

Bullying: Japanese Style

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Introduction

This paper will examine bullying in Japanese schools. After some preliminary considerations about the history and prevalence of bullying in schools in Japan, I will consider the following three points: cultural factors, psychological factors, and government policy.

Preliminary Considerations

In this section I will look at two points: a brief historical overview of bullying in Japan and several important court cases.

1. History

Yoji Morita (1999) provides a capsule view of the early history of bullying in Japan.

1970-80 Emphasis was on school violence and how to prevent it. Intervention programs to prevent physical violence were implemented. However, there were teachers who already at this time pointed out that there was also “yowaimono no ijime” (bullying of the weak). This was already a common phenomenon in Japanese society, but these teachers warned that the current phenomenon was different because of the duration and cunning involved. Their voices were not heard, but school violence began to ebb because of the new programs.

1980-90 The media began to focus on bullying because of the suicides of 7 pupils in 1984 and 9 in 1985 all of which were due to bullying. Both the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Justice issued directives about the problem. In 1987 the Ministry of Education reported in its “Annual fact-find on problem behaviour in school” that the occurrence of bullying in schools had decreased greatly over two years: 150,000 in 1985, 50,000 in 1986, and 35,000 in 1987.

1990-2000 In 1994 the Ministry of Education conducted a survey of 9420 schools on bullying (Ministry of Education, 1994). A few points relevant to this paper are the following. Verbal and indirect (e.g. exclusion from group, ignoring, etc.) bullying were much more frequent than physical bullying, especially among girls. The bullying done by more than one aggressor was almost 75%. Almost 50% of the victims described their aggressors as close or ordinary friends. In response to the bullying, while 40% told their aggressors to stop, 30% reported just keeping quiet and letting the bullies do

what they wished. This, of course, guarantees a continuation of the bullying (Banzai, 1995). Furthermore, this tendency increased with the age of the children involved. Likewise, the number of aggressors who felt remorse for bullying tended to decrease with age while the number enjoying it tended to increase. Younger children failed to report bullying to their teachers because of fear of retaliation and doubt that the teachers could solve the problem, while older students failed to do so because they thought the problem was their own. Of the fellow students who witnessed bullying almost 50% said they wanted to avoid any involvement which would, of course, include helping the victim. Of those parents who knew their child was being bullied and did not report it to teachers over 50% gave as their reason that bullying is not a problem serious enough to bring to the attention of teachers, an attitude common to parents around the world (Thomas, 2008).

Bullying made a resurgence again in the mid '90's with ten cases of suicide from bullying reported in 1995 along with 57,000 cases of bullying reported in the schools. The Ministry of Education organized new conferences and committees to deal with the problem and increased the number of counselors in schools. In 1995, the Ministry of Education placed one school counselor in each public junior high school, where problems associated with school refusal syndrome and bullying were most severe. This was the first national level counseling and psychotherapy service in Japan. By the year 2000, 2,250 junior high schools employed at least one certified clinical psychologist on a part-time basis (Iwakabe, 2008).

In 1996 the Ministry of Education hosted in Tokyo and Osaka an international symposium on bullying in cooperation with the National Institute for Educational Research. Speculation on the causes of bullying ranged from "examination hell" to hoisting the national flag.

Current data on bullying published after Morita's research is as follows. Recent statistics (July 2009) for bullying in Japan showed that of the more than 40,000 schools surveyed 47% reported knowledge of bullying at the school. The number of bullying incidents reported was a little over 100,000 meaning an average of 2.5 per school. (e-Stat, 2009)

2. Court Cases

Two important court cases called national attention to the bullying problem (Morita, 1999). The first court case in which bullying in the form of mental harassment was recognized as a cause of suicide occurred in December of 1986 when a 13 year old boy committed suicide. He left a note saying he could not bear the mental and physical

bullying any longer. The mental bullying included a mock funeral for him carried out in class in which even some of the teachers participated. The first court to rule on the case, the Tokyo District Court, recognized only the physical violence of the aggressors. However, the parents were not satisfied and appealed the decision to the Tokyo High Court which overturned the previous ruling, recognized mental bullying as a cause of the suicide, and ordered the parents to pay damages.

A second well-known case called attention to a specifically Japanese aspect of bullying, the power of the group. In November of 1994 a 13 year old boy committed suicide in Aichi Prefecture. In a suicide note he said that the group of “friends” he ran with had assaulted and threatened him many times and extorted over \$8000 dollars from him over a two-year period. The victim had been warned by his father to leave the group, but rejected the advice and tried to act as if there were no problem. The other members of the group put up a façade of friendly horseplay to deceive teachers. In later instances of bullying which led to death it would be pointed out that many young Japanese do not know how to draw the line between playfulness and violence (Naito, 2007)

Cultural Factors

In this section I will review some factors which seem to be culturally specific to Japanese bullying, namely: feminine nuance, family influence, randomness, and group pressure.

