

Bullying in a girl's world. A case study of a group of girls in a Norwegian school.

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Abstract

Symbolic forms of bullying (“soft” bullying) may be an underrated problem in discussions on bullying. A reason for this may be that the signals emitted from such events are often weak and incoherent, hence much of the information disappears before it reaches external parties. A second reason is that much information disappears due to problems of communication. Even more can get lost in attempts at communicating such experiences scientifically, due to rigid rules of verification and validity.

In this study, I describe various forms of symbolic (or “soft”) bullying. I show that contextual information is necessary in order to see the pattern, without which we cannot decide whether an incident/episode is “bullying” or not. Empirical examples are listed and summarized to *rules*, indicating that bullying is *a pattern of action*.

If only persons who are *close to the victim* see the details – hence the pattern - their experience may get lost in communication. In social science, scientific claims (inter-subjective agreement, external validity and neutrality) may filtrate even more information, so that patterns that are visible at close range, may be lost in the filtering process. I suggest that this problem can be overcome by collecting personal bullying stories, and by identifying homologous elements in the stories - a first step to a theory of “soft bullying” - that can span a broad variety of social contexts.

Introduction.

Bullying can be defined as intentional, systematic harassment by a person or a group against a

weaker person or group, who cannot defend themselves in the situation. The goal of bullying may be to dominate, exploit, exclude, degrade or humiliate the target. In cases of group violence towards one person or a weaker group, the Scandinavian and German name of the phenomenon is "mobbing" (introduced by Heinemann, 1973).¹ However, from a psychological point of view, intimidation of one (strong) person by another (weaker) person, can be seen as essentially the same phenomenon as group violence. Dan Olweus who, besides Erling Roland, has been the most cited and leading researcher on bullying in the Nordic countries, defines bullying as lasting, continuous or repeated negative actions by *an individual or group* of people against a weaker individual or group. (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1978, 1993; Olweus, Limber, & Mihalic, 1999; Roland, 1999; Smith & Sharp, 1994). The concept of *negative actions* can be defined by its *forms* (example: aggression, derogatory remarks etc.); by the *intention* of the actors defined as bullies (suppression, dominance etc.); or by the *consequences* of such actions (e.g., pain, submission, shame, trauma etc. on the part of the victim).

According to research on gender aspects of bullying, boys and girls are about equally *exposed* to bullying, but boys are far more often *perpetrators* than girls are (Farrington, 1993; Olweus, 1978, 1992, 1993; Salmivalli, Huttunen, & Lagerspetz, 1997; Salmivalli, Lagerspetz, Björkqvist, Österman, & Kaukiainen, 1996). These observations may be true. However, they may also, at least partially, be a consequence of the fact that *direct* and/or physical forms of harassment are much easier to detect than indirect, symbolic (or psycho-social) forms of harassment. There may be reasons for such limitation of the concept of "bullying", e.g. for statistical purposes.² However, by focusing on conspicuous, visible forms of harassment, less conspicuous forms may disappear into the background: Such forms may be interpreted as normal, and therefore *legitimate* social behavior. Further, because such forms of behaviour send an *ambiguous message*, the patterns of action/inter-action, in which these forms of harassment are embedded, may also be lost in the process of verification, even though they are very palpable for the persons that are exposed to such forms of communication.

If *unambiguous evidence* is necessary in order to decide whether a pattern of action is to be characterized as bullying or not, direct forms of harassment will be recorded, while indirect, symbolic and/or insidious forms of negative action – such as tacit social exclusion – will remain hidden below the surface.

In this article, I shall describe some forms of indirect (or “soft”) bullying. The article consists of six parts: 1) *Methods*: sources of information, and how the information was analysed; 2) *A story*, including a description of structural relations among the involved actors; 3) *Description* of methods of power and control used in “soft” forms of bullying; 4) *Intervention* efforts by teachers and parents; 5) Climax, turning point and journey back to life; 6) *Reflection* on parent and teacher intervention; the chances of successful intervention by adults; 7) *Problems of proximity and bias*. The problem of proximity and bias will be addressed because the author of this article is the father of the alleged victim (“Camilla”) in the story below, and also a part-time teacher at the school where this story took place.

1. Methods. Sources of information, data collection, and data interpretation.

The information presented in the story/“conflict” presented below is based on five different sources: 1) *Conversations* with the (alleged) victim of bullying, called *Camilla*; 2) *Camilla’s diary* from the period (to which Camilla gave me access after the bullying was over)³; 3) *Conversations* with the lead teacher; 4) *Meetings* with the parents of the alleged bullies (except for Herborg’s parents); 5) *Personal observation* of these children’s interaction during recess.

Camilla gave me personal information while the “conflict” was ongoing, and later I also got access to her diaries. At times I and Camilla’s mother – i.e. both her parents - were probably the only persons Camilla confided in. She may have confided in her two-year older sister, and she (her sister) may also have heard some of my conversations with Camilla, but I do not know *what* she may have heard. She was a teenager at this time, and often withdrew to her own room.

I also had conversations with the parents of the two most important persons among the alleged bullies. In the story below, I have called them *Cornelia and Constance*. I met Constance’s parents once, and Cornelia’s parents twice. The meeting with Constance’s parents was in Constance’s home. The first meeting with Cornelia’s parents took place in our home; the second meeting was in Cornelia’s home.

The story below took place at District School, in a small village. I had been a teacher at District School, and I lived in this village, but at the time the events described below took place, I worked in a town nearby, situated about 2 hours’ drive away from the school. I

usually commuted to town on Mondays, came back on Thursdays, and worked as a supply teacher when I had time; usually on Fridays, but sometimes all week. In these periods, I had access to the school premises, including classrooms. I could observe pupils' interactions on the play-yard during recess, from a classroom window. I could also observe their interactions during inspection duty during breaks between school lessons. I saw only a few incidents of bullying when doing inspection during recess, and never observed bullying among girls.⁴

I often stayed in the classroom during recess, in order to prepare and organize the next lesson. Through some of the classroom windows, facing blind zones of the school yard, I could observe through the window what was going on.^{5 6} I could observe pupils' interactions while they stood talking, or were strolling around school listening to music from their small music recorders. It was possible to see gestures and body movements, including how power and rank could be signaled by small face or body gestures. It was possible to see *who*, among the pupils, were considered *important*, and who were less important among the group of children. It was clear (enough) to me that Cornelia, Constance and a third person (Herborg) were the most "important" among the girls in Camilla's class. I also saw incidents of negative actions, and that Camilla avoided confrontations in such situations. However, these incidents did not *per se* tell me that bullying was the name of the game. I saw some negative action, but I did not categorize these actions as *bullying* until later.

In addition to the above-mentioned sources of information, this paper is based on information from the lead teacher, a young woman. She had a rather good overview of inter-personal/ friendship relations, popularity and leadership among children. She confirmed to me that Camilla was often *alone* during breaks, and that she often looked "lost". With the help of her information, combined with information from Camilla, I could gradually map the power structure in the group of girls in the class. However, power relations among the girls were not easy to discern. They only became visible for me when inter-personal relations *changed*. This information is reflected in the figures and story below. The lead teacher also told me about *her attempts to do something* about "the problem", described in detail below.

During the conversations with Camilla, I never prompted Camilla to "tell", but Camilla was clearly unhappy, so I sometimes asked what was "on her mind", or "is there something you want to talk about?" She was often anxious and nervous, but when she started talking, what she told me was characterized by focus on facts and sequence of events, not on her own

emotions or “how it felt”. It was also rich on details (too rich to be made up, I thought), and episodic rather than “epic”.

Our conversations usually proceeded like this: She told about incidents between the girls during last week, and focussed on the incidents that she wanted me to respond to. I listened to her without interruptions. I never made notes during these conversations. Now and then I asked a question or two, or just reflected her story in my own words, in order to check whether I had understood details correctly. She knew she could trust me, but *to my best judgement*, I did not try to influence on her emotions: E.g. I never gave her strong support, and I never took sides with her version of the story. I rather asked: “So, what do you think you can do about this?”, or “is there anybody at school who can protect you?” I never tried to intervene directly in the conflict. For example, I did not approach the other girls directly, to ask them what was going on. I never tried to stop them, scold them or coax them to change their behavior. However, I took initiative to three *quadrilateral meetings* with the parents and their children: Two meetings with the parents of the girl called *Cornelia*, and one meeting with the parents of the girl called *Constance* in the story below. The girls (the direct “conflict parties”) were present at these meetings.

These meetings were quadrilateral in one sense, trilateral in another sense: The parents of the girls met in couples, so that I and my wife met the parents of each of the other girls bilaterally (i.e. we and one other *couple of parents at a time*). The character of these meetings were a combination of fact-finding and arbitration/mediation: The girls were not invited to *discuss* with or against one another. They were rather asked to tell about “the conflict” as they saw it, so that the parents could give them advice on an *informed* and – as far as possible – an *unbiased* basis.

