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Linköping University Post Print

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'She's Weird!' — The Social Construction of Bullying in School: A Review of Qualitative Research

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Qualitative research provides opportunities to study bullying and peer harassment as social processes, interactions and meaning-making in the everyday context of particular settings. It offers the possibility of developing a deep understanding of the culture and group processes of bullying and the participants' perspectives on peer harassment as well. It gives participants opportunities to discuss their own understanding and experiences of bullying in their own words. This article reviews qualitative studies on bullying or peer harassment in school (including some studies in which qualitative and quantitative methods — so-called mixed methods — have been used).

Keywords: Bullying, qualitative research, review.

The social construction of the deviant child

Research has shown that a common explanation among students as to why bullying occurs is that the victim is different or deviant in some way, such as having different clothes, appearance, behaviour or way of speaking (e.g. Frisén and others, 2007, 2008; Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008; Hazler and others, 1992; Horowitz and others, 2004; Thornberg, 2010; Thornberg and Knutsen, 2011; Varjas and others, 2008). The victim is seen as a person who does not fit in.

Social misfit

Social norms are produced among students at school and students claim that social exclusion and isolation are the consequences of non-conformity to these norms (Cranham and Carroll, 2003). Ethnographic studies have identified and linked bullying and harassment to a significant element of intolerance of diversity in peer culture at school (Cadigan, 2002; Duncan, 1999; MacDonald and Swart, 2004; Merton, 1994). Insults among the girls in Besag's (2006) study were usually about signalling disapproval of another girl's behaviour with respect to the social rules and accepted social mores of the group. In her ethno-

graphic study of interactions within a girl group at school, Goodwin (2002a,b) observed how the girls in their interactions with another girl, who made efforts to affiliate herself with the group without being accepted by the group, produced degradation rituals in response to behaviour they cast as socially inappropriate. In this way, the girl was socially constructed as deviant and marginal to the group. In addition, Kless (1992) found that unpopular and socially rejected students had not learned the normative behaviour involved in access rituals. High-status students then targeted these students to maintain their social boundaries. According to the social misfit hypothesis (Wright and others, 1986), what is perceived as deviance can vary across groups, and a lack of compatibility between the culture of the peer group and the individual's attitudes and behaviour could result in bullying. In one group, a certain behavioural style can result in rejection and victimisation, but in another group the same behavioural style can result in acceptance, as a function of different sets of group norms.

Labelling and stigmatising the victim

Teräsahjo and Salmivalli (2003) found in their focus group study that in many cases children separated the victim from other students and constructed him or her as a negatively deviant student, the 'odd student', who deserved to be treated with hostility. In this children's discourse, when children were talking about reasons for bullying they talked about the victim as a 'little bit different', 'odd', 'weird' or used other expressions of deviance. The victim was seen as a student who did not behave as he or she should have. Teräsahjo and Salmivalli use the concept 'the odd student repertoire' and related it to the discourse of homogeneity — deviant students disturb the existing order and threaten the status quo — and its demands on conformity. The constructed 'different-ness' or 'deviance' in everyday life at school is then used to justify bullying and harassment (Lahelma, 2004; Teräsahjo and Salmivalli, 2003; Thornberg, 2010). Being negatively labelled as different becomes the dominant feature of the victim's social identity at school (Merton, 1996). A negative reputation of the victim is constructed and spread further within the community. Even those who do not actively participate in bullying do not want to socialise with the victim because of social pressure (Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008). Once being constructed as a victim, stigmatised with negative labels, and rejected by peers, ethnographic findings revealed that it was almost impossible for these students to change their status and improve their situation (Evans and Eder, 1993; Merton, 1996).

This social construction of a deviant peer can be associated with stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) and labelling theory (Becker, 1963; Phelan and Link, 1999). When an individual is labelled as deviant, he or she is defined as a person who violates important social 'taken-for-granted' norms or normative standards of the social group, culture or society (Phelan and Link, 1999). According to labelling theory, deviance is in the eye of the beholder. There is nothing inherently deviant in any particular behaviour until some powerful group or group members define the behaviour as deviant. Becker (1963) argues, 'social groups

create deviance by making the rules whose infraction constitutes deviance, and by applying those rules to particular people and labelling them as outsiders' (p. 9). Qualitative research on bullying clearly indicates that stigma theory and labelling theory might be adopted to under- stand the social process of bullying. When a student is labelled as deviant, he or she is interpreted as a person who violates important social 'taken-for-granted' norms or normative standards of the peer culture. Stigma is then the core concept of understanding the con- sequences of labelling.

