

Human Rights abuses: bullying from insults to torture

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Abstract

How does bullying work in a society that lacks moral values? I come from a society that is supposedly Christian, but in which those in power have at times acted in ways that are exactly opposite to Christian moral values - violating human rights, including the right to life. When the last coup d'état erupted in Argentina in 1976, no one could have imagined that simply expressing the desire to change 'the world' through social reform, could lead them into one of the most terrible forms of bullying: torture and murder. However, this happened and created deep harm into the Argentinean society, at all levels: both individual and collective; both psychological and physical.

People who wanted to make the world a better place were persecuted. Disappeared and imprisoned, they were bullied and subjected to torture, and often killed. Kidnappings began with insults, continued with torture plus insults, and in thousands of cases, ended in death. What is the psychology of these bullies and torturers? What makes a person go beyond their inner humanity, so that they are able to destroy others' lives, by bullying, torturing and killing some, and by removing loved ones from others?

In this paper, beginning with my own experiences as a small child, I will explore the bullying to which my people were subjected during years of military dictatorship, and the ways in which even now, those who are implicated in heinous acts, still manage, somehow, to avoid punishment for what they did.

Key Words: bullying, victimization, human rights violations, lack of moral values, power imbalance

1. Defining bullying

Many scholars agree that the basic concept of bullying is based on behaviour that uses power imbalance, like Edgar (2005) who states that bullying involves relationships that depend on a disproportion of power, and Farrington (1993) who referred to bullying as a constant psychological or physical coercion, from a powerful person over a less powerful one.

Research related to bullying comes mostly from the education field, such as incidents of school violence, social psychology, sociology, health, medicine and criminal justice.

In this paper I will focus mostly on the power that differentiates the bullies from their victims. Bullying may be: indirect (i.e. isolation, exclusion, non-inclusion)

or direct (open attacks). I will illustrate these definitions with some examples extracted from some interviews I have done for my PhD thesis research in reconciliation after a conflict. These are quotes from survivors of the last dictatorship we had in my home country, Argentina. All references are from Medina Bustos, 2009.

'I was pregnant, I was frightened that the AAA (Argentine Anticommunist Alliance) could look for me and shoot me dead with 40 bullets far away in a bridge, as they used to do with many of my friends. They started to machine-gun the front door, I run to the next room, but 60 of them entered, hooded 'encapuchados', and took my husband'.

Bustos Marta, 2007

'They kidnapped me at 3 am, 23 rd March 1976. I was at home, preparing to travel the next day. They took me directly to a metal mattress and started to torture me, in all my body, with a 'picana', until I fainted. They asked for names I never heard before, and they repeated at me: your family are all 'boleta' dead, and we cut one of your husband's legs'

Bustos, Mirta, 2009

'They hit me over my head with gun, there was blood everywhere, they called me 'Montonero'. They handcuffed me and threw me inside a car. I was thirsty, I wanted to drink water. I started to shout: I want water!. Ah, Do you want water? They said. And they took me to the 'submarino', inside a well, handcuffed in a ladder'.

Pedro, Miramonte, 2008

These three examples show clearly the abuse of power and bullying in all levels: from insults to torture.

2. What makes some people become 'evil'?

Staub (2003) defines 'evil' as "human destructiveness"², for example, small acts such as repressive parents, or peers harassing on a child daily for a long time or

great violence against others, like genocide. Those actions can destroy people's personality, dignity, self-image or the capability to trust people.

Perpetrators often justify their acts arguing that they were defending high values, that they have moral reasons to protect their communities. Those destructive actions, according to Staub (2003) such as in the case of genocide, are the outcome of basic ordinary psychological and social processes that leads to these extreme forms of expression. Hence, it is very important to understand the roots of those acts. Once perpetrators and people who support them are embedded in a group, trained in obedience to authority and indoctrinated in ideology, they resign their individual decision making to the group and its leaders. Their perception of the facts and its shared belief system changes to represent new realities. As a consequence, the group processes come to rule the psychology of the perpetrators. 'Obedience to authority' has been viewed as a significant determinant of the behaviour of perpetrators since the experiments done by Stanley Milgram (1965, 1974). Milgram conducted a study focusing on the conflict between obedience to authority and personal conscience. He examined the justifications for acts of genocide that were given by those accused at the World War II, Nuremberg War Crimes trials. Their defence often was based on 'obedience', in that they were just obeying orders under the authority of their superiors. The experiment began in July 1961, a year after the trial of Adolf Eichmann in Jerusalem. Individuals were recruited to take part in a psychological experiment investigating memory and learning through the use of punishment at Linsly-Chittenden Hall- a Yale University laboratory. Milgram set up the experiment to answer the question 'Could it be that Eichmann, and his million accomplices in the Holocaust were just following orders?' He discussed the findings of his study in his book *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974). As described by Zimbardo (2007), the task of that experiment was that one of the subjects was going to be the 'teacher' who gives the 'learner' a set of two word pairs to memorize. During the test, the 'teacher' gives a key word and the 'learner' responds. When the 'learner' responds correctly, the 'teacher' gives a verbal incentive, like 'good' or 'that's right', but when the 'learners' respond incorrectly, the 'teacher' pressed a lever on an impressive-looking shock machine that they were told would administer an immediate shock to punish the error, and which was increased for each mistake. Every time the 'learner' made a mistake, the 'teacher' had to press the next higher voltage switch. In Milgram's experiment, two of every three (65 percent) of the volunteers obeyed orders to punish the 'learner', until the maximum shock level of 450 volts, said to be 'dangerous' was administered.

