

Bullying in school-- the dark side of human nature? An anthropological examination on how bullying gives pleasure

1. Introduction

Is there such thing as the dark side of human nature? If there is, it certainly exhibits itself in the event of bullying in school. What makes innocent school children bully their fellow schoolmate? Bullying is not a specific problem that only occurs in certain countries and school. It is a cross-cultural problem [1] that touches tens of thousands of school children every year in the world.

Bullying in school is certainly not the only form of bullying that takes place all over the world. However there are ample amount of school bullying research and statistics available, following the notorious school shooting cases in America and also suicide cases of bullying victims. I choose to discuss bullying in school because of its key distinctions from other forms of bullying:

1. The culpable are children/ young people. Their life is simpler. They are still in the process of development physically and psychologically. They are supposed to act more according to instinct. Not like adults, who have fully-developed cognitive thinking ability and they are held morally responsible for their actions.
2. No obvious incentive is involved. Children/ young people do not have to provide for themselves. No money involves, no profit gained from bullying in school.

2. Pleasure

What do bullies feel when they see other people suffer? Conventional bully research mostly use questionnaire. With questionnaire the interviewee have the freedom to express their own view however the public is craving for objective, scientific facts. Hence last year (2008) when a bullies' brain scanning study conducted by Jean Decety and Benjamin Lahey of University of Chicago was published, it was widely-publicized. [2] The subject of this research is a group of eight 16-18 years old boys who has aggressive conduct disorder, which included a history of lying, stealing, committing vandalism, and bullying. The researchers showed them a series of brief videos that depict painful situation. The brain of these young people light up, in the regions that associated with reward and pleasure. Instead previous research showing when non-bullies see other people in pain, the part of brain that shows they are experiencing pain light up—which is a sign of empathy.

Bullies like to see others in pain—this notion is nothing new. However it is the first time to have a brain scan experiment to demonstrate this as concrete scientific fact. This research received so much publicity perhaps because it brings into light what everyone knows but not dares to admit. Human beings live together as members of society. It is not some surprising news to know there are some of us who behave anti-socially—after all, everyday there are people who commit all kinds of crimes from petty theft to murder. To know someone witness others' suffering not in cold-blood, but in pleasure—one cannot help but feel a chill on the back.

How do researchers explain bullying

Some researchers have been explaining bullying with evolution theory in a way that is not so much different to 19th century European colonialist justify their aggression with Darwin's motto 'fittest survives'. Ken Rigby (2002) suggested bullying is part of the inherited human instinct of struggling for life. [3] White et co (2007) suggested bullies in school actually have more sex partners and consequently better reproductive chances. [4]

While human beings may trace their origin back to primates, one must note that human society and animal kingdom function in a fundamentally different ways. Struggling for life, surely is an inherited human instinct; or, it is an inherited instinct of all living beings. But while a big fish eats small fish is it the same thing as a big kid beat up a small one in school playground? Certainly not. Animals (predators) hunt for food. (physical needs) Bullies go after a weaker fellow classmate to see his suffering and humiliation (psychological wants). The motives are completely different. Within a tribe of primates the dominant male may chase the weaker members around to exert his position, but at the end of the day the whole tribe would make peace and in generally they live harmoniously. No primate would bully one member of the tribe continuously until one commit suicide. Not to mention the dominant male is also responsible for the safety of the whole tribe. A school bully will not and cannot take this responsibility. In the case of claiming bullies have more sex partners and better reproductive chances. I have to say human beings are not rabbits. Having more sex partners does not mean there are better reproductive chances.

Patricia Hawley (1999) claimed the aim of bullying, at the end, is to achieve social dominance. She suggested bullying is an unsuccessful adaptation to modern life, that bullies, at one point will realise pro-social means is a more effective way to achieve social dominance than anti-social means. [5] She also claimed that bullies at one point will realise pro-social mean is a more effective way to achieve social dominance and subsequently the bossy teenagers will grow up into sensible adults. This could happen in some cases. However expecting all bullies will give up their aggression by ‘natural enlightenment’ is too idealistic. Research by Dan Olweus [6] showed that a large percentage of school bullies continued their aggression after entering adulthood. The proportion of former school bullies who had a criminal record in their 20s is significantly higher than average. It is also questionable if bullying is a way to achieve social dominance. Research showed that bullies were not particularly popular (to assume popularity is one of the key components of achieving social dominance). [7] However the research result shown that the bullies were not particularly unpopular either.

In my opinion there are 2 levels of gratification associate with bullying. i. The instant sensual gratification while causing pain & seeing other people suffer. It is associated with sadistic tendency (though not involving the sex drive) ii. Gratification that has the deeper root from human evolution, concerns one’s position in the social hierarchy.

