

2 The social concept of bullying: philosophical reflections on definitions

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We offer exemplars illustrating how a society lives in its youth.
(Daiute et al. 2006: 10)

Introduction

In her book on youth conflict and development, American psychologist Colette Daiute observes that a society lives in its youth. The problems that youths face are not peripheral to society, but mirror central problems of social life in important ways. This approach may seem obvious in cases of extreme conflict, such as when societies are in the midst of civil war or seeking to rebuild themselves after conflict, or when they are torn apart by intense social, racial or ethnic violence. But it may be the case more generally as well. Understanding the problems youths face is central to understanding the societies in which they live.

School bullying can also tell us something about how a society lives in its youth. In an international context, many instances of bullying need to be understood in relation to broad social problems like racial discrimination, sexual harassment and homophobia (Meyer 2007a). But here, I focus on how school bullying needs to be understood in terms of the basic challenges of living in a community with others. I seek to contribute to understanding school bullying as a social phenomenon rather than as a relation between individual bullies and victims. This approach reflects recent research that focuses on the social dynamics of bullying (Eriksson et al. 2002) in contrast to the individualistic approach that has dominated the field. Shifting the analytical lens to the group does not devalue the meaning of bullying for individuals who are involved in its processes, which in some cases creates meaning that lasts into adult life. But this analytical shift focuses on how group processes produce social recognition from being included in a group, as well as pain and humiliation from being excluded. As a researcher and a parent, I have struggled to understand why – even after removing the child(ren) directly responsible for incidents of serious bullying – the negative dynamics within a class

remain unchanged and why different children take on new roles in the dynamics of bullying. An individualistic approach to bullying is inadequate to grasp this pattern.

Background on bullying research

Bullying in Denmark, as in other countries, is a widespread and serious problem. In a 2008 study of sixth-grade students¹ (12-to-13 years of age) conducted by the National Council for Children, 32 per cent of the children surveyed said that they had been bullied, while 20 per cent responded that they had engaged in bullying (Pedersen 2008). Some acts of bullying and some school responses may be in violation of the 1989 Human Rights Convention on the Rights of the Child. Article 16 of the Convention ensures children the right to protection against unlawful attacks on their honour or reputation; article 19 ensures children the right of protection from physical or mental violence, injury or abuse; and article 28 stipulates that school discipline must be consistent with a child's human dignity. When the collaborative research project eXbus began its work, we issued an open invitation on our website for adults to post their stories of childhood bullying anonymously. Phrases that appeared in these stories include 'psychic terror', 'total isolation', 'depression', 'thoughts of suicide', 'evil', 'powerlessness', 'humiliation' and others (www.exbus.dk, Galleriet).

In Scandinavia, research on this subject began in the early 1970s with the publication of work by Peter-Paul Heinemann (1972) and Dan Olweus (1973). Further public concern about school bullying in Norway was sparked in 1982 by the suicides of three boys between the ages of 10 and 14. Newspaper reports on the suicides stated that they were likely to have been caused by severe bullying (Olweus 1993a: 1–2). Similarly, public shock in Japan was generated in 1986 when a 13-year-old schoolboy committed suicide in Tokyo. His classmates had treated him as if he were dead and had even staged a mock funeral for him in their classroom (Morita et al. 1999 in Smith et al. 1999: 311).

The words '*mobning*'/'*mobbning*' in the Scandinavian languages and 'bullying' in English each have their own genealogy. When Heinemann introduced the term '*mobbning*' in Swedish, he was referring to group violence against a deviant individual, which occurs and stops suddenly (Smith et al. 2002: 1119). Heinemann borrowed the term from Konrad Lorenz, an Austrian zoologist and Nobel Prize winner, whose 1966 book, *On Aggression*, was popular reading. The Swedish translator of Lorenz's book used the term

¹ This corresponds to seventh grade/year in American or British schools.

mobbning to refer to a collective attack by a group of animals on an animal of another species, usually a natural enemy of the group (Olweus in Smith et al. 1999: 8–10). In this translation of Lorenz's book, *mobbning* was also used to characterise the action of a school class or group of soldiers who ganged up on a deviant individual. This initial use of the term to focus on a collective group resonated with the English word 'mob', which refers to a loosely organised group that is accidentally formed and relatively short-lived. Despite this linguistic emphasis on the group, Olweus quickly sought to shift the meaning of *mobbning* to the role of individuals. He argued that a focus on the group obscures the role of individuals, puts the blame on the victim, who may be assumed to provoke the 'normal' majority, and treats the group as a temporary constellation. Olweus's work has shaped the prevailing view that bullying is systematic, repetitive harassment of an individual(s) by one or more individuals.

In English, current usage draws upon terms such as 'bullying', 'bully/victim problems' and 'victimisation', and there is no reference to a mob or group. The history of the word 'bully' also traces a shift from an earlier positive connotation to its current negative meaning. 'Bully' has its etymological roots in the Middle Dutch word *boele*, which means 'sweetheart', 'fine fellow' or 'blusterer' (in Smith et al. 2002: 1120). In both the Scandinavian and English cases, the history of the word moves from its more positive meanings (e.g. normal group behaviour or individual well-meaning behaviour) to more negative meanings. This linguistic shift corresponds to a moral shift as well. Whereas earlier attitudes held that 'children will be children', today there is a widespread moral disapprobation of bullying. On the one hand, we can applaud this moral shift for bringing public and political attention to issues of prevention and intervention. On the other hand, we must be wary that this moral shift may also represent a moralising approach to bullying, which could undercut researchers' ability to analyse its fundamental dynamics.

Attending to language opens up the more general question of whether it is possible to define bullying cross-culturally. Is there a common phenomenon of bullying that is expressed differently in various languages, or is the experience of bullying culturally and linguistically coded? Here, I give a few examples of variations across language. In Japanese, the counterpart for bullying is the term *ijime*, which is loosely translated to mean treating someone badly, teasing, being cruel or annoying. The Japanese term emphasises social manipulation and refers to mental or physical suffering within a group-interaction process (ibid.: 1121). In Italian, the terms *prepotenza* and *violenza* are used to signify bullying and imply violent, physical actions. In French, the phrase *faits de violence* is used and *malmenances* has also been suggested (ibid.: 129–309). There is

no comparable Spanish term, however, and some Spanish researchers suggest that this semantic absence reveals a deficiency in social understanding (Smith et al. 1999: 161). Even within one language, like English, there are several national and cultural variations related to the connotations of bullying. For example, in Scotland, there is a strong oral tradition that discourages victims from telling: ‘Tell-tale tit, your mammy cannae knit. . .’ (ibid.: 94). This oral tradition gives a very different meaning to bullying than its American usage, which associates bullying with harassment and, as such, refers to actions that are punishable by law (e.g. sexual harassment).

Some problems of definition

As the resident philosopher of the eXbus research group, it fell on my shoulders to reflect on definitions of bullying. In my view, it is neither desirable nor possible to develop a definition of bullying that is universally valid or final. Research in this field takes place in specific national, cultural and linguistic environments – all of which contribute components to the more general understanding of bullying. Although it is impossible to develop a universally valid definition, we can learn a great deal from the way researchers have defined bullying: what these definitions take for granted and what they overlook (Eriksson et al. 2002: 19). We can learn about the family of concepts to which these definitions belong. We can learn what kind of dualisms these definitions call forth. In this way, studying definitions is useful in developing a critical lens to view the research in this field. Critical insights also point to alternative paths for understanding bullying. Before I turn to the specific definitions of bullying, I present some of the problems with definitions that one faces along the way.