In this article, I shall move back-and-forth between the sources of information mentioned above. I shall also combine bits of information gathered at different points in time. This is because a pattern of action -- a *modus operandi* – cannot be revealed by plotting events along a timeline. Stories of harassment have a power structure; the events are embedded in those power relations, and without understanding of those relations, events become unconnected dots of data – i.e. not information. In other words, events are manifestations of (power) relations; those relations *qualify*, i.e., decide the real content, of each event. The story appears when this *pattern of relational events* is being discovered. When that happens, the events

combine to a story. This methodological point is based on literary theory and phenomenology. The difference between a (phenomenological) case study and fiction is simply that social science must be based on empirical reality, while fiction does not.⁷

The real story underlying this essay has enough “incidents” to fill a novel. However, most of the incidents may, if read in isolation; one-by one, be considered as “insignificant” by a neutral observer. Below, I will refer to what *Camilla felt* were *significant events*. The most significant events are those that left a strong impression on her. These events are selected, because each event adds meaning and coherence to Camilla’s story. I was not able to see the meaning and significance of many of these events until I saw a *pattern, or rather a convergence of two patterns*: A pattern of conflict over *positions and power in a social group, and a modus operandi* by individuals that coincided with the intra-group conflict pattern. Gradually, I also saw the interaction patterns as expressions of *structural tensions that triggered inter-personal conflicts*, rather than vice versa. I will show this in some detail below.

2. The story.

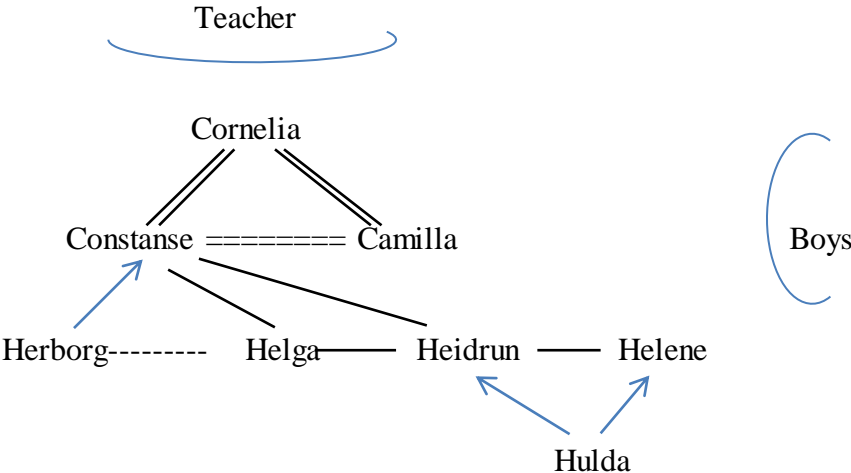
The story takes place at District School, a school of average Norwegian size, situated in a small village in Northern Norway. The school has *one class (form) per cohort*. Each class has about 20 pupils, recruited from several villages/hamlets, with a population varying from about 50 to 400 persons, situated within a circumference of 30 kilometres (~ 30 minutes bussing) from the school. About 2/3 of the pupils live in a place I shall call “Port”. *Port* is a small, fishing village of about 400 inhabitants, where most people earn their livelihood directly or indirectly from deep sea fishing and fish processing industry. Most of the other children live in two smaller villages, here called “*Peninsula*” (*about 150 inhabitants*) and *Fjord* (*about 50 inhabitants*). The rest live along the road in-between these places, where homes are scattered along the road.

The traditional economic basis of all these villages is *fishing and small household farming*. At the time of this investigation, there were two *fairly big industrial plants* (family business). The biggest plant, situated in Port, employed up to 150 employees⁸ - 50% of whom were women in unskilled, low-paid industrial jobs.⁹ In addition to this, there are various of sub-suppliers to the industrial plants, or to the local fishing fleet, a jetty, some subcontractors to the industry, and service providers (a machine entrepreneur, a couple of truck owners, a small

dry dock, a garage, several carpenters, two accountants, two shopkeepers, a post delivery service, a kiosk, a marina, etc.).¹⁰

District School is situated in *Fjord* (20 km away from Port), where most of the teachers live in a small “ghetto” of houses near by the school. We shall now enter fifth class (when pupils are 11 years old) at District School, and focus on the girls. I shall introduce this group of girls via a diagram (fig. 1).

Figure 1: Structure of the girls’ group at the start of the 5th school year (age 11).



Explanation to fig. 1: ===== Dyad w/ high interaction/ strong bonds; — Dyad, less high interaction; —> Unbalanced dyad (i.e., one person seeks friendship, the other does not reciprocate the initiative). No line: Weak or no connection (except accidental interaction, usually organized by the school). The group has 3-layers (top-middle-bottom), indicating popularity. Semicircle: *Border* between insiders (here: the girls) and outsiders (here: teachers and boys).

The number of lines between two persons illustrates the strength of relations between different dyads (or: to what degree they are concentrated on one another). An actor’s sum of lines indicates *interactive capacity*, relative to the others in the structure. The teacher and boys are “outsiders”, in the sense that they are marginal as regards interaction between the girls. We shall now follow this group over a period of 2 years, and show how the relations and positions of the girls change during this period.

To begin with, Camilla, Cornelia and Constance are “best friends.” They write notes to one another; make ranking lists of boys and girls (more or less on a weekly basis); keep and exchange all kinds of secrets inside the triad; and exchange gifts. Gifts are a very complicated *exchange of symbols* that signify *friendship and trust*. The relationship between all three girls indicates that stable, well-functioning triads are entirely possible among girls.

The class is divided into small work groups of 4-5 students per group. As a rule, all groups are in the same classroom.¹¹ Camilla and Constance are members of the same work group, while Cornelia is in a different group (groups are put together by the teacher, but the students’ wishes count when the teacher does so). One day Cornelia says to Camilla: “You and I are best friends, and we share almost everything. We ought to be together in the same group.” Camilla agrees, and asks the teacher to be moved over to Cornelia’s group. The teacher accepts her request.

The first day at school after Camilla’s transfer to a new group, everything looks fine (to Camilla, that is). However, on the next day, in the first break between lessons, Cornelia goes past Camilla on her way out from class, looking straight “through” Camilla with “an empty glance” (Camilla’s expression), as if she weren’t there. She goes directly over to Constance. Camilla tries to get in touch with both of them, but is rejected. Camilla immediately knows for sure that she is in trouble, although she doesn’t understand why.

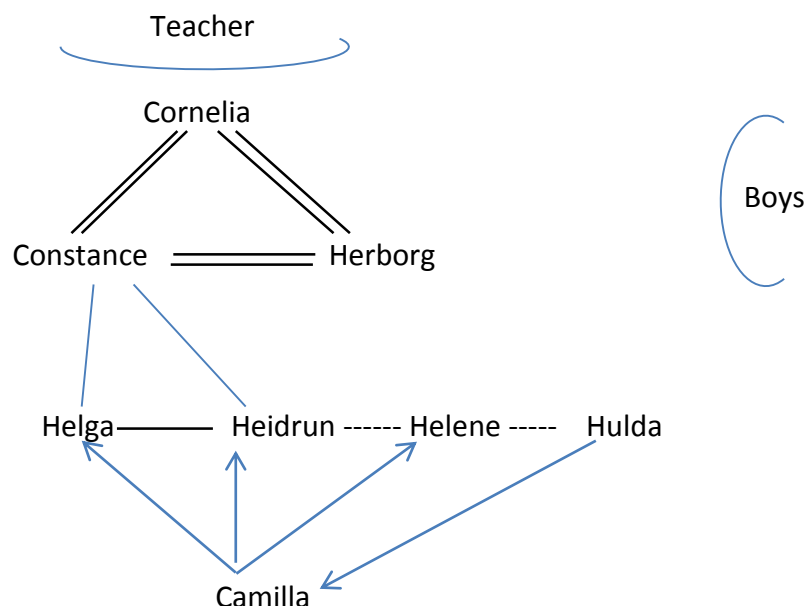
This is the beginning of two years of frequently recurring problems for Camilla. The day after (the “worst day in my life”, according to her diary), Constance comes to her, and claims “the picture”. “The picture” is a photo of the two girls cheek- to- cheek (“eternal friends”), taken at photo booth during a school excursion to the nearest town. There is one copy of this picture, and this copy is a shared property that changes hands at certain intervals. For the time being, Camilla has it. Camilla vacillates, says she doesn’t “have it”, but the next day she “has found it”, and gives it to Constance. However, Constance refuses to receive it. Instead she commands Camilla to tear the picture in two parts, saying: “you can keep yourself”.

