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Citation:

FAIRBAIRN, G (2010) Can you have bullying without a bully?

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Document Version:

Article (Accepted Version)

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Can there be bullying without a bully?

When I write my name on a piece of paper, the actions I perform can constitute a variety of different acts. For example, depending on the piece of paper on which I write, they might represent the act of making a contract or, if the piece of paper is a cheque, of paying a bill. I am drawing here, on the distinction that Harré and Secord (1972) make between movements, actions and acts in their book *The Explanation of Social Behaviour*, which can help us to make sense of a variety of aspects of human experience. In the past, for example (Fairbairn, 1995) I used it in helping to unpick the differences between suicide and other acts that resemble, but are different from suicide¹, including ‘gestured suicide’, in which a person enacts what looks like suicide in the hope and expectation, not of dying, but of having an effect on other people such as moving them to despair or to feelings of guilt; and ‘cosmic roulette’, in which a person acts apparently suicidally, not with the intention of dying, but of inviting God or the cosmos to decide whether he lives. The distinction between acts and actions will also prove useful in thinking about the question of whether we can have bullying without a bully.

Sometimes an act is accomplished, not through the performance of a single action, but through a sequence of actions; and sometimes the same act can be performed via different sequences of actions. Thus, for example, the act that the poet Sylvia Plath performed when she finally suicided, was made up of a number of actions, including the steps she took to ensure that her children did not find her as she died with her head in the oven of her cooker, and those she took to reduce the flow of fresh air into the kitchen in which she died, by blocking places in the doors and windows where air could enter as she breathed in the gas that poisoned her. And depending on the culture in which the marriage is made, the act by which two people become married can be performed via different sequences of actions, including the saying of certain words in response to questions from a third party and exchanging rings in front of witnesses, or any number of other sequences.

Bullying is rarely, if ever, present in a single act. Usually we think of it as taking place over time, as consisting of a sequence of acts, performed with bad intentions. So, for example, if in an isolated incident, a child hits another in the school yard, we would not normally think of this as bullying (though it could be²). Rather, we would normally think of a single blow as bullying only if it was part of a sequence of such behaviours performed with the right kinds of intentions and motivations. Bullies generally pursue their dreadful business over time; that is what makes bullying so awful.

Can you have bullying without a bully?

Turning now to the question of whether there can be bullying without a bully, I want to begin with the special form of bullying that is sexual abuse.

¹ I discussed some of these in my paper at last year’s conference on bullying and the abuse of power, in Salzburg. (Fairbairn, 2010)

² If say, the protagonist’s hit, though his first, was only one in a multitude of hits from a group of children that had been delivered over a period of time.

Many years ago, in a book entitled *Sexuality, learning difficulties and doing what's right* (1995, David Fulton) Denis Rowley and I discussed the ways in which sexual abuse might be defined. We were disturbed by the definitions that were circulating in discussions of the sexual abuse of people with learning difficulties³, which seemed to focus on detailed descriptions of who had to do what to which part of another person's body and what they had to do it with, for an act to count as abuse. We were especially troubled by the fact that most definitions of sexual abuse did not give sufficient importance to considerations of intention. As a result, we were concerned that the current definitions would exclude acts that we thought plainly constituted sexual abuse, thus leading to failure to identify some sexual abusers. We were also concerned that they could lead to the labelling of some acts as sexually abusive, which plainly were not, and to the labelling of some people as sexual abusers, who plainly were not.

In thinking through the nature of sexual abuse we came to the conclusion that there could be situations in which, although sexual abuse was undoubtedly present, there was no perpetrator of abuse, and also that there could be situations in which although there was undoubtedly an abuser, no one was a victim of abuse.

One example of sexual abuse without an abuser, would be a situation in which a person with severe learning disabilities, whose sexual interest in another person was not reciprocated, and who did not understand the commonly accepted 'rules' about the need for consent, imposed himself in a sexual way on this other, who experienced his attentions as abusive. In this situation we would have abuse, but no abuser, because the protagonist did not understand the rules of the game in which he was involving himself. Such a situation might arise, not simply because the individual in question was unaware and perhaps even because he could not be aware, but because his own introduction to sexual activity had been through abuse by others, which he had come to view as a commonplace. Of course the fact that there is no abuser in a situation of this kind, does not mean that there is no need for action. Obviously, those who experience abuse need help. The abusive behaviour needs to stop, and action needs to be taken to avoid its happening again, either to the person or persons who have experienced abuse to date, or to others, which will include working with the protagonist.

