerleader’s boyfriend, whom she indicates is also her friend, fell on the ice during a hockey game. Vanessa stood up in the stands and shouted, “Walk it off, baby, walk it off. You’re still hot,” to which the boy and everyone in the stands laughed. Throughout Vanessa’s narrative, and later in her mother’s extensive comments about her daughter and her friends, there is a sense that these girls “put themselves out there.” They are not afraid of being in the public eye.

While drama can occur in any adolescent group regardless of its status within the social hierarchy, cheerleaders are often part of groups that are at the top of the social hierarchy. They are local celebrities. Peers will take note of what they say and do. Senft (2008) discusses “micro-celebrity,” a set of behaviors in which one has an audience that is viewed as a fan base, and in which popularity is sustained through creation of an identity that one presents and manipulates, often through the use of online mediated communication.

Within the context of adolescent peer culture, status and popularity are commodities that can come with a price. In his work on status relationships among adolescents in a high school context, Milner (2006) posits that popularity and status are finite resources and that in order for one student to gain status and popularity, another must lose some. This dynamic sets up the possibility that peers will use cruelty, aggression, and meanness to shift power away from those who have it and reposition it in the hands of others. By ‘putting themselves out there’ and by sharing their intimate secrets with a wide audience these girls have let people feel as if they are close to them, but they have also made themselves vulnerable. Thus attacking Samantha for being promiscuous, when they themselves have used sex to advance their visibility (i.e., through the PSP episode), sets them up for the barrage of public harassment, which follows.

Reading the case study presented here is like reading a story from *People* magazine. One feels as if one is looking through the keyhole of someone’s bedroom door. Celebrities invite fans in to get a sense of who they are by offering private information, but they are also at the mercy of paparazzi and gossip writers who seek to expose details of their lives that are embarrassing and salacious. Some adolescents, in their efforts to construct an identity and position themselves in their peer hierarchies behave like celebrities who seek attention. By “putting themselves out there” the girls have set up the possibility that drama will ensue, and in their case, it did.

## **Groups and Power**

Several times, Cheryl commented on the difference in behavior that she sees when the girls are in dyads versus when they are together as a group. She believes that when the girls are in pairs they are less inclined to engage in problematic behaviors. Research does suggest that people behave differently in dyads as compared to groups (Zimbardo, 1969). Goldstein (2002) cites deindividuation and groupthink as two mechanisms that sometimes occur in groups. Deindividuation results when people lose their sense of individuality and become submerged in a group (Goldstein, 2002, p. 30). Deindividuation produces behavior that is emotional, impulsive, irrational, regressive and highly intense (p. 33), adjectives that have also been used to describe drama. Groupthink is similar with adolescent groups being prone to this phenomenon because of pressure to conform (p. 33). Together, deindividuation and groupthink seem to increase the likelihood that a group will engage in drama.

Hawley (2003), and Prinstein and Cillessen (2003) have explored social groups that contain what they call, bistrategic controllers. These are individuals who are popular and powerful, who use their strength in both positive and coercive ways to stay popular and in control. These friendship groups are often found to be cliquey and conflictual, but close and intimate, and by the accounts given in these studies, these bistrategic controllers are well-adapted. Groups of this nature who are able to successfully manipulate each other and situations may be prone to drama. Vanessa is certainly a powerful individual, and according to the descriptions given by Cheryl, other members of this group are also. Given the popularity of these girls, and their ability to wield social power, coupled with their excessive emotionality and over-reactive tendencies, it seems predictable that they could produce drama.

## **Does Drama Always Involve Conflict?**

Previous research on drama (Marwick & boyd, 2011b) suggests that it is characterized by relational conflict. While drama does often involve conflict, there are instances within this case where it can be argued that drama is taking place but that conflict has yet to develop.