Camilla says she does not need the picture, and hands it over to Constance once more, but the latter returns the picture and repeats: “*You* tear it apart.” Camilla takes the picture, and puts it back in her wallet. Later, about a year after this incidence, she still has the picture in her

bedside drawer. I've presented this little episode to illustrate what will be an important sub-text below: *Symbolic violence* (Bourdieu 1991) – a form of violence that is almost invisible - would usually not be called violence by a naïve observer, and often not even by the target (or victim) of such violence. Symbolic violence is, according to Bourdieu, a kind of violence that *works selectively on minds*. Therefore, it varies according to the target's understanding, receptivity and vulnerability to specific signs, symbols and forms of communication. On the level of *interaction*, power may be exercised via subtle, invisible forms of symbolic control: If the targeted person is *susceptible* to specific, subtle forms of communication, he/she will tend to adapt and adjust behaviour accordingly. If he/she is *not/less susceptible* to these forms of communication, he/she may be excluded from the community of communicators. In both cases, the person is virtually rendered powerless, especially as regards asserting his/her interests, identity and integrity. Camilla was in a vulnerable state of mind, and Constance's action, which symbolically ends their friendship, may be as hurtful as a blow of the fist, or even more so.^{12 13}

The group is now reorganized in the course of a hectic month of daily conflicts ("disasters", according to Camilla). The pattern of relations then stabilises in a structure like this:

Figure 2: The group after restructuring



Explanation: Simple and double lines have the same meaning as in figure 1. A broken line (---) signifies a discontinuous (or weak) relation. Arrow pointing *downwards* = attacks or attempts to dominate ("picking on") somebody. Arrows pointing upwards = attraction or

attempts at getting in contact with somebody.

The intra-group power is now held by Cornelia and Constance (and perhaps Herborg), with Hulda as her assistant (Cornelia and Constance are clearly the leaders). As we might expect, Camilla is expelled and deprived of all her former friendship relations in the group. It should be noted that as far as interactive power (or friendship ties) is concerned, Herborg and Hulda have increased their power and leeway, while Camilla has lost hers. This is a consequence of changes in *the position* in the structure of the mentioned girls. Note Herborg: She has “conquered” Camilla’s place, while the interactive power/ action potential of the others (except Hulda) is close to status quo. Hulda’s position in the plot is transitory. After some time, she is back to her former status as an outsider, trying to get in touch with Helene and Camilla. I do not have material to explain Hulda’s movements, nor of her changes in structural position.¹⁴

After attempting to make friends with Heidrun and Helga, Camilla attaches to Helene, who accepts her friendship. Helene and Camilla have hardly been acquaintance before “the trouble” started (Camilla's words), so the friendship can be understood as *circumstantial* (two lonely birds seek company). Later their relation develops into a firm friendship that lasts until Camilla moves to town, and the girls start living separate lives in separate places. According to Camilla, Helene was the only person who cared about her when she was down and helpless, and both Helene’s and Camilla’s parents are happy that the two girls have “found” each other.¹⁵

3. Power and control methods. Examples.

Camilla now reveals that she has withdrawn from power struggles, accepted the new power relations, and seeks peace. However, that does not help her much. On the contrary, she is now being harassed *more* than before. Below, I will show some of the means of such harassment. Since negative actions towards her are ritualized, I shall present them as *a set of rules*, exemplified by incidents copied from Camilla's diary notes (written in a very direct and factual voice, without much assessment or adjectives), or recorded by me *after* (never during) conversations with Camilla.

1. Beware of contagion (or: “Camilla is contagious”).

- Camilla has been sitting on Cornelia's chair. When Cornelia discovers this, she

demonstratively cleans her chair before she sits down on it. “Everybody” in the class can see this, and *Camilla thinks that this is the point*.

- Cornelia loses her wool mitten during a flirt with one of the boys. Camilla takes up the mitten (a sign of subservience/willingness to please). Cornelia takes the mitten *with the tips of her thumb and forefinger*, showing her repugnance of touching something that Camilla has touched, by means of face and body gestures.

2. Territorial control: Camilla is fair game.

- Breaks between lessons, entrance to/ exit from classrooms, locker rooms, shower rooms etc. are convenient places for actions to demarcate who has power, and who is “fair game”.
- After gym, the girls always take a shower. In the changing room, there is a *long bench*, and on the wall behind the bench, pegs are mounted side-by side, with about 50 cm between each peg. The girls hang their clothes on the pegs, and then go to take a shower. After shower, the girls sit down to dress on the bench, side-by side (rather crowded). One day, when Camilla comes out of the shower room, someone sits in front of her clothes. In order to get to her clothes, she must *either* ask the person to move, use physical force, or stretch - naked - over the girl who sits in front of her clothes. She does neither: She moves one step aside, where there is an open space between two other girls, in order to unhook her clothes from the side without infringing on somebody’s “private space”. However, before she gets there, another girl has moved into that space. Thus, her access to her clothes is efficiently blocked, and she stands naked in front of everybody. *No words, no loud sounds; only body movements, empty glances and a hostile atmosphere*. (This happens more than once, so Camilla thinks it is done “on purpose”).

Such “practical jokes” take a few seconds, and evidence of the event, which may be useful for the victim, disappears once the game is over. The event *may* be innocent; it is very difficult to record such an event as “bullying” or “harassment”; therefore it is soon forgotten by everybody, except the victim: She is already cornered; already disposed to feel collective hostility directed against her. So *for her*, such events may be very difficult to forget. The events tend to get *entrenched* in her mind. Especially if negative memories are frequently ripped open again, the mind is not allowed to “rest” or forget such memories. Each repetition rips open the wound¹⁶, and makes it more easily

accessible to the mind, so that the person starts *ruminating* over the events. Rumination *reinforces* (negative) *memories*, and the circle of reinforcement is restarted again and again.¹⁷ For Camilla, it is impossible to know whether only a few girls, or “everybody” participate in the game. Hence, she ruminates over “what is happening to me? And “what do they think of me?”, besides the more acute problem: “How can I avoid it?”

3. *Double bind; reduce the target’s available options:*

A characteristic of the situations described above, is that the exposed/targeted person has *few or no options*: If she strikes back aggressively (physically or verbally), she may *inflict blame and shame on herself*. If she doesn’t, she is being humiliated. She is in a situation of double bind (Bateson, 1972), and she knows it. The latter option (no action) seems like the better one, since the virtue of *restraint or reservation* is a way to keep up self-respect and respect among others. Open aggression would be a kind of self-degradation. According to Bourdieu, reactions to such incidents will depend on habitus. Accordingly, we may hypothesize that there is a class habitus plus a gender habitus at work here, so that a girl from the (cultural) middle class, where modesty and self-control is often considered a virtue, will react more strongly than boys and girls from other social classes¹⁸. However, this is not necessarily so. From the bullies’ perspective, the incident may be a form of *charismatic education* (Bernstein, 1990): Self-control and introverted reactions in the face of superior power may be exactly what the girls are trying to *teach* Camilla during these encounters. This assumption was not made, and could not be made, by dotting events along a timeline. Connecting the dots was only possible by going back-and-forth among events, such as these:

- During breaks between lessons, the girls often walk in groups around the school. If their roads are crossing, Camilla and Helene are now and then intercepted by the troika. How frequently this happens, I cannot tell. However, lack of predictability may be as important as frequency: Lack of predictability creates uncertainty; uncertainty creates *continuous* vigilance and anxiety in the target.¹⁹
- Camilla feels she is being “spotted”, so that the mere chance of the roads cross is an opportunity to make that happen. Camilla “always” gives way (*she says*), although she does not experience *direct*, physical threats. It is more about taken-for granted privileges, of the kind “*who* has priority, and *who* gives way without questioning that priority”.
- The same rule applies when the children are on the move *out of or into* the classroom:

At the door/entrance, there is always queuing. Hence there is a question of *order* (*who goes first*). Camilla says she never tries to “get first” to the door. Intuitively, I believe her: Waiting in line is a natural way of avoiding conflict, and *seeking* conflict would put her at risk.

- During lessons, Camilla is intercepted when going to get her books in the bookshelves²⁰. Also in this case, I do not know how frequently it happens, but again –lack of predictability may be as efficient as predictability (see endnote 15).
- She also finds her books damaged or just “lost”, without reasonable explanations. Camilla perceives this as *a statement*: She is “fair game”. The teacher does not remember having noticed these incidents. (Source: Conversation with the teacher *in retrospect*).

4. *Silence the victim; marginalize the parents.*

Camilla feels she cannot “tell” her teacher about these events, due to a number of reasons: She would have to explain her “situation” *before* she can explain why apparently “small” incidents are hurtful and humiliating. She thinks the teacher will not understand anyway, and take too much of the teacher’s time. Camilla sees limited prospects of being able to explain “the problem” to the teacher in a way that would make a difference: Few outsiders have the patience to listen to complaints about “trifles” like this. The ones who *might* do so are friends and family, i.e. persons who are biased in her favour, and will listen to her anyway.

This fact can be *used* by bullies as *a means to marginalize teachers, parents and other outsiders* that may try to intervene to stop or spoil “the game”. Parents are, from an objective point of view, a conflict party; hence they are biased; hence they are “disqualified” from intervening. Parents know this, and the children who are involved in bullying relations probably also know it.²¹ Camilla understands it intuitively, and gives up trying to involve the teacher. (She is also very sceptical when her own parents contact the other parents, but she joins in, to *give it a try*. See below).

4. *Compassion will be punished (or: Those who pity the outcast will be punished).*

- Girls who overtly contact Camilla, or indicate friendship with her, are punished during the next days. A typical example of such punishment attempts to isolate them from their friends (or turn their friends against them). The troika can offer both goods and

“bads”, so the threat is real enough.