Firstly, there is the question: what is a definition? Researchers into bullying typically assume that the purpose of a definition is to place a specific phenomenon into a subset under a general category or concept. For example, Olweus considers bullying to be a subset of the more general category of aggression. By this, he means that bullying is always a form of aggression, but that there are also forms of aggression that are not bullying (Smith et al. 1999: 13). With this approach, what is true of the general category (i.e. aggression) is also true of the subset (i.e. bullying). If we assume, as Olweus does, that aggression is intentional and harmful behaviour, then it follows that bullying is also intentional and harmful.

But this basic approach to definitions may be misguided. It may be more useful to think of a definition not in terms of placing a specific phenomenon under a general category, but instead in terms of interpreting a phenomenon as a complex constellation of elements. With the

subset approach to definitions, the assumptions made about the general category become definitive for the specific phenomenon. For example, if bullying is a subset of aggressive behaviour, then bullies are aggressors. But this approach precludes the possibility that individuals may sometimes be bullies and sometimes victims. Understanding large-scale atrocities brings forth the notion of the 'grey zone', which refers to a physical and moral space where individuals are both victims and perpetrators.² In bullying, there may also be a grey zone where children contribute to the harmful patterns of behaviour from which they also suffer. This example illustrates that the assumption that a definition of bullying must be placed as a subset within a general category limits being able to understand the complex subjective experiences involved.

Secondly, there is the question: what is the process of developing a definition? Philosophers in critical theory and in science studies point to the social history of knowledge. Knowledge is a result of processes of struggle over legitimacy and justification. Uncovering this social history involves asking: what institutions and paradigms have the power to name or define? Which perspectives are included or excluded in the process of defining knowledge? What are the ongoing effects of dominant paradigms? In the research on bullying, the dominant paradigm draws upon methods of research from individual psychology and education. With the growing number of social psychologists and sociologists contributing to research on bullying, this paradigm is now being challenged (Eriksson et al. 2002: 14). But in practice, the dominance of the individual-psychology paradigm has resulted in a highly homogeneous research field. Researchers have typically adopted a definition of bullying as a form of individual aggression and applied this definition to their own national and cultural contexts, and the homogeneity of the research reinforces the legitimacy of this definition. The strategy of developing a definition that is considered context-independent is well known within philosophy and the philosophy of science. This strategy assumes that a researcher can formulate universal principles that are subsequently applied in practice; it could be called a top-down approach to knowledge (Schott 2003: 107–10). By contrast, a bottom-up approach emphasises that knowledge always emerges from the social life of participants. This approach acknowledges that there is a concrete descriptive dimension of knowledge, and also that knowledge is open-ended, changing and revisable rather than fixed and unchanging. A bottom-up approach to

² Primo Levi, an Austrian-born Jew who wrote about his experiences at Auschwitz, used the term 'grey zone' to describe the Kapos in the death camps, prisoners who were given power over other prisoners in exchange for food or privileges from the Nazis (Card 1999: 7–8).

knowledge calls attention to how the users of concepts are also producers of these concepts. In the context of bullying, a bottom-up approach seeks to reflect on how students and teachers define bullying based on their own experiences, and how one best involves them in the process of debate (Lee 2006: 64–8). If a definition is context-dependent, produced by its users and revisable, then it is likely that the definition will be flexible enough to cover a range of meanings and be open enough to incorporate new meanings along the way.

Thirdly, there is the question: which perspectives are articulated in definitions? If definitions are the result of conflicts and debates, then there is a risk that some perspectives are recognised as legitimate while others are dismissed. In the field of bullying, this means that we may ask whether there are systematic differences in the perspectives of teachers, parents and students, and to what extent a research definition acknowledges these differences. Many researchers do acknowledge such differences: for example, some suggest that teachers have a broader concept of bullying than students, since they focus on bullying as a form of both physical and psychological power (*ibid.*: 64–5). Other researchers suggest that students have a more inclusive idea of bullying than teachers, since they view bullying as a systematic abuse of power; hence, their understanding is closer to the researchers' approach (Naylor et al. 2006: 554–5). From a practical point of view, the observation that students have a more inclusive definition of bullying than teachers may be linked to the observation that teachers do not see many of the incidents of bullying that children see. From a theoretical point of view, this observation suggests that the researcher may be well-advised to 'adopt the perspective of the child rather than that of the adult' (Lee 2006: 71). Such an approach does not mean that researchers should simply mirror the perspective of a child; rather, they should seek to understand the complexities of the world that produces these perspectives (Hastrup 1992: 73).

With these clusters of problems with regard to definitions in mind, I now turn to some of the leading definitions of bullying. My discussion does not pretend to be inclusive. A quick online search for 'bullying' in English during February 2009 produced over two million hits, with 300,000 articles listed as research articles. A search in Danish produced over 58,000 articles on bullying, with over 10,000 listed as research articles. Such a massive output attests to the growing importance of this subject. My goal is not to give a comprehensive overview, but to reflect on three paradigms that emerge when one attempts to become oriented in the field. I do not use the term 'paradigm' in the strict sense often found within the natural sciences, where it refers to the prevailing method of experimentation and interpretation. But I am suggesting that the social

scientists who have studied bullying have reached widespread agreement on certain definitions that map out the field. My goal is to focus on the general assumptions and implications of these definitions, rather than on the details and modifications made by individual authors.

Paradigms of bullying definitions

Here, I examine three definitions of bullying: (1) bullying as a form of individual aggression; (2) bullying as a form of social violence; and (3) bullying as a form of dysfunctional group dynamics. These definitions map out the leading conceptual approaches to defining bullying. Although my interest is more in the pattern of the definition and less in the contribution of any particular author, Dan Olweus holds an exceptional position. Olweus's approach has dominated this field of research since the 1970s, and he gave his own name to the intervention programmes he designed. A review of the literature from 2002 indicates that three out of five articles in the field are influenced by his work (Eriksson et al. 2002: 51). The primary differences between the three definitions I examine here relate to the ontological question: what is the nature of bullying (ibid.: 98)? Answers to this question have implications for the epistemological question: how does one recognise bullying? In other respects, however, there is a good deal of overlap between these three definitions.

