

Bullying – root and branch of oppression

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Abstract

In this paper I begin by talking about bullying from a personal perspective. I am not a human rights lawyer. I don't need to be. I know when my rights have been impugned. I know how I feel: fearful, angry, frightened, aggressive, torn, undermined and belittled. Sometimes one of these feelings will be in the ascendant; but often what I feel is an amalgam of everything that I cannot resolve. I just feel sick, undermined, passively seething. Sometimes I even wonder if I long to kill or be killed. Usually it starts with words - syllabic razor shards of malice, hatred or the lethal poison of indifference, but it becomes easier to understand and deal with when I am openly attacked. Then I can see my 'enemy'; I can plan my counter attack and my defence. But what do I do when it's 'just' words? I was taught that 'words can never hurt me' but what lies we tell our children! Words were ever the attack I never saw coming, the stealth bombers that flew in under the radar and tripped the wires of my undermining. How many times did well-meaning teachers and solicitous parents explain that, 'you can only be bullied if you are afraid. It's your fault if you allow people to bully you', or alternatively that, 'Bullies are just cowards, who were probably bullied themselves.'

Bullying is a near universal phenomenon; we all bully and are bullied. I will explore some truths about the human condition, the nature of self and groups; about manipulation and seduction; about power and its abuse. I will touch on Allport's seminal work 'The nature of prejudice' and especially on his 'scale of discrimination', which suggests that words underpin and enable all forms of discrimination, from playground bullying to murder and genocide.

Key Words:

Allport, bullying, discrimination, genocide, harassment, oppression, power, prejudice.

1. Introduction

In this paper I will propose that the term 'bullying' although very widely construed and near universal in its experience and understanding, is

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actually what I will call the ‘root and branch’ of oppression. It is the agency of that conscious misuse of power that intimidates and victimizes. It is the unconsciously, almost randomly wielded tool that haphazardly feeds the socially inadequate person’s will to power, that defends them from the anxiety of overwhelming chaos and justifies their prejudice, enabling them to cope by living irresponsibly, building a world of false security and meaning. The term bullying is often conflated with harassment, especially in the modern context of examining and dealing with inappropriate behaviour at work, but whatever we call it, bullying results in the oppression of others. I am not going to concern myself in this paper with the effects upon the bullying person’s own psyche, but will concentrate on exploring the problems the phenomenon creates in the world for individuals, groups and whole societies.

Definitions for bullying vary and tend to be contextualised to the focus of the particular article or research under consideration. A semi-random search for ‘definitions’ revealed some variations in emphasis, but strongly linked themes. The comments I make are intended to link with later observations in the main text.

Wording	Source	Comment
‘the act of intimidating a weaker person to make them do something’	http://wordnetweb.princeton.edu/perl/webwn?s=bullying accessed 04/10/09	Intimidation may or may not be to make someone do something – it could be purely for self-gratification of the bully.
‘can encompass a wide variety of actions but generally includes behaviour that is intended to extend one's power over someone else...’	www.acadiau.ca/president/equity/glossary.htm accessed 04/10/09	Bullying may involve the exercise of legitimate and/or illegitimate power over others, but always in an illegitimate way. I am unsure about the extent to which we can always say it is ‘intended’ though.
‘The purpose of bullying is to hide inadequacy.’ ‘Bullies project their inadequacy on to others:’ ‘to avoid accepting responsibility for their behaviour and	http://www.bullyonline.org/workbully/bully.htm accessed 04/10/09	Bullying stems from character development issues and projects the bully’s internal chaos into the world. Prejudice is a ‘vehicle’ – oppression of others the result. ‘Purpose’ as expressed