- Birthday parties are great opportunities to illustrate the point: Birthdays are events of high symbolic significance for children at this age. At such events the child is in focus: The birthday child is “queen of the ball” for a whole day, and others are anxious to see whether they are invited -- or not. Camilla is, of course, never invited to any of the triad’s birthday parties. In addition, nobody except Helene invites her to their birthday party. This may be because they all dislike her, but it may also be out of *fear of the troika*, since the troika can make sure that nobody, or nobody who “counts”, will come to their own birthday party. Since birthday parties are scattered throughout the year, such events are significant and frequent possibilities to test power relations and discover possible infirmity (“cracks”) in the power structure.
- Almost two years into the conflict, Camilla invites all the girls in her class, plus some of the boys to her birthday party. Helene, Hulda and a couple of boys arrive. An hour later, Heidrun arrives. Heidrun has taken the bus home after school, and asked her mother to drive her back to Camilla’s place (Camilla lives just by the school; Heidrun lives 15 km away). *Interpretation*: Heidrun pretends she is going home, in order to conceal that she breaks the boycott of Camilla. Girls may experience, in different ways, that those who try to break the boycott, are being punished.

4. *Manoeuvres to isolate the victim; include her friend(s) in the in-group, keep her excluded.*

- Helene is often invited to take part in activities, games etc. by one of the members of the troika. If she rejects, she is verbally abused (poisonous comments, social isolation from others in the class etc.).
- On a couple of occasions, when Constance is not at school, Cornelia tries to get in touch with Helene and Camilla. This may be a sign that there’s a rupture somewhere in the top triad. This tends to create unrest among the other girls. (Everybody is watching everybody). Several times, Camilla also feels “invited” to reconnect, but she fears the consequences. Therefore she never yields to the temptation, and the structure remains intact.

In the examples listed above, there’s always an ambiguity as regards *interpretation*: Most of the acts may be called teasing, joking, “fun”, or *testing*. Young people *test* one another frequently, and an outsider will easily interpret the events mentioned above as just that. According to Camilla, their actions are *manoeuvres*, aiming at isolating *her*. Helene and

Camilla have many conversations on this topic: They need to know – hence interpret -- what such events actually *mean*, so they can find out how to react to them.

Cornelia takes most initiatives to such actions, but the interpretation of that fact is far from straightforward: Is Cornelia playing power games; is she taking *a leadership role* in a drama and the group; or is Cornelia herself restricted by a power outside of her control – a power that nevertheless has a strong influence on her? Answers to these questions were hard to find, but some events (described below) indicated that there were rather strong “impersonal” forces at work in the group, so that *even the leader was not in a position to choose freely how to act and what to do*.

4. Intervention and mediation.

The possibilities of teacher(s) and parents to intervene in the drama are limited. However, both *the lead teacher* and Camilla’s parents try to intervene by engaging the parents of the (alleged) bullies.

4.1 Teacher intervention.

The lead teacher - a young woman - tries to intervene in the conflict on several occasions. First, she tries *shuttle diplomacy*: She asks Camilla whether she “wants to be friends with” the girls in the troika. Camilla answers positively, and the teacher talks to the troika, and tells them that Camilla wants to be their friend. The result is negative, and the attitudes of the troika vis-à-vis Camilla *harden* as a consequence of this initiative.

The lead teacher then tries to organize *class meetings*. At the first class meeting the teacher asks the troika and Camilla to tell “what is going on” between them, and *why* the girls are “quarrelling.” Camilla does not understand the question. She is not “quarrelling with anybody”, she says. The other girls remain silent, and so do the boys. The boys do not understand what this is about, or why they have been asked to participate.

The meeting is unproductive, but the teacher tries again: She now arranges another meeting, trying to focus on *problem solving*. She asks “*what are we going to do about this problem?*” The boys are confused, and distance themselves from the whole problem. The girls still remain silent. After a long, embarrassing period when nobody speaks, Herborg speaks up:

There are only two problems in this class, she says: First, there is Camilla, who is “scheming”, “makes a fuss” about nothing and “blabs” to teachers and adults. The second problem is that teachers and other adults *intervene in the pupils’ affairs*, by trying “to force us to be friends with Camilla.” Clearly, *nothing* should be done, except leaving the children alone.

According to Camilla, the other girls “just sat and stared” during this meeting, without saying a word. Camilla reads their silence as approval of Herborg’s opinion. Camilla rises from her chair, leaves the scene quickly, goes home, and promises herself “never” to attend such meetings again. We (her parents) are able to induce her to going to school the next day (and then *the next, then the next*, one day at a time), but she never again goes to class meetings. When a class meeting is being announced, she disappears from school before the meeting starts, and reports sick.

The meeting results in status quo, but from now on, the pupils involved in this conflict, are very negative to all attempts at adult intervention. From Camilla’s point of view, the teacher’s intervention is a disaster. She has expected a disastrous outcome, and her expectations are met: During the next days, she is being exposed to several new “rounds” of insidious attacks. She is now a “bitch”, a “snake”, a “telltale”, and a person who makes trouble for others. Thus, the class meetings have turned out to be a *people’s court* against Camilla. Most children in the class are not involved in the conflict, *distance themselves* from “it”, and as a consequence, they also keep Camilla at a distance. (Rationale: “This is not my business, and I do not want to be involved in this problem”. Consequence for Camilla: She is being more isolated).

It is easy to see that class meetings, as suggested by Nissen (1989) may aggravate the situation, especially for pupils that are vulnerable. According to Nissen, class meetings should be tailored to the type of problem at hand. Class meetings (or meetings with all parties to the conflict) may be productive if, and only if, it is possible to find *common ground* and *common responsibility* for solving the problem at hand.²² In this case, these conditions were not met.

4.2 Parents’ intervention.

When Camilla’s misery has lasted for about a year, Camilla’s mother and father take initiative to bilateral meetings with Constance’s and Cornelia’s parents. Two meetings are arranged with Cornelia’s parents, and one meeting is arranged with Constance’s parents. The first meeting with Cornelia’s parents take place in Camilla’s home; the other two meetings take

place in Constance's and Cornelia's home. The girls are present at these meetings.

The conversations at these meetings would typically go like this:

After introductory pleasantries, I would apply to Cornelia/Constance, saying:

- Camilla is not happy, but she does not know what is wrong. Can you tell me what is wrong between you?

- (Silence)

- According to Camilla, here is what happened in the shower one day. (I then paraphrased the story Camilla told me, referred to above).

- Silence.

- How was it, then?

- Silence, shrug of the shoulders, defiant facial expression, staring.

At the time, I interpreted silence and reticence as a sign of bad conscience. Today, I interpret their reactions as an expression of distrust, defiance and unwillingness to break the group solidarity. In this case, silence may also have been a tacit rejection of what the girls perceived as "adult interference" in their internal affairs. When it came to questions about details (like "what exactly happened in the shower room that day"?) the girls remained silent, but their gestures (facial expressions, looks, body language) indicated *passive-aggressive rejection* of adult intervention.

Trying to talk about *details* (sequence or order of actions; face and body expressions, forms of communication; tone of voice; exact choice of words etc.) was in vain. At the end of the meeting in Constance's home, Constance's father said to us, with reference to Constance's silence: "Well, you see, she does not want to talk about this, so ..." (shrug of the shoulders). I concluded *tacitly* that these conversations were fruitless and meaningless, and after a few more pleasantries, we left the place silently.

I found these meetings painful and humiliating, and so did my wife. We had taken initiative to peace and conflict resolution; we met the bullies on their premises (home), just to be ignored and dismissed by 12-year old kids, with a sort of tacit, passive support from their parents. Camilla felt that these meetings had made her even more vulnerable at school. She isolated herself (also from us – her parents). That did not relieve her psychosomatic symptoms, nor her fear of going to school. Both she and the other girls knew that she had to go to school, and

that there were many opportunities during school hours to “teach her a lesson”.

Shortly after the meeting between us and Constance’s parents, Herborg asked Camilla “why didn’t you call *my* parents?” Obviously, the rumour of these meetings had spread, and Herborg may have thought that *not* being invited to/asked for a meeting (in the children’s perceptions this amounted to “not being accused”) was a sign that her power and role in the group was being underrated. She may also be right about this: Neither Camilla nor we (her parents) had thought of Herborg as a significant actor or driving force in this conflict. However, if we look at the structural changes, Herborg had conquered Camilla’s position. From a structural point-of view, she had won that position at the sacrifice of Camilla. Not recognizing that may be equivalent to underrating Herborg’s independent drive and agency in the group.

There has been no conflict - not even much contact - between Herborg and Camilla *before* the conflict, so at *that* time, it was impossible for us to know Herborg’s agency and role in the conflict. However, we had not even thought of it, *due to a double mistake*: 1) underrating the agency and vigour of a silent person who appears to be an outsider in direct interaction among the pupils; 2) underrating driving force inherent in structural position, and opportunities to “*climb*” socially in a social structure; a force that *generates* ambitions and agency in individuals.

