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Gender control - (Re) framing bullying, harassment and gender regulation

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ABSTRACT

In the last decade, discourses of bullying and harassment have featured prominently within educational policy and administration, academic research, popular media, and public dialogue. The ways in which these have been framed has generally been consistent with an individualistic, behavioural perspective that distinctly outlines a ‘bully’ and a ‘victim’- each with specific attributes and performances. This approach arguably simplifies and reduces complex socio-cultural aspects surrounding young people and the wider communities that they are situated within, while simultaneously preventing a deconstruction of gendered, classed and racialised meanings within ‘bullying’ frameworks.

This chapter proposes utilising a post-structural feminist approach to re-frame ideas of bullying and harassment as only one indicator of a wider framework of gender regulation. The role of compulsory heterosexuality and the subsequent binary expectations of femininity and masculinity in the production of this regulation will be reviewed in consideration with wider literature. In consideration of these aspects, the concept of a gender regulation framework will be examined to allow more effective exploration of violence in schools.

INTRODUCTION

The saturation of the ‘bullying’ discourse in academic, educational and popular media has been increasing over the last several years (Carrera, DePalma, & Lameiras, 2011; Walton, 2005). Instances of ‘bullying’, a term that can often obscure the realities of violence and

harassment (Brown, Chesney-Lind, & Stein, 2007), have been placed under scrutiny from the general public and replicated in popular culture (for example: Gorton, 2011; Padva, 2008). The sheer volume of literature around the effects of bullying on the mental health of young people as well as teacher approaches to interventions and the success of various school programs is a testament to the prevalence of the issue in contemporary society.

There is research and anecdotal consensus that physical, psychological, verbal and now, cyber bullying, are occurring within schools across Australia (Skues, Cunningham, & Pokharel, 2005). This chapter does not aim to disprove that these aspects are prevalent or troubling; peer group exclusion and isolation have been well documented to be related to depression and anxiety, mental health difficulties and other negative behavioural and psychological outcomes (Boulton & Smith, 1994; Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2005; Warrington & Younger, 2011). Instead, it aims to review the way in which we define, explain and discuss what bullying actually is, and to critically examine the limits of the current bullying discourses (Ringrose & Renold, 2010). The popular representations of bullying to this point have largely been presented in relation to fixed psychological, behavioural and individualistic concepts of bullying behaviours (Carrera et al., 2011; Walton, 2005). Bullying is defined in broad, inexplicit, or inconsistent ways that often resist accounting for more subliminal instances of social control mechanisms or “socialization process[es]” (Pascoe, 2007, p. 24). This is problematic when viewing ‘bullying’ and ‘harassment’ in a wider framework of socio-cultural practices within schools, including gender/ed expectations and interactions from students, teachers and wider communities.

This chapter will aim to re-frame discourses of bullying in relation to Judith Butler’s discussions around gender performativity (1990) and intelligible bodies (1993, 2004). Literature demonstrating traditional (essentialist) portrayals of bullying, including the bully/victim binary will be deconstructed by reviewing (and proposing) a post-structural feminist theoretical approach. In conclusion, the concept of ‘gender regulation’ will be proposed as an alternative way of viewing and evaluating school based violence and harassment.

TRADITIONAL (ESSENTIALIST) READINGS OF BULLYING

The word ‘bullying’ has saturated schools (both formally and informally), popular culture and academic investment over the last several years. There are a number of advertising