<p>the effect it has on others’ ‘to reduce their fear...’ ‘bullies have low self-confidence and low self-esteem, and thus feel insecure. Low self-esteem is a factor highlighted by all studies of bullying.’ ‘Bullies are seething with resentment, bitterness, hatred and anger, and often have wide-ranging prejudices as a vehicle for dumping their anger onto others.’</p>		<p>here may not be a fully-conscious purpose, but a sub-conscious, semi-automatic, unquestioning response to perceived threat or generalised ‘hatred’ or ‘anger’.</p>
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2. Some personal experience – just two incidents

I heard he was looking for me. SL the 5th year school bully was out to get me. This was the Grammar School equivalent of a ‘contract on my life’. I was 3rd year. I’d seen it happen to others, but I’d imagined I was immune, managing my days and relationships so as not to offend anyone; being nice to everyone was my nature I reasoned, so why would anyone think ill of me. How could anyone but an idiot imagine that I would be so crass and stupid – or have such a death wish – as to be the one who’d turned SL’s desk over, scattering his books and things all over the classroom floor. Why would he think it was me? Instantly, I became hyper-vigilant. I didn’t know that was what I’d become, but that’s what it is, to suddenly realize you are a victim in waiting; prey for the great hunter. Waiting for your doom. Wondering now, for the first time, seriously, whether to access the wisdom deep in the autonomic brain to make fight or flight my strategy. Should I be proactive, go to him and explain it was not me? Words were ever my strongest suite. Surely they would defend me and reason would win out? Or should I hide? Would he forget in a few hours, days - if I laid low and kept out of his way?

But it was too late. He found me. Top of the stairs on the landing: new block - near humanities, ironically. Thirty-eight years later I can see it so clearly; well, up to a point I can. He just started shouting and swearing at me

and I recall shouting back, protesting my innocence; hating his unreasoning stance. But then he started poking me with a finger in my chest. I exploded. I lost all sense of restraint and I rained blows to his head and body, despite him being nearly twice my size. He reeled back to the edge of the stairs and I don't know what happened next as I was completely out of control. Reports from amazed onlookers, who'd gleefully been shouting 'Fight! Fight!' say that I punched, pushed or kicked him down the stairs to the half-landing. I cannot remember. I cannot remember how I left the scene or what I did next. Or how I got home. Or what I said to anyone. Or why I was never arrested, come to that.

I never saw SL again, but as he was due to leave school I never gave it another thought. I never had any problem with being bullied at school thereafter either, but that might be because others knew something I didn't. Years later I learned that SL's arm was fractured, his jaw broken in two places and two teeth were knocked out. I do not want to believe that I could harm another human being like this, whatever the provocation. But I am both humbled and deeply troubled to know that I can. And the most awful thing is, I still cannot work out whether he 'deserved' it or not. But that's one of the problems with bullying – no one can predict the consequences and no one can be sure what was right, or even exactly what happened. We've both lived silently with this unknown violation since then.

It happened again though. Six years after this, I was in basic training for the Police and I'd endured ten weeks of bullying by the instructors, based on my 'BBC' accent. For them, bluff Yorkshiremen, I just 'spoke too posh' to be a real officer and they tore into me at every opportunity. I thought I was in control, but then one night, the worst of the two was walking back late at night from the mess, when I was on security patrol. It was a pitch November night, wet and cold. I melted into the darkness by the bins and my gloved hand closed on a glass bottle. For one moment it would have been sweet to have smashed that bottle into his smug, jeering face asking in my best accent if that was 'top hole' enough for him... Of course, I am glad I didn't; but I was stunned for a time to realize that I was capable of such a response at all. Do bullies have the faintest idea what they are doing – and risking? My apparent lack of macho response to them had deeper effects on me as well though. I had no role models to balance the perspective that I had been inculcated with, that it was a dirty dark world out there and I'd better get the baddies before they got me. Being a bully was recommended. Welcome to 1977 police training. It nearly worked.