A structural analysis of *Herborg's and Camilla's positions in the group of girls before and after the conflict*, would have lead us straight to such an hypothesis: From a structural/positional point of view, Herborg gained a lot by the conflict. She also had very much to lose if Camilla were admitted back into the group, and recognized as a full member of the group. The fact that there was no direct conflict, even not much contact between Herborg and Camilla *before* the conflict broke out, was a poor indicator when it came to finding the actors who “counted”. It was also a poor indicator of “who should talk to whom”.

5. Climax, turning point and conflict transformation (journey back to life)

Climax

At the end of the 6th school year, the class is at an outing to the beach. The pupils play games on the beach, and Camilla and some boys start to play-fight. During the “fight”, Camilla is thrown into the sea by some of the popular boys. The atmosphere was one of *fun*, not least for

Camilla, who felt a beam of sunlight after 2 years. She got attention by boys; she was not “nobody”. After the incident, Camilla went behind a big stone to get on some dry clothes. While she was doing this, she was looked up by the troika who ask: “So you have been peeing in your trousers again?”

The teacher did not notice the episode. A moment ago, she had seen Camilla being pushed into the sea by the boys. She gave the boys a *pro forma* reprimand for “being naughty”, but her reprimand was not serious: The atmosphere was not negative, and the episode was “just fun”, also for Camilla. The teacher probably understood that in this situation, a negative reaction against the boys would be *displaced*. However, she did not hear or see what happened behind the stone, except for laughter and hollering.

The turning point.

During the 2-year period described above, both Camilla and we (her family) had a problematic time. Our energies and power to meet the day were worn down almost on a daily basis. Building and rebuilding Camilla’s energy to meet the day became a daily task. Get her prepared for going to school in the morning, cheer her up and get her started with her homework in the afternoon etc. was laborious and energy consuming. Family relations got strained; there was easily a “fuss” about trifles; and Camilla was getting more and more distressed and “difficult”.

Then, at the end of the second school year after the conflict had erupted, we received two phone calls, both coming like “a bolt from the blue”. The first call was from Constance’s mother. Camilla’s mother, who picked up the receiver, got the following tirade, expressed in a loud and aggressive voice by Constances’ mother: Camilla’s two years older sister had, together with another girl in her class, started bullying Constance, Herborg and Cornelia. Ostensibly, the two older girls stalked the three girls, intercepted them during recess, shouted abusive words at them, stared at them in a hostile way; and one day Camilla’s big sister had spitted on Constance’s shoes, and shouted derogatory words at her. Shortly after this, she got a phone call from Herborg’s mother, who recited some of the same incidents, although in a neutral voice, indicating she only referred to what she had been told, and wanted to know what was “going on”.

Camilla’s mother replied to both that she knew nothing of this, but she would “of course” talk

to her eldest daughter about the accusations. After the phone calls, she confronted her with the allegations. Big sister admitted to nothing and denied nothing. She tacitly stared at her mother, rose from her chair, and left the room silently, but demonstratively. Camilla's mother went after her, admonished her to "stop it" - whatever "it" was she was involved in. However, she issued no warning, and the episode never resulted in any reprimands. A couple of days later, she got another other phone call with an equivalent message from from Herborg's mother.

A bit later, I was able to get the following information out of Camilla's big sister: There had been "an episode" where she had spitted in front of herself, and "unfortunately, one of the little brats came in my way." This, she said, was "an accident", and she had said "sorry, I did not see you". She did not remember exactly to whom she had said those words. However, she denied having said "abusive" words, and certainly not "shouted". If such words had been expressed, they might have been said in a conversation *between* herself and her friend while talking together "about something else." *The words were not meant for the ears of "little brats"*, so if Constance, Cornelia or Herborg had heard negative words, they had been in the wrong place at the wrong time: They had simply been "too *close*" to her - a place where "they should not be". On the other hand, if "the little monsters" were afraid of her, that was "no problem", she said. If these episodes could teach them a little "respect" and "manners" - even better. She was tired of looking at the "trouble", and she was even more tired of seeing adults -- such as her own parents -- being "helpless" and submissive vis a vis "12-year-old kids."

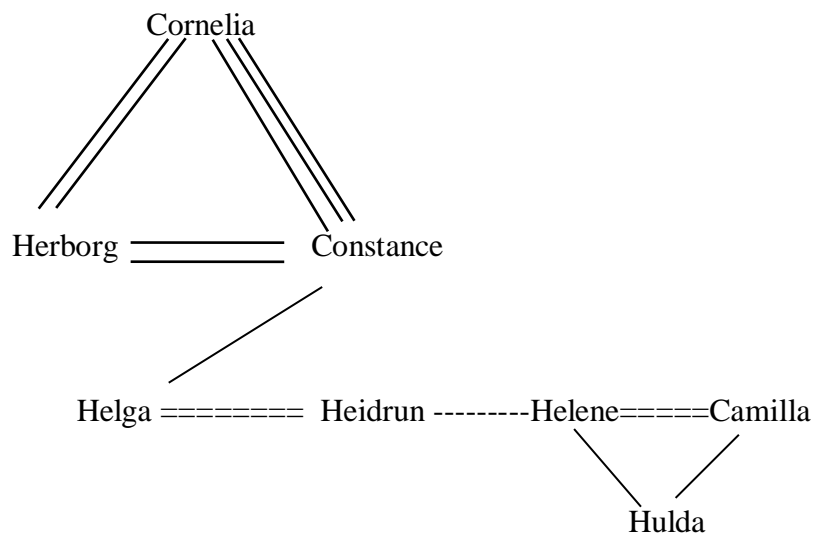
Conflict transformation (or: Journey back to life).

What apparently was a "counter-bullying campaign" of Camilla's older sister and her friend continued for 2 or 3 weeks in spring. It ended shortly before summer holidays. Camilla's mood changed very quickly. Her psychosomatic problems and resistance to going to school disappeared almost instantaneously. We received no more telephone calls from parents of the troika, and heard no more about it from our children.

After summer holiday, Camilla was back to normal functioning. According to Camilla herself, there was a change in *the atmosphere* in her class: The girls interacted in less hostile ways vis a vis one another, and the relation among them was now one of "cool distance". In the course of the next two years, there were only a couple of negative incidents among the girls, and these incidents were soon forgotten. The structure of the group was *slightly altered* (see figure

4). The girls were now focusing “who” they were (as individuals), rather than on the relation between them. They showed “who they were” by clothing, taste of music, sports/leisure activities (“ball games and singing” vs “fashion and boys”), relation to politics and to gender roles.

Figure 4: Group structure at the end of the 7th school year (13-14 years of age).



Comments to figure 4: Two separate groups have developed, and the borders between them are clear. Between these groups there is a dyad (Helga-Heidrun). Both triads and dyads are *fairly stable*. Cornelia-Constance are “best friends” (with Herborg included in a triad), so are Helga – Heidrun and Helene-Camilla (with Hulda included in a triad). Heidrun and Helga are a sort of buffer between the two triads. That is, they are friends with both, but not a threat to any of them. In the figure, this is indicated by unbroken lines within (stable) dyads and triads²³, and broken line between weaker relations. Inter alia, this implies that each of the “best friends” can be friends with a third party without conflict over friendships and positions. Thus, anxiety and energy spent on mutual testing and control is dampened. *Helga and Heidrun’s flexible position seem to represent a stabilising element between the two other groups.*

This new situation – helped by maturity (the girls were now 13 years old) created more peaceful forms of interaction, and possibly a transformation of the conflict patterns, from intense relational conflicts to more “cool”, distanced and *indirect competition*. These interaction patterns were over issues such as music, sports, pop idols, clothes and other

aesthetic values related to *identity*. However, they did not – as far as I know – result in any direct confrontations. These, new expressions of competition may be interpreted as indirect and *mediated* forms of communication among the girls.²⁴

6. Reflections on teacher and parent intervention.

In the conflict above, neither class discussions nor mediation succeeded. Perhaps they could not succeed, for want of inside information regarding the conflict issues and processes inside the group of girls. Especially, the teacher seems to have been short of insight into the intra-group processes, motives and agendas of the participants: She could not intervene in a powerful way because she could not say for sure *who* had to *change* their attitudes and behaviors, *in what way* these must change, what steps the participants must take to prove they were serious about changing their behavior, and *when* and how the teacher expected results.

As a consequence, the teacher was neither able to lead meetings among the conflict parties towards specific aims, nor to control the outcomes in the process towards those goals, nor to check at certain intervals whether the process was going in the direction of peace or not. These preconditions, which may also be preconditions for peaceful settlement of asymmetric conflict generally, are *unlikely to be met* if the teacher has no training in handling conflicts and conflict processes, to make a plan for their transformation, and to check whether the processes go according to (that) plan.

