

Running head: BULLYING

An Overview of Bullying

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Bullying has increasingly been in the public eye since 1999 when the shootings at Columbine High School in Jefferson Colorado resulted in the death of twelve students and one teacher (Brubacher, Fondacaro, Brank, Brown, & Miller, 2009). The two students who engaged in the shootings allegedly were the victims of bullying. At the end of their rampage they committed suicide. This incident dramatically raised interest in the problem. It existed long before (Raskauskas & Stolz, 2007).

While incidents like the shootings at Columbine High School and the psychological harm caused by cyber-bullying which recently reached the front page of the New York Times (Hoffman, 2010) have raised public awareness, bullying is a long standing problem which not limited to schools but found throughout society (Ericson, 2001). As this is a broad overview of a large topic, I will provide an operating definition of bullying, some possible causes, some indication of the psychological harm done, and some thought about directions that might be taken to change the situation. Because children and adolescents are at greater risk of serious psychological damage than adults, I will confine my discussion to bullying among the young. Far more research is available about bullying in schools than in homes. As a result, my attention will focus on schools.

Based on several sources, I give an operating definition of bullying as the intentional, repeated attempt to intimidate a victim through humiliation, fear or abuse for the purpose of demonstrating superiority (Brubacher et. al., 2009; Dooley, Pyzalski, & Cross, 2009; Ericson, 2001). Bullying may be physical, verbal, or psychological. Physical bullying may involve stealing the victim's belongings as well as direct attacks. Verbal bullying generally takes the form of taunts and insults, often of a sexual nature. Psychological bullying is accomplished by spreading rumors or by some form of social exclusion. Note the key components required to

signify bullying are intent and repetition. There are other forms of relational aggression that do not meet this requirement.

Both sexes bully though boys are more likely to engage in physical bullying (Dooley, et al., 2009). Contrary to what might be expected, there is evidence that boys engage in verbal and psychological bullying almost as often as girls (Ostrov & Godleski, 2010).

As previously noted, bullying is not new. Normally children learn social and cultural rules about what is acceptable in displaying anger and aggression (Boyd & Bee, 2009). The apparent increase in bullying in recent years may indicate that these norms have been undermined though, as much bullying is not reported, the increase may merely show that more incidents are becoming known (Correia, 2008),

Evolutionary psychology tells us that aggressive behavior is inherent in all animals. Inevitably there is competition for the survival of the fittest. Different species establish different norms for dealing with this genetic imperative. Humans establish social and cultural norms. Different ethnic and ethnographic groups will establish different norms. In *Childhood and Society*, Erik Erikson reported studies of two ethnographic groups of native Americans (Erikson, 1963). When Erikson studied the Sioux at the Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota he found a culture that was based for eons on hunting the buffalo of the American plains. In the nineteenth century the buffalo were hunted to near extinction and the Sioux were herded from the plains to reservations. Erikson documents the way this destroyed cultural norms that had worked for generations. Specifically, as hunters, the Sioux developed social norms where aggression was directed to hunting and toward other groups. The Sioux were noted for their cruelty to enemies as well as their hunting prowess. At the same time, aggression within the group was essentially unknown. When the Sioux' traditional means of survival were altered,

these social norms were destroyed. When Erikson studied the group, the norms had not been successfully replaced despite the fact that several decades had elapsed since the Sioux had been nomadic hunters.

We need only look at the trauma to which Western European culture has been subjected in the last hundred years to realize that the cultural norms of the nineteenth century have been repeatedly undermined. In the United States, an open frontier was closed. An industrial economy rose and fell. The country became the world's dominant military and economic power. That era appears to be ending. Battles for racial and gender equality have been waged. Technology has revolutionized almost every aspect of society. Could our cultural and social norms survive unchanged? I think not. Bullying is a symptom of far greater social issues. It is imperative that this be acknowledged in order to deal with it. We may also surmise that bullying is a means of dealing with the essential aggression, which is found in humans. We must find solutions, which are based on altering the behavior in such a way as to give outlet to this aggression. At the same time this outlet must promote the formation of a new social cohesion. I believe any solution that ignores these fundamentals is doomed.

