

Understanding Bullying: Context of Power

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Abstract: Bullying is a pervasive phenomenon across several institutions. It is not only related to the individual but situated in the context in which it happens. Its analysis also reveals that it is not merely a psychological phenomenon and can be understood through inputs from the field of social psychology, sociology and even anthropology. Like any other concept, exploration of bullying has evolved over time. However, few ideas that define bullying have been maintained such as those of 'power'. This paper attempts to understand the defining elements of bullying and situate them in a theoretical framework and the concept of 'power' has been examined drawing from Foucault's seminal works.

Keywords: Bullying, pervasive phenomenon, anthropology.

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of school bullying has existed for generations of schooling but it has garnered considerable attention in the last few years, worldwide. It is recognized as a widespread but neglected problem in schools and otherwise. Various countries have witnessed grave consequences in the form of youth suicide, even in India. The phenomenon cannot merely be psychological and varied disciplines such as educational psychology, developmental psychology, school psychology, sociology and even anthropology are helpful in simplifying the understanding of bullying.

The origin of the term 'bullying' is attributed to the term 'mobbing' adopted by P. P. Heinemann from the context of racial discrimination, borrowed from a book on aggression written by the renowned Austrian ethologist, Konrad Lorenz. Although this term is used in the context of animals, in the work done by him in 1968, he used the term to characterize the action of a school class or a group of soldiers ganging up against a deviating individual [2]. However, the suitability of the word was soon questioned as bullying cannot be always limited to the aggression of one group on an individual. And if such a term is taken as the origin of the phenomena of bullying, it would make it difficult for the school to recognize cases of personalized aggressions as 'bullying'. Moreover, as the number of bullies is greater than the number of victim/recipient, it can also be assumed that the fault lies in the person who is a victim, which might not be the case always.

As of now, bullying has been defined by numerous researchers and psychologists as repeated oppression, psychological or physical of a less powerful person by a more powerful person [1]. Rigby [1] then modifies the definition and states it as "Bullying is a repeated oppression, psychological or physical, of a less powerful person by a more powerful person or group of persons." In fact, the definition of bullying given by Olweus in 1983 [2] reads that "a student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students". It can be examined that the element of the number of participants or perpetrators has been amended and it appropriately captures the concern expressed in the equation of the term 'bullying' with 'mobbing'. Still, the factor that has remained common to both these definitions and many others is the consideration of 'power imbalance' between people involved in bullying. In light of these definitions, the three criteria of intentionality of the action, repetitiveness of the behavior and presence of power imbalance between the participants, are now accepted as defining features of bullying amongst both researchers and practitioners.

Understanding bullying also requires knowing about the various forms in which it manifest, namely- physical, verbal, emotional and recently, cyberbullying. While the other three forms of bullying differ in the manifestations of it, for cyberbullying, the medium changes altogether consequently affecting and affected by, in terms of the range of its audience and the effects on bully /victim. While cyberbullying is considered as

an extension of bullying which uses technology, and is quite recent, the other forms of bullying and their effects have been studied by a number of researchers. Despite linkages made between illnesses, school avoidance, poor academic performance, increased fear and anxiety and suicidal ideation, low self esteem, depression and anxiety, it is not entirely clear whether the connections between bullying, victimization and psychosocial difficulties reflect causes, consequences, or merely concomitant correlate of bullying and victimization [3].

