# Defining Violence:
# Towards A Pupil Based Definition

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It is surprisingly rare to find a definition of violence. In particular with relation to children and adolescents, in either the popular or research literature.  Thus uncertainty prevails as to whether violence is limited to physical abuse or includes verbal and psychological abuse.

A clear and unambiguous definition of violence is needed if progress is to be made in determining the extent of violence in Europe.  A precise definition would facilitate the making of cross-cultural comparisons.  Moreover, such a definition would benefit programmes designed to prevent and counter violence throughout Europe.

There is a tendency, at present, towards viewing aggression, bullying and violence as being synonymous.  While few will disagree that bullying and violence are sub-sets of aggressive behaviour, disagreements are encountered, especially in respect of what constitutes bullying and violence.

The Concise Oxford Dictionary defines violence as unlawful exercise of physical force.  Olweus (1999), also confines violence to the use of physical force.  He defines violence/violent behaviour as aggressive behaviour where the actor or perpetrator uses his or her own body as an object (including a weapon) to inflict (relatively serious) injury or discomfort upon an individual. With such a definition there is an overlap between violence and bullying, where bullying is carried out by physical aggression.

However, violence has been defined in a broader sense to include behaviour by people or against people liable to cause physical or psychological harm (Gulbenkian Foundation, 1995).  A further example is seen in a schools programme in Ireland 'Exploring Masculinity', one of whose themes is violence in the home.  Their definition of violence in this context includes emotional abuse in addition to physical abuse.

Emotional abuse includes threats, verbal attacks, taunting and shouting.  Another definition is found in the policy statement of the Health and Safety Authority in Ireland. It defines violence as occurring 'where persons are verbally abused, threatened or assaulted in circumstances related to their work."

If violence is to include verbal, psychological and physical abuse, how then may violence to be distinguished from bullying?  Bullying, while an old concept has given rise to many attempts to define it in the last 15 years.

Prior to the first European seminar on school bullying in 1987 there was not only a poor awareness of bullying but also an uncertainty among many of the participating European countries as to which word was the best equivalent of bullying (O'Moore, 1990). The Scandinavian definition of bullying was, therefore, adopted. The many European countries who have since measured the extent of bullying in their countries have adopted, if not the word mobbing, at least a definition of bullying as set out by Olweus in his well known questionnaire, Life At School, (Smith et al. 1999b). The Olweus definition is as follows:

"We say a student is being bullied when another student or a group of students –

- Say mean and unpleasant things or make fun of him, or call him or her mean and hurtful names.
- Completely ignore or exclude him or her from their group of friends or leave him or her out of things on purpose.
- Hit, kick, push and shove around, or threaten him or her.
- Tell lies or false rumours about him or her or send mean notes and try to make other students dislike or hurt him or her.
- And things like that.

These things may take place frequently and it is difficult for the student being bullied to defend himself or herself. It is also bullying when a student is teased repeatedly in a negative and hurtful way. But we don't call it bullying when the teasing is made in a friendly and playful way. Also it is not bullying when two students of about the same strength or power, argue or fight." (Olweus, 1999).

This loose definition of bullying, therefore, sets out certain basic criteria of bullying. These are that bullying:

- Includes verbal, psychological and physical aggression.
- That the behaviour is repeated over time
- That there is an imbalance of power between victim and bully
- That the behaviour is intentionsal.

Farrington (1993) in his definition of bullying has included a further criteria to the above four, namely, that bullying behaviour is not provoked. However, this can be challenged by the view that bullying behaviour can be triggered by 'provocative victims' (Stephenson and Smith, 1989).

The other criteria of intentionality, repetitiveness and power-imbalance have also become a source of controversy (O'Moore, 1994; Rigby, 2001). More recent research has indicated that children do not place the same emphasis on the imbalance of power or on the repeated or intentional nature of bullying (Smith & Levan, 1995; Madsen,1996; Smith et al., 1999a).

Guerin (2001), has also found that children (aged 10-13 years) focus more on the effect on the victim and victim's interpretation of the incident. She found that less than ten percent of the children surveyed found that aggressive behaviour needed to occur regularly in order for it to be defined as bullying. Thus, from this it would

appear that children's interpretation of bullying is largely indistinguishable from acts of violence or aggression in particular, as defined by Baron (1997).

