



BULLYING AS SOCIAL INEQUALITY

CJ Pascoe

THE ENEMY / Issue One
theenemyreader.org

We live in the era of *the bully*. One can hardly open a newspaper, watch television or talk to a colleague without encountering some sort of reference to the current “bullying epidemic.” One book even claims that we live in a “[bully society](#).” According to one report, up to seventy percent of young people experience bullying.¹ Though rates of bullying have declined since 1992², attention to the phenomenon seems to have increased exponentially. The White House hosts an anti-bullying webpage. Superstars run anti-bullying foundations. Legislatures enthusiastically pass anti-bullying laws. Schools prominently display anti-bullying policies on their websites. Indeed, bullying has become big business as trainers and consultants hawk anti-bullying programs guaranteed to stop the scourge.

In many ways, to be anti-bullying is akin to being anti-terrorist. What good citizen could endorse an alternate perspective? As such, it is small wonder that this essay advocates an anti-bully stance. But the generic anti-bully position poses a problem in current discussions of the subject (as perhaps it does in a discussion about ending terrorism as well). The term serves to denote interactions between an aggressor and a victim (be they groups or individuals) in which feelings are hurt. This approach leads to situations in which some surprising groups claim victim status while assigning blame for bullying to those who disagree with them. For instance, while the prevalence of anti-gay bullying in schools has been well documented, some voices on the Christian right claim that statutes that protect GLBTQ people (such as school anti-bullying ordinances that protect students based on sexual identity or gender expression) serve as a way to bully Christians for their religious beliefs. Situations like these make it seem as if we live in a society in which *anyone* can be bullied for *anything*.

It is precisely because of the way in which the term can refer to any sort of interaction in which one may be opposed to the view of another or suffer hurt feelings, that this essay calls for “an end to bullying.” In doing so, I follow the lead of other initiatives such as the [Beyond Bullying Project](#) and [The Queering Education Research Institute](#) both of which seek to reframe contemporary understandings of bullying by refocusing the discussion on issues of social inequality and power, rather than on individual pathology. I suggest that rather than casting bullying as a psychological or individual phenomenon in which any hurt feeling or disagreement qualifies, we

The term “bullying” serves to denote interactions between an aggressor and a victim in which feelings are hurt. This leads to situations in which some surprising groups claim victim status while painting those who disagree with them as bullies.

attend to the role social inequality plays in the current bullying “epidemic.” I call here for bullying to be understood as not necessarily about one pathological individual or group targeting another, less powerful individual or group, but rather as an interactional reproduction of structural inequalities that socializes young people into accepting social inequality. That is, the interactional process of bullying both builds on existing embodied, classed, raced, gendered and sexualized social inequalities and simultaneously prepares young people to accept such inequalities as a “normal” part of living in the world.

In this model of bullying, we as a society assign some of the dirty work of the reproduction of social inequality to our children, then pathologize them for interactionally

acting out the sort of inequality that we as adults instantiate in law, policy, cultural values and social institutions. The current discourse of bullying obfuscates the role of social inequality in these interactions, instead assigning blame for these interactions to cruel young people who have a particular set of psychological problems. Our culture-wide discussion of bullying needs to shift focus from individual *behavior* to the aggressive *interaction* itself. It also needs to attend to the social contexts in which bullying occurs as well as ask questions about meanings produced by such interactions. These interactions also shouldn't be understood as the sole province of young people. Shifting the discussion in this way would place social forces, institutionalized inequality and cultural norms that reproduce inequality at the center of the discussion. This would bring policies and phenomena pertaining to social inequalities such as the dismantling of social welfare systems, current anti-fat bias in medical and health research, continued criminalization of young men of color, widespread Title IX violations in education and laws that specifically target the civil rights of sexual minorities into a discussion about bullying such that this discussion would not solely focus on young persons' seemingly random cruelty to another.

Such a focus on social inequalities is not, as of yet, reflected in current popular and academic analyses of bullying. These approaches rest on the assumption that the key to understanding and solving the epidemic lies in individual-level variables pertaining to aggressors, victims, causes, and effects. This research tells us about the age, race, class, home-life, educational accomplishments, emotional dispositions, intellectual levels and other important identity markers of bullies and victims. Bullies, for instance, are more likely to be high status, popular boys who are school leaders and

who feel good about themselves and their interactions with others³. In this model, bullies are a distinct set of young people, as are victims.

Similarly, in this model, young people (and indeed most of the research is about young people) are bullied for exhibiting "difference." However, these differences are not neutral or accidental. Take for example two of the most common bases for bullying among young people: body size⁴ and sexuality⁵. When young people are engaging in homophobic bullying, their behavior reflects dominant legal and cultural standings of LGBTQ people. When young people tease their overweight peers, they are reinforcing a culture-wide approach to bodies that endorses fat-shaming. When people who are gender-variant are not protected in 44 states⁶ (to say nothing of the lack of federal protection), homophobic bullying doesn't seem so divorced from the adult world. Similarly, when overweight adults can be charged more for plane flights, legally discriminated against at work and denied medical care, young people's "bullying" seems more like enforcement of social norms already well entrenched in adult society.

Sexuality and weight-based bullying are not the product of pathological individuals, but are interactional reproduction of larger social inequalities. That is, overweight and sexual minority young people are not bullied because they are different than the average student. They are actively framed as undesirable in the aggressive interaction itself. The young people committing the bullying are not so much acting pathologically as they are behaving as well-socialized individuals who have successfully internalized social norms. The young people are enforcing said norms, acting, in effect, as agents of social reproduction of inequality—socializing others into accepting inequality.

