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Bullying in a lifelong perspective

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I Aim of the project

In this presentation, we argue for a contextualized understanding of bullying. We address the complexity involved in studying and understanding bullying, especially in relation to the way people describe their experiences and understand them in the light of their actual life arrangements. We do so by concentrating on their personal descriptions, meaning making and interpretations of their experiences.

We are challenged by several questions such as:

- How can we 'bullying' as a phenomenon that is moving over time and across contexts where people participate?
- Can we 'just' study the meaning making of bullying experiences or are they so entangled in other important life incidences that it does not make sense to study bullying experiences separately?

- Do all experiences play a role in the lived life that follows (or should we consider a hierarchy of experiences)?
- How do we ensure that the complexity and the course of life are explored in relation to the bullying experiences; and how should we understand the way the past is ‘gnawing’ into the present?

The structure of this presentation is the following:

- 1) Presentation of our theoretical (and methodological) approach
- 2) Presentation of some findings from our empirical work and some preliminary analyses
- 3) Discussion of possible theoretical and methodology pathways and challenges

We also planned to discuss more specifically the school as a powerful scholastic context. However, our empirical work so far does not allow us to do this on a very sophisticated level. But maybe in the discussion we can all go further into that theme.

II Theoretical approach

Bullying constitutes the topic of our study. The focus is: How do adults handle their childhood experiences of bullying?

Our preoccupation is:

How do we include a historical perspective in order to understand the individual life course, without reproducing an understanding of the relation between past experiences and the present lives (that people live) which is dominated by causal and linear thinking – an approach often seen in this field of research.

Both cultural-historical and activity theoretical approaches as well as post structural theories have been sources of inspiration in our attempt to find ways of integrating a dynamic understanding of bullying. This should be of no surprise in this conference. Unfortunately, time does not allow us to unfold aspects of our theoretical framework here, but lets us quickly introduce a few important theoretical points.

Following Dreier (2008), we want to argue for a contextualized understanding of bullying – which focuses on the person in relations and moving in and across concrete social contexts over time.

Moreover, we seek to understand, how bullying experiences are influencing the ongoing identity work in a life-span perspective. Inspired by Bruner (1990), we suggest that an important step towards a more encompassing understanding of bullying is to focus on the interconnectedness between bullying experiences and the lived life on the one hand, and bullying and identity work on the other.

One way of doing so is to draw on what Bruner calls a ‘folk psychological’ understanding of bullying, and to illuminate both the cultural and the individual meaning-making processes connected to bullying and bullying experiences. In a moment we will show how this has been our focus in the first part of our empirical study.

In accordance with a life-span perspective we have been interested in different approaches to time. Inspired by Middleton and Brown (2005), we understand the present as being infused with the burden of a past that does not pass, and does not ever escape us. However, it is not a useful metaphor to think of ourselves as ‘containers’ of our own experiences, as is common in the cognitivistic approaches. According to Middleton and Brown, experiences from the past are rather ‘gnawing’ into the present. They also emphasize that past and present should not be separated spatially. The question however, is how does this take place?

In relation to our research project, this means that bullying experiences should not be separated in 'then' and 'now'. Rather, the descriptions we get will most likely be a fusion between 'real' past incidents and 'actual present'.

As a result, our centre of interest is not to search for a veridical recall of specific past incidences. Nor do we want to address bullying experiences as being deterministic - forming the entire life-course to come. As our preliminary empirical analysis reveals understanding people's experiences in the past in relation to their life-course is much more complex than that.

II Background

Few studies have addressed questions on how adults handle their childhood experiences of bullying.

A general view on the work conducted on bullying and the impact or persistence of (school) bullying experiences in the childhood indicates a range of negative physical, emotional and cognitive consequences with implications for development and learning (Lindberg, 2007; TRYG, Sourander & Helstelä, 2000; Rigby, 2002).

Further, in his book, 'New Perspectives on Bullying', Ken Rigby, the Australian social scientist argues that revenge is not an uncommon answer to bullying – for instance in *College Killing* (Rigby, 2002:19; Rabøl Hansen, *I don't like Mondays*, Information, 2008).

Additional statistical results show:

- A connection between bullying and life satisfaction
- A connection between bullying, depression and bad physical health.
- Persistence of bullying experiences in childhood to adolescence (Sourander and Helstelä, 2000): Bullying and victimizations are often persistent and associated with severe emotional and behaviour problems.
- A complex association between age of the adult and the way they are remembering and affected by their bullying experiences later in life (Jordonova et al., 2007). The findings also suggest that adults in their mid-life compared with young adults and older ones represent a specific vulnerability.