campaigns, government and non-government approaches to encouraging a reduction of ‘bullying behaviours’ in Australian schools (for example: Australian Educational Authorities, 2011; Australian Government, 2011; Marslew, 2005; National Centre Against Bullying, 2011). Alongside this saturation, academic literature poses questions and research around what a bully or a victim (or a bully/victim) is, how their behaviours are informed and the ways in which these behaviours manifest (for example: Boulton & Smith, 1994; Omizo, Omizo, Baxa, & Miyose, 2006; Rigby, 2005; Stevens, De Bourdeaudhuij, & Van Oost, 2002; Wolke, Woods, Stanford, & Schulz, 2001). These questions and approaches represent largely essentialist understandings around the personality traits, characteristics and motivations for both bullies and victims. The basis of essentialism is often “associated with the idea that identities are somehow fundamental and therefore are incapable of change” (Rasmussen, 2006, p. 86), a discourse that Rasmussen (2006) suggests is widespread when discussing sexualities and secondary schooling. Group identities are naturalised as being “internally homogenous, clearly bounded, mutually exclusive, and maintaining specific determinate interests” (Jaggar, 1999, p. 314). Essentially this isolates and disempowers individuals through embedding their social roles with specific and immovable definitions. Consequently, opportunities for placing blame and pathos onto particular identities or aspects of a phenomenon are produced due to the suggestion that constructs are universal and resistant to contextual difference. This approach has largely been adopted by schools, despite the fact that “responses that pathologise wrongdoers may lock them into those pathologised identities” (Bansel, Davies, Laws, & Linnell, 2009, p. 59).

An essentialist reading of bullying manifests in a number of ways. One of the most concerning limits is that instances that occur in schools as ‘one-off’s’ forego recognition as bullying, despite if there is harm involved to students or teachers involved. Bullying is consistently defined in literature as recurring over a period of time, with the actions being repeated (Olweus, 1993; Rigby, 2005). This creates contention when attempting to define violent or damaging occurrences that impact on the schooling environment, such as those described by Stein (2003), relating to sexual discrimination and sexual harassment in the United States. If these instances are unique, despite their level of intent or their level of psychological or physical damage to someone, it is not possible for those interpreting the instances to label them as bullying. This could, in turn, lead to a perception of reduced seriousness or naturalisation of individual instances (Bansel et al., 2009), and an inability to review the instances as part of a larger social or cultural mechanism.

Another boundary of the bullying discourse is that the ‘victim’ is said to be directly targeted by an individual or group (Omizo et al., 2006; Rigby, 2005). This indicator excludes occasions that result in individuals or groups being excluded or victimised when the perception is that there is no direct motivation by the ‘bully/ies’ (see, for example: Bansel et al., 2009). Teachers are less able to intervene if it’s seen as ‘just joking’ or ‘not serious’, perhaps if it is not seen as vehement or deliberate, however, this may not necessarily correlate with victim perception of events or the feelings that they experience of exclusion, shame or other negative emotions (for example: Pascoe, 2007; Ryan & Morgan, 2011).

Finally, bullying is defined as being ‘unprovoked’ (Omizo et al., 2006)- that is the bully may specifically target a victim, but this victim did not provoke that action- as well as the bully being either stronger or being perceived to be stronger than the victim (Boulton & Underwood, 1992). Again this is a boundary that restricts the visibility and the ability to intervene in acts of violence. How is provocation identified? The identification of provocation within schools would essentially come to a viewer, or a mediator of an incident, with their own set of assumptions, perceptions, values and histories that interact with a possible judgment. This is potentially embedded with inequity through the strong reliance on subjective arbitrations. Additionally, the perpetrator themselves may feel provoked simply by the existence of another person’s being that resides in opposition to dominant views or understandings (Warrington & Younger, 2011).

These definitive boundaries work to constrict the ability of teachers and institutions to perceive applications of power and violence among children, as well as simultaneously linking explicit and narrow criteria to student interpretation of bullying. The space outside of this definition holds possibilities for a wide, diverse and dynamic range of power relations and socio-cultural control mechanisms. These, distinctly because of their location outside normative (and dominant) bullying understandings are less visible and present less possibility for intervention.

Overall it has been suggested that traditional bully discourses that are built around bully/victim binaries are simplistic and are unable to offer either practical resources for teachers and institutions nor symbolic assistance to interpret instances of violence (Bansel et al., 2009; Carrera et al., 2011; Horton, 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). By posing constricted and explicit definitions of what a bully, victim and incident of bullying is, it is unfeasible to take into account issues regarding race, class, gender, sex and other variables

embedded with socio-cultural power. Critically, the traditional bullying discourse is unable to account for complex situations and incidents that can be read in terms of power structures, individual performances, interactional processes and institutional pejoratives that are entrenched with meanings around what is acceptable within a heteronormative social structure. The ways in which those who view the bullying interpret it and then apply their own understandings- or conversely communicate their meanings to students who then adjust their performances- are equally as important as the individual incidents or acts. A revised theoretical framework of is required to gain a more flexible and contextual approach to an analysis of these interpretations and interventions.