The first definition of bullying as a form of individual aggression was formulated by Olweus, and it continues to hold a dominant position in the field. Olweus summarises his definition as follows: 'A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students' (Smith et al. 1999: 10ff.) Olweus stresses that these negative actions are intentional forms of 'harm-doing' and that bullying is a subset of aggressive behaviour. Violence, which he defines as using one's own body or an object to inflict injury on another individual, is also a subset of aggressive behaviour. Some bullying is carried out by physical means, so there is an overlap between these two subsets. However, much bullying is not carried out by physical means but is instead verbal, involves the use of offensive gestures or social exclusion. Olweus also stresses that bullying is done repeatedly and over time, as opposed to occasional or insignificant acts of aggression in order to emphasise its systematic character. And he underscores that bullying happens in relationships of asymmetric power. Differences in power may be real or perceived, they may refer to differences in physical or mental capacities, or they may refer to differences in number (e.g. several students ganging up on one victim). Since bullying often occurs without any provocation, Olweus considers it to be a form of abuse. In his view, the positions

of 'bully' and 'victim' are stable over time (Olweus 1993a: 27); some individuals are bullies for a long period of time – even years – while others are victims for a long period of time. Olweus describes bullies as aggressive individuals who are impulsive, have a need to dominate, have a positive attitude towards violence and have little empathy for their victims. His view is echoed by other researchers who have characterised bullies as powerful, sadistic, dysfunctional, anti-social or proto-criminal (Farrington 1993). Olweus explains this aggressive-reaction pattern as a consequence of poor child-rearing, particularly on the part of the 'primary caretaker (usually the mother)' (Olweus 1993a: 32–9). When the primary caretaker lacks warmth and involvement or has been permissive and tolerant, then she will rear an aggressive child with a tendency to become a bully. Just as Olweus focuses on the personality characteristics of bullies, he also highlights the typical personality traits of victims. Victims are passive, submissive, anxious, insecure and weak, largely because they have overprotective mothers (*ibid.*). He notes that bullying can also be a group phenomenon. When neutral observers witness the actions of a bully, their own ability to resist aggressive tendencies is weakened (*ibid.*: 43–4).

In claiming that bullying is an expression of individual aggression, Olweus makes a number of problematic assumptions. His strategy assumes that something outside of the classroom is the root of problems that occur inside the classroom (Eriksson et al. 2002: 39). Therefore, by virtue of their home environments, some individuals are natural bullies and others are natural victims. This focus on individual personalities expresses Olweus's explicit interest in analysing bullying ('*mobbning*' in Swedish) in terms of the individual, in contrast to the etymological origin of the word. In doing so, he stipulates personality types with a stable set of characteristics instead of exploring how individuals may also be transformed by the situations in which they find themselves. Thus, Olweus views bullying quintessentially as a relation between two fixed personality types – bully and victim – and he overlooks the experience of children who sometimes act like the bully and other times are bullied. Recent research indicates that the positions of 'bully' and 'victim' are much more fluid than Olweus's theory allows. In fact, qualitative interviews conducted by several researchers in the eXbus group indicate how quickly these positions can shift because individuals are constantly aware of the precariousness of their roles within a group and feel a need to assert their value to it. Jette Kofoed's and Dorte Marie Søndergaard's chapters (see pages 159 and 47, respectively) both discuss such a fluidity of positions. Further, this approach implies that the personal qualities of an individual are less significant to bullying than the complex dynamics within a class. Although Olweus acknowledges that groups may also play a role in

bullying, he understands 'the group' as being made up of a leader – an aggressive individual – and his/her followers, whose defences become weakened so that they model the aggressor's behaviour. This understanding of group relations overlooks the many processes by which groups define themselves, including deciding who is included and excluded.

Another problem with Olweus's focus on personal aggression is his claim that bullying expresses the intention to harm another person. Intentionality is a notoriously difficult problem, as attested to by other philosophical writing on the subject. How does one know an individual's intentions? Does an individual know his/her intentions best? Does 'intentional harm' refer only to harming for its own sake, as with sadism? Or does it also include harm that is instrumental in achieving some other goal, such as higher status in the group? If harm is only instrumental, then does an individual intend to achieve status rather than inflict harm? How does an observer know the intentions of another person? Does the observer elicit self-reports or does she/he observe the effect(s) on the victim(s)? And do all individuals who inflict harm have a common intention? These theoretical questions indicate the problem with anchoring a definition of bullying in terms of individual intentions. Invoking intention in such a definition may be, at best, a postulate of the researcher.

Olweus's concept of power is also derived from his individualistic approach. He is concerned with the power of one individual to dominate or subdue another (Olweus 1993a: 35) rather than how power functions in an institutional context, which is the focus of social theories of power.³ But to understand power with regard to the institution of the school raises a broad range of questions. As Nina Hein asks (see page 301): do parents experience themselves as empowered or powerless in relation to the school? Do teachers have 'usable' or 'unusable' power (Terry 1998: 258)? What kind of power is exerted within the school by social norms; for example, norms about sexuality (Meyer 2007a; Phoenix et al. 2003: 179)? What kind of power is exerted by governmental directives that stipulate the content of the curriculum, the amount of time used for different tasks and the nature of testing? In other words, a child is not

³ With the phrase 'social theory of power', I refer to a very broad range of work from the nineteenth century to the present day that develops a theoretical understanding of concepts of power, the social, the political and identity in contrast to strictly empirical studies of institutional relations. A few of the major figures in this field include Karl Marx, post-Marxist philosophers in France (as varied as Lucien Goldmann, Jean-Paul Sartre, Louis Althusser, Pierre Bourdieu and post-structuralist theorists such as Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze), in Hungary (e.g. Georg Lukács), in Germany (including several generations of critical theorists from the Frankfurt School) and in the United Kingdom (e.g. E. P. Thompson and Terry Eagleton) as well as contemporary theorists writing about race and gender.

just either dominant or submissive, but is involved in a range of power relations, many of which may be relevant to a situation of bullying.

Olweus's definition has long been the dominant paradigm for understanding and responding to school bullying. Researchers in many different countries often rely on his definition when asking teachers or students about the frequency of bullying and their roles in it. The widespread influence of Olweus's work makes it especially important to address it critically. Recalling some of the problems with definitions, one could ask: which perspectives are reflected in his definition? And whose position is treated as worthy of respect? On first glance, Olweus seems to construct a definition of bullying that is based on the victim's point of view. He locates the cause of bullying within the aggressor, even though he does note that some victims are 'provocative' and may have both anxious and aggressive reaction patterns (Olweus 1993a: 32–4). But he also describes victims as anxious, insecure, withdrawn, suffering from low self-esteem, feeling stupid, ashamed or unattractive and apt to cry (for younger children). This description hardly exudes respect for the victim. His description of bullies as anti-social aggressors is also negative. However, he notes that 'typical' bullies do not suffer from anxiety or insecurity, and they have physical (or non-physical) strength; as such, bullies appear to have some qualities that are widely valued in Western societies. Olweus's description of parents is also negative: in his view, bullying is ultimately explained by poor parenting, particularly parents who love too little, who allow too much freedom, who use physical punishment and/or who give way to violent emotional outbursts (*ibid.*: 39–40). In this analysis, it is particularly the mother as primary caregiver who is under attack. But Olweus also views teachers as doing 'relatively little to stop bullying at school' (*ibid.*: 20), although he sees their role as decisive in preventing bullying and 'redirecting such behaviors into more socially acceptable channels' (*ibid.*: 46). It seems the position most deserving of respect in his theory is that of the researcher, who can design a programme of intervention to stop what poor parents and inadequate teachers have been unable to do.