Victim career

In their generated grounded theory, based on qualitative interviews with prior victims of school bullying, Thornberg and others (2010) identified four phases of victimising: initial attacks, double victimising (interplay between external and internal victimising), bullying exit and after-effects of bullying. Already in the initial attacks, the informants became victimised by being negatively labelled as different. This stigmatising process was then strongly maintained and enhanced during the established bullying period. The external victimising affected the informants and initiated an internal victimising. The informants incorporated the victim-image and its negative labels which their classmates produced in conversations and behaviour directed towards them at the same time as the informants tried to develop strategies to protect themselves that in turn, and contrary to their intention, often supported the bullies' agenda and confirmed the socially constructed victim-image. Internal victimising involved a sense of not fitting in, self-protecting, self-doubting, self-blaming and resignation. In Kvarme and others' (2010) study, victims reported that they felt stupid, excluded, helpless and powerless.

Some studies described how the transition to a new school in many cases helped the students to get away from their former victim role as a result of a more highly differentiated social scene based on a larger number and greater variety of peer cultures, groups, and students (Kinney, 1993), or a more pleasant and accepting social climate in the new class (Thornberg and others, 2010). The ongoing interpersonal interactions with their new friends emanated from and supported their recovery of identity from their previously stigmatised state by becoming 'normal' (Kinney, 1993). Nevertheless, according to Thornberg and others (2010), several informants indicated through their narratives that, after the bullying had ended, there was still a lingering internal victimising, which in turn created some psychosocial problems for them. Even if the bullying had ended (the external victimising was gone), the internal victimising more or less continued to operate within them, which affected their thoughts and feelings as well as their behaviour in relation to themselves and others for many years afterwards.

Bullying as social positioning

Ethnographic studies have shown a clear link between peer harassment and the process of social positioning in school (Adler and Adler, 1998; Besag, 2006; Bliding, 2004; Cadigan, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Eder and others, 1995; Garpelin, 2004; Goodwin, 2002a,b; Kinney, 1993; Kless, 1992; MacDonald and Swart, 2004; Merton, 1997).

Cultural patterns underlying bullying

In their study, MacDonald and Swart (2004) identified an authoritarian and conflicted culture (depicted by conflicted power relations, autocratic structures and procedures and hierarchical channels of communication) in school underlying bullying. Furthermore, the emphasis on status and popularity in the school social environment seemed to promote a social hierarchy in the peer culture. Bullying was produced as a result of the negotiation and struggle process of this social hierarchy. MacDonald and Swart (2004) revealed a non-inclusive culture of school that placed an emphasis on sport, which subtly resulted in distinguishing between the 'cool' students and the 'nerds' further fuelled the cycle of bullying (also see Eder and others, 1995, regarding the boys).

In his ethnographic study, Duncan (1999) associated bullying with the discourse of normality (developmental norms applied to boys and girls) and the competitive ethos of school — 'being measured always against a set of norms, frequently without their criteria being made explicit, constructed a myriad of interlocking hierarchies in which pupils were constantly weighing up their values relative to those of others' (p. 135). Many studies have highlighted how bullying and harassment as well as status and popularity can maintain as well as be produced by gender constructions (Adler and Adler, 1998; Duncan, 1999; Eder and others, 1995; Kless, 1992; Phoenix and others, 2003; Stoudt, 2006), gender conflicts (Duncan, 1999) and heterosexual hegemony (Cadigan, 2002; Duncan, 1999; Eder and others, 1995; Phoenix and others, 2003; Ringrose, 2008). Homosexuality and 'gender-inappropriate' behaviour and appearance were socially represented as deviant and valueless or disgusting among students and used as stigmatising labels in harassment and bullying situations. Hence, rather than reducing the understanding of bullying in individual psychological terms, bullying can be interpreted and analysed as the too zealous maintenance of the dominant normative or moral order (Davies, 2011; Ellwood and Davies, 2010).

