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Changing Perspective is Changing the System-Bullying as "Strong Situation"

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Abstract

When asked individually, a majority of pupils perceive bullying as wrong, antisocial and pronounce the necessity to do something against it. However as part of their class nine out of ten are attributed a distinct role in the bullying process by peers. Moral knowledge or competence adds little to differentiate these bullying roles, but moral motivation does. Moral motivation and in special moral disengagement is linked to a context, to the class. It is argued, that bullying needs to be defined as a strong situation to overcome the effects of group-dynamics predicted by socialpsychology.

Keywords: Bullying; Group-dynamics; Participant roles

Introduction

Even though around up to 5% pupils experience serious bullying [1] the frequent, systematic and collective attacking of an individual in their group or class, there is still a tendency to frame this as a consequence of individual behavioral problems [2]. The bullys' readiness for aggression as well as various facets of psychosocial adaptation difficulties on the victim's side was perceived as much preconditioned as a more or less dynamic relationship of the bully and the victim. Conceptually close to conflict the complexity of the phenomenon bullying was substantially underestimated. This resulted in intervention approaches which aim at improving the social competence on both sides, still in place as method of choice to successfully take action against bullying.

How bullying displays in class

In everyday school life bullying displays in countless "small niceties" children and teenagers do to each other. "One has to cope with that", should-however-only be valid as long as these "niceties" are evenly spread among all members of the group: everybody deals out and everybody receives. If this is not the case and they all aim at one person it applies: "You can stab a person or you can maul him with countless needle stings; the effect is probably the same!"

Victims of bullying are, without doubt, victims of violence-even when the attacks they have to bare seem negligible if seen separately. We need to understand violence not only as the vis absoluta, so to say the physical, will-breaking violence, but also in the sense of vis compulsiva, which indirectly steers the will of the other towards the desired direction.

Furthermore, this kind of violence is less real on the level of single acts than in the degrading of an individual, which is composed of the sum incidents, the systematic of their occurrence ("at some point of the day it will happen") and the relative singularity within the group: "This happens to nobody else but me and nobody helps". Accordingly, the consequences are very specific: in the short-term, victims of bullying suffer from sleeping disorders and psychosomatic syndrome and show increased rates of school truancy [3]. Long-term victims have an

increased risk of depression [4], suicidal thoughts and even worse. Years after graduating from school, victims of steady bullying report more emotional loneliness (not social isolation) and a more anxious relationship-style, which implies a more negative image of themselves and their counterpart compared to persons without bullying experience [5].

Bullying as group-phenomenon

Bullying follows the logic of group dynamics as the bully-supported by some group members-repeatedly and systematically attacks and degrades the victim over a longer period, which ultimately leads to his/her social isolation. In search for dominance a vulnerable but arbitrary individual in class is exploited. To get the dominant position attributed by peers, the bully needs to attain the power of interpretation of what is accepted in class or not (social norms). Only in this way it is possible to reveal the bully's aggression in a more socially accepted light, than the victim's reaction to it, which becomes interpreted as a violation of norms, the longer bullying proceeds.

Peer relationships provide a substantial basis for a sound cognitive, emotional and social development. Consequently, peers strive for a stable positioning within the group arrangement as a kind of developmental task. If bullying happens in class, group membership and the ambition for a stable positioning obviously superimpose the morally appropriate interpretation of the situation and the individual often does not manage to behave in a way that would be expected on the basis of individually formulated standards or moral competence.

Machiavelism and the power of interpretation

Bullying is a proactive form of aggression which is purposefully used to attain or maintain social power/dominance. The strive for dominance is evolutionary heritage and shared by roughly 30% of a population [6]. Many of them use solely pro-social or coercive strategies, while around one in three are identified as bi-strategists or machiavellists and apply both strategies to attain control of social or material resources to gain status within the group. Empirical evidence confirms that from an advanced elementary school age on, children who initiate bullying are better at taking over the perspective of others. They excel others in cognitive abilities, which are needed to

successfully deceive and manipulate, in order to achieve their goals. They are friendly and reasonable towards the teacher and have a good conduct towards their friends-who would/should expect these (small) machiavellists to show a completely different, face when they interact with other children? Factually peer reports identify 40% of the bullies as machiavellists [7].