1. Feminine Nuance

Perhaps one of the big differences with other countries and cultures is that in Japan bullying is not viewed as a “macho” boy’s thing (Morita, 2001; Morita, 1999, Taki, 1992). The word used for bullying in Japan is “ijime” which refers more to feminine attitudes and behaviors and is identified more with cowardice than with macho (bull). And, in fact, Japanese women use this word rather freely to describe women’s interactions among themselves. Reflecting this difference the Ministry of Education uses a separate category for violent behavior. The act of boys extorting money by physically hitting a boy would not usually be called ijime In Japan bullying is often an invisible phenomenon against the weak and is more prevalent among girls in the form of ignoring or exclusion than is found in other countries... Likewise, victims and bullies are more often in the same class in Japan while in other countries the pattern is more frequently older children bullying younger ones. That may be why

exclusion and ignoring are frequent in Japan; it is easier if the children are in the same class or club activity.

2. Family Influence

Another strong cultural factor is the change in family life in Japan. Komori, Miyazato, and Orii (1991) have pointed this out.

“The increased number of children in need of psychological help could be explained from a sociocultural viewpoint. The enormous Japanese economic growth has required an increase in the labor population and, at the same time, the number of nuclear families has increased. The number of workaholic husbands and double-income families has also increased while the number of children per family has decreased. These changes certainly have led to the fragility of the Japanese family in both urban and rural populations” (p. 24)

Coupled with this new and fragile family configuration, in many ways weaker and less supportive of children than the previous generation of extended family with parents who had more time for their children and had more children, is the added burden of the Japanese educational system. The system has been criticized by many Japanese psychologists as being too uniform and rigid, with extreme pressure demanding conformity, and too narrowly focused on academic success (Kawanishi, 2009). All of which leads to an attempt to produce “good boys and girls” at the expense of fostering individuality. Children are valued only if they succeed academically. (Kameguchi & Murphy-Shigematsu, 2001).

3. Randomness

Okuhisa (1996), comparing contemporary bullying in Japan with previous periods in Japanese history, makes the interesting observation that one difference is that in previous times bullies had some kind of subjective determination and reason behind their acts, whereas now that does not seem to be the case. Indeed, there seems to be no clear direction or determination in many of the bullying cases in Japan.

4. Group Pressure

A fourth Japanese cultural characteristic is the large number of bullying cases which involve groups. While the simplistic division of East and West into individualistic and group-oriented societies has been confused by globalization, nevertheless, bullying by groups seems to be a characteristic of Japan. Many victims

continue to remain in their group and be bullied rather than endure isolation. Morita (1985, 1999) emphasized this aspect when he included purposely in his own definition of bullying the terms “group-interaction process”, and “inside a group”.

Psychological Factors

In this section I will look at several psychological factors which are either peculiar to Japanese people or are more prevalent in Japan than in other countries. This will include Japanese therapeutic interventions in general and in particular for bullying.

1. Japanese Characteristics

IBASHO. An unusual concept in Japanese psychology is that of “ibasho” (one’s psychological place). Norisada (2008) has divided it into four factors: sense of authenticity, sense of role, sense of perceived acceptance, sense of relief. A finding that might be related to bullying is that sense of authenticity and relief increases steadily from junior high to university in males but decreases for females. This may account for the high number of girls involved in bullying incidents in Japan, and why exclusion is such a potent form of bullying in Japan. Being victimized in this way can often lead to suicidal thoughts (Rigby (2001).

KIRERU/MUKATSUKI Psychoanalysts in Japan have pointed out that many young Japanese grow up with a narcissistic outlook on life which is often shattered in school because of not living up to expectations of parents or not getting the best grades (Kawanishi, 2009; Morita, 1999, 2001). As a result of this frustration they often experience “kireru or mukatsuki” (flying off the handle all of a sudden) which often issues in “ijime” Such irritation comes from children who have no time for freedom and spontaneity (Kobayashi, 1995). This theory fits well with the critique of the Japanese educational system described above.

AMAE Another well-known characteristic, often seen as unique to the Japanese, is that of “amae” (dependence). This became known throughout the world due to the popularity of the English translation of a book written by the psychiatrist Takeo Doi, who first articulated the concept in Japan (Doi, 1973) He defined it as the desire to be passively loved, especially by the mother, and the unwillingness to cope with the objective real world. This is an important factor in the parent-child

relationship in Japan since, for all practical purposes, the mother assumes the burden of child-rearing. Father-absence in child-rearing may account for some bullying since the father is usually the one who introduces the child to the hard facts of the real world, a world that Japanese bullies shun.

Kosawa further developed the idea of dependence (Iwakabe, 2008). He proposed that Japanese neurosis comes from trying to repress this need for dependency on the mother because of disbelief in the mother's endless love. The resolution lies in responding with limitless maternal affection. In incidents of Japanese bullying mothers feel a tremendous amount of guilt. In the psychological atmosphere just described that is easy to understand.