3. Bullying and harassment – interpretation and technicalities.

I have no idea whether my response to perceived bullying was typical or not. We hear more often of the victims who take one of the two polarity responses to dominance: that is, they resist, usually by attacking their bully-tormentor, often with serious or fatal consequences, or they fall into total withdrawal by suicide. The former response is most often reported as the ‘husband-killing wife’, who transpires to be the victim of a life, or death, of a thousand cuts; someone who has been abused for years and who snaps over a final insult. I can relate to that. The latter response was most recently highlighted in the news by the tragic deaths of Fiona and Francesca Pilkington, immolated due to repeated low-level bullying over years. But whether the result of bullying dominance is to attack, to acquiesce with the oppressor by self-abnegation or to self-destroy, the outcome is violent, denying of human rights and dignity and harmful to wider society. Yet ‘society’ acknowledges bullying with such ambivalence and confusion it is hard to see how it can ever change. It is railed against, but it is systemic.

It is fine and understandable for the indignant outpourings of the moral majority to flow freely on the subject of how the police and council authorities failed and how poor parenting led to feral children roaming the streets, but are we all prepared to look into our own lives to see how we all perpetuate the behaviours that underpin the phenomenon of bullying? Will we look at how we all, with few exceptions, need to own and control that demon aspect of the human psyche, which seeks to dominate, control and use others at all levels? For that demon is fed by the ontological anxiety of existence itself. It is subtle, complex and all pervasive, as expressed by Johnston (1993:263)

We know that the demon of anxiety is one of the most insidious monsters in the modern psyche. Apart from conscious anxiety about yesterday and tomorrow, there is that unconscious anxiety, which can become compulsive, driving people to alcohol, to drugs, to inordinate sex, to compulsive craving for power and even to self-destruction. It can drive people to exploit others, not from hatred, but from a desire to prove themselves and allay their inner fears.

In this statement, I’d contend only Johnston’s reference to the ‘modern’ psyche; anxiety and its concomitant tendency towards bullying behaviour is recorded throughout human history. It was an aspect of the comprehensive examination in Allport’s seminal 1954 study ‘The Nature of Prejudice,’ that I will refer to in more detail later, and it appears in aspects of modern systems theory. For instance, Beerel (2006) observes that:

Change threatens survival and hence systems (people) resist. This resistance can take many forms. Often, fear and insecurity within the system provides the seedbed for unethical behavior. Calm, well-balanced systems usually experience less insecurity and fear and thus are less likely to develop a culture that encourages misconduct. Misconduct is invariably a sign of distress.

It is clear that bullying can be seen as an aspect of ‘misconduct,’ but can and should we conclude that bullying is a sign of distress? It is the usual outcome of it for sure, but ‘a sign?’ It is certainly an indicator of systemic stress; Beerel (op.cit) expounds this theme in the context of work systems:

Systems import all kinds of elements from the other systems of which they are part. For example if the larger system is feeling insecure and experiencing fear, the sub-systems will import these emotions into their environments and they will be insecure and fearful too. If the larger system is at war, the sub-systems will become warlike too. If the company as a whole behaves as a corporate bully, its divisions and departments will also mirror this kind of behavior.

Johnston, Allport and Beerel are relating in different ways to destructive, exploitative behaviours that are inevitable in the context of the systems we belong to and our individual, group and corporate natural responses to the anxiety of life circumstances. They imply that it is our internal perceptions of self, risk, insecurity and danger in the environment that leads to ‘misconduct’ and potentially to bullying. We are distressed and we leak our distress onto others, seeking control over others to falsely assure ourselves that we are in control of something.