He defined aggression as "any form of behaviour directed toward the goal of harming or injuring another living being who is motivated to avoid such treatment." It would appear that the conditions associated with bullying, such as the aforementioned critera are predominantly adult based. At what age children develop the more adult meaning of bullying, needs to be further investigated.

However, as interest in workplace bullying has grown and definitions of workplace bullying are being developed it has become evident that there is not a universal acceptance, even among adults, that bullying is bound by conditions of aggression. With regards to possibly the least controversial criteria of repetitiveness, there are definitions, for example, which acknowledge that an "isolated incident which serves to intimidate on an ongoing basis can be regarded as bullying." (SIPTU).

It would appear also that in France undue emphasis is not placed on the repetitive nature of bullying. Fabre-Cornali et al (1999) states that school bullying, for example, refers primarily to 'faits de violence'. Thus bullying in France includes all the different forms of misuse of power (crime and offences against people, or against personal or school property), all the forms of violence of the school itself, as an institution, and also all minor but frequent manifestations of 'incivilities' (incivilitiés) which disturb school life (such as impoliteness, noise, disorder etc). Thus Faber-Cornali et al (1999) points out that a translation of 'bullying' as 'malmenances' has been suggested. In Poland bullying is being introduced interchangeably as aggression and violence (Janowski, 1999). This reflects that new terms and definitions in Europe of bullying are emerging as awareness and understanding of bullying is increasing. Where cultures do not place an emphasis on the judgement of aggressive acts in respect of repetitiveness, intention etc, as did Olweus, it is difficult to draw a distinction between bullying and violence. This is particularly the case where violence is not restricted to physical abuse.

As interest in bullying increases there will undoubtedly be more discussion on what constitutes bullying.

However, in spite of within and between cultural variations in definitions of bullying what is important to recognise is that children do not necessarily share the conceptual understanding of the definitions as do adults. Thus to base educational programmes, packages, procedures and polices for children based on adult definitions of bullying is likely to prove counter productive.

To-date, unsatisfactory levels of success of intervention programmes relating to bullying have been reported (Elsea & Smith, 1998). A contributory factor may be the discrepancy between the adult and child's view of bullying. For example, Bjorkqvist (1997), has,, pointed out that young children make judgements on acts of aggression on the basis of the severity of injury. If school policies place undue emphasis on bullying being only repeated aggression, it is expected that children may not report or seek help with aggressive acts that are not repeated. Thus valuable opportunities are lost in shaping and correcting aggressive behaviour which might even have been violent in nature.

Similarly, an over-emphasis on intentionality as a pre-requisite for bullying, prevents reports of aggressive acts being reported or investigated, if they are understood not to be intentional.

Opportunities are again lost for intervention where there are polices that emphasise injury as a condition of bullying. Victims of aggression in those circumstances may feel that they are not in a position to lodge a complaint unless there is clear evidence of injury. Thus, problems that could be nipped in the bud may instead result in a potential escalation of aggression.

Essentially, at the heart of all bullying as with violence is aggression. Thus, to make distinctions between bullying and violence, many of which are contrived, is to lose opportunities to prevent and counter many forms of aggression. In the climate of concern that has built up over bullying in the last fifteen years, children and adults have for too long avoided detection and correction of the their aggressive behaviour.

This is possibly due to the fact that aggressive behaviour which has not been defined as 'bullying' has been left to go unchallenged. It is therefore important that in the current drive across Europe to prevent and reduce violence that aggression in all its forms should be challenged.

Our attention must therefore go beyond physical aggression so that we do not miss further opportunities to tackle aggression in all its forms. A definition of violence should therefore be as broad as possible, taking in aggression beyond physical aggression. Also, as violence is conceived of as perhaps pertaining to the more severe forms of aggression, caution must be exercised that policies do not restrict opportunities to correct aggression that is less severe in nature.

Thus to address violence optimally in schools, it is proposed that Novas Res, defines violence as follows:

'Violence is aggressive behaviour, that may be physically, sexually or emotionally abusive. The aggressive behaviour is conducted by an individual or group against another, or others. Physically abusive behaviour, is where a child, adolescent or group directly or indirectly ill treats, injures, or kills another or others. The aggressive behaviour can involve pushing, shoving, shaking, punching, kicking, squeezing, burning or any other form of physical assault on a person(s) or on property. Emotionally abusive behaviour, is where there is verbal attacks, threats, taunts, slagging, mocking, yelling, exclusion, and malicious rumours. Sexually abusive behaviour is where there is sexual assault or rape.'

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