Data reveal the role of the bully and the victim to be substantially correlated indicating, that the occurrence of one (bully or victim) empirically predicts an essential part occurrence of the other. For long, this led to the mistaken assumption of a direct entanglement in context of a conflict. Meanwhile there is increasing evidence that bullying is, in fact, functional behavior, as the bully manipulates the group with the clever choice of an easily exploitable victim to secure himself a central role within the attention hierarchy of the class.

Wrong time, wrong place-the victim role

The victim, however, suffers: he/she is attacked and humiliated in a perfidious game and rarely has a chance to successfully defend itself or escape the role of victim without external help. The longer bullying persists, the more the bully compasses the power of interpretation of the victim's behavior until all its social relationships are destroyed and its self-esteem is at its lowest.

If the victim leaves the class-because its well-being earns highest priority-bullies (and supporting peers) instantly look for a new victim, which is at least an indirect proof of the interchange ability of victims, as well as of the wrongness of the hypothesis of self-inflicted bullying. Long-term data confirm a two times increased risk for a stable bully role from primary up to secondary school but no higher risk for a primary school victim to maintain the role in secondary school (compared to those, who are not victimized in primary school but get victimized in secondary school) [8].

Moreover, somebody suffers psychosocial and emotional damage caused by bullying because a system demands attendance at school but cannot guarantee the individuals protection in these cases. If the duty and the resulting responsibility were properly interlocked, bullying would be preventable-not always in its beginnings, but without doubt during the successive process of systematic degrading, in which more and more children take part.

Bullying is morally wrong because bullies and their supporters exploit the victim with solely egoistical motives and make it suffer. This also constitutes an urgent political and legal problem, because bullying violates concrete rights, anchored e.g., in the German basic law, like the right to free physical and mental development (Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, §2).

Bullying from outside or inside the group

Most students perceive bullying as negative and cruel. They cannot comprehend something like it can happen within a class [9]. In the same study at least 50% of students under the age of 14 stated that they would help, if they watch somebody being bullied-among older students the percentage decreased to one third.

One part of those who did not want to do anything about bullying, hold the opinion they should actually help, the other part reports it does not concern them. Most students stated they do not take part in bullying, while a fifth stated that they actively take part in bullying.

How can this data be decoded? On one hand, there is little reason to doubt the truthfulness of these statements: practitioners know of the honest outrage of students, if they hear about bullying or are confronted with examples. Sadly, this experience also includes the disillusioning realisation that in the case of bullying within their class the same students behaves completely contrary to their stated conviction and do not even seem to realize the contradiction.

Search for dominance as the motive for bullying

The bully's striving for dominance in mind, the image of the mean-spirited individual, which is ready to "step over corpses" to reach his goal without any moral constraint, imposes itself [10]. Most psychologists however, would argue that bully behavoir is easily explained on the basis of learning theory. As success rewards this behavior it can develop without the assumption of viciousness.

In order to explain the phenomenon bullying as a whole, our primary focus lies on whether there is an identifiable prerequisite (sine qua non), which makes the criterion "somebody within a class is being victimized/is a victim" predictable.

Research on aggression confirms this; for it to occur proactive aggressive behavior must be present within the class [11]. New studies further differentiate that bullies with good or above average socio-cognitive skills successfully manipulate their peers and their more relational than physical aggression facilitates the "disappearing behind the group", as a means to avoid sanctions [12]. Peers however have clear knowledge of who is pulling the strings and is constantly thinking of new ways to systematically humiliate the victim, which on one hand guarantees status and popularity within the class and, on the other hand, successively diminishes the victims popularity within the class, often to the point of its complete isolation.

Pursuit of dominance is ambivalent. While coercive strategies are part of certain children's behavioral repertoire from kindergarten age on, these are often reinforced by success but around the time of entry to school are also met by increased social rejection, as cognitive development enables the use of prosocial strategies not before the age of eight [6]. Besides individual factors, the context's (peers') reaction plays a substantial role in determining whether those who strive for dominance develop as coercive strategists, prosocial strategists or bi-strategists [6].