At several points in the narrative there is a discrete event that develops in response to a trigger that provokes emotion that can be characterized as being ‘upset.’ This happens when the girls first learn of Sydney’s betrayal, when the principal challenges the girls as they attempt to get out of school, and finally when they are sitting around the table at Hayley’s house. In each of these situations the girls are upset by what has happened, but they have not yet responded in such a way as to engage in or create conflict. Current understandings of drama suggest that their emotional response to a trigger constitutes drama by itself, without further responses that provoke controversy and conflict. A model of drama which includes and excludes conflict may look like the following:  $[[\text{Event} \rightarrow \text{Emotions}] \rightarrow \text{Response}]$ , with both “Events  $\rightarrow$  Emotions,” and “Events  $\rightarrow$  Emotions  $\rightarrow$  Response” reflecting drama, the first model involving no conflict-generating response, and the second involving a conflict-generating response. For example if the girls had not tweeted negative comments about Samantha, the situation might still have been considered drama, even though there were no conflict-generating responses. The question that this raises is whether or not drama always involves conflict. The events of this case seem to suggest that while drama often triggers conflict, events that involve high emotionality, overreaction, and exaggeration, but are not followed by conflict, may still be drama. This hypothesis should be further tested as knowledge of drama is expanded and refined.

## **Bullying Legislation and Drama**

Educators are increasingly faced with laws that require them to develop policies, procedures, and punishments to address bullying. This pressure makes it imperative that school administrators be able to accurately identify bullying and respond to it in ways that protect them from civil actions by parents. However, the research on drama, albeit limited, along with other research questioning whether students, parents, and educators all understand bullying the way researchers do (Menesini, Fonzi, & Smith, 2002; Mishner, Scarcello, Pepler, & Wiener, 2005; Naylor, Cowie, Cossin, de Bettencourt, & Lemme, 2006; Vaillancourt et al., 2008) makes the application of these policies and procedures challenging. If adolescents dismiss the rhetoric of bullying and do not frame their social problems in the same terms that are used and understood by researchers, policy makers, and school administrators, efforts to address bullying in high schools may be misguided and ineffective. Furthermore, when adolescents, and sometimes their parents, speak of “drama” as a problematic dynamic for which there are no formal definitions or remedies, policy makers and educators may be missing a problem that needs to be addressed.

Cyberbullying adds another layer to this issue. Many states and localities include cyberbullying in their school bullying laws. Yet, it is unclear whether or not these laws will hold up in court. Some of these laws may infringe on students’ first amendment rights to free speech. It is also possible that the courts may find that in some cases, educators may be overreaching their authority if they punish students who engage in cyber aggression that does not make use of school equipment or occur on school grounds. (Backus, 2009)

The social milieu of high schools are often messy, and with mediated communication stirred into the mix, it is often difficult to apply labels like “conflict” or “bullying” to a particular set of student interactions. Even when a student or an administrator calls a situation ‘bullying,’ it is a subjective determination made through that person’s understanding of what conflict or bullying is. Multiple individuals involved in the same incident may interpret what happened differently and use different labels to describe it.

## **Limitations and Future Study**

There are several limitations to this study. One is that there was only one researcher involved in the project, thus the analysis reflects the work of a single individual.

Second, one of the participants (Vanessa) could not be included in member checking because the final manuscript contains information that Cheryl does not want her daughter to know. It became apparent during the interview with Cheryl after Vanessa had left that there were “multiple realities” (Stake, 1994, p. 13) being described in this study. A major point of disagreement between Cheryl and Vanessa has to do with a critical element in the story. Cheryl claimed that she let Vanessa leave school so that she could access a computer to clear tweets from her Twitter account because the tweets had been sent from school. Vanessa argues that her mother is wrong on this detail and that the tweets were sent later after the girls were gathered at Hayley’s house. It became a contentious point of disagreement during the interview, one that remained unresolved, but which Cheryl thinks is an example of Vanessa lying. Manipulation, and by extension lying, are issues related to the topic of drama, and relevant to this case study because Cheryl discussed the problem of Vanessa’s frequent lying at length. In doing so, Cheryl divulged information regarding how she came to know when Vanessa was lying to her through informants. Because of the need to protect Cheryl’s relationship with her daughter, it became imperative that Vanessa not be offered the opportunity to review this manuscript and comment on it, and while this may seem to be a

breach of trust between researcher and research participant (Vanessa), it became a limiting, but necessary step in this case study.

Additionally, it would have been beneficial to interview some of the other students or parents involved in these events. Cheryl felt that involving others would be advantageous both for the group and for the sake of the research, and she was willing to contact the parents of the girls involved, but because of Vanessa's reaction to the interview, it became apparent that to extend the reach of the study would be inadvisable. Thus, while it would have been helpful to have Vanessa read the manuscript, and to seek the stories of others involved in this situation, it was apparent that to do so might 'stir the pot' and potentially inflict harm.