Moreover, Olweus's focus on the dualism of aggressor/victim as the key to understanding bullying overlooks how children may move in and out of these positions. In linking bullying to a family of concepts, such as pathology, criminal behaviour and anti-social behaviour, he suggests that bullying is abnormal and occurs when socially integrative practices fail. But this pathologisation of bullying is disturbing, given that Olweus also cites the incidence of bullying to be consistently 5-to-10 per cent of the students questioned (*ibid.*: 17). Instead of assuming – along with Olweus – that nearly 10 per cent of children are trapped in pathological

relations, it may be more useful to look at bullying as a phenomenon experienced by ordinary children in specific group contexts.

In contrast to the first paradigm that defines bullying in terms of individual aggression, the second paradigm defines bullying in terms of social violence. My focus here is not on the work of an individual researcher, as with the first paradigm wherein the influence of Olweus is so extensive. Instead, I try to map a position that is held by both policy-makers and researchers in several different countries where bullying is debated. My source material is taken from several contributors to the anthology *The Nature of School Bullying: A Cross-National Perspective*, co-edited by Peter K. Smith.⁴

The approach to bullying as a form of social violence is expressed, for example, in the policy plan issued in 1996 by the Dutch Ministry of Education:

It should be realized that lack of safety in schools cannot be viewed in isolation from the social environment of the school. [...] The violence that manifests itself in schools has its origins mainly outside them. It reflects a general problem for which society as a whole is responsible. (cited in Smith et al. 1999: 217)

In a similar vein, prominent British criminologist David Farrington writes, 'School bullying is to some extent a microcosm of offending in the community' (Farrington 1993: 394). As with the paradigm of individual aggression discussed above, researchers and policymakers who focus on violence as the source of bullying tend to look outside the classroom for an explanation of the problems inside the classroom. When researchers do view bullying in terms of individuals' use of violence, they are apt to invoke the theory of aggression implicit in the first paradigm. Despite this overlap between the two paradigms, this second approach also looks to social causes of violence, including socio-economic factors and the media. For example, in France, bullying is understood as '*faits de violence*' or acts of violence, defined by the French Penal Code (Smith et al. 1999: 129–31), which includes offences against persons and/or property and offences committed by a school through a misuse of power. In a French context, this view of bullying as a social problem may be influenced by factors such as increased unemployment, increased

⁴ This book was inspired by a cross-national study on bullying conducted by the Japanese Ministry of Education, Science, Sports and Culture, which was coordinated by Yohji Morita. Peter K. Smith edited the English-language version of a similar Japanese book, *School Bullying Around the World: Challenges and Interventions*, edited by Morita (Smith et al. 1999: 3–4). Although Smith is a leading figure in this field of research, I do not focus on his specific contributions here. He follows Olweus's definition of bullying and studies developmental factors, amongst other things, in children's concepts of bullying.

social and racial segregation, increased ‘social distance’ between teachers and children from working-class families and the media’s attention to violent crime (ibid.: 134–5). In defining bullying through the judicial concept of violence, French responses to bullying have focused on legalities; for example, by stressing the need to improve cooperation between schools, the police and the legal system.

In Germany, a country that has experienced major social changes since its reunification in 1990, researchers also understand bullying primarily as a social problem linked to youth crime and youth violence against foreigners (ibid.: 228). Some researchers argue for the need to differentiate bullying from other forms of violence, such as vandalism and inflicting serious physical injuries, since bullying is ‘relatively frequent and long-lasting aggressiveness within relationships characterized by an imbalance of power’ (ibid.: 242). A conceptual strategy can be traced here, wherein the paradigm of individual aggression is invoked to differentiate between physical violence and repetitive, relational aggression. But this strategy fails, since both phenomena could be explained by either individual or social factors.

In Poland, researchers interpret bullying as a form of social brutality – a brutality that is also evident in the rapid rise of juvenile crime, in the behaviour of fans at football matches and in clashes at political demonstrations. This increased brutality is explained by the political and social transformation that Poland has been undergoing since 1989; this includes the ‘system-transforming process’ with its subsequent poverty and economic inequalities, the opening of borders and a related increase in organised crime. One Polish researcher describes severe bullying in schools as ‘the second or the “hidden” curriculum typical of totalitarian. . . organizations’:

Examples include having one’s head put in a toilet bowl and being forced to eat the larvae of worms from rotting fruit. [. . .] Students who spontaneously and readily think up and use torture against their school mates will develop a durable tendency to bully after a few cases and will often feel beyond any punishment. (ibid.: 270)

This author connects bullying to the terror inflicted by senior soldiers on new military recruits in the 1980s when soldiers were routinely blackmailed, beaten and forced to perform humiliating services. In comparing school bullying to torture, the author implies that bullying is also an exercise of arbitrary power through practices of humiliation.

Developing countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa also connect bullying and school violence to their region’s economic, cultural and political conditions, including poverty, unemployment, malnutrition, social marginalisation, congested classes and, in some cases, ethnic violence and post-civil war conditions. In this context, researchers tend not to draw a clear distinction between violence and bullying. In countries

that are preoccupied by the consequences of war, political repression and underdevelopment, researchers are less interested in the distinction between ‘aggressors’ and ‘victims’ than with ‘the victimization of individuals by the system and politics’ (ibid.: 370–4).

As a final example of interpreting bullying in terms of the violence in society, I mention the United States (US). In Austin, Texas, an anti-bullying project was developed by an agency that works with sexual- and domestic-violence prevention and intervention. This agency considers bullying to be related to sexual harassment and dating violence; in its view, all of these phenomena are ‘aggressive acts that are intended to hurt or control another person, are often repeated over time, and occur in the context of a relationship in which the bully/harasser/abuser has more physical or social power than the target/victim’ (Smith, Pepler and Rigby 2004: 211–12). The authors rely on Olweus’s work to define bullying in terms of aggressive acts by an individual, but they also link it to widespread problems of sexual violence in families, the workplace and social life. With this approach, bullying is an expression of power that ultimately resides in an individual because of his/her access to social authority (e.g. gender or bureaucratic authority).

These examples of cross-national perspectives indicate that many researchers see bullying as a reflection of the violence in society at large, and they do not focus on individual aggression rooted in the family. However, emphasising that the roots of bullying are found in social violence does not preclude a discussion about individual aggression. For example, some researchers suggest that social upheaval produces families that breed aggressive behaviour. Based on these examples, it appears that societies marked by social upheaval or transformation – such as system changes, immigration or increased social inequalities – write their national narratives into an understanding of bullying. When politicians and researchers believe that their society is in violent upheaval, then social violence provides a framework for interpreting bullying. Although this may be an obvious strategy to utilise when societies are in crisis, it is also important to recognise how researchers may carry basic social categories into their analyses of bullying under ordinary circumstances. In this way, crises narratives are useful in order to shed light on processes of interpreting ordinary social relations. However, a weakness of the social-violence approach is that attentiveness to the social relations outside of school is linked to a relative inattentiveness to the nature of the social groups within the school.