From social-learning theory perspective, there is enough reason to assume that, whatever amount of moral competence exists within the individual, it has a clear antagonist in the reinforcement mechanisms of the context. With prevention and intervention in mind, this demands educational and potentially ethical influence. Here the behavior and model of the teacher becomes an element of the moral challenge in bullying. Concisely said what happens within a group is what the group allows; even though there is no bullying without striving for dominance, striving for dominance does not necessarily lead to bullying.

The dynamic of bullying's emergence-participant roles

When bullying happens nine out of ten students are part of it [10,13], meaning that, on basis of school surveys, the majority of students can be assigned roles which have a reinforcing or constraining effect on the process of bullying (Figure 1).
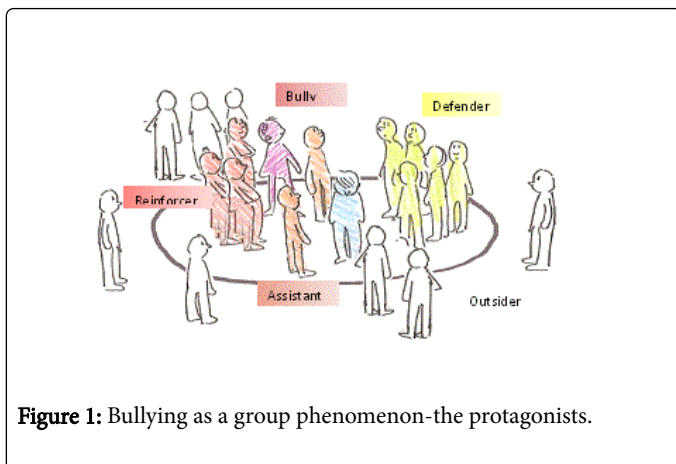
Figure 1: Bullying as a group phenomenon-the protagonists.

On one side, there are the bullies (10%) showing active and initiating, leadership oriented bullying behavior, the assistants (10%) who actively support the bullies actions, while reinforcers contribute to bullying by applauding and inciting the bully. On the side of non-aggressive behaviors, defender (20-30%) are characterized by direct intervention, indirect support by getting help or by comforting the victim, while outsider (20-30%) do nothing or mind their own business, which reinforces any kind of aggression, because no clear counter position is being taken[1].

Contrary to in elementary schools, in secondary school surprisingly clear classifications of aggressive and non-aggressive students can be conducted on the basis of their reciprocal friendship nominations-reciprocal friendships are a source of reinforcement and stabilisation of aggressive behavior.

Another reinforcement factor is based on social status and perceived popularity. While in elementary school mainly the bullies are substantially less accepted ("who do you like most?") than popular ("who do you think has the most friends?"), in secondary school this can be evidenced for all three aggressive roles: An overestimation of the students in aggressive roles (low social acceptance, but popular), which is not without influence on bullying. Those who are popular seem to be doing something right, are in the focus of attention and serve as benchmark for accepted behavior within the group.

The implementation of adolescents' individual convictions and sympathies into behavior ("I don't like it when somebody who cannot defend himself is attacked") is strongly influenced by the prevailing social norms within their peer group ("Most of the class finds it cool when XY is being mobbed, because he/she is a nerd/wimp anyway"). The students who wholeheartedly claim to find bullying vicious and antisocial are affected by diffusion of responsibility ("the others are also not doing anything") and pluralistic ignorance ("the others are also not doing anything, so it can't be that bad"), when bullying occurs within their direct social context (the class). The accumulated effect of the many "needle stitches" degrading the victim-which, as a single act barely seem morally questionable to those participating - is easily repressed, if the bully successfully defines the social norms, placing the

victim and its reactions more and more outside of these norm's area of application.

Moral competence as an influencing factor

At first glance one might conceive bullying to be moderated by moral competencies and attitudes of the participants. Are certain deficits in the probully-group's moral self-regulation a necessary conditions for the development of a bullying dynamic, which spreads in the class or-from the perspective of the victim-escalates?