I . The pleasure in exerting power

To be powerful, to be strong, to be able to exert power over others, must be an inherited instinct to all predators. After all it is about survival: if one cannot capture its prey, one

will starve. As the decedents of hunters, human being must have this instinct inherited. This is the reason why competitive sports are so popular. It is a measure of power.

ii. Social hierarchy

One researcher, Adreen Nishina from University of Claifornia suggested that bullying is a kind of ‘social dance’, gaining a higher place in the social hierarchy. [8] If one cannot achieve social dominance by bullying, one can certainly create a ‘social underdog’ by bullying. The usual victim of bullying, who is already shy and timid and not the most popular person in class, would become an outcast after the bullies start picking on him. [9] No one would like to be his friend (in fear of the bullies). The victim often finds himself socially isolated and spends recess time alone.

Shadenfreude & social comparison theory

We can draw comparison between bullying and Shadenfreude. Shadenfreude, originally a German word, means to feel pleasure in seeing other people’s suffering. [10]

Shadenfreude usually refers to a relatively harmless way of guilty pleasure, e.g. sitting at home watching news of allegedly corrupted corporate executive being arrested. (In fact, everyday world news is full of all kinds of misfortune.) Sociologist has been explaining Shadenfreude with social comparison theory.

The definition of social comparison theory is: humans evaluate themselves not so much by objective standards as by comparison with people around them. [11] Our self-perception is relative. We are actually constantly comparing ourselves with people around us, and adjust our self-perception accordingly. In other words, we feel better

when people around us go down. This may be, result from living in social hierarchy for so many generations. Each member of the society has his own position. The higher one's position is the better is one's survival chance. In the case of primates, a dominant male can mate with more females, thus have a better chance to pass his gene. However for primates usually one moves up the social hierarchy when one grows stronger, e.g. a young male grows up and become a dominant male (positive change). In the case of Schadenfreude, one has a better self-perception of oneself while seeing others go down. The person who feels Schadenfreude does not have any change himself—he has not get stronger or richer. It is only seeing people around him go down makes him have a false sense of elevation.

Anyone can feel Schadenfreude. It is always easier just to stand on the side and watch instead of taking part directly in some action. Not everyone will bully others, even if one has the opportunities, e.g. one is in a position of power imbalance: being the stronger member of the class/ having better social skill. In my opinion: following factors, determine if one will bully:

1. Personal traits: whether one has aggressive personality or not.
2. Empathy: the ability to feel for others. However there are different cases: one may bully while not knowing the victim would feel miserable, one also may bully while fully knowing the extent of suffering he causes. The latter case is more malicious!
3. Sense of right and wrong. (If we assume bullying is a socially unacceptable/ wrong behaviour) Parents are the first one to teach the social norm to their children. Even before children become old enough to enter school, if they show any aggressive behaviour (e.g. bullying their sibling), parents should stop them immediately and tell

them this kind of behaviour is not acceptable. From this children would build up a sense of right and wrong. Later even if their parents are not present, or when they grow older, the ingrained sense of right and wrong should act as an inhibition when they have the opportunities to initiate/ join bullying.

4. Presence of punishment: Some bullies may be aware that bullying is not a socially acceptable behaviour; however they may still do it when there is no adult presence—when they can get away from it. Indirect form of bullying, e.g. rumour spreading, cutting off friends of the victim, is not that easy to trace and may not be deemed punishable.

One can see the rearing condition of a child is often one of the key factors determining if the child will become a bully. According to Dan Olweus (1993) children reared in the following conditions are most prone to become a bully:

1. Lack of warmth and involvement from the caretaker (especially the mother) during the child's early years. The child would fail to learn the importance of empathy and caring for others.
2. If the caretaker has been permissive and allowed aggressive behaviour on the part of the child.
3. The use of 'power-assertive' child rearing methods such as physical punishment and violent emotional outbursts. The child would think violence is a normal part of life. Being mal-treated at home also may make the child 'let the steam out' and subsequently mal-treat others at school.

[12]

Learning:

Even if a child is not reared in the condition mentioned above, nor born with an aggressive personality, one can still learn bullying by imitating others behaviours in school.