In the paradigm of social violence, public institutions and language play an important role in defining bullying. This is true in France where the penal code governing violence provides a framework for understanding bullying; in the US, where laws regarding sexual and domestic violence

affect the approach to school bullying; and also in a post-communist society like Poland, where the country's history of military power and torture is echoed in the understanding of bullying. In this sense, some researchers are more aware of their own relationship to public institutions than those who strictly adopt the paradigm of individual aggression wherein bullying is attributed to individual characteristics isolated from other social processes. When Polish researcher Andrzej Janowski compares extreme bullying to torture, he implies that bullying and torture deserve the same moral abhorrence. However, he distinguishes the attitude of the authorities in these two cases: whereas the Polish senior military officers 'welcomed' violent acts to terrorise new recruits (Janowski in Smith 1999: 270), school authorities do not approve of such behaviour – rather, they are either blind to it or helpless to cope with it. In condemning bullying as being similar to torture, Janowski focuses on the harm and humiliation to which the victim is subjected. And it seems to be more generally the case that the paradigm of social violence is attuned to the victim's position. This attentiveness may be enhanced, as noted by UNESCO researcher Toshio Ohsako, by the sensibility that all members of a society are victimised by the violence that is endemic in their political and social systems.

The paradigm of social violence places bullying into a family of concepts that includes violence, totalitarianism, crisis and social and political upheaval – an alliance that emphasises the severity of some acts of bullying. The description of certain acts of bullying as 'torture' may be well-founded, as suggested in literature about torture. Torture may be both physical and psychological. With psychological torture, severe pain and suffering can be inflicted by non-physical methods that may appear insignificant when considered individually (e.g. verbal abuse, petty humiliations, intimidations, verbal threats). But the repetition and accumulation of such acts create a system that wears a person down, disrupting his/her personality and eventually breaking him/her; as such, it counts as psychic torture (Reyes 2007: 612). But in placing bullying in the context of crisis, the social-violence approach also implies that violence is contrasted with peaceful relations, and crisis conditions are contrasted with normality. In this respect, the social-violence paradigm, like the individual-aggression paradigm, also situates bullying as a deviation from ordinary interactions.

The third approach that I examine here defines bullying in terms of oppressive or dysfunctional group dynamics. As opposed to the preceding two paradigms, this approach considers the dynamics within a class to be the source of problems inside the classroom. One young Swedish researcher suggests that bullying is a form of group-think, invoking Irving Janus's theory in which the social influence of a group leads to

behaviour by it that is more exaggerated and destructive than the behaviour of any individual member would otherwise be. In a group, individuals gain a form of anonymity, assume the norms of the group and achieve a sense of belonging (Heintz 2004: 10). By striving to maintain a sense of in-group identity, an illusion of invulnerability is created along with a strong belief in the rightness of one's own moral position, which leads to forming stereotypes about other groups (ibid.: 53–5). In a group context, great pressure to conform contributes to self-censorship, so that the group only absorbs information that is self-fulfilling about its stereotypes and rationalisations. In this approach, destructive group-think is an expression of dysfunctional group dynamics; in a school context, this can be manifested as bullying.

Finnish researcher Christina Salmivalli and her colleagues have focused on the internal group dynamics of bullying as well. In their analysis of the social interactions within a group, they highlight six 'participant roles' in a bullying situation. In addition to (1) victims 'who are systematically attacked by others' and (2) bullies 'who have an active, initiative-taking...role', there are (3) assistants of bullies who 'eagerly join in', (4) reinforcers of bullies who 'offer positive feedback...by laughing, by encouraging gestures, or just by gathering around as an audience', (5) outsiders who withdraw 'without taking sides with anyone' and (6) defenders who 'may comfort the victim, or actively try to make others stop bullying' (Smith, Pepler and Rigby 2004: 252). This focus on the different roles within the dynamics of bullying has contributed to analyses about the role of bystanders which have emerged in studies of large-scale atrocities (Staub 1989, 2003). Salmivalli's research develops the insight that bystanders enable harm-doing, either by actively encouraging the harm (i.e. acting as assistants and reinforcers) or by passively allowing it through their failure to intervene (i.e. acting as outsiders). It is also important to recognise the flexibility of these positions; this means that, for example, an active bystander can become an active bully or can withdraw, while an outsider can become either a reinforcer or a defender.

Japanese researchers have also been particularly attentive to bullying as a group phenomenon. In 1985, Yohji Morita proposed the following definition of bullying:

A type of aggressive behaviour by which someone who holds a dominant position in a group-interaction process, by intentional or collective acts, causes mental and/or physical suffering to another inside a group. (cited in Smith et al. 1999: 320)

This approach overlaps with the first paradigm by stressing aggressive behaviour and intentionality. But in contrast to the first paradigm, Morita

emphasises that group interaction is key to the suffering that is inflicted, and he recognises that a target of bullying is inside the group rather than outside. This approach is in alignment with recent research that considers bullying to be a process of social inclusion and exclusion. And it opens the door to understanding the ways in which social exclusion is a significant mechanism for defining processes of social inclusion.⁵

Australian researchers have also highlighted group processes. Ken Rigby and Phillip Slee, prominent researchers in the field, propose the following definition: 'Bullying is oppression directed by more powerful persons or by a group of persons against individuals who cannot adequately defend themselves' (ibid.: 324). And bullying is 'the systematic abuse of power in interpersonal relationships' (Rigby 2008: 22). This approach includes elements of each of the three paradigms I have discussed here. By emphasising words such as 'power' and 'oppression' and invoking the term 'unjust', the authors take concepts typically applied to societal interaction and use them as a lens to view in-group dynamics. In doing so, they adopt normative judgements about social violence as a frame of reference for understanding bullying. But they also draw upon a theory of anti-social behaviour rooted in individual aggression. It is important to recognise, as they do, that an analytical focus on the group as well as on the individual are not exclusive approaches but are, instead, complementary in understanding the complex processes of bullying. Thus, a coupling of both social and individual dynamics is appealing to new researchers in the field. Rigby points to the ways that individual behaviour is context-dependent and not independent, as well as to how a child's role as bully is fluid and not fixed; for example, a child may bully at one school but not another (ibid.: 29). But he also describes bullying as intentional harm-doing (in the case of 'malignant bullying') that creates pleasure for the perpetrator, and he explains its genesis from dysfunctional families (Smith et al. 1999: 332) to which he adds genetic factors and early child-care. Thus, he imports many of Olweus's problematic assumptions into his analysis. And in seeing power as an expression of individuals' social or manipulative skills (Rigby 2008: 23), he misses the opportunity to explore how power within a group shapes individuals' opportunities to act.

⁵ There is substantial literature in social psychology about the complex processes of inclusion/exclusion, which I do not review here. Some key insights from this literature are that people seek belonging and inclusion, but this then requires boundaries and exclusion (Abrams et al. 2005). Researchers focus on individuals' strategies of negotiation as a way of 'making sense of social conditions that are not of their own making' (Benjamin et al. 2003), and researchers often pair a focus on inclusion/exclusion with the individual-aggression paradigm (Totten and Quigley 2003).

This third paradigm, which focuses on dysfunctional groups and intra-group oppression, is imbued with normative terms such as right/wrong, good/evil and just/unjust (ibid.: 25, 180). By implication, these authors suggest that groups without bullying are functional groups with 'just' social and moral relationships. Although they highlight the role of group interaction, they do not provide an analysis of why some individuals become oppressors within these groups. That is, their explanation of *why* bullying occurs ultimately reverts back to the first paradigm, and they invoke a child's upbringing or biology to explain what they label 'anti-social behaviour' (ibid.: 51, 55). These researchers are incensed with abhorrence for severe bullying and filled with righteous anger about the suffering of the victims. But there is danger in a theoretical approach that only treats the position of the victim as being worthy of respect. Such an approach cannot provide an analysis of how ordinary group dynamics create situations in which ordinary children also may assume positions as either bullies and/or active bystanders.