One cause of the psychological conditions that creates a bully may well be found in having been bullied at home. In *Procedural Justice in Resolving Family Disputes: Implications for Childhood Bullying*, Michael Brubacher, Mark Fondacaro, Eve Brank, Veda Brown, and Scott Miller (2009) examined some the family conditions that lead to the making of a bully. Another key is the nature of the procedures used within the family to resolve conflicts. When the child perceives these procedures as unfair or unjust, the conditions that will justify bullying are fostered. These conditions are substantially enhanced where violence in the home is part of the

conflict resolution process. Where the child perceives violence as the norm, the child will bring that norm into the classroom.

To deal with bullying, it becomes superfluous to address all of the specific conditions that create a bully. However, if we accept the hypothesis that bullies are created by problems in the family environment then the time when children will most readily be subject to major changes in their cultural and social norms is during adolescence when peer influences come to play a dominant role. If we can foster a social environment that finds bullying unacceptable, we will provide a basis for addressing the issue. At the same time, while fostering an environment where bullying is shunned, we must not attempt to guide the form which socially acceptable outlets for aggression will take. The outside effort to impose a new social system on the Sioux was at best unsuccessful and may have only exacerbated the problem (Erikson, 1963). I suggest the bully may well be seeking the approval from his peers in lieu of approval not received in the home. Foster an environment where bullying becomes unacceptable to the peer group. Peer disapproval will be far more effective in discouraging the bully than any outside authority. Allow the group to form norms providing outlets for aggression that promote a cohesive social fabric.

In recent years technology has played an increasing role in verbal and psychological bullying. This is done through social Internet sites such as Facebook and MySpace as well as through text messages on cell phones (Gradlinger, Strohmeier, & Spiel, 2009; Katzer, Fetrchenhauer, & Belschak, 2009). I am told by several personal sources that MySpace, which at one time was extremely popular among teens, is regaining popularity among adolescents as their parents do not belong to it, are less aware of it, and therefore less likely to monitor the communication. The lack of parental supervision supports the growing amount of evidence that suggests text messaging is becoming the most common means of electronic bullying

(Gradlinger, et al., 2009). When a text is sent from a cell phone not in the recipient's contact list, the name of the sender is unknown. The bully is anonymous. There are programs available for advanced cell phones that allow the sender to hide the true phone number. The Internet, social networking, and text messaging is transforming the nature of communication. As this is still evolving rapidly, studies are often outdated by the time of publication. It is an area that needs intense research for reasons that go far beyond this context.

In my area a local middle school principal has turned the anonymous feature of text messaging to advantage. He asks that his name and the name of his school not be used, as he has not secured any permission or approval from his superiors. He got a cell phone with a dedicated number. He has publicized the number throughout the school. He guarantees that any text message he receives on that phone will be treated with confidentiality, and that he will take action based on problems reported to him. The phone has been available for most of the school year that ended in June. As the students have learned to trust the anonymity and confidentiality, the principal has been told of several significant problems, some involving bullying, which were totally unknown. The principal notes that in many instances the reports are not coming from victims but witnesses. The troubling aspect of this is that the principal does not feel comfortable letting his superiors know about a technique that might be very useful for many. I cannot blame him for being uncomfortable letting what he is doing be known. The question of what is and is not appropriate for schools to do in these matters is murky (Hoffman, 2010). Clear legal guidelines are desperately needed.

We must also address the psychological damage caused to those who are bullied. Recent studies have stressed the damage done by bullying over the Internet and on cell phones as well as traditional forms (Card & Hodges, 2008; Correia, 2008; Dooley, et al., 2009; Gradlinger, et al.,

2009; Katzer, et al., 2009). The consensus is that victims have problems of social integration, generally suffer from low self-esteem, tend to be physically weak, often show signs of hyperactivity, and delinquency. Specific physical characteristics do not seem to play a direct role. While much has been written about the nature of the victims little seems to have been done to address dealing with the psychological damage that has been caused. If we can further our efforts to provide help to victims we may be able to mitigate the damage. We must not lose ourselves in the cocoon of evidence while forgetting that this is about children and adolescents being harmed. I will look at two specific cases of young men subjected to bullying. Both have given permission. These are not their real names.