RE-FRAMING 'BULLYING' USING POST-STRUCTURAL FEMINISM

Post-structuralist approaches have been used to describe “the mechanisms of power and how meaning and power are organised, enacted and opposed in our society” (Blaise, 2005, p. 15). It allows the critique of traditional binaries that have power embedded within them, for example girl/boy, gay/straight, rich/poor etc. Aspects of language, discourse, subjectivity, agency and power can be examined in relation to the constructs of dominant or normative meanings, and a more complex portrayal of how power structures are mediated can be produced.

When feminism is intertwined with post structuralism, they create a flexible framework that allows the analysis of gender and why gender inequity exists. By looking at power structures that create oppression, post-structural feminism can explore how oppression works and how resisting gender inequities may be possible (Blaise, 2005). Importantly, it also allows for an exploration of how “girls and women actively position themselves in the discourses that subordinate them as well as consideration of the workings of patriarchal structures” (Weiner, 1994, p. 2) within microcosms like small groups or schools or within wider communities or societies.

Finally a post-structuralist feminist approach centralises the importance of the body and the meanings that these bodies have inscribed upon them. Not only do individuals embody socio-cultural understandings, but they also work as mechanisms that communicate these meanings to others, establishing and maintaining a foundation of social and cultural control (Garrett, 2004). In this way certain constructions, or ways of being, are normalised, privileged and celebrated over others.

In terms of school or peer based performances, this approach represents a flexible and thorough means of interpretation and exploration. Events that may be perceived as normal, everyday occurrences can be re-interpreted as mechanisms for social control and constructs of normative or dominant expectations. Instead of viewing isolated incidents as singular, "...a moment, an apparently isolated act or incident, is interleaved with other moments and acts" (Bansel et al., 2009, p. 66). This is particularly the case when reviewing constructs of gender and the ways in which intelligible gender identities (Renold, 2006) are imparted through individual, interactional and institutional exchanges.

Post structural feminism resists and critiques the "binary logic of protection (i.e. 'victims' of bullying) and vilification (i.e. pathologising 'the bully')" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 574) offered by traditional bullying discourse. Much like the intelligible femininities and masculinities operating within school communities, the bully/victim binary is dominant within academic research and popular culture, despite its potential to "simplify and individualise complex social and cultural phenomena" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 574). Ringrose and Renold (2010) investigate the potential for students to be labelled as a bully or a victim given the wider public understandings of these terms, and frame their paper around what is an accepted or normative bullying act within heteronormative masculinities and femininities. Interestingly, many of the bullying characteristics purveyed by research were either avoided or simply inapplicable to the participants in their research. Bullying contained vastly different meanings depending on the context and the gender of those involved. Boys who targeted females fell outside of dominant (intelligible) masculine performances; it was untenable to be both masculine and a bully of girls. It was equally as abject to be a boy victim, which was "rendered invisible... by the school and the parents" (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 584). Different instances were responded to differently, identifying the concept of an umbrella category of 'bullying' as being flawed and superficial. Power relationships, discourses and subjectivities demonstrated a role in interpreting and intervening in bullying instances.

This was also demonstrated in Meyer's (2008) research regarding teacher non-interventions. Her research specifically reviewed gendered harassment, and the fact that although this was the most dominant form (and motivation) of bullying in schools in Canada and the U.S.A., it was also one that proved the most inconsistent in terms of teacher responses. Barriers or motivators for intervention included institutional and social influences (external) as well as

personal identities and experiences (internal). It was obvious from her research that gendered harassment had personal, social, cultural and institutional meanings and power embedded within it, and was far more problematic to counter than more 'simple' instances.

These reflections detail the complex and multi-faceted, contextual nature of what is simplistically referred to as 'bullying'. The concluding section of this chapter will propose an alternative to viewing violence, both in repeated circumstances as well as in 'one off' instances.