Framing young people's aggressive behavior as bullying elides the complicated way in which these interactions are a central part of a gendered, classed, raced, sexualized and embodied socialization process that supports and reproduces varied lines of inequality. Looking at bullying as an interactional reproduction of larger structural inequalities, rather than a manifestation of a particular set of individual-level variables, indicates that current popular and academic discourses about bullying exclude important elements, resulting in responses to bullying that are largely individualistic and symbolic rather than structural and systemic.

When young people are engaging in homophobic bullying, their behavior reflects dominant legal and cultural standings of LGBTQ people. This behavior cannot be dismissed as youthful bad decision-making or rendered marginal by the word "bullying."

This reframing necessitates that young people are taken seriously as social actors. If they are doing the dirty work of social reproduction, then their behavior cannot be dismissed as youthful bad decision-making or rendered marginal by the word "bullying." We often don't take young people seriously as actors in their own social worlds, but instead frame them as beings in the process of becoming actual people.⁷ The deployment of the word bullying (so often used to describe young people's behavior and not adult behavior), is part of the process of infantilizing and delegitimizing youth as full-fledged social actors; it minimizes the importance of their interactions, allowing adults to be blind to the way in which bullying often reflects, reproduces, and prepares young people to accept inequalities embedded in larger social structures.

When bullying is framed as the interactional reproduction of social inequality, a picture emerges wherein young people socialize each other into accepting inequality. In many ways, this is a much more complicated and serious issue than framing their behavior as teasing one another for neutral, random, isolated or undesirable forms of difference. Importantly, thinking of these aggressive interactions as the reproduction of inequality frames them as *normative* rather than *pathological* behaviors. When considered in this light, bullying is not so much an epidemic of a pathological way of interacting, but a common mode of social reproduction.

This reframing also necessitates a focus on interactions, not individuals. That is, instead of looking at the type of person who bullies, we need to attend to what the bullying interactions look like, when they occur, where they occur, what actors are involved, and what social meanings are embedded in them. Likely what we will see is that by looking at the interaction itself, rather than at the static identities of *bully* and *victim*, we might see a dynamic interaction that does not always have a single victim or aggressor. Indeed, that the two can switch place—even within a single interaction—is evidence enough that trait-based research can only take us so far.

This shift in analysis becomes important in discussions about bullying and violence like the one that followed the Columbine shootings, for example, in which some analysts claimed that the shooters were bullied, while others claimed that they were bullies⁸. Prioritizing the interaction over the individual renders this discussion unimportant; instead, it enables analysts to understand how aggressive interactions were an important part of the social world at this particular school. Both sides argued past one another because each relied on a conceptualization of bullying that conceives of "the

bullies” and “the bullied” as two discrete groups. Focusing on the interactions, rather than individuals, enables an understanding of how both sides may have been right and refocuses a discussion about solutions.

Instead of looking at individual “bullies”, we need to attend to what the bullying interactions look like and what social meanings are embedded in them.

Moves like these may well render use of the actual term “bully” irrelevant by indicating that it is artificially separating some interactions from others and some individuals, “bullies,” from others, “victims.” When we label aggressive interactions between young people “bullying” and ignore the messages about social inequality in these interactions, we risk divorcing what they are doing from larger issues of power. Doing so discursively contains this sort of behavior within the domain of youth, framing it as something in which adults play little role. It allows adults to project blame on to kids for being mean to one another, rather than acknowledging that their behavior reflects (and reinforces) society-wide problems of inequality and prejudice. It allows adults to tell them “it gets better,” as if the adult world is rife with equality and kindness and not one that encourages social inequality through social policy and cultural norms. It allows the rest of society to evade blame for perpetuating the structural and cultural inequalities that young people play out interactionally.

Endnotes

1. Beaty, Lee A., and Erick B. Alexeyev. "The Problem of School Bullies: What the Research Tells Us." *Adolescence* 43.169 (2008): 1-11. Print.
2. Finkelhor, David. *Trends in Bullying and Peer Victimization*. Durham, New Hampshire: Crimes Against Children Research Center, 2013. Print.
3. Levy, Nathaniel, et al. *Bullying in a Networked Era: A Literature Review*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Center for Internet & Society Research Publication Series, 2012. Print.; Vaillancourt, Tracy, Shelley Hymel, and Patricia McDougall. "Bullying Is Power: Implications for School-Based Intervention Strategies." *Journal of Applied School Psychology* 19.2: 157-76. Print.
4. Griffiths, I. J., et al. "Obesity and Bullying: Different Effects for Boys and Girls." *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 91.2: 121-25. Print.; Rebecca M. Puhl, Joerg Luedicke. "Weight-Based Victimization among Adolescents in the School Setting: Emotional Reactions and Coping Behaviors." *Journal of Youth and Adolescence* 41 (2012): 27-40. Print. (Griffiths et al. 2006; Puhl, Peterson and Luedicke 2013; Lumegn et al 2010)
5. Levy, Nathaniel, et al. *Bullying in a Networked Era: A Literature Review*. Cambridge, MA: Berkman Center for Internet & Society Research Publication Series, 2012. Print.
6. Please see <http://www.transgenderlaw.org/resources/transfactsheet.pdf> for more information.
7. Corsaro, William. *The Sociology of Childhood*. London: Pine Forge Press, 1997. Print.
8. See Dave Cullen's book *Columbine* (2009) for more on this discussion.