At the bottom of the social hierarchy

In their analysis of interview data with normal hearing and hearing impaired students, Dixon and others (2004) found a link between being defined as different and being attributed lower social status. Becoming trapped in such low social position was the first step on the way of becoming trapped in social marginalisation and an ongoing victimising

of bullying. Ethno- graphic studies have indicated that low-status students — especially so-called 'loners' and 'nerds' — are the typical targets of bullying (Cadigan, 2002; Eder and others, 1995; Kinney, 1993; Kless, 1992; also confirmed in students' perceptions on bullying in qualitative inter- view research, see Frisén and others, 2008; Phillips, 2003) They were easily socially defined as 'odd' or deviant, which justified the harassment, and interpreted as weak and defenceless, which made them easy targets. 'The students who most dramatically felt the negative impact of the school status hierarchy were those at the very bottom' (Eder and others, 1995, p. 49). Based on her ethnographic study on peer harassment, Cadigan (2002) argues that while supportive friendships served as a shield against harassment (making 'loners' especially vulnerable), friends could also be a source of harassment (also see Besag, 2006; Mishna, 2004; Mishna and others, 2008). According to Kless (1992), students at the bottom of the social hierarchy were mostly loners and were caught in a social trap. They did not want to associate with each other because it would be committing a form of 'social suicide' if they interacted with others on this lower stratum in the social hierarchy. Their unpopular label would be reinforced. Therefore, many of them sought group acceptance in popular groups, but usually became targets or victims of these peers. Such bullying maintained the social boundaries.

The struggle for status, popularity, power and friends

In a current study, in which schoolchildren were interviewed about the causes of bullying, the two most prevalent explanations from the children were to view bullying as a reaction to deviance and to view bullying as a struggle for status, power or friends (Thornberg, 2010). As Hamarus and Kaikkonen (2008) conclude, bullying is a way of creating status and peer culture.

> A bully who defines what is different in the pupil community creates the group of 'us' and 'them' and through the definition gains acceptance for the values represented by 'us'. This definition creates a status within the community and the means of bullying create fear of the social punishment to follow. (p. 342)

In this way, the bully gains power and status among the peers. According to some ethnographic studies, toughness was used as a predominant method among boys to establish their position in the status hierarchy, which easily resulted in peer harassment and bullying (Adler and Adler, 1998; Duncan, 1999; Eder and others, 1995; Kless, 1992). Furthermore, social hierarchy among peers and the social perception of the victim as different or deviant have been associated in the research (e.g. Cadigan, 2002; Eder and others, 1995). For example, Merton (1994) found that difference was experienced hierarchically as better/worse or good/ bad, and hence, 'difference tends to be experienced as disconfirming and negative, rather than as neutral variation that does not have to be assimilated to be better/worse hierarchical perspective' (p. 35).

According to a Swedish ethnographic study (Bliding, 2004), children's relations-work in

everyday school life involved both inclusion and exclusion practices, like two sides of the same coin. In the complex process of peer culture, bullying was a part of making and main- taining friendships by defining and excluding non-friends. Among girls, struggling for friendship as well as power and popularity within friendship groups often produced indirect and verbal bullying and other forms of harassment (Besag, 2006; Owens and others, 2000). Besag (2006) found temporary bullying shifted as a result of changes in status, power and friendships. In addition, some ethnographic studies associated bullying or peer harassment with the popular cliques — the process of inclusion versus exclusion pro- duced peer harassment when there were students who wanted to be members but who were disliked or failed to follow the social norms of the cliques, or when members be- came rejected as a result of inner struggling for social positions within the cliques (Adler and Adler, 1998; Besag, 2006; Duncan, 1999; Eder and others, 1995; Merton, 1997).