It should be pointed out that *amae* is different from adolescent depression, another possible psychological factor in bullying, but one that does not seem to be different in Japan than in other countries (Laser, Luster, & Oshio, 2007)

The characteristic of *amae* may explain why Japanese are so often passive in the face of bullying. Smith, Shu, and Madsen (2001) have argued that:

“many children experience some teasing and harassment in their early school years, but that continued harassment is likely only with those who fail to cope in satisfactory ways and get into a reinforcing cycle of poor coping, low self-esteem, lack of protective friendships, and vulnerability to further bullying.”
(p. 332)

2. Japanese Style Psychotherapeutic Interventions

Several Japanese counselors have found an empowerment model of counseling useful in helping victims of bullying (Suzuki, 2008). This model's approach to empowerment employs 4 stages: strength perspective, education, encouragement, and collaboration. The model forms a pyramid starting from the strength perspective and peaking in collaboration. The first step consists in bringing out the strengths and resources of the client rather than focus on weaknesses and problems. The next step is to see the problem objectively, learn about it, and change the way one looks at it. Step three is where the counselor encourages the clients to face whatever fears they may have, acknowledge the difficulties and even possibility of failure, yet be willing to move forward. It is only in the last step that the counselor forms a partnership with the client in moving to solve the problem.

Suzuki provides five actual case examples. In a chart summarizing the interventions in each category for each client she gives examples of how she did each step. For example, in case one for an intervention she made in the category of

strengths, she noted that although the student had not been able to make friends in middle or high school, nevertheless he had continued in school. In step two for education she attempted to change the fixed idea that one should not fight back. In the third step of encouragement she recommended verbal retorts as a way of fighting back. And for the fourth step of cooperation she talked over making time alone while in school.

In an extensive review of the literature on social support in Japanese schools Mizuno and Ishikuma (2004) concluded that counselors should make great efforts to establish peer support systems for children, especially the older ones.

Tanaka (2007) reports on a case of grief counseling used for the parents of a high school student who was beaten to death by a group of his fellow students in a park two months after he entered the school. The school maintained contact with the parents for four years, the time the student would have graduated. The homeroom teacher began exchanging letters with the parents and sent them notices of school events and photos of student activities at their request. Finally, through negotiations with the principal and the local board of education, the parents were given a graduate diploma without any serial number.

Onishi (2007) in a study of 490 students in four schools found that students in classes which reported they were less likely to bully had stronger norms against such behavior. He suggests that sharing values against bullying and abuse in the classroom can be effective ways of decreasing bullying.

Komori, Miyazato, and Orii (1991) describe a technique for helping troubled children which centers on the mother recording family conversation as if it were a scenario and then reviewing it with child and therapist in the next session pointing out positive emotions and pleasure of the child. This is typical of Japanese type of interventions which tend to de-emphasize direct verbal interactions with the therapist. Sandplay techniques are also popular in Japan because, as Iwakabe (2008) points out, many Japanese are not comfortable discussing personal problems or expressing their feelings directly to a counselor/therapist. In Japanese culture it was traditionally thought to be more virtuous to keep one's thoughts and feelings to one's self. Likewise, indirect and nonverbal techniques are thought to foster a more intuitive relationship.

Government Policy

In this section I will explain the measures that the Japanese Ministry of Education and other government agencies have taken concerning this problem. This includes setting up regional trauma centers designed to aid schools in the event of

bullying-related suicides as well as providing for third party investigation into school suicides to determine if they were caused by bullying or not (The Daily Yomiuri, 2009). The Ministry has also established a nationwide hotline for consultation on this problem. It has continued to give directives to school administrators and teachers about how to prevent bullying and deal with it after it has occurred.

The Ministry of Education defined bullying in 1994 in the following way.

Regardless of the place, whether it be at school or elsewhere, bullying occurs when one child continuously attacks a weaker child physically or psychologically to the point that the one attacked feels intense pain. (Forgot Memory, 2009)

In 2007 the Ministry of Education compiled a long list of examples of how various schools had been dealing with the problem of ijime (Ijime, 2007) Some of these included for example the following. Every day a different teacher or staff member would observe carefully the students as they came and left school. Other schools used a team approach consisting of counselor, homeroom teacher and so on to deal with problems of ijime. Still others began to ask students to write a diary each day of their activities and thoughts/feelings. Others concentrated on teaching all students social skills. Others established peer friend groups of students who had experienced ijime. Another school distributed to all students a “rights card” to heighten their awareness of individual rights, especially in the face of ijime. Olweus (2001) has suggested a similar stance. One school proposed a zero tolerance approach to its teachers: not to permit even the smallest incident of bullying. By placing these and other examples online the Ministry hopes to provide a variety of methods which can be adopted by each school and adapted to its situation.

Conclusion

Some aspects of bullying which seem to be peculiar to the Japanese are the following:

1. Feminine color to both the language and methods used for bullying.
2. Strength of peer pressure which keeps victims in groups in which they are being bullied.
3. Psychological background of dependence and “entitlement” of young people.
4. School system that creates frustrations in students who are academically challenged and creates robotic yes-men in academic achievers.
5. A father-absent family system that lacks necessary discipline.

How Japan will cope with bullying in the future remains to be seen.

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