Different studies show that differences in abstract moral knowledge and the ability to apply it on situations do not present a strong explanation for the different behaviors: bullies in elementary school age correctly judge simple moral misbehavior more rarely than prosocial children [14,15], but among the 9-13 year olds, bullies can make the moral distinction between deliberate and accidental damage just as well as defender [16]. Furthermore, many studies confirm bullies' good socio-cognitive capabilities, which clearly distinguish them from assistants and defender [15]. This leads to the assumption that bullies and defender should be similarly able to apply moral norms to specific situations.

More considerable effects are shown by studies, which analyse moral motivations: emotions that sanction unmoral behavior (feeling bad or guilty) count as indicators for moral motivation. Who tends to justify unmoral behavior with pseudo-moral rationalization ("the victim provoked the action and so it is his fault"), proves his "moral disengagement" and is able to supress internalized moral reaction patterns and sanctions in a particular way [17]. Bullies' moral motivation is significantly weaker than that of prosocial kids [18] and older perpetrators have an especially pronounced discrepancy of moral knowledge and moral motivation [14]. Moreover, many studies show a strong correlation of bullying role and moral disengagement: bullies, reinforcer and assistants each show significantly more moral disengagement than victims, outsider and defender [15,19].

A moral psychological perspective for prevention/intervention

If bullying is morally wrong group behavior[2]influenceable factor.

The here proposed starting point is not to empower individual moral competencies in those prone to aggression, but to enable the other large subgroups to apply their general moral conviction to the concrete bullying case and to implement it in form of an accepted group norm. With this the bully loses the room for manoeuver for effective bullying and his pseudo-moral justification. Empirical data suggest, that with early prevention the potential perpetrator's striving for dominance can be diverted to prosocial strategic behavior [6], which makes an instrumentalisation of certain group members obsolete.

Even though the individual moral competency and motivation of every single group member does not allow an accurate prediction of individual bullying roles, these can slow down the social dynamic, which leads to bullying, if they are prevalent and promoted within the

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[1]   The remaining children which would complete the group to a 100% are those of the category "without role". The category "without role" is a rest-category, where you will find the children, which score comparably high on two sub-scales (z-value difference <0.01) or which do not score a value above the class average on any sub-scale.

[2]   The following is not focused on the question of the moral evaluation of individual misbehavior of group members. The empirical data suggests that an individual assignment of guilt, without complementary measures of prevention, is counterproductive for the victim [20].

group [21]. There are strong reciprocity effects between environment and individual dispositions: the bullying initiator carries a defined profile, namely preference for dominance and good control over internal sanctions. But he can only apply these competencies in a certain environment. The environment makes the reinterpretation of social rules easy for the bully, so that he himself and also his assistants and reinforcers can successfully distance themselves from an initially clear moral evaluation of bullying. Additionally, many students are not capable of realising that they clearly overestimate the bullys' social acceptance among their classmates. They perceive a conflict of values (moral standards vs. own position within the peer group), in which a light preference towards moral disengagement or a slightly below-average ability to judge can tip the scales towards supporting the bully. The recognition that assistants and reinforcers get from a bi-strategist, reinforces the readiness for further moral disengagement.

Prevention should create a social environment, which becomes useable on the level of intervention before the dynamic gains momentum. An environment, in which interpretation- and value-conflicts are initially given, the chance diminishes to create a strong social situation, namely a situation in which the participants' behavior is with little variation congruent to the desirable behavior (cf. to logic of strong situations: [22]). Accordingly, a clarification of the situation has the priority so that it is clear to every group member, which deeds are morally legitimate and generally accepted within the group. The goal is to establish a culture on class- and school-level, in which clear social rules against bullying behavior are set: certain types of behavior are established, certain behavior is sanctioned and certain behavior is rewarded with approval. Thus, the chance of reinterpretation of rules becomes impeded. When the group actively attributes responsibility in concrete situations, typical moral disengagement strategies do not take effect anymore. In case participating also counts as breach of the rules, rationalisations like "the victim deserves it" or "individuals are not responsible for the actions of the group" do not convince anymore (Figure 2).

Changing the perspective implies changing the system?

