School Bullying and Social and Moral Orders

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This article provides a theoretical consideration of the ways in which school bullying relates to social and moral orders and the relations of power that are central to the upholding of such orders. Moving away from the focus on individual aggressive intentionality that has hitherto dominated school bullying research, the article argues that understanding the social processes of bullying requires not only understanding bullying as a group interactional process but also how such interaction is part of power relations within both the immediate context of the school and the wider society. © 2011 The Author(s). Children & Society © 2011 National Children's Bureau and Blackwell Publishing Limited.

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Introduction

While most bullying researchers seem to agree that power relations are central to understanding school bullying, there has been a relative lack of theorisation of those power relations. Moving away from the focus on individual aggressive intentionality that has hitherto dominated school bullying research, this article provides a theoretical consideration of the ways in which school bullying relates to social and moral orders and the relations of power central to the upholding of such orders. In so doing, the article argues that it is necessary to understand bullying as a group interactional process, and also how such interaction is part of power relations within both the immediate context of the school and the wider society.

School bullying and aggressive intentionality

Peter-Paul Heinemann is often credited with being the first to theorise bullying in his 1972 book *Mobbning*, wherein he defined bullying as 'the group's collective aggressiveness towards an individual or group of individuals who provoke or attract this aggressiveness' (Heinemann, 1972, p. 7 – my translation). Heinemann argued that bullies are not deviant children *per se*, but rather ordinary children who partake in bullying in particular group situations. Dan Olweus (1978) drew on Heinemann's theorising but questioned the perceived coherent nature of the mob as outlined by Heinemann and instead sought to distinguish between the various roles of those involved. Olweus (1978, p. 4) wanted to highlight precisely those individuals 'who take the initiative and who, in a sense, are largely responsible for the situation's arising at all'. While Heinemann was interested in understanding how particular situations made bullying more likely to occur, Olweus shifted the focus and placed more emphasis on the behavioural characteristics of those involved (Roland, 1993).

While definitions of bullying may differ in how they are formulated, most are similar in their focus on aggressive intentionality (Espelage and Swearer, 2003). Indeed, school bullying

often has been perceived as 'proactive' aggression (Olweus, 2003). This view of bullying as proactive aggression has meant that the intention of bullying has usually been taken as given, and when bullying researchers have discussed intentionality, it has usually been to refer to aggressiveness and the intention to cause harm. This is highlighted by Delwyn Tattum's (1993, p. 8) definition of bullying as 'the wilful, conscious desire to hurt another and put her/him under stress'. By emphasising the aggressive intentionality of bullying, the focus has tended to be on bullying as a breakdown in the social order, with some students engaging in what is perceived as 'evil-minded' behaviour, and others inviting it in some way; either passively or provocatively (Olweus, 1993). Rather than a focus on the social order, the focus has instead been on the individuals involved (Duncan, 1999).

The view that bullying is intentionally and proactively aggressive stems from the aggression focus of much school bullying research. Questioning the aggressive intent of bullying allows for a consideration of the social processes involved in bullying and opens up for the possibility that the intention of bullying may not necessarily be evil-minded. Research into Japanese school bullying (*ijime*), for example, has tended to focus on the situation as the cause of bullying, and Mitsuru Taki (2001, p. 119) states that 'Japanese bullying is considered not as specific behaviour conducted by extraordinary children with problematic backgrounds, but as the behaviour of ordinary children'. In line with the work done on Japanese school bullying (Taki, 2001; Yoneyama, 1999; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003), a number of Scandinavian based researchers (Kofoed and Søndergaard, 2009) have begun to consider the possibility that bullying is conducted by 'ordinary' children, during social processes of group inclusion and exclusion.

If, as research figures suggest, school bullying is a prevalent problem involving large numbers of students, then it seems incomprehensible that bullying emanates from the behavioural characteristics of individuals. Indeed, rather than assuming that large numbers of children are proactively aggressive or 'evil-minded', it may be more useful to understand school bullying as a social phenomenon involving ordinary children in particular situations (Bansel and others, 2009; Schott, 2009; Søndergaard, 2009). If school bullying is not about extraordinary, aggressive or deviant children but rather ordinary children, then it becomes necessary to ask not what is wrong with those children who bully, but rather why do those children do what they do? Rather than starting from the starting point that the intention of bullying is necessarily aggressive, it is pertinent to instead question the intention of bullying and the role it performs in power relations in particular contexts.

A child is not just aggressive, passive or provocative, but rather has to navigate a range of power relations. The ways in which she/he does this may have profound implications for the extent to which they are involved in bullying. Restricting the discussion of bullying to one of aggressive intentionality downplays the power relations within schools and within the wider society, and thus fails to acknowledge the ways in which such power relations are imbued with understandings of gender, sexuality, age, class and ethnicity (Osler, 2006). Bullying may say less about the aggressive tendencies of those involved than it does about the relations of power that are dominant within society.

