Moving Bullies and Victims Up on Conflict-Researchers' Waiting Lists

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Some conflicts blow up broader and last longer than others. Bullying or mobbing, sometimes traveling under the names of harassment, abusive behavior, incivility, or mistreatment, is one of them. Bullying has three well-articulated definitional elements (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003). First, there are two conflict parties, be they individuals or groups, with at least one of them experiencing obstruction or irritation by the other party. Second, there are power differences between the parties: the more powerful party is the bully or perpetrator; the less powerful party is the victim or target. Third, there are prolonged conflict processes initiated by the bullying party, who repeatedly and persistently confronts the victim with negative acts, with the consequence that the victimized party ends up in an inferior position from which it is difficult to defend oneself.

Bullying is serious business, as especially evidenced by its lethal consequences: suicide rather than homicide in case of interpersonal bullying; homicide rather than suicide in case of intergroup bullying. It would therefore come as no surprise if conflict researchers were paying lots of attention to bullies, victims, their mutual relations, and remedial actions. Surprisingly, IACM members are preoccupied with priorities other than power-laden and protracted processes of bullying. Indeed, the ferry between the conflict island and the bullying island carries few passengers (for exceptions, see Boswell & Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Keashley & Nowell, 2003; Liu, Chi, Friedman, & Tsai, 2009; Olson-Buchanan & Boswell, 2008). Conveniently sampling bullying issues that intrigue me most, I invite you to process the following three research challenges: all-over-again problems, neutral-and-aloof problems, and root-beyond-root problems.

All-Over-Again Problems

When we say that conflicts are cyclical, we do not think of an unceasing series of issue-behavior-outcome cycles. Especially when winner and loser are staring us in the face in no uncertain ways, we tend to come to the conclusion that this was the last cycle and that it is all over now unless the loser wants to take revenge later on. Bullies and victims shatter this crystal clear insight. After having become a clear winner,

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the prototypical bully starts all over again by confronting the same target with a new round of negative acts. After having become a clear loser, the prototypical victim starts all over again by swallowing even more sickening fruits from the perpetrator's poisoned tree. Why does each party do that? Who makes which steps, and when, in changing their mutual relationship? What can each party's timing of repetitive responses and strategy changes tell us about processes of escalation and de-escalation?

Neutral-and-Aloof Problems

Scholars from multiple disciplines have created and fostered an impressive and useful array of principal parties and third parties to conflicts. Yet, in doing so, they were implicitly dwarfing the influence of neutral witnesses, aloof bystanders, and similar nonprofessional outsiders who have little or no control, neither over the conflict processes nor over the outcomes of the conflict. Because of their near-zero level of conflict control, I call them *zeroth parties*. There is a theory on siding of zeroth parties in conflict (Van de Vliert, 1981; Yang, Van de Vliert, & Shi, 2007), but that theory is restricted to bullies, victims, or other principal parties who put zeroth parties under pressure to take sides. It does not address questions about pressureless situations, such as: Can a neutral-and-aloof party, like a hole in a wall, be present and absent at the same time? What is the zeroth-party's hidden impact on bullies and victims, and on their mutual relationship? How does the zeroth party nullify and justify its contributions to the perpetrator's pit-bullization and the target's victimization?

Root-Beyond-Root Problems

We in IACM are strong on the fruits of conflict, but weak on the roots of conflict. Specifically, we need a big leap forward in unpeeling impacts of subsequent environments, layer by layer, until we reach the ultimate roots of conflict: genetic survival over time, and climatic survival in a particular place (Van de Vliert, 2009). My research hunch is that genetic-survival roots of conflict are related to us being gendered rather than warm-blooded beings, whereas climatic-survival roots of conflict are related to us being warm-blooded rather than gendered beings.

Genetic-Survival Roots

On one hand, gender differences in, for example, sexual harassment and discrimination (e.g., Taylor & Beinstein Miller, 1994), are lining up before the doors of science, ignorantly waiting to perhaps be declared a distant echo of genetic survival over time. Is it no coincidence that males tend to be bullies instead of victims, and that females tend to be victims instead of bullies? Is it no coincidence that male bullies use overt physical violence rather than covert manipulation, whereas female bullies use covert manipulation rather than overt physical violence?

Climatic-Survival Roots

Competition and cooperation to satisfy one's own basic needs for thermal comfort, nutrition, and health, on the other hand, have deep links with warm-bloodedness and colder-than-temperate or hotter-than-temperate climates. Venturing into this untrodden territory, the Bergen Bullying Research Group has begun to draw climato-economic maps of interpersonal bullying among employees (107-nation study; Van de Vliert, Einarsen, & Nielsen, 2010), and of intergroup bullying of journalists and media assistants (175-nation study; Van de Vliert, 2010). World maps of where certain bullies and victims have their habitats are important because effect sizes in investigations and interventions represent standardized deviations from given baselines of bullying specified in these maps. Only cross-national maps of the prevalence and severity of bullying can help us accurately and validly interpret effects of investigations and interventions in organizations, schools, and families. In countries such as Bosnia-Herzegovina, Malawi, and Mongolia, for instance, bullying is so common that effect sizes cannot be compared with those in Honduras, Kuwait, and Luxembourg, where bullying is rare.

Valuable and exciting research challenges abound. Can we develop a statistic for the generalizability of effect sizes of antecedents and consequents of bullying found under given ecological circumstances of climate-based demands and wealth-based resources? Can demand resources models and theories of mortality salience (Van de Vliert, 2009) explain why bullying and victimization are most prevalent in poor countries with demanding cold or hot climates, intermediately prevalent in countries with temperate climates irrespective of income per head, and least prevalent in rich countries with demanding cold or hot climates? What do Milgram's (1974) obedience to authority, and Brewer's (1999) ingroup formation and identification, have to say about the perplexing and degrading game that bullies and victims choose to play in particular climato-economic habitats?

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