One cannot be sure what makes a child copy certain behaviour. Bully is a character that appeared very often in children's literature. Almost all stories with a background of school have at least 1 bully character. Bully characters are usually portrayed as negative role model and receive what they deserve at the end.[13]

There has been many research showing watching violent TV & movies, and playing violent TV games has strong correlation with aggressive behaviour. However it has not been proved if watching violent TV & movies actually causes aggressive behaviour, or, the other way around, people with aggressive behaviour like to watch violent TV. One should not over-look that there are also a lot of violent content in everyday news (though they may not be graphic). If we look further back in time, human history basically has always been a violent one. [14]

4. School and Adolescence

Adolescence is a special period in one's life. During this period young people will negotiate puberty and the completion of growth, take on sexually dimorphic body shape, develop new cognitive skills (including abstract thinking capacities), develop a clearer

sense of personal and sexual identity, and develop a degree of emotional, personal, and financial independence from their parents. [15]

During adolescence young people spend a large amount of time in school (average 8 hours). It is more than the time they spend at home. Young people in this period are anxious to build up their own identity. They are more sensitive to how others percept themselves.

Peer group and peer pressure:

Most adolescents join a peer group. They may have to conform, consciously or unconsciously to their group member's appearance or behaviour, in order to fit in. If there is a bully in the group, he might encourage his group member to join in bullying. Since adolescents are more susceptible to peer pressure, being isolated socially is harsh. When young people witness bullying they may not speak out against it in fear of retaliation from bullies.

Enclosure:

If bullying is a repeated action [16], it can only happen in an enclosure---where the victim has nowhere to run. Enclosure means more than a wall around the school. Teachers are doing roll calls once or twice a day. Students not attending school without a legitimate reason and proof (certificate signed by a doctor) may receive a warning. If the offence is repeated their parents would be notified. The exact practice may vary in different countries. However, the basic idea is the same wherever public education is compulsory. It is especially hard for the victim, if one know he would be bullied but he has no choice but to go to school.

Lack of adults' supervision during break time

According to one study by Dan Olweus, schools which lack adults' supervision during break time has higher rate of bullying. [17] Or in another situation, an adult is present but does not intervene when he witness bullying, there is also a higher rate of bullying. It would send a wrong message to the bullies implying the school tolerates bullying. There was some old sayings normalizing bullying such as 'bullying is part of growing up'. However in recent years there has been a higher public awareness on bullying, its seriousness and its potential damage. The schools have been better informed and some has been using different methods to tackle this problem. Recently there was the first convicted case of cyber bullying in England. [18]

5. Bullying in school relating to other type of bullying

Bullying does not only happen in school. Basically it can happen anywhere. Workplace, home, on the street...etc. Bullying can be a complex matter and sometimes when other factors are involved (e.g. economic incentive, cultural background). Nevertheless there is one common premise: bullies are glad to see others suffer.

In the long run a society which contains more members which commit anti-social acts has worse survival chance than a society which its members are pro-social and care for each other. [19] Perhaps we can never fully eradicate bullying, but to have a correct understanding of its causes and origin may help us find a better way to tackle it.

Note:

1. A cross-national profile of bullying and victimization among adolescents in 40 countries [Int J Public Health. 2009 September; 54\(Suppl 2\): 216–224.](#)
doi: 10.1007/s00038-009-5413-9.

<http://www.pubmedcentral.nih.gov/articlerender.fcgi?artid=2747624>

2. Bullies' Brains Light Up With Pleasure as People Squirm

<http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2008/11/081107-bully-brain.html>

Brain Scans Show Bullies May Enjoy Watching Pain

<http://www.medicalnewstoday.com/articles/128633.php>

Brain Scans Show Bullies Enjoy Others' Pain

<http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/11/07/AR2008110701898.html>

3. New perspective on bullying by Ken Rigby (2002) London: Jessica Kingsley.

4. http://www.albany.edu/~ddwhite/pdf/NEEPS_2007.pdf

5. Patricia Hawley (1999) The Ontogenesis of Social Dominance: A strategy-based evolutionary perspective.

6. Dan Olweus (1993) Bullying at School-What we know and what we can do. Blackwell. Cornwall. p.36

7. Dan Olweus (1993) p. 26

8. <http://www.livescience.com/history/071012-hn-bully.html>

9. Dan Olweus (1993) p. 49

10. <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/08/24/arts/sorrow-so-sweet-a-guilty-pleasure-in-another-s-woe.html>

11. Festinger, L. (1954). A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7(2) 117-140.

12. Dan Olweus (1993) p. 39

13. <http://www.carolhurst.com/subjects/bullies.html>

14. http://www.themoneytimes.com/news/20071105/study_violent_tv_linked_to_aggression-id-1012738.html

15. Viner, Russell; Christie, Deborah (5 February 2005). "[ABC of adolescence: Adolescent development](#)". *British Medical Journal* **330**: 301–304.

doi:10.1136/bmj.330.7486.301. PMID 15695279

16. Dan Olweus (1993) p. 8-9

17. Dan Olweus (1993) p. 25

18. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2009/aug/21/facebook-bullying-sentence-teenage-girl>

19. <http://www.learningtogive.org/papers/paper52.html>