In the studies that have been conducted so far the general approach seems to follow a rather traditional approach to bullying (i.e. Olweus) which focuses on:

- 1) The individual

- 2) A causalistic and linear understanding of the consequences of bullying.

We suggest however, that new theoretical understandings and concepts are relevant and necessary and that further research on the extent and persistence of bullying experiences is needed, especially focusing on:

- 1) *How* adults handle and live with their bullying experiences.
- 2) *The individual meaning and interpretation* of the incidents and experiences in question (i.e. Jordonova et al. 2007).
- 3) *If and how* persons position themselves and are positioned differently in the bullying over time and across contexts.

III Research methodology

Our research methodology consists of several approaches. First of all, EXbus has a website where people are invited to tell about their bullying experiences and post them anonymously on the site. Several (26) have done so. The narratives are constructed around specific questions that of course influence the way that people have described their experiences.

The structure of the main part of the narratives is also dominated by a mono-causalistic approach, which is not uncommon in autobiographic narratives (cf. Bruner, 1990). Furthermore, only persons with some degree of 'victimization' have responded (no 'bullies'), and several persons report

great wounds and social uneasiness, unhappiness etc. - due to bullying in school.

The individual reports are important. However, we need more elaborate and complex material to explore our research topic in all its complexity:

- First, other dimensions in life should be explored in relation to bullying experiences.
- Secondly, it is also necessary to investigate how the bullies and the ones that have been witnessing bullying handle their experiences.

Before we go any further we would like quickly to present our research design, which consists of several different approaches:

Research design:

- a) Individual and group interviews in two Danish adult schools of higher education
- b) 'Memory work': Inspired by Haug (1987) and Widerberg (2001)
- c) Qualitative explorative interviews with adults with different kinds of bullying experiences in their childhood.
- d) Quantitative research

Today, though, we will mainly draw on findings from our qualitative interviews with adults having experienced bullying and from our study in the two Danish adult schools of higher education.

IV Empirical findings

As already stated, we are faced with several challenges in our work. One important challenge is: How can we ‘catch’ a phenomenon such as bullying that is moving over time and across contexts.

Generally the participants in the interviews seem to have no problem in finding concrete and specific episodes that they categorize as ‘bullying’ – even though the word bullying did not exist when they attended school.

However the interviews conducted in the two Danish adult schools of higher education also show a blurred, grey zoned and complicated understanding of bullying in relation for us as researchers to encircle the phenomenon as well as the concept.

So the challenge still remains: How we on a more detailed level understand ‘bullying’ – what counts as bullying and what is only ‘teasing’.

Ingrid, one participant in our study, is in her late 40’ies, and does not have any difficulty describing bullying. Contrary to the reports from the Exbus

website, Ingrid has not been bullied herself – but she is convinced that she has watched other kids bullying and being bullied.

The interview with Ingrid allows us to discuss an important finding in our study: namely that even though she has not been bullied herself, her position as a bystander never the less seems to have consequences for her as an adult

Ingrid gives several reasons for not participating directly – one being that her parents were teachers at the school that she attended, and therefore, she had to be very careful about her conduct.

Ingrid describes in detail one of the incidents:”... some(body) followed that girl on their bikes. I also followed her but I was in the back of the group. I didn’t bike as quickly as the ones just behind her you see, but we hunted her [...] We could have driven her to death, and I didn’t say anything. I was there, I was part of that group, I supported them I feel. I should have said no [...] I was part of it [the bullying] without knowing it.”

What is interesting here is, that even 30 years after the incident - and even though Ingrid ‘only’ was a by-stander – she still seems to be marked by feelings of guilt and shame.

Another participant in our study is Paul, who is in his mid-60ies.

Like Ingrid, Paul does not have any difficulties in describing his bullying experiences in childhood . For Paul they consisted of a systematic exclusion of him in school by his class-mates and one of his teachers. He describes in detail how he experienced the other pupils who bullied him 'as arrogant,' and he uses the word 'revenge' to describe one of the motivating factors for his later successful career. 'I wanted to show them!'

What is interesting here is that Paul underlines how he interprets his experiences with bullying and being humiliated in school. On the one hand, it has caused a 'low self- esteem'; and on the other, the bullying has also resulted in a kind of 'fuel' for his later career.

The complexity involved in Paul's different understanding of his bullying experiences suggests that meaning- making seems to be an important focus in our analysis followed by theoretical informed analyses.