There are many competing and complementary psychological theories to explain the root drives for bullying behaviour. However, understanding the genesis of a phenomenon does not lead automatically to its recognition and to dealing with it in the world, especially as those behaviours are very diverse in their delivery and in their reception. It is vital to remember that bullying may or may not be intentional; it is the reception of the behaviour in terms of its effect that is the principal determining factor. In making this statement I am following the principle enshrined in the European Equal Treatment directive, which introduced the concept of Harassment in the Workplace¹ to the Community on 9 February 1976 (Council Directive 76/207/EEC and Council Directive 2002/73/EC) and which I believe to be a useful model for understanding and thus beginning to address bullying and

the abuse of power in the workplace at least. Article 2(2) (as revised and specifically related to sexual harassment) defines harassment as "...unwanted conduct... with the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of a person, and of creating an intimidating, hostile, degrading, humiliating or offensive environment." If we accept this principle, I contend that we have a basis for understanding that bullying is essentially analogous to harassment. As such, it is unwanted conduct that has the purpose or effect of violating the dignity of another, negatively affecting the environment. Both harassment and 'bullying' need to reach a certain threshold that may be evidenced in terms of behaviour that can be observed and thus described, to become actionable. The vast majority of this evidence will be in terms of the interplay between words and gestures, much of which is ambivalent.

It is really important to note that it is not necessary for the 'violation' to intend to harass or bully, as it is the effect of their actions that is the determining factor. We frequently find examples of bullying behaviour that has not been perceived as such by the perpetrators and yet has had devastating effects upon others subjected to it. In such cases we tend to use a 'reasonable person' test to assign civil or criminal liability for the behaviour. Where knowing culpability cannot be ascertained and the behaviour falls short of that which a 'reasonable person' would know to be objectionable, the outcome of actions tends to be in terms of education or information rather than restorative or punitive. On the other hand, bullying action that was always intended to affect another, but which does not have the desired effect, must still be construed as undesirable behaviour, as the intent was culpable and certainly requires addressing.

4. **Oppression and prejudice – introducing Allport**

The intention of the above reflections is to draw attention to and determine the widespread occurrence of bullying and harassment behaviours in society. So far we have referred to the outcomes of such behaviour as principally affecting the dignity of individuals and the quality of environments. But at what point might we conclude that such behaviour constitutes 'oppression:' is oppression indicated by repetition, extent, effect or some other determining aspect?

If we take a dictionary definition², oppression is:

1	the exercise of authority or power in a burdensome, cruel, or unjust manner
2	an act or instance of oppressing
3	the state of being oppressed
4	the feeling of being heavily burdened, mentally or physically, by troubles, adverse conditions, anxiety, etc.

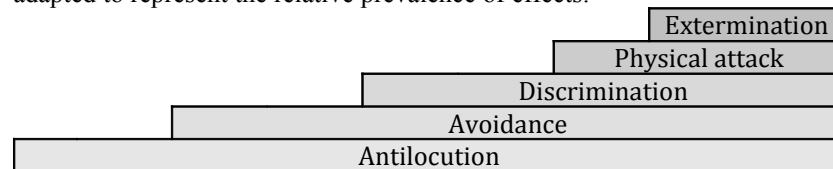
Elsewhere, in varying terms, this definition is expanded to incorporate the concept of an inequality of bargaining power, resulting in one party's lack of ability to negotiate or exercise meaningful choice, a crucial aspect and notable outcome of bullying behaviours. 'Oppression' thus appears to be a phenomenon that might apply to an individual, a group of any size, a religion, an ethnic group, a state or a country. Can bullying and thus oppression be found in the behaviour of *groups* towards individuals and other groups? Of course it may. If we refer back to the quotes from Beerel, we see references to systems theory, which indicates that groups may take on the dominant behaviours of other parts of the system – although it may be that the source of the power abuse that initiated the oppressive system can actually be traced to just one or two individuals.

Does bullying always involve an abuse of power, per se? Well, since we observe that to bully another individual or group implies a power differential in order to have any effect, the answer to that must be 'yes' – the abuse of power is axiomatic. Of course, the legitimate exercise of power to persuade will always be a matter of perception and position – thus coercive action intended to be benevolent may be perceived as hostile and unwelcome – and thus may be judged a bullying tactic by those subjected to it, whilst being strongly defended by its perpetrators.