I have focused on three patterns of response to the question: what is bullying? In all of these approaches, researchers assume that there is a general concept under which bullying can be subsumed: individual aggression, social violence or dysfunctional groups. These responses have powerfully influenced how the meaning of bullying has been constructed (Smith et al. 2002: 1131). However, there are researchers who challenge several of these assumptions. Some of them do not believe that there can only be one universally acceptable definition, preferring instead to examine a range of behaviour that causes distress (Arora 1996 in Monks and Smith 2006: 819). Others emphasise that bullying refers to a broad range of negative actions, and is best understood as a continuum (Lee 2006: 73). And there are yet other researchers – whose lead I follow – who stress the need to open up the understanding of bullying as a complex reality (Eriksson et al. 2002: 103).

Bullying as a social concept

As already noted, the homogeneity of the research on bullying is partially explained by the dominant use of individual psychology to examine this subject. However, when researchers from fields like social psychology, sociology, anthropology, minority studies and philosophy begin to study bullying, they initiate new approaches to understanding it. I study bullying as a philosopher, analysing it in terms of theories of conflict, otherness and abjection that have been developed by thinkers working in continental philosophy, critical theory, poststructuralist theory, race

theory, post-Holocaust studies and feminist theory.⁶ With this background – and on the basis of an ongoing dialogue with the eXbus researchers conducting empirical research – I present four hypotheses about social processes. My goal is to see how these reflections may foster new perspectives on bullying. In philosophical language, one might consider these hypotheses to be loosely part of social ontology, in that they address the fundamental question: what is a society (Searle 2003: 1)? A response to this question is thereby useful for answering the more specific question: what is a social group within a class? Like the paradigm of social violence, I claim that concepts developed to understand large-scale social processes are useful for understanding small-scale group processes within the class. But I also underscore the role of group dynamics, which is highlighted by the paradigm of dysfunctional groups. In contrast to the latter, however, I focus my attention on processes within ordinary groups. My four hypotheses about social processes follow.

- **Hypothesis 1:** Power inheres in a social system and is distributed in such a way that some individuals have access to more material or symbolic power than others. All individuals have access to power – not primarily because of their personalities, but because of the distribution of roles, functions or identities within a social system. Since all individuals are dominated by power in the social system, they are also at risk for and vulnerable to losing the privileges with which they identify.
- **Hypothesis 2:** Conflict is an inherent dimension of social relations. Hence, society needs to manage conflict rather than attempting to eradicate it entirely in the hope of achieving stable, harmonious relations. Conflicts within society are not an expression of pre-existing, natural antagonisms between individuals or groups. Rather, opposing identities are generated from within a social group.
- **Hypothesis 3:** A society is defined in terms of whom it both includes and excludes. Exclusion is necessary to establish the borders of society (e.g. national, geographical, cultural, political, economic, linguistic). Such borders are not rigid, but are constantly under pressure to be renegotiated. Individuals or groups who are excluded become viewed as ‘the other’ by the society that excludes them. In principle, the concept of ‘the other’ is not harmful to those who are excluded, since they also belong to a society that is defined by whom it includes/excludes. But if

⁶ This is not the place for a discussion about the theoretical background for these insights. But some of the thinkers who have inspired this approach include Giorgio Agamben, Benedict Anderson, Hannah Arendt, Simone de Beauvoir, Seyla Benhabib, Pierre Bourdieu, Jacques Derrida, Mary Douglas, Terry Eagleton, Michel Foucault, G. F. Hegel, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Herbert Marcuse and Patricia Williams.

individuals or groups become excluded from all *possible* societies, then they lose the social meaning in their lives (e.g. recognition, rights, privileges, etc.). Individuals or groups who move across borders disturb the system for organising inside/outside; thus, they are viewed as potentially dangerous.

- **Hypothesis 4:** Interpersonal relations are mediated by social institutions and symbolic representations, such as language and values.

As a thought experiment, I propose that these insights about social ontology, which have been developed in relation to large-scale groups, may apply to small-scale groups as well. With this background, I formulate the following provisional definition of bullying:

Bullying occurs in relation to formal institutions, such as the school, where individuals cannot easily leave the group. The ongoing process of constituting informal groups through the mechanisms of inclusion and exclusion provides a social context for bullying. Changes in position are dangerous to group order, becoming a source of fear and anxiety since all members of the group risk being excluded. Bullying occurs when groups respond to this anxiety by projecting the threat to group order onto particular individuals; these individuals become systematically excluded as the 'other'. Although these processes may appear to be functional to the group, they deprive individuals who are bullied of the social recognition necessary for human dignity. In this way, being bullied may be experienced as a form of psychic torture.

This definition theoretically addresses the questions: where does bullying take place? (in formal institutions); what is it? (the systematic exclusion of the 'other'); who is involved? (all members of the group); how does it take place? (through mechanisms of inclusion/exclusion); why does it take place? (to secure group order); and when does it take place? (when anxiety in the group becomes mobilised). This proposal is closely related to Dorte Marie Søndergaard's reflections (see page 47) about the role of social fear, social anxiety and abjection in understanding the processes of bullying. Søndergaard gives a close analysis of the subjective processes involved when the fear of social exclusion triggers a form of panic that produces contempt and disgust towards a figure(s) in the group. In doing so, she also analyses the movement that occurs between the dynamics of both non-bullying and bullying situations.

My provisional definition includes many elements that are widely accepted in current research, including the importance of the social space at school as well as the recent emphasis on inclusion and exclusion. As with Morita's approach, this definition acknowledges that the outsider in the process of exclusion is not absolutely outside, but is a constitutive element of the group. It differs from the first paradigm by focusing on group processes rather than individual characteristics, intentions or

power; it differs from the second paradigm by focusing on processes within the class; and it differs from the third paradigm by viewing bullying as a social process that occurs within normal groups, as opposed to dysfunctional groups.

Since I recognise the severity of harm that can result from bullying, one might wonder whether it makes a difference to insist that such groups are not dysfunctional or pathological. In my view, this assumption is necessary in order to keep the analytic lens on the dynamics within a class. Without this assumption, one is forced to ask: why are some groups dysfunctional? To this question, researchers have most often resorted to the first paradigm and answered the question by referring to aggressive individuals within the group. I think it is advisable to disqualify the question: *why* are some children bullies and some children victims? In my view, one gets no further by posing this question than from asking: why are women treated as the 'other' in society (Schott in Card 2003: 240)? Like Simone de Beauvoir in her book *The Second Sex* (1949/1974), I answer the question of 'why' with 'how'. One can understand *how* group processes operate and how some individuals *become* bullies, victims and/or bystanders. Individuals who are excluded from the group – who are positioned as the 'other' – are attributed with characteristics that define them as outsiders to the group.