This case study and its findings suggest a number of issues worthy of future study. As Marwick and boyd observe (under review) there is very little empirical research on drama and as a result the construct is difficult to situate in a theoretical context. Drama seems to involve adolescent individual, interpersonal, and peer and group relationships and behaviors. It also draws on the study of youth culture in the way it implicates adolescent norms around gender and sexuality. It is intricately connected to our understanding of human communication and to the multiple, and ever emerging technological tools that youth employ as they communicate with each other. Theoretical development in locating drama in a particular perspective is a necessary step if researchers are to make sense of this phenomenon.

Likewise, while some may argue that the study of drama can be subsumed under work on other phenomena, the little research available seems to suggest that drama is not the same as social-relational aggression, bullying, or even some conceptualizations of conflict. While it may seem parsimonious to attempt to develop an understanding of drama that makes use of already existing theory and research, it is not clear at this juncture whether doing so would be advisable. So for the moment, it seems that an independent pursuit of an understanding of drama is advisable.

There are a number of other questions that would be helpful to address. One is the effect that age, race, gender, social class, economic status, and geographic location have on how drama is framed. Marwick and boyd (under review) did not find much support for drama being understood as something that happens in middle school. Likewise, Allen's work (2012, accepted with revisions) was with high school students and did not include middle schoolers. Allen's work is also limited by the fact that her research was conducted in one locale with upper middle class students. Marwick and boyd (under review) and Veinot and colleagues (Veinot et al., 2011) have included participants who reflect a broader socio-economic, racial, and geographic base, and they did find somewhat different understandings of drama across different demographics, but without more research it is impossible to generalize these findings.

While the extant research on drama makes use of qualitative research methods, it will be helpful to ask research questions and design subsequent studies that employ quantitative and mixed methods, although a word of caution should be offered. Much of the research on bullying, with which drama is closely related (Allen, accepted with revisions) is informed by a post-positivist theoretical perspective. This produces generalizable knowledge, but it is often at the expense of contextual information that has been omitted because of a reductionist approach. As Marwick and boyd (under review) state, "drama is a messy process, full of contradictions and blurred boundaries" (p. 35). A constructionist epistemology, supported by an interpretivist theoretical perspective would allow researchers to embrace the messiness that seems to be characteristic of drama. Research on drama can benefit from all of the perspectives, approaches, and tools that researchers have at their disposal.

Lastly, while little research has been conducted on drama, it has been my experience as an educational trainer and consultant in K-12 education, to find educators hungry for

information on drama, particularly on how to deal with it. As one school social worker lamented during a presentation on drama, “All I do, ALL day long, is deal with drama.” In isolation, this comment has little research value, but it suggests that at least one tired, and somewhat beleaguered school social worker, knows a great deal about drama and desperately needs some help figuring out what to do about it. Drama appears to be problematic on a number of levels, begging for information that leads to solutions. Researchers have much work to do.

### Conclusion

Drama is an emergent construct that has been discovered and developed through interviews and focus groups, and now a case study that included participant observation. Participants in these conversations have offered their understanding of what they think drama is. According to teenagers, drama is exaggerating the importance of an event, a behavior, or a comment. It is overreacting and making a “mountain out of a molehill.” It often involves more emotion than the situation warrants. Drama tends to be something that girls “do,” and it involves a fair amount of “performing” for an audience, which in the era of social media, means that the drama is often taking place on or through tweeting, texting, or Facebook. Drama is often “about” sex, dating, or romance, and reinforcing adolescent norms around gender stereotypes and heterosexuality. People who do drama are “feeding off each other” and making everyone else’s “business” their own. Drama can be fun and entertaining, burdensome, tedious and exhausting, or painful and damaging. Drama lasts as long as it is providing some value to someone, yet at times it can be resurrected or can be used to bait others.

Research suggests that drama is related to more well-developed and understood constructs such as conflict, aggression, and bullying, yet none of the literature on any of these topics completely explains or describes drama. The case study and participant observation presented in this article suggests that drama is a broad concept that may include conflict, aggression and bullying, but not be synonymous with any of these constructs, nor be limited to them. Likewise, it may refer to individual, discrete events. Further research is needed.

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