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Suicide and bullying in schools

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Abstract

Bullying is perhaps the most important ethical issue of the modern world. It always involves the same basic human emotions. Those who bully act as they do because, for example, they enjoy the feeling of power that they get from dominating others, and find it pleasurable to watch others suffering. Those who are bullied suffer, not simply because of the cruel treatment they receive, but perhaps, most especially, because they are either powerless to do anything about it, or unwilling to do what they could do about it, because they fear the possibility that it might just exacerbate their situation. And so they not only suffer, but feel trapped in suffering. This is common, whatever the nature of the bullying; of the bullies, of those who are bullied, and the place or places in which it goes on.

Bullying can ruin lives and it can end lives. In this paper I focus attention on suicide, the most drastic of ways in which bullied individuals may act in order to escape from the bullying to which they are subjected, and especially on suicide among young people who are bullied.

Key Words: Bullying, suicide, gestured suicide, cosmic roulette.

A few years ago my best friend and I were talking over the phone when he told me that he had recently seen someone who was in our class at school. He had not spoken to this man - let's call him "Ben", but said that he looked just the same as when we last saw him - still the same awkward appearance, still the same thick glasses, still the same strange walk. Just the same, though by then Ben, like us, was middle aged. When I asked whether he had introduced himself my friend - David, replied that he hadn't, since he doubted whether Ben would remember him. In any event, he argued, he wouldn't have known what to say, though he had wanted to speak, because he felt an urge to apologise for the bullying to which Ben had been subjected - the pushing and shoving, the name calling. It had made him feel embarrassed and guilty just to think of it.

As we talked we recalled other boys who were bullied in our school, including "Vincent", whose habit of ostentatiously sweeping back his greasy, Brylcremed hair set people on edge and led to an array of nasty nicknames and to physical as well as psychological harrassment. Then there was

“Donald”, the extremely bright only child of elderly and rather old fashioned parents, which might explain his odd haircut – very short but sticking up at the side, as if someone had taken a pair of sheep shears to him. Donald was shy, kept himself to himself, and tended to grunt rather than speak; and what’s more he grunted in an accent that was noticeably different from everyone else’s.

David did not feel embarrassed and guilty because the bullying that went on in our school had anything directly to do with him. He is too good a person for that, and was even as a teenager. However, although he was never part of the bullying that Ben and Vincent and Donald suffered, David felt embarrassed and guilty because it was equally true that he had never attempted to intervene to stop the bullies. Seeing Ben again had made him reflect on the fact that by failing to intervene, he shared the guilt of those who did the harrasing, the pushing, the name calling; those who rejoiced in the psychological cruelty they meted out. I warrant that most of us can recall occasions in our lives – whether during our school days or since, when by refraining from intervention, we contributed to the bullying experienced by someone we know or knew in the past.

Like David, I remember what happened to Ben, the man he had seen in the street, who looked just the same as he did during our school days. Like him, though I played no part in it, I did not attempt to intervene. Indeed, to some extent I share his feelings of guilt about having allowed Ben’s bullying to go unchallenged, even though at the time there was little that as an individual, I could have done to help. However, if I allow myself the luxury of doing so, I feel a certain smugness (satisfaction) about the fact that I was not only Donald’s friend but set out deliberately to become his friend, because I didn’t like the way some of my classmates treated him. (Donald, you will recall, was the shy guy with the strange haircut and the older parents, who grunted rather than spoke.) On the other hand, that smugness is to some extent tempered by memories of Vincent, who I disliked, partly because he seemed very conceited for no particular reason, and partly because he seemed not to care about the effects his annoying habits had on others. That is why, although like David, I never contributed to the bullying that Vincent experienced, I can recall having found some satisfaction in it at times. Thinking back now, it occurs to me that perhaps his bragging and uncaring attitude towards others was an attempt to establish his identity in the face of the bullies’ attempts to destroy it.