In their study, Adler and Adler (1998) found five techniques of exclusion used by clique members: (i) out-group subjugation, referring to harassing outsiders and turning others against them; (ii) in-group subjugation, referring to more central clique members harass- ing and being mean towards clique members with a weaker standing, as a systematic organisation of downward harassment; (iii) compliance, referring to going along with leaders or other high-status clique members' mean acts or request of acting mean towards a peer; (iv) stigmatisation, referring to the entire clique rejecting and harassing a particu- lar clique member for a period; and (v) expulsion, referring to a process in which a clique member became permanently excluded from the clique, and as a result of their former behaviour as clique members, many of them had trouble being accepted by and hence establishing friendship with non-clique members. Hence, ethnographic studies like Adler and Adler (1998) and Merton (1997) showed that both low-status students (e.g. 'loners') and students within popular groups or cliques could become victims of bullying.

Bully career

Qualitative studies have investigated how students become bullies as a result of cultural pat- terns and social processes in school. Becoming a bully has been explained in terms of an authoritarian and conflicted school culture (MacDonald and Swart, 2004), intolerance for diversity in peer culture (Cadigan, 2002; MacDonald and Swart, 2004; Merton, 1994) and social hierarchy and positioning in peer and school culture (e.g. Adler and Adler, 1998; Besag, 2006; MacDonald and Swart, 2004; Merton, 1997; Phillips, 2003). In Burns and others' (2008) interview study with students about becoming a bully, in addition to the theme of enjoyment, a significant theme of belonging and enhancing group status emphasis- ing the need to maintain inclusion within a group emerged, and involved three key concepts: social norms (the pressure to conform), popularity and social position (including elements of attention, power and status).

In their small-scale interview study with eight bullies, Lam and Liu (2007) generated a

pro- cess model of the path to bullying, involving four phases. In the rejecting phase, students witnessed bullying, disliked the bullies and sympathised with the victim. In the performing phase, they moved towards becoming a bully. A common justification to begin bullying was to avoid becoming a victim. Some of them expressed a sense of insecurity in school and therefore joined the bullies for protection. Others expressed a sense of collective power, emotional release, material reward or bullying for fun. The main theme in the third phase, the perpetuating phase, was the presence and strength of inhibiting and encouraging factors. Encouraging factors were about gaining psychological security, material reward, fun, power and prestige. Inhibiting factors were about school punishment, control exerted by the family and sympathy for the victims. As long as the encouraging factors were perceived as more significant than the inhibiting factors, the students continued bullying. They also justified their bullying actions by claiming that the victims were not really victims as they 'deserved' to be bullied. Group support was also an encouraging factor, creating a diffusion of responsibility and a feeling of just following the group norms. In addition, acting as bullies gave 'them a sense of strength, status and potency not attainable from schoolwork or from home' (p. 67). The withdrawing phase was about moving away from the bullying. Two students reported that they had stopped bullying and three that they had reduced their bullying behaviour. The inhibiting factors became more significant to these students than the encouraging factors.

The culture of secrecy and the dissociated teachers

Reports from Swedish students indicate that bullying and other forms of peer harassment typically take place in the playground and other places far away from the teachers (Bliding and others, 2002; Osbeck and others, 2003). Observational studies using statistical analysis have shown the same pattern (Craig and Pepler, 1997; Craig and others, 2000). Cadigan (2002) found in her ethnographic study that peer harassment was frequently subtle, making it difficult to define and prevent. Bullies also hid their activity from teachers by misleading and mispresentation strategies, such as using double messages, for example greeting the victim when the teachers was present to make the teachers believe that the victim was a friend (Hamarus and Kaikkonen, 2008). In Garpelin's (2004) study, peer victimisation that took place within peers' in-groups was often hard to recognise or react upon among out- group members — a condition that Garpelin termed back-region victimisation. Furthermore, coping strategies that have been identified among victims are social isolating and avoiding bullies (Gamliel and others, 2003; Thornberg and others, 2010), trying not to be noticed in social situations, creating and spending time in an inner world, trying not to feel anything or to hide negative emotional reactions when being bullied (Thornberg and others, 2010), approaching the bully with a non-aggressive demeanour while discussing rational and logical reasons why the bully should stop bullying, or using verbal retaliation (Gamliel and others, 2003). Unfortunately, many of these strategies appear to make bullying and its harmful effects invisible or diffuse in everyday school life.