2) This leads us to the second important challenge that we addressed in the beginning of this presentation:

- Do all experiences play a role in the lived life that follows? Or should we consider a hierarchy of experiences?) i.e.: Can we ‘just’ study the meaning-making of bullying experiences - or are they so entangled in other important life incidences that it does not make sense to study bullying experiences separately?

As already argued the aim of our research is to address the complexity involved in studying and understanding bullying, especially in relation to the way people describe their experiences and understand them in the light of their actual life arrangements. We do so by concentrating on their personal descriptions, meaning-makings and interpretations of both positive and negative periods and incidents – other than bullying.

As a starting point in our interviews, we therefore aim at exploring what appears meaningful for the participants today. Drawing on Bertelsen (1994) and Mathiassen (2005) and by focusing on what people are engaged in - in their present life and what seems meaningful to them a part from or in addition to their bullying experiences - we thereby avoid a too causalistic narrative.

Our findings so far demonstrate that this approach produces rich and multi-faceted material that opens up for descriptions of many courses, paths and routes. This we see as very central and important in the understanding of bullying experiences in a life-span perspective.

However, a challenge for us now becomes how to deal with our theoretical ambition to encounter the complexity involved in our topic when the participants do not understand their experiences in the same way as we do:

Paul's understanding of his bullying experiences reflects for instance a very linear and causalistic understanding of his experiences:

Bullying => Humiliation => feelings of inferiority => low self esteem => revenge => fuel for his later career.

In Paul's meaning-making, his bullying experiences have no doubt influenced his life course both positively and negatively.

Positively (it can be argued) because he has been filled with a feeling of revenge: 'I wanted to show them' - which has been 'useful' for his career.

Negatively, because he feels it has inhibited the developing of a secure and positive self-esteem to some extent. In Paul's opinion, it is therefore

obvious that everything should be done to prevent children from being bullied, something he emphasized in his upbringing of his own children.

However, we question Paul's meaning-making processes in the interview, as he is referring to other 'humiliating experiences' that did not happen in school but in other life contexts, which we understand also having contributed to his feeling of humiliation.

When we asked him, if these heavy and burdensome experiences (values taken from his own descriptions) could be part of his 'fuel'. He listens but refuses.

Our new challenge here is that our striving for complex descriptions is often contrary to the meaning-making of our participants. In relation to our preliminary analyses, Paul's story contains a very complex pattern of events, which indicates that many other and painful experiences have also influenced his life-course. For instance:

- His physical condition: weak, wear glasses
- His poor socio-economic background
- His ongoing identity-work: When he becomes a teenager he learns that his father is not his real father. Further his mother tells him, that

his real father is a ‘bad’ person, an alcoholic and a criminal (he is disturbed, he needs to understand his roots – is that the ‘fuel’)

- His mother who several times puts him in difficult positions by for instance lying to him about his father.
- The need for meaning-making –ditto
- His ‘genes’ – is he reproducing his fathers ‘foodmad?-steps’?

Adventurous, courageous and restlessness

However, if we re-approach Paul’s interpretation, it could be argued that his insisting on the bullying as fuel for his actual successful career is somewhat meaningful for him - as a fusion between past and present.

However, in our view – his interpretation is much too simple (top of the iceberg)!!

IV Discussion: Important theoretical and methodology pathways and challenges

Summing up:

- 1) We have found it very productive and enlightening to follow our participants’ meaning-making processes in relation to their bullying experiences in the light of their actual life arrangements.

- 2) Also, it is important to extend the analysis by addressing all the dimensions in the descriptions. This enables us to show another level of complexity than a traditional perspective.
- 3) Further, the focus on our participants' meaning- making process' seems to be a proper and functional unit of analysis followed by theoretical informed analyses.
- 4) Finally, the bullying experiences seem to be connected with 'key events'. When the participants describe their bullying experiences (in the past) they often continue to repeat the same incidence – for Paul it was the football

In the following we shall try to elaborate on our theoretical points and methodological challenges.

- Complexity vs. consequences
- Bullying as 'fuel'/useful vs. harmful

We have not touched properly upon the central dimensions in our data concerning:

- 1) responsibility
- 2) guilt
- 3) shame
- 4) intentionality
- 5) empathy

6) tension between bullying as a group phenomenon and the individual level

We would like to end this presentation by highlighting the need to develop new theoretical understandings and concepts in order to address the many under researched and complex aspects related to the issue of bullying. As already mentioned there is a particularly strong need to investigate in more detail:

- 1) *How* adults handle and live with their bullying experiences
- 2) *The individual meaning* and interpretation of the incidents and experiences in question
and
- 3) *If and how* persons position themselves and are positioned differently in the bullying over time and across contexts.