School bullying and power relations

While a number of school bullying researchers have emphasised the power relations involved in bullying, this has seldom been elaborated on and has been somewhat ambiguous in its

usage (Mishna, 2004). Olweus (2003, p. 12) states that bullying involves an 'asymmetrical power relationship', wherein those being bullied find it difficult to defend themselves. Rigby and others (2004, p. 5) refer to bullying as a 'systematic abuse of power', which involves less powerful individuals being unfairly targeted by more powerful individuals. In both of these explanations, there is a perceived difference in the power of the person(s) doing the bullying and the person(s) being bullied. However, it is not clear what this power difference entails. Olweus (2003, p. 12) suggests that such power asymmetry equates to 'an imbalance in strength' and argues that the term bullying does not apply if the interaction involves students of similar psychological or physical strength. Ken Rigby (2008, p. 23) takes the power discussion further to provide a list of the types of 'power differences' found in schools:

- Being able to physically hurt others;
- Being numerically superior;
- Being more confident, more assertive than others;
- Having greater verbal dexterity − more specifically the capacity to hurt or threaten by one's choice of words and how one speaks;
- Having superior social or manipulative skill − the capacity to turn people against someone or get them excluded;
- Having greater status and the corresponding capacity to impose on others.

However, these 'power differences' do not explain the power relations within which bullying occurs, but rather I suggest that they are the effects of social relations. A student's greater confidence, assertiveness, verbal dexterity or social or manipulative skill is most likely contingent on their position within the social relations of which they are a part.

Rather than only investigating the effects of social relations, it is necessary to investigate how the social relations themselves may be the effects of power. As Michel Foucault (1998, p. 93) argues, 'power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society'. It is precisely this 'strategical situation' that needs illuminating if a study of bullying is to adequately take into account the power relations involved. An individual's ability to exercise power is dependent on how they are positioned and position themselves in relation to social and moral orders, whether in terms of their official position within an institution as students or teachers, their age, class, ethnicity, gender, sexuality or other 'social vectors of inequality' (Whitehead, 2002, p. 107). It is therefore important to consider how bullying relates to social and moral orders within the group, within the institutional setting, and within the wider society, because while incidents of bullying may be condemned and deemed unacceptable, the orders which they serve to police and reiterate may be widely accepted (Bansel and others, 2009).

Shoko Yoneyama (1999), for example, suggests that Japanese school bullying is used as a means to enforce conformity and that bullying is done to those who do not conform to the norms that are prevalent in the context in which they find themselves. In so doing, Yoneyama alludes to the importance of power relations at the wider societal level. Likewise, researchers writing about racial bullying in the Dutch and UK contexts highlight the importance of difference and its centrality to wider moral and social orders when they suggest that any attempt to address racial bullying must also address the racial structure of those societies (Gillborn, 1993; Verkuyten and Thijs, 2002). In considering bullying, then, it is pertinent to

question the extent to which those involved were conforming to and upholding distinctions that are used in the ordering of society more generally (Bansel and others, 2009).

While one student may be bullied because of the colour of her skin, another student in the same class, whose skin colour is similar to those doing the bullying, may be bullied for having red hair, for being 'gay', for being 'weak' or for studying too hard. A student who was once bullied may also begin to later bully others and thus become what has been termed a bully-victim (Olweus, 2003). Thus, rather than understanding power in a static way, in terms of only strength for example, it is useful to understand power as something that is 'exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of non-egalitarian and mobile relations' (Foucault, 1998, p. 94). Doing so allows for recognition that where there is power, there is also resistance. Removing the resistance of the victim from the power dimension of bullying may itself be a violent act, because in concealing the resistance the repetitiveness of the actions that were undertaken in the face of that resistance may also be concealed (Wade, 1997). Søndergaard (2009), for example, highlights the confusion that arises when less visible forms of bullying are resisted by the person being bullied and how visible resistance reduces the perceived applicability of the bullying definition as it is most commonly defined. Rather than involving a bully and a victim of unequal psychological or physical strength, it may become seen as a more two-sided form of conflict and therefore not bullying as it is oft-defined. However, to write off such an episode based on the notion that the individuals involved were evenly matched ignores the power relations within which the bullying occurs.

School bullying and institutionalisation

It is surprising that so little consideration has been paid to the institutional setting of the school, when by definition this is where *school* bullying occurs. An analysis of the relationship between bullying and schooling is seriously lacking and when schooling has been included in discussions of bullying, it has not tended to go beyond analysis of school size, class size or the location of bullying (Espelage and Swearer, 2003; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003). While a number of researchers have alluded to the school setting and many have discussed where bullying occurs most frequently (Behre and others, 2001; Matusova, 1997), few have taken this further to examine the links between bullying and institutionalisation.