An example of a situation in which there is an abuser, but in which no one is abused, would be one in which the protagonist's actions add up to an act or acts of sexual abuse, because what he does transgresses acceptable behaviour and involves using others as sexual objects without their consent, but from the point of view of the person or persons who are the targets of his heinous acts, there is no apparent abuse.

For instance, a man whose job included the supervision of men with intellectual disabilities as they changed before swimming, arranged mirrors in the changing rooms so that he could watch them undress, and gained sexual satisfaction from doing so. This man's actions in watching these men undoubtedly amounted to sexual abuse, even

³ Depending on where you come from you might be more used to referring to such people as 'mentally handicapped', 'retarded', 'intellectually disabled' or as 'people with learning disabilities', or hearing them referred to using these and similar terms.

though they were unaware of what was going on, and therefore did not experience abuse, or any kind of discomfort. Something similar would clearly be true of the acts of those who make and distribute photographs of children for consumption by paedophiles, provided that the children in question were not harmed either in the making of the images or by their distribution. Lest anyone should fear that I want to act as an apologist for such people, let me be clear: in such circumstances the acts of those who make and distribute such material are undoubtedly those of sexual abusers, even if it is never the case that their abusive acts have any direct impact on the subjects of their abuse, who are thus never abused.

Turning now to bullying that is not sexual in nature, I want to focus, first, on situations in which people who are apparently socially and morally unaware, act in ways that harm others, without being conscious of what they are doing. In such circumstances it makes sense to say that although the individual who is the target of such actions is bullied, whether verbally, physically or psychologically, the one who does the harm is not a bully, because she does not intend by her actions to abuse the power she can exert, to the detriment of those who are harmed by them. Some people will no doubt find this an odd view, because they believe that bullying must be intentional. But is this true?

For bullying to occur, must it be the case that an individual intends, by her behaviour to harm, intimidate, upset or otherwise damage the wellbeing and flourishing of another? Or could it be the case that some of what is perceived and experienced as bullying, did not arise out of bad intentions? To be bullying, must it be pursued because the bully takes a delight in it? Or can it take place without her or him knowing what it is that they are doing?

Thinking about workplace bullying, for example, is it possible that a manager could act in ways that 'bully' a colleague – undercutting his confidence; holding threats over him; monitoring his work excessively; denying him privileges that are awarded to others; allocating unpopular and unattractive duties to him; setting him impossible, or more subtly, barely realisable targets and deadlines; failing to acknowledge his successes, and so on, without being aware of what she is doing?

Without being a bully?

Could it, for example, simply be that because this apparently unreasonable manager lacks empathy, she cannot see the results of her actions? Could she realise that the individual in question is unhappy, but fail to notice that his unhappiness might be related in some ways to her actions? After all, even if her actions are unfair, because not based on rational appraisal of his ability and skill, and of his performance of and commitment to his duties, it might be the case that she simply allocates popular duties to people she likes, merely because she likes them, and not because she actively chooses to withhold them from others (even others that she dislikes). And it is equally possible that she might allocate unpopular duties to those that she thinks will perform them best.

It is important to note that the fact that a manager does not set out to harm those who feel bullied by her, does not mean that nothing needs to be done to improve the lives of those who are harmed by her actions. If she is damaging others, something needs

to be done about it, and a caring employer, whose intention was to address the problems of bullying and harassment, would address, not only the need to review this individual's work to assess whether she was in fact bullying others, but to address the discomfort of anyone who has suffered as a result of her acts, whether or not she intended to harm them.

So far I have looked at situations where the sexually abusive behaviours in which some people engage seem to have no victims, because no one is harmed by their actions, and at situations where, in spite of the fact that sexual abuse goes on, there is no perpetrator of abuse, because the protagonist was unaware of the social rules that govern sexual behaviour with others. I have also considered situations in the workplace, in which it might make sense to say that though there is bullying, there is no perpetrator of bullying, because the person whose actions are experienced as bullying by another, lacks understanding of the effects of both her direct and indirect actions, on the bullied individual.