Though bullies are universally to be disapproved of, challenged and overthrown, not all victims of bullying are likeable people. Vincent wasn’t. Of course, the fact that someone is not likeable does not justify bullying her or him; and it does not justify non-intervention on the part of those who do not bully, but refrain from taking action to stop it. However, it is important to take account of it when we are trying to understand and put an end to at least

some bullying. I don't think, for example, that it is good enough for parents and teachers to simply tell children that they must try to get on together and in particular, that they must be nice to children who are being bullied. After all, they may have good reasons for not liking those children. Rather, if we are to put an end to bullying in schools, we need to help children and teenagers to understand that all people, whether we like them or find them attractive or not, should be respected and cared for, because that is what being a morally decent human being demands.

Moral education of this kind is difficult. It involves, for example, finding ways to help young people to develop skills in empathy, which is rather harder than inviting or even instructing them to be sympathetic towards others who are in trouble. It involves enabling them to develop the power of imaginative identification with others as well as helping them to develop good will and a caring attitude.

To return to the beginning and to Ben for a moment, given that physically he has changed little, I find it easy to imagine people making fun of him still, for example, in his work place – assuming he has a job – whether he is a civil servant or an academic; a doctor, a clerk or a shopkeeper. Bullying takes place everywhere, at all levels in social and professional life, and it always involves the same basic human emotions. Those who bully enjoy the feeling of power that they get from dominating others, and for some reason they find it pleasurable to watch others suffering. Those who are bullied suffer, not simply because of the cruel treatment they receive, but perhaps, most especially, because they are either powerless to do anything about it, or unwilling to do what they could do about it, because they fear the possibility that doing so might simply exacerbate their situation. And so they not only suffer, but feel trapped in suffering. This is common, whatever the nature of the bullying; of the bullies, of those who are bullied, and the place or places in which it goes on.

Sometimes, however, those who are bullied, feel so distressed by what is happening to them, that whatever their fears, they appeal to others for help. For example, if she is brave enough, someone who is bullied at work may take action aimed at putting an end to what is happening to her by complaining about, or taking out a grievance against those who are bullying her - or against her employer if she has drawn attention to her plight and nothing has been done to address it. Of course, this is difficult when her manager is the bully, and in some large organisations it will undoubtedly be difficult because those who are charged with dealing with matters such as bullying and harassment, may fail to act in impartial ways in investigating complaints, because they favour managers over other staff; in some they may even be complicit in the bullying that is going on. As a result, those who are bullied may look for ways out of the situation in which they are being bullied. For example, they may try to move to another job, and some bullying is

probably aimed at securing this result. Consider, for example, situations in which bullying managers set out deliberately to undercut an individual's confidence or to deprive them of opportunities for job satisfaction and development, and fail, systematically, both to communicate clearly about expectations, and to recognise effort or success.

Fear of simply making things worse if they complain to those in authority is experienced by many of those who are bullied. For example, school pupils who are bullied will often fail to ask for help, because they fear the dreadful consequences of doing so. Like people who are bullied in the workplace the simplest solution for such pupils, may be to find a new school if they are brave enough at least to share with their parents or guardians the fact that they are being bullied.

There is a more drastic way of getting out of a situation in which one is being bullied, though it involves getting away from a great deal more as well.

For many years the Pilkington family, including Francecca, who had learning disabilities, had been subjected to bullying and abusive behaviour by young people in their area.¹ The police seem to have been less supportive than they might have been and Mrs Pilkington was at the end of her tether. One evening in October 2007 she took Francecca for a drive, with their family pet – a rabbit. She drove for a few minutes before parking her car in a lay-by where it was hidden from the road by trees and bushes. In the car there was a ten litre can of petrol that she had filled earlier in the day and its back seat was piled high with clothes. At just after 11 o' clock that evening a lorry driver who had parked in same lay-by was awoken when Mrs Pilkington's car exploded with great violence, killing both her and her daughter. Their escape from bullying came at the expense of their lives.

Bullying, as a contributory factor in the suicides of young people, is common. For example, on 16 September this year Holly Grogan, a 15 yr old girl from an English public school who was said to have a "zest for life", died after jumping 30ft from a bridge into the path of oncoming traffic on a dual-carriageway.² Holly had been subjected to cyber-bullying via her Facebook page. And on October 20 2006, a 14 year old Polish girl killed herself after an incident in her school, when she was attacked by a group of boys in her class at her school in Gdansk.³ Domańska reports what happened:

A teacher leaves her classroom at Junior High School No. 2 in Gdańsk. Five boys surround Ania, a beautiful, shy girl. They pull her out from behind the desk and pull down her pants. Laughing and swearing, they grope her and pretend to rape her. The 20-minute incident is recorded on a mobile phone.