This conclusion may be criticized: It appears to be anti-dialogic, besides authoritarian. However, the following arguments are in favor of the conclusion: Dialogue is a process, in which participants *listen* to one another, *express* their opinions (preferably in a respectful way), are open to (counter)arguments from the other side, and prepared to let “the better argument” count more than personal motives and goals. A precondition for such a process, is that Ego sees Alter as his/her equal; a person with the same human rights and responsibilities as oneself. In bullying relations, those criteria are often rendered null and void: *Bullying is a process that creates a system of privileges for one part, and reduces the other part to a status as a “subhuman”*. Once established, double standards are *an integrated part of the interaction system, as well as the mentality of the dominator*: There is one set of rules for the bullies; another set of rules for the victim, and a third set of rules for *outsiders*. An important precondition for maintaining this pattern of unequal rights, is that this system of privileges is kept intact/not undermined. As long as one party have few or no internal or external limits to

what they can do, and the other party is limited in visible as well as invisible ways, the word “dialogue” is a misnomer. Communication between two parties that are extremely unequal in rights as well as power, is *at best* a parody of dialogue: The participants involved in such communication do not learn dialogical methods, nor a culture of dialogue, nor the fact that dialogue can transform a conflict and produce fair/just outcomes for all parties.

Dialogue presupposes a minimum of power balance between the involved parties. In order to arrive at that balance, there must be a process of *conscientization* (Freire, 1979), so that consciousness, sympathetic concern, moral sentiments and behaviors can change in the dominant as well as the dominated party. This is especially important if, in reality, *conflict consciousness correlates inversely to position in the power structure*, so that those in power *don't see the problem*, while those who have little or no power *see* the problem, but are not able to define it, or – if they can define it – they do not see how they can *bring about change* in the power relations. Sometimes bullies (and victims, too) need a wake-up call in order to start reflecting on those questions, and start internalizing the answers to those questions, as well as on some moral standards, such as that of *equality in human worth*.

7. Position of the researcher, and the problem of bias.

This story is about a person close to the author. That is, the author is biased. Firstly, the story told above is to a certain degree, based on information *bias*. Information about many events are gathered mainly from one source, Camilla. She sees the events from *her* perspective, a fact that produces a *partial* and one-sided account of “what happened”. Secondly, being Camilla’s father, I am also involved as a conflict party. There are scientific, ethical and moral problems involved in this. There are serious scientific problems involved in *writing* a story based on details given by one informant. The relation between author and the main informant is also so close that the story may be discarded as partial, ambiguous and invalid. Thirdly, there are ethical and legal dilemmas involved in *publicizing* this material.

However, proximity to informants has *one* advantage, compared to distanced/neutral/”unbiased” – also called “objective” - information: It gives access to information that would remain hidden and undisclosed, if all the control mechanisms and filters that are usually put on social research, were on. This goes for rules of privacy, neutrality, and triangulation. In cases of hidden bullying, control mechanisms against bias may be a filter that efficiently prevents relational facts and power relations from being disclosed in the first place. Further,

when facts are disclosed, the filters aiming at neutrality and objectivity, may in fact filter the most crucial facts in ways that *make the pattern dissolve* right in front of our eyes.

Information among persons who live close to one another may be less filtrated than information from a source to a neutral, distant third party. Some of the most *essential* information that we need in order to see a pattern of action, *a modus operandi*, may be lost in the process of filtration. This especially goes for sensitive information, e.g. details that may be hidden because one or both of the involved persons/parties do not want these details to be revealed. When this is the case, neutral persons and third parties get only *strongly censored, even distorted information*. One of the reasons why “soft” and symbolic forms of bullying tend to remain hidden, may be that external parties – e.g. teachers/ school authorities – miss the details that connect events (“dots”) to a pattern (a “story”). Another reason may be that researchers have to weigh evidence from several parties before drawing conclusions. *If essential information is filtered before it reaches third parties, “neutral parties” also sit on biased information*. That is, there is no unbiased perspective available at all. The ideal way of solving this problem is to gather information from *two or more perspectives, ideally, two perspectives on the same events, and the same story* – then assess the two or more perspectives, weigh them, and draw a balanced conclusion. However, if the only thing we get are two biased stories - one picture based on *low-density information* (as we see things at a distance) and one based on *high-density information* (as we see things at close range/in a microscope) – what we get is, at best, *a hybrid image*²⁵. In hybrid images, *a slight shift of perspective* will make you see a *very different image*.²⁶ If the picture *remains ambiguous*, the researcher may of course refer to the two perspectives, and let the story rest there without further attempts at getting an unambiguous, clear answer. However, in cases of potential/*possible* bullying, teachers and organizational leaders often have to make decisions based on ambiguous images, because they have to make decisions on “what to do about the problem”.

For an external observer, this story may look like a series of *disconnected random incidents*. However, for those involved, and especially for the victim, the “events” are part of a pattern of *regular, ritualized harassment*. The difference between these two perspectives can be explained thus: A person who sees events, but does not see *how* the events are connected via their psycho-social effects on both the individual target and the group, may not connect the events to a coherent story. Seeing symbolic forms of aggression *as* bullying, is about seeing

patterned psycho-social relationships: When actions are repeated, or constitute a series of consecutive, logically interconnected actions, the pattern of events constitutes a story.

Proximity to the events is sometimes necessary in order to see small details that *connect the events to a pattern*. The best understanding of the object is achieved by looking at the picture both at close range, then at a distance, back again. Thus, research (re-search; to *search again*) is a dialectical movement, a pendulum movement back and forth between proximity and distance, between theory and reality, between the perspective of the victim and the perspective of his/her (alleged) victimizers. Then we see that the image is in fact composed of two different images.

However, if it is not possible to get both views, we may have to choose. In this case, I *had to* choose proximity, and then gradually fill in the other perspectives as far as possible.

Proximity helped me see a pattern, but only one side of the story. Distance could only be achieved by means of time: First time I wrote down this story was in 1999. It took me 16 years more to finish this article, with the methodological and structural reflections added here. Time helped me detach from the biases that follow from emotional (etc.) attachment to one party.²⁷

In the social world, we connect events to patterns by association and inference. For example, we *infer* motives from actions, statements or gestures (and we often combine the sources of information to understand motives). We can also understand other people's motives by *putting ourselves in their situation*, and ask how we would have acted or reacted "if we were them", there and then. This mental operation is at the core of the hermeneutic method, which is about *understanding, rather than explaining* phenomena. According to Dilthey, this is a distinctive feature of social and human phenomena, different from natural phenomena, due to the fact that *humans have a spiritual life* characterized by *a search for wholeness and association between present, past and future, for connection between the self and the others* (i.e., we have historical and social awareness), and for understanding human experience and inner life.²⁸ The hermeneutic research process is a *recurrent movement* (or a shuttle movement) from the particular and the whole, from the explicit to the implicit, and vice versa. The explicit, e.g. behaviors, gestures, verbal expressions etc. become meaningful by understanding the *implicit* meaning and intention inherent in, or expressed through those behaviors. The particular - events, incidents and intentions, as perceived by the mind of an individual at

moment - become understandable in light of the whole, and *the whole* is constituted by a) the *relations* between the “I” and the “me”; b) relations between the “I/me” and “the others”; c) the history that leads up to the event(s), d) the *context* of the event(s) and action(s), and e) the meaning of the event for the participants/actors and their relations to one another *henceforth/after the event(s)*.

In this essay I have attempted to see *the explicit* (events, incidents, behaviors) in the light of the implicit (intentions, actor’s goals, context and consequences of the actions, etc.). If we can combine information from a variety of sources to *a whole*, the patterns we can see in one context can have validity outside of this context, due to some recognizable characteristics of the phenomena, combined with *some* access to the mental life of the participants, such as their position in the structure and their relation to one another.

In this article, *the story* is the empirical (or *foregrounded*) level of information; the group structure (i.e. the *structured relations* among group members) completes the story (makes it whole), *the external structure* (the geographical, economic and sociological information) is *the external frame*, within which the story takes place,²⁹ and the sum of all these informations constitute the whole.

Epilogue.

Being exposed to indirect (or “soft”) forms of bullying can be very traumatizing. However, the worst trauma for victims may be the feeling that their experience is idiosyncratic, private and not valid for anybody else. Hence, victims of bullying often interpret what happens to them as *their private problem*. Often they conclude that “there is something fundamentally wrong with me”, even “I do not belong to the social, human world”. Therefore, they are often afraid of *crossing the doorstep to the public domain*: Doing so may be too threatening to their basic existential feeling (being “justified” as a living, human being in this world). Hence, they only talk about their experience to people they trust entirely. Since the source is biased, the story is biased. However, sometimes that is the only way to get the story across the threshold, into the public domain.

This is a problem when it comes to external validity and generalizability of victim stories. If the story cannot be verified by others who have *seen* what happened to them, and they only confide in persons they trust entirely, their story can always be called into question. Hence, it

remains private, and before being interpreted in a relational frame, taking the whole network of relations into account, it is also *idiosyncratic and highly subjective*. The alternatives for the researcher may be *to write a biased story, keep the story in the drawer, or transform it to fiction* (write a novel or a short-story). If the alternative to publicizing a story based on biased sources is to keep serious social problems hidden, an analysis based on biased information can be defended, if the sources of bias is laid bare; the problems inherent in the bias is laid bare; and the causes and consequences of the bias are discussed in an open and frank manner.