I want, finally, to focus on another kind of situation in which it might make sense to speak of having bullying without a bully, in which though bullying goes on, those who engage in the behaviours that constitute it, are manipulated by another. Imagine, for example, a university manager who uses her power in ways that are hurtful to another person who perceives them as unfair. Unlike the unaware, unempathic and emotionally illiterate manager in my last example, this individual does what she does deliberately and with skill. Let's assume that our protagonist who I will call Mrs Power, does what she does because she does not like this other person, or is, for some reason, afraid of him and wants to 'keep him in his place'. Perhaps he is better qualified than her, not only for his job, but for hers. Let's assume, also, that she takes some pleasure in pushing her victim - Mr Meek - about psychologically, making his life awkward in different ways. Some, or perhaps all of us in this room, will have come across or even experienced situations of this kind and most of us would probably agree that Mrs P is a bully and that Mr M is bullied.

But now imagine that one of the ways in which Mrs P chooses to abuse and bully Mr Meek involves getting others to do her dirty work for her. She might, for example, encourage or even expect others to be unkind or obstructive to him, or feed them stories about him. She could do so either in an informal and obviously unprofessional way by gossiping about him, or in a more formal and apparently professional way, by telling them, 'confidentially' about, say, the need to be especially vigilant when they are handling his expenses claims and applications for international travel; about the need to ensure that a record is maintained about his attendance at Faculty meetings and about whether he is punctual in submitting documentation such as draft exam papers and mark sheets, because of his tendency to be rather casual and unprofessional about matters of importance. Suppose that these others act in the ways Mrs P expects of them. Are they then, also guilty of bullying? Are they bullies? Or are they merely agents of Mrs P? Or even better, perhaps, are they merely what McLuhan (1967) might refer to as extensions of Mrs P?

In order for them to be bullies, does it have to be the case that those who, at Mrs P's behest, engage in behaviour that has the effect of putting pressure on Mr M, of

making him nervous and unsure of himself, are not only aware of the results of that behaviour, but take some pleasure in watching him squirm? What if they are aware that unless they act as she wishes, Mrs P will withdraw from them 'gifts' of one kind or another, say opportunities to engage in rewarding or enjoyable activities; her support when problems arise, or other privileges?

I want to end this brief presentation by parachuting in some remarks about the place of empathy in bullying, which will form the basis of the paper I offer at next year's conference. Everyone who is aware of others has the ability to empathise, to employ the gift or the developed skill of empathy to a certain extent. Sometimes it is described as the ability to see the world from another person's shoes, but I think it is more than this. It is about the attempt imaginatively to inhabit the other's world - to understand, to experience, and to feel things as another human person might feel them, rather than about the attempt to imagine what one's own experiences - one's own perceptions and feelings would be, in that situation. We can empathise with others in their joy and in their sadness, in their excitement and in their misery and distress. This is one reason that empathy is important in bullying, because empathic ability, combined with good will and caring intentions is what prevents those who do not bully from doing so, or helps them to realize that some of their acts may be having the effect of bullying others, and thus of helping them to modify their behaviour. That is why I suggested earlier that one situation in which we might have bullying without a bully was where the protagonist, lacking empathy, fails to see and understand the results of her actions.

What I have said so far seems to go along with the commonly held and rather cosy view that empathy is always a positive thing. However, it is important to realize that empathy can be used for bad as well as good purposes, an idea that I first explored (Fairbairn, 2008) in the context of a discussion of the ways in which, by changing their image of the 'other', ordinary people like you and me are turned into warriors who are prepared to kill and maim others. It is empathic skill that allows a skilled salesperson to sell you something you didn't know you needed, with money you didn't know you had; and it is empathy that allows those who wish to subjugate others to decide the best tactics to adopt in order to do so, and that allows the best torturers to practice their art so well. And in a similar way, empathy can enable bullies to bully more effectively, because strongly developed empathic skills can allow them to understand their victims and what will upset and unsettle them most.

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