A Rose Is a Rose Is a Rose

Bullying in All of Its Disguises

Or, a rose by any other name is still a rose. Or, if it smells like a rose, it must be a rose. And so it is with bullying, which often masquerades under terms such as harassment, favoritism, false accusation, nepotism, or secret plots, carried out to cause someone’s demise. To introduce this special issue on bullying and to open a dialogue about bullying in its various forms and disguises, I will share some of my bullying and coping stories here.

My parents were immigrants from Hungary/Austria, and while they did speak English, it was with a decided accent. I did not know how my speech sounded to others until I entered kindergarten. For example, I pronounced check as jack, and my classmates giggled. The teacher would correct me but also told me not to mind the rude children. I remember announcing to a heckler one day that I could outread him. The teacher heard this and allowed the contest to begin. I won because he couldn’t read at all. Lesson learned. I am sure this early victory gave me the gumption to resist future bullying and not take the victim path.

Another one of my earliest recollections about being bullied—but deciding not to be a silent victim—occurred when I was in third grade and attending religious school after public school. On Friday afternoons, Catholic pupils who attended public schools were released early to go to classes, taught by nuns, in the various European ethnic churches. The nun teaching my class did not like us and constantly reminded us to not touch anything in the desks of the “regular” Catholic pupils who sat there. She made the point many times that they were “real” students, leaving us to conclude that we were not.

One Friday afternoon, I had had quite enough of this belittling. I raised my hand and said, “Sister, please?” When she allowed me to speak, I asked, “Sister, is it true that Catholic pupils are always very neat?” She smiled and answered, “Yes.” I continued, even though she had not exactly given permission: “And Sister, they would never waste food, right?” “No, they would not,” she replied, becoming a bit annoyed with me. At this point, I reached into the desk at which I was seated and pulled out scraps of papers and junk, as well as a partly eaten apple, and put them on top of the desk. “Then what’s this?” I asked.

I still remember the fury in her eyes and her shaking a ruler at me, ordering me to leave the classroom and never return. Walking home, I wondered what my mother’s reaction would be. All she said was, “Well, what punishment do you think they will give you? Be prepared to do it. You have to finish the year to make your First Communion.”

What a wonderful lesson that was. In effect, my mother condoned my speaking up against the bully and prepared me to expect the next step. I learned that speaking out would have consequences, but that they could be handled. She didn’t praise me, but neither did she discount nor denigrate what I did.

I don’t recall any memorable stories about bullying during the rest of grade school or high school. Teachers noticed that I liked to write and gave me opportunities to join school newspapers and annual yearbooks. Sexism in sports was not present in my town, so I played baseball as the only female member of a boys’ team. I also played on girls’ basketball teams. There was teasing, but sides changed quickly, so no bully or victim status was permanent.

College was another story. Here, I learned that faculty bullied by not allowing questions. During my first clinical rotation, if anyone made a query, the faculty member loved to say: “Yours not to question why; yours but to do…” She let us end the rhyme ourselves. I did not think then that this was bullying, but actually it was—by imposing rules and authority when a more appropriate mode would have been satisfying curiosity and encouraging delving into topics and situations to a greater depth.

However, I’m sure many of us have stories of bullying in academia. Whether politics is the real name of the game in academia has been disputed and argued in print and conferences. The American Association of University Professors media regularly carries stories about how faculty were bullied (e.g., denied tenure or promotion) or how institutions were not playing fairly with their constituencies or boards. The public press often selects some of these stories to be aired more widely. I would like to believe these incidences of bullying or wrongdoing attract audiences because they are unusual, and are not the norm at all.

In her biography of Hildegard E. Peplau, Callaway (2002) describes false allegations made by the Dean of Teachers College, Columbia University, against Peplau.
during the 1950s after a series of confrontations over curriculum and teaching methods. Since these allegations (a “legalese” term; I prefer accusations) were rooted in rumors and animosity, they were not confrontable. After many months of unsuccessfully trying to track the sources of the allegations, Peplau resigned.

Bullying in nursing can be understood somewhat since women and nurses had been socialized to be deferent to men. When the women’s movement gained the attention of nurses in the 1970s, they began to be somewhat willing to consider changing expectations about their being deferent to physicians. Editors of the American Journal of Nursing invited me to write an article about the confrontation process, as I had done several workshops on the topic. In the article (Smoyak, 1974), I state: “Confrontation is known as a tactic in the larger game of power politics, a strategy for conflict resolution” (p. 1632). Such a strategy had not been thinkable before then. Steps of the confrontation process were named and illustrated: (a) Do the homework in getting facts and preplanning, (b) stay at the system level to state the issue and make compelling points, and (c) strengthen the new images and repeat the messages following the confrontation. Taking these steps provides assurance that the person using confrontation will not feel like a victim.

Challenging the normative order goes hand in glove with confrontation. “One cannot be a nurse without being a philosopher and an ethicist at the same time” (Smoyak, 1985, p. 16). I don’t suggest that authority should be challenged as a routine practice, but rather that nurses should not go along with unfair rules or unsafe practices. A close cousin to such questioning is “blowing the whistle,” the process and outcomes of which have received attention in the literature.

In the examples of bullying described here, the bully was obviously threatened by the person, who refused to accept victim status. Related to that, I have one final personal story. In the 1970s, I was guest faculty at a southwestern university, teaching a summer course about families. The students’ clinical experience included working on an adolescent unit at a local hospital. On one of the adolescent units, bullying was a constant phenomenon, resulting in the victims’ crying, acting out, and refusing food and medications. I decided to try an approach to take the wind out of the bullies’ sails, so after several hour-long group sessions with the victims, some bystanders, and staff, we designed a plan. When a bullying episode occurred, the potential victim was to reframe the exchange by complimenting the bully in any way possible; for example, “Thank you for noticing me; I was feeling so alone,” or “Wow, what a clever way to say you like my hair; someone else would think you were making fun,” or “What’s the best thing that happened to you today?” The bystanders were invited to help by contributing to the positive statements. The staff watched and recorded the episodes, then we held an evening group meeting, just before bedtime. These meetings first involved only staff, the potential victims, and their “helpers” (the bystanders), but after many of these sessions, the bullies petitioned to also attend. At first, this was very strained, but eventually it worked out.

Unfortunately, this clinical intervention, which worked so well and became “standard operating procedure,” was never shared beyond the hospital. I am greatly remiss in not writing an article for publication. For that, I apologize. But, I hope by sharing these stories I have been able to shed light on the phenomenon of bullying and the various forms it takes, in all environments, across the life span. The articles in this special issue explore the potential theoretical bases for bullying, the positions of those who bully and who are bullied, the issue of bullying in the nursing profession, and the phenomenon of cyberbullying—and offer strategies and interventions psychiatric-mental health nurses can use to detect, treat, and prevent bullying behavior.

I would also be remiss if I neglected to thank Dr. Barbara Warren, who served as guest editor of this issue, soliciting the articles by Broome and Williams-Evans and Williams and Godfrey, and writing one herself.

REFERENCES