A GENDER REGULATION FRAMEWORK

It has been suggested that the pathologised participant terminologies of 'bully' and 'victim' need to be destabilised both in language and expectations (Bansel et al., 2009; Carrera et al., 2011; Ringrose & Renold, 2010). Not only are these identities reiterating dominant orders of subjectivities (Bansel et al., 2009), they are also situated within and representative of the required language, behaviours, attitudes and performances that are required to demonstrate intelligible, binary forms of masculinity and femininity (Renold, 2006), and the linked notion of compulsory heterosexuality. Through the repeated invocation of particular gendered beings (bullies), and the repudiation of others (victims), there is a consistent establishment of gendered expectations within communities (Butler, 1993). Continuing along this thread, it logically follows that being accepted into peer groups effectively quantifies and demonstrates the depth of normative gender definitions (Warrington & Younger, 2011). Those who are not restricted and policed fall within accepted and dominant gender forms, iterating priorities of contextual heterosexuality.

Pascoe refers to these dynamic (and contextually based) inclusions and exclusions as "socialization process[es] in which all youth- boys and girls, straight and gay, feminine and masculine- suffer" (2007, p. 24). This frame effectively portrays the extent and possibility of everyday actions that invoke and inscribe gendered norms through repetition, while concurrently establishing an abject other, a constituted outside to be avoided (Blaise, 2005; Pascoe, 2007). Several studies have detailed the outcomes of these processes, including male expectations of emphasised femininities (Renold, 2003, 2006), the ways in which females generate and regulate classed hetero-femininities (Archer, Halsall, & Hollingworth, 2007; Renold & Ringrose, 2008), male production and maintenance of ideals of acceptable masculinity (Martino, 2000), institutionalised gendered messages (DePalma & Atkinson,

2010; Keddie, 2007; Røthing, 2008) and institutional violence (Stein, 2003). All of these purvey the notion of compulsory heterosexuality at some point of their production, and many discuss the inherent subjectivities that are created and fashioned within cultural techniques and regimes of practice (Martino, 2000; Rasmussen, 2006).

Judith Butler's (1990) notion of gender performance is underpinned by the understanding that subjects are culturally produced through the process of subjectification. . She suggests that "gender is not a question of having or being, but of doing, and it is something one is compelled to do in order to be constituted as a recognisable human subject" (Brady & Schirato, 2011, pp. 44-45). In this way gender is conceptualised as a performance, and individuals can be seen as 'doing' girl or boy, positioning themselves as a culturally sanctioned, intelligible product (Butler, 2004). Within what Butler (1990) terms the 'heterosexual matrix', heterosexual binaries of what is masculine or feminine, male or female, become regulated through ongoing and repeated performances. "... Gender is not just natural, or something one is, but rather something we all produce through our actions. By repeatedly acting 'feminine' or 'masculine' we actually create those categories" (Pascoe, 2007, p. 14). These categories are inherently linked to compulsory heterosexuality, "enforced both through rewards for appropriate gendered and heterosexual behaviours and through punishments for deviations from the conventional or 'normal' ways of being a girl or a boy" (Blaise, 2005, p. 22). In this way it is possible to view compulsory heterosexuality as an institution, embedded with practices of discipline and power, and the capability to alter social relationships.

What follows then is the crux of the issue; the possibility (and need) to re-conceptualise bullying as a system of ordered performances, centred on complex inclusions and exclusions (Benjamin, Hall, Collins, & Sheehy, 2003) related to dominant gendered forms. This can be achieved through both research and practice reviewing (and rejecting) the discursive limits of essentialist bullying definitions, and framing interpersonal relationships between students, teachers and institutions as sites of subjectivity and power, working within a grid of gender intelligibility (Butler, 2004). Future research contains possibilities for viewing, examining and deconstructing compulsive heterosexuality (Pascoe, 2007) along with the dynamic manifestations of language, discourse, subjectivity, agency and power that accompany. Research that explicitly examines cultures of compulsory heterosexuality and the ways in

which individual, interactional and institutional elements interact with this concept will potentially offer dynamic and evolving sociological explorations within education.

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