DECODING THE ELEMENTS OF SCHOOL BULLYING

As mentioned earlier, the elements of intentionality, repetitiveness and power imbalance are the defining features for categorizing any aggressive action as bullying. Of these, repetitiveness and power imbalance are issues that need to be dwelled further upon. The concept of 'power' is a sociological concept and is discussed here in relation to the work of Foucault. Power as an idea has been explored in heterogeneous contexts. It's simplistic and reductionist understanding has been challenged. The detrimental impact of power relations creates zones of exclusivity, further generating the need for resistance. This is particularly relevant to the sphere of education, and understanding the milieu in which the child participates, often as a passive agent. But locating it merely in this domain overlooks the dynamics of intra-individual, inter-individual and societal forces acting from without on the individual. Within this frame of reference, Foucault's ideas on the nature of power relations and manifestations of power are unique in their formulation. The focus is on the analytics of power, that is, seeking to explore *how it operates* [4]. Though an expansive discussion on the nature of the same is beyond the scope of this paper yet the effort will be directed at understanding some essential elements that have a bearing on understanding of bullying as a phenomenon. Integral to locate here is the idea that power, according to Foucault, exists only in action, that is, it exists in being exercised. Lapping [5] explicates on this radical formulation

"Power, he (Foucault) says 'invests' those who are dominated, and 'is transmitted by them and through them. This produces an image of the subject as a medium for relations of power.'"

Other points of convergence about the formulations about power in Foucault's work have been its immanence every social relation which in effect is continuously transforming and its heterogeneous omnipresence as a "relation, a current, a strategy, an experience" [5]. The concept of power as "nonsubjective" [6] lends a completely novel dimension to the understanding of how power functions. As an

extension to this, Ryan [7] mentions that though actions involving, exhibiting and exercising power are willed, yet individuals and groups cannot control the process in a simple way. This is to say that the overall aspects escape the actor's intentions. This brings to fore new ways of thinking about bullying not as a simplistic normative regulation of the other.

In the succeeding section, we would discuss few factors that affect the control or lack of power in the context of school bullying and then analyze how schooling, bullying and power fit into the Foucauldian framework. The synergy between this understanding of power is inextricably linked to phenomena under examination in this paper. A study by Oliver and Candappa [8] very clearly explicates on this dynamic of power with respect to bullying. The researchers put forth the argument that power is derived in this contorted relation (the bully and the bullied) by the act of not 'telling'. Silence is the support and the source of drawing and reinforcing power. They document that the need to tell, a part of several affirmatory programmes focussing on attempts to tackle the act of bullying are essential mechanisms to disrupt this relation. The 'culture of silence' that surrounds the act of bullying is an important aspect because here there is evident an undesired complicitness in the relation of power [8].

In any society, power relationships are existent and inherent in social groups, owing to the differences in socio economic status, social relationships, strength, age, caste and class, in the Indian context. Individual factors such as age, gender have been researched in relation to bullying behaviors and it has been noted that they provide an advantage or a disadvantage depending on the role ascribed in bullying, advantage to bullies and disadvantage if the person is a target of bullying [9]. Also, while age differences are highly noticeable in children, with the increase in age, its power advantage decreases. A probable reason for it could be that as children grow older, they gain power by the virtue of being physically bigger and stronger. Remarkably huge gaps between powers are hence normalized. Hence it is also predicted that the prevalence of victimization should decrease with age, as age and the relative power advantages associated with it decrease [9].

Gender and socio economic status have also been studied as contributors for power existence between bullying participants. Although few researchers have linked gender and victimization and related being a female with a higher risk of victimization and males as having more power over females [10, 11]; no prediction for future results can be made in this regard. Researchers have also associated lower SES to have a power disadvantage while those at higher SES to have a power advantage. The most interesting relation of power is with the social exclusion

or inclusion. Actions such as supportive relationships in the classroom, engagement in group tasks and also civic engagement are shown to have increase the social power of an individual [9].

Interestingly, accordance of power is affected by the context in which bullying occurs. Bullying in the electronic space, i.e., cyber bullying, is unaffected by few of these factors. Cyber bullying has a high degree of anonymity and this allows the bully to be unperturbed by the immediate reaction of the victim and his /her distress. In a sense, this empowers the bully. Other factors of age, gender, caste, class and SES might not be clearly evident to others in this online mode. Few researches [12, 13] have established relationships of gender and ethnicity with this mode of bullying. The component of social exclusion, well affecting the power dynamics in offline or traditional mode of bullying, seeps through and influences online bullying. It has been established that online and offline interactions might overlap and strengthen each other.