Further, the problems caused by bias in sources of information is to some extent a problem of distance/proximity to the source: If the writer presenter is very close to the source, let alone in symbiosis with the source, the bias of the source will not only affect, but virtually *infect* the perspective of the writer. Distance to the source may reduce this problem. Distance can be gained in several ways: 1) By triangulation; get information from other sources; ideally from sources with an opposite view; 2) By relational and/or emotional distance to the source, so the writer is not dependent on the goodwill of the source; 3) By the emotional distance that – more or less naturally -- comes by time and the “fading” of emotional memory over time; 4) By relating the story, the actors’ motives and actions to a larger structure, so that attribution bias/errors caused by the author’s *position* and perspective vis a vis the different actors in the “plot”, are somewhat neutralized and counterbalanced by a *structural and relational understanding* of their motives and actions.

In this article, I have tried to do a bit of all of this: I have triangulated where I found it possible (not very successful); I have edited and rewritten the text over and over again for 20 years before “publishing” it (see details on this in *endnote 30*);³⁰ I have made efforts to put the story in a *structural frame*, hoping that the structural frame can move the focus *from the story itself to the general theoretical problems* that the story raises. I also hope that the structural perspective on the story will reveal *a pattern* of interaction that would have remained hidden, or been overshadowed by the events, if the story had only been analysed from an *actor* perspective, or an *individual, psychological* perspective.

If readers can identify or recognize common patterns in this case and other cases, the case has some validity outside of its own frame. If common patterns can be recognized in a variety of stories that span a variety of social contexts, the *specific* problems experienced by individuals can gradually be recognized as a *common* human and social problem. After all, this is how

many groups – not least groups of individuals who suffer from internalized shame - have been able to walk across the “doorstep miles”³¹, communicate their “private” problem, and start solving the problem *in the open social space*, where the problem belongs.

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¹ Before him, Konrad Lorenz had introduced the concept of “mobbing” for instinctive, collective aggression in groups gregarious animals (Lorenz, 1963).

² Generalizations based on statistics can hardly be made without unambiguous criteria of inclusion and exclusion.

³ This detail counts. It means that Camilla wrote down these notes for herself, not for anyone else to see, and certainly not for “the public”.

⁴ During teacher inspection in the school yard I saw *several fights*, but only one instance of clear-cut *bullying* - among *boys*. When I saw fights, I intervened to stop the ongoing fighting on the spot, and in the case of bullying- which was very serious - I intervened by organizational means (three days suspension from the school, plus a talk with the parents, plus a follow-up intervention to help the victim avoid confrontations with the bullies thereafter).

⁵ I observed from a classroom window facing a part of the school yard that was usually not observed by teachers.* According to Heinemann (1973), this is exactly where an observer should look, if he/she wants to observe bullying in schools. Persons will change behaviour when they are being (un)observed, or when they think they are being (un)observed. They will certainly do so if they (think they) are being observed by persons who will assess their actions negatively, or punish them for what they are doing. Behavior may also change when persons fear being observed by persons who may “tell” authorities or other persons that are in a position to sanction their actions, or harm them in any way. If these assumptions are *generally* true, they are also true when it comes to bullying/bullying

situations.

* **Note on the school area of observation:** This school did not have an inner school yard surrounded by school buildings or a fence. This kind of architecture is mostly typical for city schools, but not necessarily for country schools. “My” school was a long, narrow building, positioned in the North-South direction, with one corridor that constituted the “spine” of the building. On both sides of the corridor there were classrooms facing, respectively, West and East. There was a road surrounding the school: Broad enough for cars, but not used as a drive-way. The place was only used as a school yard. On the Southern short-end of the school, there was a playground for ball games etc. for the big children; on the Northern end there was another, minor playing ground for youngest pupils (7-9 years old). The teachers’ room was facing *West* (with no outlook towards the three other sides of the school). The Eastern side of the school was what I call “the blind zone” of the school yard. By “blind zone”, I mean an area where teachers rarely observe what is going on. 1/4th of the classroom windows were facing that area, but during breaks there were usually no teachers in the classrooms. Therefore, the pupils could, as a rule, think they were being unobserved in this area. I chose those classrooms for my observations.

⁶ Note on privacy rules/laws: I was a part-time teacher at the school, which includes general rights/duties to observe students, also during breaks. So I did not violate any laws or rules when doing these observations. However, it is problematic, in terms of privacy laws, regulations and ethical rules of research, to *publicize* such observations in a case study. That is a/the main reasons why I cannot *publicize* this story as it is: Even though it might be, from a *purely ethical* point of view, defensible to do so now --20 years after the facts -- it might violate these children’s right to privacy according to Norwegian law. Further, as will be discussed further down,

⁷ By this I am not indicating that fiction cannot be based on empirical reality, as well as a lot of investigation of real events. On the contrary, novels and short stories often have a strong basis in real events, a lot of research, and scientific insights. In fact, a story that does not relate strongly to real life *experiences* will often fall on barren ground among the public. However, *the author is free to treat the real life stories as he/she wishes*: The author of fiction does not make truth claims, or claims that what he/she describes refer to factual events: He/she is not responsible vis a vis his/her informants except for, arguably, a moral responsibility to protect the privacy of his/her sources of information. However, even that is open to discussion (example: the roman à clef).

⁸ Number of workers vary throughout the year, and according to variations in the inflow of fish (or “catch”) from one season to another. The women mainly do the unskilled work; the men more often work with maintenance of machines and buildings, transport, loading, or as foremen. There are a few office clerks and quality controllers (mainly men with some education or on-the-job training).

⁹ Job security and job intensity depended on the fishermen’s daily catch, which varied from one season to another, and from one year to another. Most of the workers – many of them women -- were laid off temporarily during low-season. However, the seasons were (are) predictable, and so was the average income over the year – or at least over 2-3 years (due to Norwegian lay-off regulations, which guarantee workers a certain income in periods of temporary lay-off).

¹⁰ **Local power relations and parents’ position in the community:** The community, in which District School is situated, consists of three different villages: Port, Peninsula, and Fjord. The community as a whole is dependent on incomes from deep-sea fishing and fish processing industry, small-scale farming and services to the industry and households. The occupations of the parents of the children involved in this story are shown in table 1.

Table 1: Parents occupation, education, income and relation to the local community.

	Occupation		Community relations		Income (relative)*		Education**	
	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother	Father	Mother
Camilla	Teacher	Teacher	Immigrant	Imm.	1,2	1,2	Higher	Higher
Helene	Grocer's	Housewife	Native	Imm.	1,5	?	Medium**	Basic
Cornelia	Industry owner	Ind. worker	Native	Native	NA	0,8	Basic**	Basic
Constance	Fisherman (own vessel)	Housewife	Native	Native	?	?	Basic	Basic
Herborg	Fisherman	Student	Native	Native	1,5	?	Basic	Medium
Helga	Carpenter	Housewife	Native	Native	1	?	Basic	Basic
Heidrun	Handyman	Housewife	Native	Native	1	?	Basic (?)	Basic
Hulda	Fisherman (own vessel)	Housewife	Native	Immigr.	2	?	Basic	Basic

* Stipulated income relative to average industrial workers yearly income (set to 1). 1 = NOK 200.000 per year. Source: Official Statistics of Norway (1996). *Wage statistics 1995*. Oslo-Kongsvinger:SSB.

** Basic education = 9 years compulsory.

Medium education = upper secondary (3 years academic/gymnasium **or** vocational)

Higher Education = College (1-3 years) **or** University education (4-7 years)

NA= Not available. Cornelia's father owns a multimillionaire business (industrial plant) together with his elder brother.

? = Uncertain or not confirmed. Constance's father owns a medium-large fishing vessel, employs several men, and is locally considered to be both clever and "well off". (Colloquial/local indicators of prosperity: Size of the house and standard of the car).

The big industry company in Port is a family business, owned/controlled by Cornelia's family. Most fishing vessels (also family business) deliver their catch to this plant. Thus, up to half of the families in the community are dependent on their goodwill. Constance is the daughter of a fisherman with a fairly large fishing vessel, and the same goes for Hulda. Several families are dependent on these men for work or income. Constance's mother is the daughter of a grocer's (family business) in Port. She is a housewife, but sometimes helps out in the family shop. Herborg's father is a fisherman (locally employed). Her mother has been a housewife, but is now taking "Gymnasium" (upper secondary, GC) education as a part-time student. (Later she takes teacher education, and becomes a teacher at the school). Helga is the daughter of a carpenter, with family/relatives in Port. When he can, he takes job orders in the community, but he often commutes during weekdays (Monday to Friday) to construction sites in other places. Heidrun's father is a handyman, taking jobs in different branches/crafts. Her mother is a housewife, but she has a part-time job in a kiosk close by her home. Helga and Heidrun are close neighbours, and 3 km away from them, Constance and Cornelia are – in this context – relatively close neighbours (they live 1 km away from one another).

Helene's family lives in Port, not far from Helga and Heidrun. Her father owns a grocer's shop near by the school in Fjord. Her mother is a housewife, but she sometimes works part-time in the family shop. Her father has some education (3 years upper secondary, business school); her mother has no education after compulsory school (9 years), but she comes from a family of teachers in the municipality center (an hour's drive from Port).