Vinnie is 32 and grew up in a middle class urban area. His father was born in Italy and left for the United States after World War II. Vinnie's father was in his fifties when Vinnie was born. There are two brothers both several years older. In looking at the family environment, there is an extremely authoritarian mother and an uninvolved father. The older brothers belittled Vinnie when they did not ignore him. In grade school Vinnie was repeatedly physically attacked by a group of older boys who consistently fell upon him whenever he was alone. This happened both in and out of school. For Vinnie the effect was that he became conscious that he was totally alone in this world, that there was no one he could turn to for help, that he had to be wholly self-sufficient. Since then, he has repeatedly been in trouble with the law. By age fourteen he was in the juvenile justice system. He has served time in state prison as well as in county jail. He has been repeatedly treated for problems involving substance abuse. He is aware he has problems and has sought and received psychological counseling. Within minutes of meeting Vinnie you realize that this young man's emotional walls are incredibly high. He lives in a state of extreme emotional isolation. He is also consumed with rage at his perceived powerlessness. There is no

easy way to assess the fully impact bullying had on Vinnie. His conscious memories may well not show all the damage. The tragic thing is that underneath all this is an extremely intelligent, sensitive, and genuinely caring human being.

The situation with Jerry is different. He grew up in a semi-rural area. He has one sister who is three years younger. The mother is permissive. The father is an alcoholic who is uninvolved. The parents divorced when Jerry was seven. By age 12 Jerry basically lived where he chose, and did what he wanted. In school Jerry was embarrassed, as he did not reach puberty until after he was fourteen. The boys in his class talked about sex as adolescent boys do. Jerry's self-esteem suffered. Then at age fifteen he suffered a severe leg injury. While unable to move normally he gained a significant amount of weight. One boy repeatedly taunted him for having "boy tits." Jerry is 25 and is still so bothered by a feeling of physical inferiority that he is afraid to take his shirt off at the beach and is embarrassed when he does so. From a tremendous amount of work in the gym Jerry's body is close to making him eligible for Calvin Klein advertisements. Despite this, even looking at himself in the mirror he still feels unattractive. A major breakthrough took place when a friend snapped a picture of Jerry at the beach with his cell phone. Seeing the photograph has made a difference. As in the case of Vinnie, there were psychological problems that made the bullying possible. But in Jerry's case, I would say the bullying clearly was a primary cause of something that has lasted for almost ten years. Jerry's general feelings of sexual inadequacy have caused him great difficulty approaching women. Here the bullying may be a factor but its significance cannot readily be assessed.

Two cases do not lead to significant conclusions. They do support the hypothesis that victims have prior psychological problems. Both have the traits commonly found among bullying victims. More important, I think they point out that anyone involved in counseling

should be aware of the issue and look for it. Jerry's history shows that in some instances, discovering a few specifics may lead to simple ways of addressing the problem.

To summarize, bullying has been a problem for many years and possibly for centuries. I feel that a general breakdown of norms that have been subjected to brutal pressure from social and economic change has made bullying become more common in recent years. Technology, social networking on the Internet, and text messaging are making psychological bullying more common. Though I have seen nothing specifically stated, I have a sense that the anonymity made possible by technology may make increase the harm done to the victim. This needs to be explored. We also need to turn technology to our advantage. The use of a cell phone by the school principal is an innovative means of allowing students to communicate without fear. We need more of this.

What causes bullying and how old the problem is does not alter what needs to be done to change it. The most crucial factor to acknowledge is that aggression is part of the ethology of human beings. We cannot successfully suppress it. There is little sense trying to find out what norms used to be effective in channeling this aggression in a socially cohesive way. The world is far too different to expect them to work today. The point in human development where we have the greatest chance of promoting new norms for dealing with aggression is adolescence where peer pressure can alter values learned in childhood. If a bully's behavior does not get peer approval, it is likely to change. Allow the peer group to find outlets for aggression that do not cause harm to the group.

Last do not forget that this is about real human beings in emotional pain. The first goal is to address the pain of both the bully and the victims.

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