Apart from the criteria of power, repetitiveness of the behavior is also emphasized in most of the definitions of bullying. This seems problematic as 'repetitiveness' is a relative term and cannot be made to fit into a set number of times action is repeated. Repetitiveness is also dependent on the severity of the action. At times, one act of bullying could be so powerful to affect the victim, that it counters the use of the criteria of 'repeated behavior' for deciding any action as bullying or not. It has also been established that the victim is affected mentally, as well as physically, as a result of bullying. So, even if a single act has the same effect on the victim, it must be considered as bullying.

This points to the need for reexamination of the definitions of bullying and what must, essentially, define it. It would require us to understand not only the reality, but also the theoretical perspectives to bullying. Thornberg [14] has argued for the necessity of dialogue between various theoretical perspectives so that a common meeting point is generated to enhance the understanding of school bullying. Few relevant models in the context of this paper are social hierarchies, school culture and power and power imbalance.

SITUATING THE ELEMENTS OF BULLYING INTO THEORY

School bullying, according to social hierarchies model, can be explained in relation to the school culture, to some extent. It is true that some schools have a conflicted culture underlying bullying. This structure of the school having an authoritarian culture, autocratic structures of management and hierarchical channels of communication, are seen to be responsible for this conflicted culture [14]. Yoneyama

and Naito [15] have suggested that schools are a social institution based on hierarchical and authoritarian relationships including a 'blaming, punitive, and disciplinary approach based on the use of aggression, power, and control; as well as a hierarchical and competitive ethos (as against caring ethos) that has little room for vulnerability'. Not only the socio economic status, as discussed earlier, but status in the school also determines who could be a target of bullying. The social hierarchies among the students in school are reinforced by the culture of competition and hierarchies in the school culture itself. Consequently, those students who are at the bottom of the hierarchy are considered as targets of bullying, while those at the higher end, are most active in bullying others [14].

This relation between social hierarchy, power and bullying is not linear. According to the social dominance theory, bullying is used as a strategy to establish and maintain social dominance, and groups are often organized in dominant hierarchies [14]. This dominance provides the individual with the power to access resources that he might not have an access to otherwise. Hence, in schools students might bully others to situate themselves in up in the social hierarchy and gain access to the resources denied, in the school and the classroom.

The power imbalance between the bully and the victim, is discussed as being relational, i.e. with an increase in power, the victim has the option to rise up in the social hierarchy. Thornberg [14] discusses power imbalance in traditional definitions of bullying as 'situated' and 'relational'. This implies that power is being attributed/ situated and does not lie inside the individual. As it is relational, it is decided by the student's placement in the bullying situation e.g. in case of bully-victims i.e children who are both bullies and victims. For them, the concept of power is undoubtedly relational. In contrast, few situations where bullying is aggravated or happening due to factors such as sexual orientation, disability or gender, the power change would be difficult and power stability would be more visible in such cases of long term bullying [14].

CONCLUSION

Hence, not one, but an interaction of the models would be required to understand bullying. A singular model cannot cater to all the aspects which influence the existence and continuation of the bullying behavior in children. One model which still might give hope is the understanding of bullying under the post structural framework. Through this framework, bullying can be understood in the second order perspective whereby not the individual factors but the social processes of discourses, discursive practices, hegemonies, ideologies and power relations would be relevant.

The definitions of bullying cannot continue to be what they were in the past. With newer perspectives and advanced forms of bullying happening in schools, the factors, components and issues of bullying need to be revisited and a comprehensive understanding be generated through interaction of perspectives. Analysing bullying in terms of power, the normalisation of the power relations between those involved in the act of bullying is dangerous because that tantamount to relinquishing agency and will to recognise the need for action.

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