So bullying is potentially a feature of any individual's behavioural pattern and it may be a characteristic of groups. The outcome of such bullying behaviour is likely to be oppression, which is per se being held in a state of dominance. And as we might see inferred in the opening illustrative stories, dominance may lead to one of three principal responses: withdrawal, acquiescence or resistance. Such responses will affect relationships at personal, group and societal levels, making the interworking of the concepts of bullying, dominance and oppression key issues for all to understand and to work on if we hope to ever cope, function, cooperate, build and eventually find peace.

Of the many strands of bullying that may be pursued, I will now focus upon one of the issues that I feel has become attenuated over time; the work of Gordon Allport in 1954 in investigating the nature of inter-group prejudice and the roots of discrimination and a key example of the relationship with oppression. After the Second World War, Allport was tasked to investigate how it was that a relatively small group of Nazi party activists could mobilize millions to engage in the horror of a conflict that led to the Holocaust. What Allport found was that it started with words. Millions died then and still perish now, because of words. It is this relatively simple conclusion that I found so meaningful when I investigated the nature of bullying, harassment and discrimination as a police trainer in the late 1980s.

Fig. 1 Allport's (1979:14) scale of prejudice and discrimination – adapted to represent the relative prevalence of effects:



Allport was quite tentative about his findings and on re-reading, I am struck by the apparent 'reasonableness' of his description in the first two levels of his scale. Since thoughts are impossible to 'police' and perhaps legally irrelevant until expressed, he proposed that the first observable indication of prejudice was what he called 'antilocution', or literally 'speaking against'. Here he expressed the notion that people with prejudices talk about them. First, to family and friends, perhaps to engender in-group identity and develop a sense of security through sharing: knowing that you are amongst like-minded people may reduce anxiety. The words might span expressions of mild disapproval of 'the others' through to quite vitriolic condemnation; but it will be limited at this level to verbal expression. The first key point here is that it is very widespread, common behaviour and in many cases, if questioned at all, could be justified as 'healthy free expression'. The second key point though is that, unquestioned, antilocution supports the next level in the scale – that of avoidance.

Avoidance is the behaviour in which people, who express, agree or collude with antilocutory expressions, begin to avoid contact with members of the out-group that is the subject of their attention, whatever the basis. It is an extension of the more widespread phenomenon of antilocution and a more deliberate and overt behaviour. Allport went to lengths to point out that fewer people engage in the escalating behaviours at each stage, but nevertheless each previous 'stage' supports those who engage in the following levels and will also be present in that escalated level. In one sense, avoidance can be seen as an attempt to keep the peace by taking responsibility for one's dislike of others, but this belies the inherent violence of separation purely based upon prejudice, increasing frustration, dislike and blame.

Discrimination, in this scale, represents the level in which individuals and groups are subjected to disadvantaging action, purely on the basis of their membership or supposed membership of an 'out' group that is reviled by the holder of sufficient power to impose sanctions against them. The power may stem from physical, political or financial superiority or any other category that enables action to be effective and detrimental. The process may be seen to be incremental in its capacity to dehumanise and possibly to demonise the out-group. Discrimination may cover a scale that

encompasses mild physical restraint or segregation to a wholesale denial of human rights.

If discrimination becomes widely accepted and the dehumanisation process established, together with escalating negative verbal and written rhetoric, anger and frustration regarding the out-group, then physical attack is often the next step in the process: from physical attack, sustained action may result in ‘extermination,’ being the destruction by murder of an individual or genocidal action towards a whole people group. Bear in mind that we are not just speaking of race and ethnicity in these terms. We may be speaking of gender – women are murdered simply for being female every single day around the globe; sexuality – homosexual people are similarly murdered for being themselves; disability – people who are perceived to be ‘defective’ are routinely murdered through both deliberate action and culpable omission and people are attacked – and disappear – for expressing political views contrary to those of the ruling administration.