Milgram summarized his findings in relation to the main experiment in 'The Perils of Obedience' (1974)³:

Stark authority was pitted against the subjects' strongest moral imperatives against hurting others, and, with the subjects' ears ringing with the screams of the victims, authority won more often than not. The extreme willingness of adults to go to almost any

lengths on the command of an authority constitutes the chief finding of the study and the fact most urgently demanding explanation.

It is also suggested that the individuals in Milgram's experiment, for example, have an 'authoritarian personality', in spite of this, Staub (2003) concurs that most people under particular circumstances have the capacity for extreme violence and the destruction of human life.

Many of the perpetrators are and were not forced or obliged to obey authorities, yet they join leaders or decision makers because they share a cultural-societal inclination to identify with that group; the effect being to exclude the victims from their moral universe. Perpetrators of violence identified certain individuals or groups as being outside the sphere of humanity, becoming 'less than human' and tainted. This dehumanisation occurs when some human beings consider other human beings to be excluded from the moral order of being human persons. Morality is our conception of how as humans, we ought to behave. In every society we have moral rules and main beliefs which set good and prohibited actions. However, good and evil are not only opposed in what we conceive as right or wrong, but also in the feelings (affection, empathy, anger, hostility, for instance) that motivates us to act in certain ways. Dehumanisation is a central process in prejudice, racism and discrimination. Thus, not responding to the human qualities of other persons facilitates inhuman actions. This, in the extreme, permits people to commit mass killing.

3. Identity and Ideology

There are three types of identities discussed by Staub (2003). *Personal, social identities*, or the level to which individual identity is embedded or connected to the group and third, *group self-concepts*, or the social way people recognize and experience their group. It is important to highlight a group's culture and the social and political institutions that articulate and shape that culture. Culture shapes individual identities; and those identities which distinguish individuals, are the ones which preserve that culture. The way people situate themselves and others as members of groups and how also they tend to value themselves and others by comparison between them and the other groups is the principal focal point of social identity theory. The content of social identities is defined by the culture, for example, we say: 'We' are intelligent, hard working, or brave to fight for our rights or maintaining important values. In contrast 'we' also hold the view that 'they' are weak, immoral, bad and dangerous. The content of social identity is what Staub (2003) referred as *group self concept*.

Our individual identity forms part also of our social identity, which comes firstly from our family and then can be extended to our nation. In difficult times, people tend to identify themselves with a particular group, and this social identity is perceived in a positive light. It can also provide a sense of security, connection and control. But, if another group can be viewed as responsible for problems, violence,

chaos, and seen as the root of the negative side of what is happening then, neither I nor my group is to blame and 'we' are justified in acting.

In the genocidal process, identities play an essential role. Ideologies are created or adopted in difficult times, such as those that occurred in Argentina, when the military created an orthodox, rigid ideology to give order to a chaotic society. They promised people a better life. The military legitimised their ideologies and justified their actions saying that they do it for the well-being of the country. The ideology defines the group and provides the group with a social identity, by participating and being enhanced in the group, its individual members feel important. The goals of the group become the goals and thus the motivation for its members. Consequently as that ideology emerges it is easier to see the other group is seen as an enemy, the cause of problems, turning into the object of aggression.

In the next section, I will explain further how the difficult conditions lead those military groups and people who supported them, to act in a harmful, violent way, towards the group they considered as their 'enemy'.

4. Bullying, Conflict and Power

When a society is facing difficult conditions, like economical problems or political violence and social disorder, all those factors can cause violence to arise between groups. In Argentina, for instance, there were certain social and economical conditions, such as brutal inflation, social violence, repression, political instability, which preceded the disappearances, kidnapping and torture of about 30,000 people during the last dictatorship. A large group of young people wanted to bring a social reform, to improve the rights, opportunities and dignity for the less privileged ones or minority groups. Montoneros was one of those groups, and it later became one of the military targets to be eliminated with all the others who held different political ideas from those in power or who just wanted to improve the conditions of poor people.

The social chaos and disorganization was extremely high. The right-wing death squads lead by the AAA (Argentinean Anticomunist Alliance), were killing people whom they identified as their enemies; in other words, the people who were seeking social justice. The frustration, impotence, anger and desperation lead the major part of the Argentinean society to ask for order. However, according to Romero (2002) when the military took power, far from bringing peace and stability they brought violence, in the name of what they called a 'Process of National Reorganization'. They designated General Videla as the president of the nation and he commanding the country until 1978. The military sought to create an orthodox culture based on simple patriotic values, family and Christianity in a rigid way. The adopted a 'nationalistic' ideology offering to the society a reality and promising a better future, devaluing the 'enemy' and excluding them from their moral realm. The military identified anyone not subscribing to these 'principles' as 'subversives' and thus legitimated their maltreatment at all levels.

5. Conclusion

Bullying is the tactic used to intimidate others into submission. It starts with words and can easily end up with murder. All it needs is for one group to identify itself as morally superior and thus designate other groups as inferior. With the assumption of power, a moral basis for action and strong in-group identification, strongly led, people may abdicate their own personal responsibility and surrender their power to the group. In doing so they are willing to do bad things for the supposed greater good of the group, which they justify by lowering the humanity and rights of those who 'oppose' them. The only way to prevent this is for every individual to be prepared to stand upon their own moral code and authority and refuse to act against others without good and personal cause. It requires courage and strength. We have seen how important is then the way we value ourselves and others, how our individual and social identities are shaped by our societies and culture. We can all develop an awareness of our common humanity with other people, creating positive relations, developing joint projects, promoting caring people and societies.

Notes

¹ Electrical proud used in Argentina during the last dictatorship, to torture people.

² Staub, E., *The Psychology of good and Evil. Why children, Adults, and Groups help and harm others*, Cambridge University Press, New York, 2003, p.5.

³ <http://home.swbell.net/revscat/perilsOfObedience.html> (accessed 13th October 2009)

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