In their ethnographic study, MacDonald and Swart (2004) identified a prevalent culture of secrecy at school (Do not tell) that contributed to the ongoing cycle of bullying. Furthermore, in their study, there was a perception among the students that the school tolerates bullying — nothing is done about bullying, teachers can or will not do anything to alleviate the bullying — and therefore they thought it was a waste of time reporting bullying incidents to teachers. MacDonald and Swart also found a lack of awareness of a reporting procedure among students hindered reporting. In his study, Garpelin (2004) revealed that victims did not report their situation to teachers or other adults for many reasons. One of them was the fear of being viewed as a 'squealer'. Another motive was the conviction that the teachers would act in a way that would make their situation as a victim worse. In addition, they did not trust teachers to keep secrets told to them in confidence. The perception among students that there is no point in telling teachers about bullying has also been found in other studies (Lloyd and Stead, 2001; Oliver and Candappa, 2007; Thomson and Gunter, 2008).

Regarding low-level bullying (name-calling, isolation and minor physical shoving and pushing) in everyday school life, Thomson and Gunter (2008) found an overwhelmingly view among students that most teachers did ignore or did not recognise such activities, were nor prepared to intervene if asked, and were incapable of doing anything effective if they take actions. In Oliver and Candappa (2007), students associated telling a teacher about bullying with a double jeopardy: (i) they might not be believed and (ii) telling might result in retaliatory actions from the perpetrators. According to Merton's (1997) findings, junior high school teachers' responses to peer harassment among the girls were to interpret them as 'natural' developmental girl conflicts, minimising their seriousness. Some teachers also found it hard to believe that girls who were popular and good students could be so mean to others. Furthermore, Merton also found that there was a school philosophy that emphasised the need for students to be more independent and self-reliant and thus should take care of conflicts without teacher intervention. As Merton (1997) puts it, 'a junior high school with a social organisation that diffused adult responsibility and with an ideology that demanded students to be self-reliant facilitated meanness' (p. 183). In sum, these studies illustrate many aspects of school culture and the social process of bullying that create a culture of secrecy (hiding or diffusing the bullying) and dissociating teachers from the peer harassments.

A final comment

Bullying is a complex social phenomenon, appealing to the need for a theoretical and methodological pluralism. In her discussion of knowledge in social science, Thayer-Bacon (1996) uses the well-known poem about six blind men who explore an elephant from different positions and describe it as like a rope, a tree, a fan, a snake, a wall and a spear on the basis of the part of the elephant that each man touched, as a metaphor. A conversation between different perspectives, in relation to the elephant would result in a more qualified under- standing. Knowledge is a social process of knowing, continually in

need of re⁄adjustment, correction and re⁄construction: 'Only by acting as a community of inquirers can they hope to gather a more complete understanding of elephants' (Thayer-Bacon, 1996, p. 7). But how useful are findings from qualitative research? Do they not fail to reach the criteria of generalisation? Well, instead of claiming statistical generalisation built upon the logic of mathematics, in qualitative research, generalisation has been discussed as interpretation work — for example, in terms of generalisation through recognition of patterns, in which the reader, not the researcher, judges the generalisability (Larsson, 2009). Findings are seen as working models, which take local conditions into account (cf. Merriam, 1998; Patton, 2002).

This review draws a complex picture of how culture patterns, social hierarchies and power among students, labelling and stigma processes, everyday relations-work and students' meaning-makings as they participate in the social dynamics might contribute to the process of bullying, harassment and victimising in school. It highlights the importance of not reducing anti-bullying practices to just focus upon deficits within bullies and victims but considering and dealing with the school and peer cultures as well as the social psychology of everyday school life. A whole-school approach with peer support systems and restorative practices (see, e.g. Cowie and Jennifer, 2008; Hopkins, 2004) has the potential of counteracting an aggressive atmosphere and the culture of secrecy about bullying as well as generating a positive social climate and empowering and training students to challenge bullying when they encounter it in everyday life and to support victims in range of ways.

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