On this background, it is easy to see that local power relations among adults may have spilled over to the children. However, I have no proof thereof, and can only substantiate such an hypothesis by logical argument – not by facts.

¹¹ The Scandinavian principle of comprehensive, *integrated* schooling implies the following organization: All children of a certain age are organized in one class, *with their homebase in the same classroom*. All children are, as a rule, being taught together in all subjects and during most lessons, independent of the performance, abilities, gender, or other characteristics of each individual student. Differences as regards ability/performance are not important for our story. What is important, is the fact that students of a class are subdivided/organized into small work groups of 3-4 students, and these work groups are their more-or-less permanent homebase during most lessons.

¹² Physical attacks, direct threats or rude language can often produce a boomerang effect on the aggressor, due to social norms against physical aggression. Symbolic action does not necessarily produce a boomerang effect, because symbols are considered a more legitimate form of social control than physical power. If the words and signs are not aggressive, but refer to legitimate forms of behavior regulation, the risk of a boomerang effect is even smaller.

¹³ Symbolic control is, according to Bernstein (Bernstein, 1975, 1990, 1996), exercised by a combination of classification and framing. If both classification and framing are strong, the options are strongly reduced. Ideally, the choice may be reduced to zero, i.e. the only option is available, is to adapt to the frames already defined. *However*, according to Bernstein, controlling people by discursive means is not a 100% efficient method, since “a discourse cannot stop a discourse.” (quotation noted from Bernstein, 1994: lecture for researchers and PhD students at the UiT). That is; it is always physically *possible* to “talk back” to a, metaphorically speaking, “deadly” message intended at silencing a person. Therefore, symbolic control is not a “certain” method of power and control: It just *increases the chance that the target will obey, remain silence, or be socially “dead” for some time*.

¹⁴ Ten years later, I met Hulda at a music festival (an outdoor concert for alternative and indigenous cultures). She was then 21 years old, and showed, by means of clothes (black), hair colours (plural), metal pins through her nose and lower lip, and a *broad line* of mascara around the eyes, some sort of protest against mainstream society.

I never asked her why, and I never asked her about the conflict. My only information about her actions (and potential motives) are from conversations with Camilla, plus one information in Camilla’s diary. Her actions in this period can, nevertheless, be interpreted in a *structural perspective*: She may have been a useful assistant for the leadership, or she may have been an actor of her own “making”: There was now a chance of improving her position by picking at Camilla (“wannabes” are often willing to go far, in order to get accepted by group leaders). When the exclusion of Camilla is finalized, Hulda is also excluded by the troika. After a year, she is in fact a third party in a triad Helene-Camilla-Hulda. Hulda and Camilla become friends, but *never close*.

¹⁵ Camilla’s and Helene’s parents are cultural outsiders in the community, although in different ways/for different reasons.

¹⁶ Edvardsen (1997) calls this phenomenon “*blister*”.

¹⁷ By rumination I mean, a tendency to try to find out of “what the event was really about, or “what did I do wrong?”, or “how can I avoid another hurting episode?” (etc.)

¹⁸ This is not necessarily so. According to Bourdieu, symbolic power is ubiquitous in human society. Therefore, habitus develops *in concrete processes of socialization*, and reacts to symbols according what has been learnt in those concrete social processes. That is, the question is rather *how* a given habitus reacts to a *specific form* of symbolic communication. In the wardrobe case, the collective action to prevent Camilla from getting at her clothes may be called a “practical joke”. Accordingly, her reactions may be called “hysteric” or “wrong”. The situation could have been transformed completely if she had started laughing at the whole situation – taking the incident as a “joke”.

However, such a reaction is much easier for an insider than an outsider. For an outsider, starting to laugh at the situation would have signalized that it is enormous personal strength, signalizing that she is prepared to live in “splendid isolation”, rather than “humble submission” to the group.

¹⁹ If pain is inflicted at irregular intervals, you never know when the next negative event may happen to you. However, you still know *that* it can happen “any time”. When a person is being *personally targeted*, this situation creates continuous vigilance and anxiety in the targeted person. This gives the actor an invisible power over his/her target.

²⁰ In Norwegian classrooms, every student has his/her own pigeon hole in a bookshelf, in which the students keep their books when not in use.

²¹ Zelma Fors (1993) observed this phenomenon in several case studies of bullying among girls.

Parents of bully victims are made powerless by the bullies, simply by referring to the fact that they are biased *and* ought not to interfere in the children's world. This means that the adults are paralyzed *because* they are adults. Hence, they can be kept from intervening because their intervention would violate principles of (Aristotelian) justice: Treat equals equally, and un-equals unequally. Since children are "equals", and adults are "stronger than children", adults should not interfere in children's conflicts.

²² Nissen focuses mostly on the process; less on the outcome. However, a focus on process without regarding outcomes is a major mistake during conflict: In conflicts, *people meet with expectations* of certain outcomes, and their participation and arguments during the meeting *will be adapted to their expectations*. Hence, we cannot disregard the expected outcomes of such a meeting: Especially if the (expected) outcome is about *personal change in behaviour*, the question of all involved parties is: *Who must change?* Hence, it is important that such a meeting produces 1) a good *description* of what has happened (past), 2) a good description of the state of affairs (present situation), and 3) what to do about it (future). *Why*-questions –such as "why did you do that or that?" - are banned, because such questions tend to *create perfect opportunities to produce accusations and excuses instead of goals, designs and a plans to solve problems* (Pikas 1998). In the meetings between Camilla and the class, all these conditions and rules were violated: First, , half of the class, (the boys) are indifferent to (or ignorant about) the problem, and among the others, there's *disagreement about what is the problem, and whether there is a problem at all*. Second, there was no common description of the problem. Third, the teacher asked "why-questions" to the bullies, which gave them a perfect opportunity to blame the victim.

²³ A triple bond, is added to symbolize extra strong bonds in one dyad.

²⁴ Note: More cool/distance relations may also be the result of "natural" development: The girls are now more mature, and as a consequence, they have "naturally" developed different interests in *external objects* (e.g. boys, music, sport, idols, magazines). Thus, also age/maturity helps calm down the conflict.

²⁵ Olivia et al. (2006) have shown that when information is filtered via a *low-pass* (or low-frequency) filter, it is more easy to see a pattern *at a distance*, while the patterns of a high-resolution images are more easily *discernible at close range*. They also note that when one interpretation has settled in the mind, *the alternative image is perceived as noise*. They show this by *imposing a high-resolution image upon a low-resolution image* – thus producing a confusing *hybrid image*. Hybrid images are difficult to interpret because they *are* basically ambiguous: Therefore, the problem is not only that the receiver is confused: The problem is also that the "sender" *issues* a confusing image. Then, the observer has to decide which distance and perspective to choose, before making his/her interpretation.

²⁶ What signals we perceive, depends on *distance, filter, and the receiver* (or instrument). When signals have a certain *regularity* or *frequency*, we can see a *pattern*. E.g. when dots or sounds at a certain frequency recur with a certain regularity, we see a *line, a curve (etc)*. When lines or curves recur in a certain regularity, we see a more complex pattern (*a figure*). The same goes for auditive signals: Sounds with a regular frequency make a "sound"; many sounds make a tune; tunes combined make a melody etc. *Distance* to the source reduces our chances of perceiving weak or irregular signals, and irregular signals cannot easily be connected to a *pattern*. Even if we see or hear a pattern, it may be difficult to describe it unambiguously, since irregularities are perceived as "noise".

²⁷ I had no choice, since I was not in a position to get crucial information from the "other side" of the conflict, and the information that passed through to the external world (outside the closed circle of girls) was so scattered and accidental, that it was very difficult to *see* a pattern at a distance. It may be difficult to see a pattern also at *very close* range. In the latter case we *do* see or hear signals, but they are too strong. Hence, we perceive them as *noise*.

²⁸ In Dilthey's famous formula, this reads: "Die Natur erklären wir, das Seelenleben verstehen wir." (Harrington, 2000, p. 442, printing error in title is in the source).

²⁹ In this article, I have not been able to show how the external frame influences on the story. However, I found it right to provide the reader with those frames, although they are not utilized in the analysis.

³⁰ The story was first written, based on diaries written by Camilla as well as the undersigned, in the early 1990s. I wrote an early, rather unfinished version of this article in 1999. On the recommendation

of Basil Bernstein, I submitted the article to the British Journal of Sociology (BJS). The editors of the BJS recommended I send it to a journal of social psychology or education. I did not do that. Instead I rewrote the story over and over again, until it got its present form.

³¹ The phrase “the doorstep miles” has been borrowed from the Norwegian Pop Group “Tre små Kinesere” (“Three small Chinese”). In their song “The doorstep miles” (dørstokkmila), they show via examples that “telling” painful experiences to others *only takes one little step, but the step feels like six miles* for those who are “locked up” in their own trauma. Very often, people with such stories only “come out” under conditions of strict anonymity; only to persons whom they trust entirely; and even then only on the condition of strict confidence. Discography to “The Doorstep Mile”:
http://no.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tro_h%C3%A5p_%26_kj%C3%A6rlighet