Eriksson and others (2002) have pointed to the institutional setting of the school as an arena for bullying and suggest that there are a number of important factors linking schools to other arenas for bullying such as workplaces, prisons and the military. First, these are all arenas where individuals have limited power to choose whom they spend their time with. Second, they are all arenas where individuals are there for a long time or an unspecified amount of time. Third, they are all arenas where individuals often cannot leave without great cost. Within the school, students can also not simply move from one place to another, but rather are expected to follow a pre-determined timetable dictating where and when they should be in which places accompanied by which people (Yoneyama and Naito, 2003). Their movements are heavily restricted and, when bullying occurs, it may not be easy to avoid (Andrews and Chen, 2006; Smith and Brain, 2000). In schools where students are in the same class all the time, this effect may be magnified because of the lack of space and the perceived permanence of the situation (Schott, 2009; Yoneyama, 1999).

Heinemann (1972) and Søndergaard (2009) argue that bullying is the means through which a group is maintained. The 'we' of the group is defined in relation to the 'them' of those

excluded (Søndergaard, 2009). Bullying may thus function as a form of abjection, whereby the boundaries of the group are defined by those excluded (Schott, 2009; Søndergaard, 2009). The ways in which students are assigned to groups (e.g. classes, years and schools) may have a profound impact on relations of bullying within those groupings. Students may not relate well to the other students in their class, year or even school, but may need to if their time at school is not to be a decidedly abject experience.

In attempting to explain why bullying occurs in some areas of schools more than others, Olweus (1993) suggests that bullying prevalence is directly related to teacher density and that there is a direct correlation between the number of teachers supervising break times and the amount of bullying that occurs. This argument highlights why researchers have found that bullying most often occurs in those spaces outside the disciplinary gaze of teachers (Behre and others, 2001; Matusova, 1997). However, this is not to say that teachers necessarily always counter bullying in schools. While teachers are in an official position to exercise power over students, the ability and willingness of teachers to intervene may be dependent on their relationship with their students (Yoneyama and Naito, 2003). Hence, while some teachers may bully some students, other teachers may not be in a position to stop the bullying of some students, and some teachers may even be bullied by some of their students. For example, teacher may be bullied by students for being 'queer' or a teacher from Pakistan may be bullied by students for being a 'paki' (Gillborn, 1993).

Teachers may also unknowingly contribute to bullying indirectly through their pedagogical practices. A number of researchers have highlighted links between boredom and bullying (Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008; Owens and others, 2000; Yoneyama and Naito, 2003), curricular content and bullying (Kenway and Fitzclarence, 1997; Martino, 1997) and stress and bullying (Taki, 2001), suggesting that non-dialogical teaching methods, non-inclusive curricula and increasing educational pressure may negatively impact relations within classrooms. At the same time, large class sizes and increasing demands on teachers to get through required course content may mean that teachers have less time for dealing with relational issues because of such institutional constraints (Osler, 2006; Rivers and others, 2007; Simmons, 2002). This is important because such institutional constraints may mean that teachers are not aware of the social dynamics of their class, although such awareness would appear to be a prerequisite for judging when bullying is occurring and for any attempt at preventing bullying (Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008).

The demands of the peer culture may also be at odds with that of the official culture of the school and these conflicting demands may be particularly gendered, class-based, racialised and so on. Asao Naito (2001, cited in Yoneyama and Naito, 2003), for example, suggests that students in Japan are not only expected to perform scholastically but must do so while navigating the often conflicting expectations of peers and teachers. Likewise, a number of school masculinities researchers have highlighted how school work may often be linked to femininity and thus considered a 'gay' activity by many boys (Connell, 2001; Epstein, 1998). This is well illustrated by Duncan (1998, p. 18) when he states that,

> It could be seen on many occasions in the workplace school that the more a boy was praised by (some) teachers, the more he would squirm uncomfortably at the thought of his class-mates' disapproval. These boys were often called 'gay' by their enemies, and in this mode the term signified weakness and compliance to adult expectations.

It may be in negotiating the conflicting demands for social conformity and demands for scholastic engagement that bullying is used to sanction perceived non-conformity. Thus, it is important not only to consider the institutional setting but also how the social and moral orders promoted within it relate to the social and moral orders maintained, policed and contested by the students in their daily interactions. Schools provide the 'setting' for school bullying, wherein individuals bully or are bullied, and also a 'privileged point of observation' for viewing power relations in the wider society (Foucault, 1982, p. 222). Indeed, schools should not be understood merely as collections of individuals, but rather as institutions wherein particular social and moral orders are reiterated, reinforced, subverted and contested (Rivers and others, 2007). It is therefore important to consider how such social and moral orders relate to bullying.

