

Humor and Bullying

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Bullying is a constant problem in our schools. Research done in the United Kingdom has shown that among one hundred and seventy-six suicides in a year within the age range of ten to fourteen, seventy-eight of these instances were related to bullying. (Dickinson) That makes over forty-four percent of suicides influenced by bullying in the United Kingdom between 2000 and 2008. Often, bullying consists of or is begun by jokes that are hurtful to the victim. The bully may find these jokes funny, or they may be using the jokes as a way to feel better about themselves, not caring about how the victim feels.

First off, we will examine the relation between bullying and the four theories of humor set forth in Morreall's book, Comic Relief. Superiority theory is the idea that humor's main purpose is to help us feel as if we are better than the butt of the joke. (Morreall p. 4) Bullies often use their form of humor to feel better than their victims. This is often rooted in a past of rejection by the bully's peers or family. By putting others down, the bully tries to feel better about his or her life. However, the victim is left feeling truly inferior and is left with lasting emotional trauma in some cases.

Incongruity theory is applied when we expect the outcome of a situation to be one ending, and instead it takes an unexpected twist. (Morreall p. 10) This theory could be applied to bullying, in that the bully is not expected by the "popular kids" to be funny, and thus attempts to disrupt the

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expectations and impress those surrounding. The bully may have built a previous reputation for being boring or dull, and thus attempts to use incongruity theory to defy what is expected of them.

Relief theory is the idea that we use humor as a way to vent stress and become calm. (Morreall p. 16) For the bully, his or her actions can be a way to relieve the stress from home life or feeling alone. As long as others laugh at the bullying behavior, the aggressor will feel a temporary relief from the stress that they feel. There is, however, no relief for the victim. The victim instead gains more built-up stress from the bullying behavior, similar to the concept in chemistry that no energy is ever lost. The stress that the bully relieves is transferred to the victim, and could lead to depression, anxiety, or suicide. There is also the possibility that the victim may in turn engage in bullying behavior towards those weaker than them.

Finally, relaxation theory explains scenarios where tension is built up, then released suddenly, allowing the audience to relax. (Morreall p. 25) Many instances of bullying rely on creating a charged situation for the victim, either physically or emotionally. Once the situation has built up sufficiently, often the bully will release the tension for themselves and the audience, and then walk away from the scene. Everyone involved is able to relax thereafter to some extent, except for the victim. The victim will remain stressed out, and will dread the next time that they have an encounter with their tormentor.

There are a number of disciplines which can be utilized to examine the issues of humor as related to bullying. The first that can be applied is psychology, as this discipline can study what occurs in the mind of the bully as well as the victim. It is important to know what psychological conditions and traits can contribute to bullying. If we can figure out what is going on inside the mind of the bully, perhaps we can find methods of therapy to correct or at least slightly curb such behavior.

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Sociology can be used to examine the larger picture, rather than simply individual case studies. Sociologists can look at social norms that seem to encourage bullying, and identify root causes for why so many think that bullying is okay. I believe a large part of this is the competitive nature of some first-world countries, where most are simply taught to care for themselves rather than others. Perhaps when we are taught by society, especially with the help of social media, that we are the most important part of our lives; some feel that they need to put others down to put themselves above the rest.

Social work and psychiatry are perhaps two of the most front-line disciplines regarding bullying. Those who have devoted their lives to these disciplines will counsel countless bullying victims, as well as often their tormentors. Good statistics and information regarding the frequency and nature of these behaviors can be gained from studying these closely related fields.

The discipline of education, especially in the elementary and high school stages, has much to do with bullying, and it is good for professionals in this field to be aware of the signs that something is not as it should be. Bullying behavior is often initiated in school, or at least with individuals met at school. If teachers know how to spot signs of bullying behavior, it can be ended before it is taken too far.

Computer science can strangely enough be applied to a newer form of bullying, known as cyberbullying. Cyberbullying is the use of digital communication to bully others. (<http://www.bullyingstatistics.org/content/facts-on-bullying.html>) This often takes the form of extremely derogatory verbiage. This has become rampant, partly due to the rise of social media. A simple trip to any YouTube video's comment section will most likely produce some form of cyberbullying.

Criminal justice may become involved in bullying, especially if assaults, threats, or suicide are involved. In these cases, police officers must know when enough harm has been done for a

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juvenile to be prosecuted and punished for his or her actions. Juvenile courts must realize that this behavior can lead to permanent harm and sentence the offender to treatment accordingly. In the corrections section of the criminal justice discipline, there must be programs and treatment in order to address the bully's needs so that he or she can successfully assimilate into society properly, without using cruel humor to make themselves feel accepted.

Journalism as a discipline can ensure that students are trained to report on bullying-related suicides in a way that is sensitive yet raises awareness about important occurrences. It is critical for the public to be educated on the problems that we face as a society, so that they can better prepare to combat bullying. This can be done by focusing on the victims rather than the aggressors, not giving the aggressor the desired attention and helping people to understand that certain types of humor can indeed be damaging.

All of these disciplines have unique viewpoints on humor and how it is utilized in bullying. To gain a better understanding of how to combat this problem, there must be communication between the great minds of each discipline so solutions can be constructed more efficiently and with more diversity of viewpoints. Rather than attempting to simply take one discipline and try to fix the problem, all disciplines can share data, information, and ideas.

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