One of the contributions made by the eXbus research group to discussions about inclusion/exclusion is the insight that exclusion does not produce an absolute outside to the group, but more accurately, produces a borderline position.⁷ Children who are bullied still belong to the formal group because they are members of the class. But they also belong to the informal group, in the sense that the social relations are charged with the emotional dynamics of negotiating positions in relation to the group. The notion of abjection, taken from the work of anthropologist Mary Douglas and psychoanalyst and linguist Julia Kristeva, is useful in understanding borderline positions.⁸ Both of these writers develop the idea that human groups – and indeed, individual subjects – require order, systems or lawfulness to give meaning to the world. At the same time, order is fragile and easily disrupted, and this disruption requires a social response. Douglas

⁷ Jette Kofoed has worked extensively with processes of inclusion/exclusion, including in her Ph.D. thesis (2004). Helle Rabøl Hansen uses the phrase '*inkluderet eksklusion*' (included exclusion) to emphasise that an individual is both excluded and included in the group at the same time. She also uses the notion of 'longing for belonging' as a psychological impetus to understand both bullying and the anguish it causes (2011a).

⁸ As mentioned, Dorte Marie Søndergaard introduces the importance of the concept of abjection in her analysis of bullying. In this discussion, she refers to Judith Butler's work, while I refer to Kristeva and Douglas.

uses the term ‘pollution’ to refer to disorder, to matter out of place (1966: 2). Kristeva introduces the term ‘abjection’ to refer to what is disgusting and degrading. She describes ‘the abject’ as that which is opposed to the ‘I’; it is ‘what disturbs identity, system, order. . . . The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite’ (1982: 2–4).⁹ The notion of abjection in the context of bullying points to the need for group borders as well as the fragility of these borders, with the latter provoking intense feelings of disgust. Since every group creates an outside to make its internal order possible, then every individual is at risk of being set outside or placed on the border.¹⁰

From this perspective, the social dynamics of inclusion and exclusion are central to groups and cannot be eliminated, although they may simultaneously create feelings of anxiety in group members, as Søndergaard analyses. Shifts in position both inside and outside of the group occur relatively frequently, so these positions are not rigid. But when the positions do become rigid – when certain individuals become fixed as the ‘other’ and lose the potential to become part of the group – then they also lose the social meaning that is bound to recognition.¹¹ When this occurs systematically and over time, this experience can be compared to psychic torture.¹²

My provisional definition of bullying is informed by the four hypotheses about social relations that I discussed above. Firstly, since power inheres in social relations and is shifting and precarious for any given individual, it is often more useful to look at individuals’ vulnerability to becoming powerless, rather than to examine who has power at any given moment in time. In a bullying context, this approach shifts the focus away from the perception of power in the prevailing definitions of bullying. Olweus, and

⁹ Elsewhere, I draw upon the notion of abjection in my analysis of war rape (Schott 2003: 110).

¹⁰ Popular films about school dynamics, such as the American film *Mean Girls* (2004), illustrate this threat. The dynamic is also useful for understanding the role of sacrifice in societies, including the role of the scapegoat. I develop this analysis further in my article ‘Sexual violence, sacrifice, and narratives of political origins’ (2010).

¹¹ In her analysis of anti-Semitism in Germany during the Second World War, Hannah Arendt points to how Jews became excluded from the concept of humanity. In one sense, this implies that Jews were excluded from being citizens of a country and thereby lost the right to belong to it. In another sense, this implies that they lost the sense of humanity in their own persons. The problems with being fixed in the position of ‘the Other’ are explored by de Beauvoir in *The Second Sex* (1949/1974). As she notes, otherness is inherent both in human consciousness and in society. Otherness is not problematic as such – rather, it is the lack of reciprocity, whereby some groups retain the position of Subject and other groups are only defined as the Other and never as subjects, that is problematic.

¹² Primo Levi, a survivor of Auschwitz, uses the term ‘shame’ to describe the feeling of being chained to an impossible self (1989/2008: 52–67). Giorgio Agamben elaborates, saying that in shame, the self ‘becomes witness to its own disorder, its own oblivion as a subject’ (Agamben 1999b: 106).

those influenced by him, define bullying as taking place amidst asymmetric power relations, and he considers this asymmetry fundamental to express the relationship between individuals who are naturally either dominant or weak. The compelling aspect in this alternative approach is not just asymmetry, but also symmetry. Despite their unequal positions in a group, all members risk losing their positions in the social order. And the need to fight for their positions within the group is one of the driving dynamics of bullying.

Secondly, this approach calls attention to how the opposing identities of individuals in conflict may be less an expression of pre-existing characteristics and more the way that characteristics are produced through the process of conflict. In the context of bullying, this approach allows one to understand how both standard 'bully' and 'victim' characteristics are themselves produced by processes in which some children become aligned with insider, outsider and borderline positions. Such an approach, in my view, treats the individuals involved with greater respect than in the standard approach, and it keeps the focus on the process of transformation for all individuals involved in a bullying situation.

Thirdly, this approach highlights a fundamental tension within group dynamics by which processes of inclusion and exclusion are both necessary and dangerous. This insight leads one to realise that bullying is an old phenomenon, although its particular strategies and techniques may be new. At the same time, one can acknowledge the severity of bullying and the emotional intensity involved in negotiating group relations.

Fourthly, this approach draws upon the insight that the values and language that mediate social relations do not have truth-value as such, but are decisive for constituting individuals' understanding of their social realities. In a bullying context, this perspective reminds us that the values by which children are bullied are rooted in a system of oppositions, so that children who have temporarily 'secured' an insider position define themselves in contrast to those who are excluded. Having the wrong cut of jeans is then not merely a different style or an indifferent acquisition, but becomes proof that a child just does not fit into the class group.¹³

At this point, it is useful to refer to my critical questions about definitions. What is taken for granted by focusing on processes of inclusion/exclusion, and what is overlooked? This approach assumes that one must examine the dynamics within the class for an explanation of the problems inside the classroom; therefore, the concept of the group is placed as central to understanding bullying. One might object that this approach

¹³ This example is taken from Søndergaard's chapter (see page 47).

overlooks the role of individual personalities, since every interaction takes place between specific individuals. The role of personality differences in human interactions is undeniable, but personality differences cannot provide an analytical anchor for a theory of bullying, because every individual both acts within a group and is affected by group interactions. Hence, I believe it is a serious misjudgement to base interventions against bullying primarily on responses to individual persons.

The definition of bullying with regard to inclusion/exclusion is explicitly linked to a family of concepts related to the social group, including concepts of power, conflict and the 'other'. Although these concepts are anchored in the role of the social group, they address the impact on individuals through notions of risk and vulnerability. This approach moves away from the dualisms of aggressive/passive and pathological/normal that are implicit in an individualist approach to bullying. And it also moves away from the dualisms of functional/dysfunctional and oppressor/oppressed that characterise some group-based understandings. By focusing on processes of inclusion/exclusion, this approach avoids the tendency to naturalise a position as being either inside or outside the group and maintains attention on how positions can shift. When children are identified with an outsider position over a long period of time, it should be understood in terms of the processes by which group positions have become rigid and not as an expression of their personal qualities (Kofoed 2004).