School bullying and moralisation

Researchers have long emphasised the effects of bullying, with bullying linked to loss of confidence, low self-esteem, social anxiety, depression, distrust of others, psychosomatic problems, suicide and even homicide (Olweus, 2003; Rigby, 2008; Smokowski and Kopasz, 2005; Vossekul and others, 2001). A number of researchers have also suggested that bullying may also affect the wider environment in which the bullying occurs. Bullying may affect the person being bullied and also bystanders, parents, families, the school and the wider community (Sullivan and others, 2004).

For those who witness bullying events, it may directly affect the way in which they behave towards other students in the class, including the student(s) being bullied. The bullying may create anxiety, even among those not directly involved and may lead to even more bullying depending on the reactions of those present. The risk of oneself becoming the target of bullying may prevent bystanders from intervening, especially if they do not expect support from teachers (Atlas and Pepler, 2001; Craig and others, 2000). Reluctance to intervene may also become more pronounced the longer students are at school, especially if teachers are seen not to help, to make the situation worse or even to bully students themselves (Rigby and Bagshaw, 2003). At the same time, teachers may be less likely to intervene if students do not report that bullying is occurring (Novick and Isaacs, 2010). Lack of intervention may in turn serve to reinforce the justifications given for the bullying in the first place, allowing the bullying to become legitimised and explainable in terms of the victim's 'deviant' behaviour (DeRosier and Mercer, 2009; Thornberg, 2010).

The more bullying is legitimised, the more extreme it may become, as empathy for those being bullied may be diminished and they may instead be looked upon with contempt (Søndergaard, 2009). Likewise, the more bullying that occurs, the more the threshold of what counts as bullying may rise and the more those doing the bullying may become desensitised to the plight of those being bullied (Hearn and Parkin, 2001). Rather than being perceived as immoral, the bullying may instead be seen as harmless, deserved or necessary, depending on the person(s) involved and how they are perceived. Responsibility may be transferred to the person(s) being bullied, who is then blamed for failing to fit in. Bullying may even be portrayed in a positive light, as something that is in the best interests of those being bullied (Horton, 2007). Bullying may become moralised, because as Marjorie Harness Goodwin (2002, p. 392) argues, 'morality is lodged in the choices made by people regarding how to treat group members in the midst of interaction. These are largely social choices that are intimately part of the context and the socio-political processes that constitute the life worlds of groups'. The reframing of bullying

into something morally justified no doubt makes it more difficult for those being bullied to obtain help and suggests that, rather than representing a breakdown in the social and moral orders, bullying may serve to reiterate and reinforce those orders.

Rather than perceiving morality as something universal and unchanging against which the actions of individuals are judged to be moral or immoral, it is necessary to understand how morality is practised in the midst of interaction, and how behaviour that is deemed to be officially abhorrent may be considered justified by those involved (Evaldsson, 2007; Goodwin, 2002; Tholander, 2002). Unfortunately, however, the vast majority of research specifically concerning the problem of school bullying has been conducted through the use of questionnaire surveys (Mishna, 2004; Smith and Brain, 2000). Restricting the focus of research to reports from students and teachers may be of limited value for understanding how bullying is influenced by the social and moral orders within which it occurs (Atlas and Pepler, 2001), especially when one recognises the loaded nature of the discourse of bullying and the associated consequences of being labelled a bully or a victim (Horton, 2006). Bullying is highly moralised and responses to questions about bullying, as a moral issue, may often not be reflective of what people actually do when dealing with bullying as a moral issue in their everyday interactions; precisely because of the moralisation involved.

Even when bullying researchers have conducted observational studies of bullying, they have tended to begin with the assumption that bullying is intentionally aggressive and that the power relations involved equate to a difference between the physical and psychological strength of the bully and the victim (Atlas and Pepler, 2001; Craig and others, 2000; see Duncan, 1999 for a notable exception). However, the findings from such research still have served to challenge commonly held understandings of bullying, for example, concerning the involvement of boys and girls, and have thus also highlighted how the findings from questionnaire-based and observation-based research into school bullying may differ significantly.

Conclusion

Rather than categorising large numbers of school students as deviant, aggressive or evil-minded, it may be more useful to consider the social processes in which they are involved when bullying occurs. Bullying is not simply a series of negative actions undertaken by particularly aggressive individuals, but rather is imbued with power relations. Taking the power relations involved in school bullying seriously involves investigating how social processes of bullying relate to social and moral orders; not only at the group level but also at the institutional and societal levels. Rather than reducing power to a question of psychological or physical strength, it may be worthwhile considering power as a strategical situation wherein students and teachers engage in relations of power by drawing on their respective positions in relation to predominant social and moral orders. Doing so has implications for how bullying is researched and suggests a need for more ethnographic studies investigating bullying as an interactive social process. This entails studying what people say they do, and what they do and how what they do relates to bullying and its perpetuation in schools.

Acknowledgements

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