The next day Aniu used a skipping rope to hang herself in her home.

These two stories seem unequivocally to point to suicide caused by bullying, as does a case addressed in an article in the *Süddeutsch Zeitung* of 8-9, February, 1997, cited by Lösels and Bliesner, with the headline:

Driven to suicide: Youth gang subjects Hamburg school boy to extortion and threats.⁴

However, the part that bullying played in the decision by young people to end their lives is not always so easy to determine, as for example, in the case in Ireland, of Robert Brummer, who shot himself with a .22 rifle and left a note that referred to the "slagging off" he had received about his height seems less clear. As Byrne points out, Brummer's note also referred to the celebrated death by suicide of Kurt Cobain, the lead singer in the pop group Nirvana.⁵ And so it is equivocal whether the bullying to which Brummer had been subjected, or the desire to emulate a high profile rock star, had influenced his act more.

The fact that bullying is a contributing factor in the suicides of many school pupils has helped to draw the attention of the media to the ways in which this vilest of human activities devastates lives all over the world. Such attention has motivated campaigns to combat bullying in a number of countries, including Japan and Norway.⁶ In 1982 in Norway, the reporting by a newspaper of the suicides of three 10-14 year old boys, probably as the result of bullying by peers, set off a chain reaction which began with public unease and ended in a national campaign against bullying in schools, the following year.⁷

For the person who dies, suicide solves the problems they are having, though it does so by removing his ability to experience anything at all. Importantly, it also does so at the expense of pain to those he leaves behind, because suicide creates emotional and ethical ripples that affect everyone who knew the person who died, some of whom may suffer the adverse effects of closeness to his self inflicted death for many years, or even for ever. Suicide, for those who are left behind, is devastating. It is an assault on our ideas of what life should be about. Any suicide is upsetting, but when the person who dies is a student or school pupil, it is likely to strike us as particularly awful. The idea that a young person, with the whole of his life ahead of him, should choose to end it all, and that we were powerless to prevent him doing so, is shocking. The realisation that a young person has killed himself because he wishes to escape from bullying, is almost guaranteed to invoke the most negative of feelings - both against those who did the bullying and against those who did not prevent it, including oneself, if the dead individual was a relative or friend; a pupil or student.

If a pupil kills himself, does this mean that he wanted to die? It might. However, the fact that his death comes as the result of his own act, does not necessarily mean that he was a suicide. He might, for example, have intended no more than to gesture at suicide as a way of drawing the attention of others to his distress, whether to engage their sympathy and thus to enlist their support, or to punish them for some real or imagined offence. The idea that some people who act in apparently suicidal ways were not trying to kill themselves, but to change their lives, by changing the ways that others act towards them, is well accepted. There are two basic ways in which a person can achieve this end.

First, he might gesture at suicide – in the hope and expectation that if he does so, others will come to his aid in ways that they might not have done otherwise.^{8, 9} Like an actor in a one-man play, the gesturer stages, directs and performs in an enactment of his death. In the theatrical performances we call plays, actors intend to produce emotional reactions in the audience; in a suicide gesture, the suicide gesturer also intends, by his performance, to move and produce emotional reactions in others. The suicide gesturer does not ask for help, but demands it, and those who become aware of his actions do not, if they are decent people, have any choice about whether to help him.

Secondly, he might engage in the dangerous game of cosmic roulette, gambling with his lives with the intention neither of ending up dead, nor of living, but rather of letting either God or the cosmos decide what happens to him.^{10, 11} Those who act like this, are more likely to do so by taking pills, than they are by taking caustic poisons, or using firearms, or hanging themselves. The reason is plain to see; ingesting pills most often allows for a rescue to come about.