It is with some reservation that I sketched out my thoughts here about an alternative definition of bullying. In my view, it is essential to involve those affected by bullying in the debates about how to understand it. But as part of these debates, researchers' new definitions can shake up habitual ways of thinking so that it is possible to let go of familiarities that have become truisms. This critical role is especially important in light of the prevalent tendency amongst researchers and educators to focus on a child's personality characteristics in order to change the roles and responsibilities in a bullying situation. One advantage of this proposed alternative is that it heeds the wisdom to respect the child's perspective. In this approach, children are neither demonised nor viewed as provocative victims. Instead, the children involved are viewed as individuals who are struggling to negotiate the social dynamics of their daily lives, which can be either a vital source of recognition or a deathly form of isolation. And rather than focusing on individuals' intentions as a way to explain the dynamics of bullying, this approach also respects the complexity of factors that complicate individuals' intentionality. Here, we should remember Michel Foucault's comment: 'People know what they do; they frequently know why they do what they do; but what they don't know is what what they do does' (cited in Dreyfus and Rabinow 1982: 187).

How a society lives in its youth

By way of conclusion, I want to stress that I am proposing a definition of bullying as a thought exercise that I consider compelling, and it is not meant to be a definition that claims any scientific grounding or legitimacy. However, I do call into question many of the prevailing definitions of bullying that profess to be scientifically valid. I have tried to present the difficulties posed by differences in language as well as national and cultural contexts in constructing a shared definition of bullying. I have questioned the method of applying a pre-formulated definition to a wide variety of actors as a strategy to gain a broad and complex understanding of the phenomenon of bullying. And I have challenged many of the assumptions made by the standard definitions that bear the imprint of Olweus's approach. But we can learn a great deal from reflections on definitions; amongst other things, definitions can teach us about ourselves.

I began this chapter with Colette Daiute's words that a society lives in its youth (Daiute et al. 2006). There are myriad ways in which the obstacles that children and youths face may express some of the core challenges within their societies. And foremost amongst these is how to live in a community with others. Bullying is a process that demonstrates such challenges of living in a group. I have proposed an approach to bullying that places it centrally within the core dynamics of ordinary group interactions. I have also suggested that, within the broad spectrum of processes by which groups constitute themselves, positions may emerge wherein individuals are assigned absolute otherness or treated as abject. In comparing bullying to psychic torture, I mean that the latter can be a useful lens through which to view the harms of bullying; these include humiliation and isolation and, in extreme cases, can contribute to the breakdown of an individual's sense of self. I am not suggesting that bullying is structurally similar to torture, since torture typically involves intended and/or authorised harm-doing, and I do not believe that these concepts are useful for understanding the central harms of bullying. However, a comparison between torture and bullying suggests that understanding extreme harms can be useful in capturing the destructive dimensions of ordinary harms like bullying.¹⁴ And in bullying, being absolutely excluded

¹⁴ I discuss the relationship between extreme and ordinary harms in Schott 2009a. The notion of abjection, which both Søndergaard and I apply here to the context of bullying, is also important in understanding torture. See Carsten Bagge Laustsen's discussion of torture (Laustsen 2007 and Diken and Laustsen 2005b).

from the group deprives an individual of the sense of meaning in life that is vital to social existence.¹⁵

Noting that extreme suffering can result from ordinary group interactions does not diminish our interest in reducing these harms. Nor does it blur the borders between bullying and group violence. Violence – whether motivated by racist, homophobic, sexist or sadistic impulses – involves a transgression of an individual's rights, and it should be morally and legally condemned.¹⁶ But the approach I propose here enables us to view bullying, even in forms that lead to extreme isolation, as a process that involves ordinary children – not pathological, anti-social deviants – who interact together in ordinary – not dysfunctional – groups. As such, this approach enables us to grasp how bullying takes place and why it is such a common occurrence.

Nordic societies in particular put a great deal of emphasis on the social group or community. Smith and Morita have suggested that one reason why research on bullying has emerged from Scandinavian countries (especially Sweden, Norway and Finland) may be because of the 'generally high standard of living, peaceful nature, and concern for human rights and liberties' (in Smith et al. 1999: 2). They imply that the high standards of welfare states have made researchers quick to spot those who are left behind. But one could also play devil's advocate and ask whether there are specific aspects of Nordic culture that contribute to bullying. In Denmark, for example, children are typically together in the same class for up to ten years. One wonders: do schools need to strengthen the group in order to make sure that no one falls outside? Or do they need to weaken the group?

I would like to invite us to think about the second possibility. If groups are inherently based on dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, then it is impossible to strengthen the group so that no one falls outside. In fact, it could be argued that the stronger a group's identity, the more hard-and-fast the position of outsider would be as well. Since bullying takes place in the institutional environment of the school, where there are formal groups within which informal groups are configured, it may be important to strengthen the proliferation of informal group ties. In other words, if children have more opportunities to develop relationships across class and age groups, and on the basis of a wide range of interests and talents (e.g. in sports, music, writing, painting, theatre productions, technology,

¹⁵ Claudia Card uses the notion of 'social death' to refer to the loss of relationships that create community, which is one of the central harms of genocide (Schott 2007: 71).

¹⁶ Mikael Häfström's film *Evil* (2003), based on the Swedish novel *Ondskan* by Jan Guillous (1981), depicts acts of extreme violence rather than bullying.

etc.), then a wider social spectrum would be available to them. In such a context, a child's position inside or outside any informal group within the class may be less likely to become an all-or-nothing condition of his/her social self. Hence, the role of cultural and recreational activities both during and after school hours must be taken seriously as a way to address the problem of bullying. This approach is in accordance with David Galloway and Erling Roland's view that a direct anti-bullying strategy is not necessarily effective in the long term (Smith, Pepler and Rigby 2004: 38). Encouraging the formation of more small, informal groups at school could and should go hand-in-hand with an individual being able to identify with a large group on a more abstract level, such as the level of the school. When a large group is comprised of a multitude of heterogeneous small groups that each has the opportunity to speak and be heard, then the risk of group polarisation¹⁷ is diminished. As noted by legal scholar Cass Sunstein, the more a heterogeneous society can expose its members to differing views, the more it avoids structures of self-insulation and the greater the possibility that 'heterogeneity, far from being a source of social fragmentation, will operate as a creative force...' (2000: 74, 119).

There is no way to avoid the vulnerability and risk of pain that life presents to us, either as children or adults. At best, we can try to be well-equipped to face the challenges we will encounter in our daily lives. Thus, the further education becomes oriented towards complex processes of understanding, the better equipped education will be to support children as they navigate the complexities they encounter, helping them to avoid the hazards of simple categorical us/them forms of moral thought. In this way, education can help children understand their own roles in bullying processes and realise how the children themselves may move in a grey zone wherein they contribute to the very processes that create harm. In this respect as well, specific anti-bullying strategies may be less important than the overall quality of the pedagogy and school environment. With the renewed worldwide interest in the work of Karl Marx, one might do well to recall his statement that, to change circumstances, it is essential to educate the educator himself [*sic!*] (Marx 1845). Researchers, educators and parents need to have a complex understanding of the processes of social life in order to avoid moralising attitudes about bullying that lock children into fixed and demeaning roles. Developing such complex understandings will help adults to help youths along the path towards a dignified future.

¹⁷ With polarisation, groups have a tendency to adopt more extreme positions than those that were evident in the previous views of individual members.