Fig. 2 Allport’s scale – adapted to represent the ‘immediate’ effect on individuals

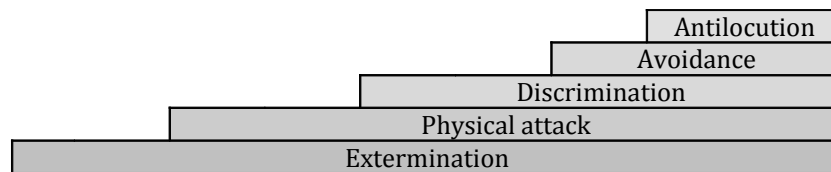


Figure 2 represents the relative impact of each of the steps in the scale in terms of the immediate effect on individual lives. Obviously therefore, the greatest and most immediate personal effect is to face extermination; proportionately fewer people experience this than physical attack, more face discrimination, many more are ‘avoided’ and possibly everyone has experienced antilocution in some way. Once again though, the issue is the linkage; that we have all experienced one level means we are connected to all – and denial of this serves only to perpetuate barriers that prevent us working together upon solutions.

Allport (1979:57) gives us the clearest and most powerful summary to the case for progressive linkage between the levels in his scale of discrimination:

It is apparent, therefore, that under certain circumstances there will be stepwise progression from verbal aggression to violence, from rumour to riot, from gossip to genocide.

5. Concluding remarks – turning to Bourdieu.

In this paper I have so far spoken of the near universality of the human experience of antilocution and it is my contention that this has a tangible relationship to the phenomenon of bullying, which is in turn intimately related to the more modern term ‘harassment’ and that both constitute aspects of oppression in terms of their effect in widely varying, but discernable, experiences of the abuse of power. Allport studied these abuse systems in the context of his examination of the term ‘prejudice’, the root of which he linked to fear and anxiety and the driven need for some, often socially inadequate people to prove themselves – a near identical definition to those focused upon the term ‘bullying’. Allport also relates the character of the person disposed to ‘prejudice’ as being of the typology identified by Adorno et al (1950) as ‘the authoritarian personality’, which is also reinforced by Adler’s ideas that linked the ‘will to power over others’ as evidence of a neurosis that tends to force over-compensating action to deal with feelings of anxiety caused by what became termed an ‘inferiority complex’³.

Although the detail would be beyond the remit of this paper, I also see much value in pursuing Bourdieu’s concept of ‘symbolic violence’⁴ in connection with his exploration of sociological constructs relating to the themes herein. The physical, emotional experience of bullying is, as has been illustrated, near universal, although it may vary in impact from irritant to catastrophe. Bourdieu developed a theory of action around the concept of habitus⁵, which can be defined as a system of ‘dispositions’, which are lasting, acquired schemes of perception, thought and action that might easily include routine bullying, harassment and the abuse of power. He postulated that individual agents develop these dispositions in response to their interpretation of the conditions they encounter. In this way Bourdieu theorizes that people can construct objective social structures around their naturally subjective, mental experiences. They will go on to form fundamental, deep-founded, un-thought beliefs that will inform their actions and thoughts. This links back to other findings of Allport, Adorno and others like Arendt⁶ who, in studying Eichmann, proposed that many ‘agents’ who carried out the atrocities of the Holocaust, were ‘terrifyingly normal,’ in that they were not particularly bullying or sociopathic individuals, but were essentially bureaucrats who were simply content to follow the system and their orders, which led her to a controversial theory proposing the ‘banality of evil’. Such a ‘system’ (linking back to the observations of Beerel in terms of systems theory) may well be related to Bourdieu’s symbolic violence, which can be construed as potentially more powerful than physical violence and represents a way for those for whom bullying is their being, to amplify their malign influence. Symbolic violence ensures that the arbitrariness of the social order is ignored, or even deemed ‘natural’, ensuring the legitimacy of

extant social structures, making oppression indeed the bitter fruit of the tree that is grown, root and branch, from bullying seed.

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Notes

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