Where a person who wished to gesture at suicide and took steps intended to do so, dies, his death is not a suicide, but a self inflicted death by accident, which has resulted from a suicide gesture that went wrong. Examples of this would be a youngster who took an overdose of pills in her bedroom, expecting that she would be rescued, but who was not found until it was too late, or one who took what she thought was a safe quantity of pills, but actually exceeded the number needed to end her life. By contrast, it is important to realise that just because a person survives following actions that suggest that he might have intended to die, this does not necessarily mean that he lacked the serious intention to arrange his death. Even in a case where what he did was unlikely to bring death or even serious harm, death may have been his aim and his remaining alive may have resulted from ignorance of what was necessary, or a lack of resolve in carrying out the necessary actions, rather than from a lack in the will to kill himself; this might be the case, for example, where his attempt involves the infliction of injury through the use of sharp objects.

There is no doubt that some young people who end their lives, intended to do so, because life was so bad for them, that they came to a conscious decision that they would rather be dead. Among these will be some who wanted to die because they were being subjected to bullying that was so distressing that death seemed a welcome release. One such case might be that of a teenager who spun a coil of the copper wire that she used in making junk jewellery and, attaching it to a metal bracelet on her wrist, threw it over the 24,000 volt electric line at a nearby railway station, and died as the result of 75% burns.¹² However, some of those who die will not have acted as they did because they wanted to be dead, even though they have brought about their deaths through their own intentional acts. In other words, some of those who die as the result of an apparent attempt to escape bullying by killing themselves, might, tragically, have been attempting nothing of the kind.

Sometimes those who survive suicide attempts, or apparent suicide attempts, claim that they acted as they did because they wanted to “to die for a while” in order to escape some awfulness in their lives, or to attract attention to that awfulness. The idea of wanting to “die for a while”, however crazy it sounds, is often presented as an explanation for apparently suicidal actions, by the protagonists of such actions who survive. The fact that some people who take apparently suicidal actions do so with the intention, merely, of getting away from it all for a while, is one reason that I think we should talk about suicide both to pupils in schools, and to young people in universities. They need to know, as all of us do, that death is at the end of a one way street; that once you are there, there is no turning back. Another reason is that young people, like all of us, need to know that some demonstrations of upset, though they may be effective in drawing our distress to the attention of others, are also very dangerous if we wish to remain alive.

So, for example, everyone, including children, should know that paracetamol, innocuous though its familiarity might lead us to think of it as being, is actually a very effective way of consigning oneself to an early death, though possibly a prolonged and distressing one, because it does not kill directly, but damages the liver so that death comes slowly but surely. And everyone, including children, needs to know about the dangers of placing ligatures round ones’ neck, or of jumping into a canal in winter, or of drinking to excess on one’s own at times of deep distress, especially if one has in the past entertained suicidal ideas.

Finally, the fact that bullying has played a part in the suicidal deaths of growing numbers of young people in schools means that young people need to know both how serious the effects can be if they engage in bullying behaviour, and how important it is for them to act in relation to situations in which they are aware that others are bullying, or being bullied. Young people should be given opportunities to talk about suicide and the reasons that people might see it as an option, because it is likely that they will have

contact with friends for whom suicidal or apparently suicidal behaviour are a feature of life, at some point in their lives. The growth of web pages like Facebook and Bebo has had the dreadful result of encouraging online memorial sites for some young suiciders, almost as if the dead person was somehow benefitting from having killed him or herself, giving rise, at times, to the suspicion that such sites might influence some young people to act in suicidal or apparently suicidal ways..

Talking to young people about suicide is not something that we should shy away from because we are afraid of the possible consequences of doing so – “You can’t talk to them about that – you might put ideas in their heads.” My guess is that the opposite is true, that broaching this most challenging of topics in schools and universities could significantly reduce both the numbers of people who die by their own hands each year, and the amount of human heartache that is caused to those who survive the suicidal deaths of loved ones.

Gavin Fairbairn is a teacher and “jobbing philosopher” who is interested in storytelling; ethics; health and social care; mental health and disability, and in the relationship between reconciliation, truth, apology and forgiveness. Before becoming an academic he worked for many years as a practitioner in special education, social work and teacher education, and he is currently Running Stream Professor of Ethics and Language at Leeds Metropolitan University.

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