The attitude towards bullying differentiates two societies in a class: the probully-group with a positive attitude towards aggression and a perception, which is focused on the intentions and actions of the bully, constitutes one third of the class. The antibully-group with a negative attitude towards bullying consists of roughly one half defender, who become active against bullying and one half outsider, who would have some potential to influence the bullying process together with the defender, resulting in a clear majority opposed to bullying.
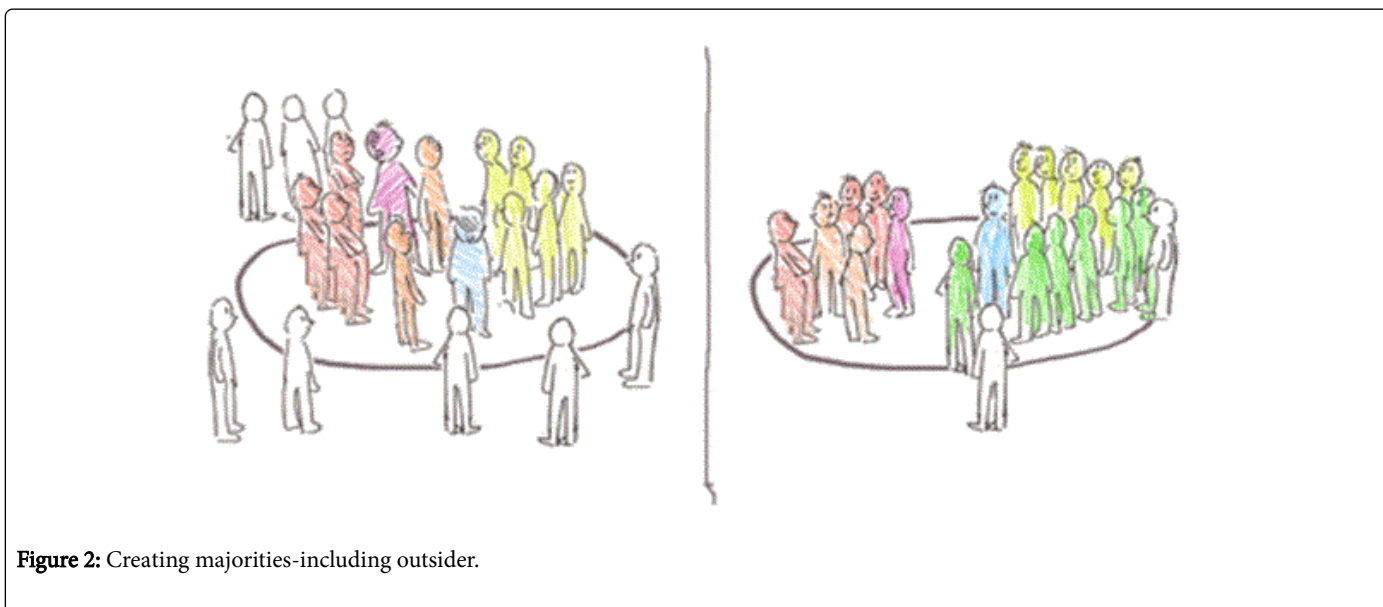

Figure 2: Creating majorities-including outsider.

New research specifies the mind-set of outsider [23]: they want to intervene indirectly as frequently as defender, but more rarely direct. In case the victim is a friend, they would comfort, get help from a teacher or intervene directly, while indirect intervention (comfort, get help) would be strongly preferred in case of the victim not being a friend. This might ground in self-estimated efficiency, because outsider do not perceive their intervening as efficient, as defender do. Even if outsider are blocked by personal distress [24] this might be tackled by getting involved through defender. Altogether the evidence points towards a better cross linking within the class to achieve an increased percentage of those, who participate in intervening: If defender and outsider do "consciously" collaborate and no matter, if through direct or indirect means, act synchronized, bullying can get choked. The majority of the class would act against bullying, if defender and outsider pool. However, direct and in special indirect intervention (comforting, getting help) also needs valuation by the teachers' consistent support and if necessary their direct action. Thus the class would be demonstrated competent model behaviour, which could strengthen the self-efficacy beliefs of outsider too.

Conclusion

Meta analyses confirm that interventions are most efficient if they come directly from within the class [25]. An interventional logic, which instead of competency training, is focused on resource activation within the class, creates and supports majorities and admits to social norms and rules, which clearly position bullying beyond the boundaries of acceptable behavior.

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