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Peer Bullying – Anxiety of Social Exclusion in a Real-Virtually mediated school life
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In this paper I am going to introduce a way of understanding some of the more complicated processes which seem to occur in a school class haunted by bullying. The approach I introduce makes a shift of attention to the social and cultural processes involved in bullying practices in stead of viewing bullying as an effect of particular individual characteristics or structures of personality.

The research I work with is embedded in a larger project called eXbus, Exploring Bullying in School. eXbus engages a team of 8 researchers from a variety of disciplines: psychology, education, philosophy, statistics, law, minority studies and sociology. I am head of the project. And the research is funded from 2007 till 2011 by a private European foundation, the Danish TrygFoundation, to scrutinize bullying as phenomenon.

My own project is based on empirical data including interviews with appr. 100 school children aged 8-14, observations in a number of school classes and after school recreation institutions, interviews with parents, teachers, and school managers, interviews with staff from 50 after school recreation institutions.

Among the central concepts in the new thinking technology, I want to propose, are concepts relating to the necessity of belonging to a social community, and hence the anxiety of social exclusion. The thinking technology also introduces the production of contempt and dignity among both children and adults in school as an important focus in this context. In the last part of my paper I will suggest an analytic approach to understand the many different forces involved in an increased anxiety in a school class.

Many school classes – not all – but many are characterised by a high level of social anxiety, with continual mutual appraisal. The children in these classes assign each other to narrow paths; it is a split-second matter for them to read each other’s behaviour, interests and artefacts (clothes, bags, cell phones etc). And norms of appropriateness are negotiated for instance by means of constant petty arguing, reciprocal appraisal and appraisal of others.

Such evaluations take place in all school classes, but their nature varies greatly from one set of children to another. The children carry out these mutual appraisals in many

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1 This paper is based on the article Mobning og Social Ekslusionsangst [Bullying and the Anxiety of Social Exclusion] Søndergaard (2009). And English translation is forthcoming.
ways, for instance by means of talking about other children in the school, or about media representations of other kids or young people in the social virtual forums in which their profiles are presented, in guest books and galleries, or via representations in music videos and the performances of different singers, in TV series, films, and talent and reality shows.

This variety of images and discourses provides numerous parameters for negotiating appropriate and inappropriate appearance, manner and equipment. Hannah is 12 years old and was interviewed for this research projects – and in her class for instance such topics as the width of trouser legs are central to appraisals of appropriate or inappropriate appearance. So when I as an interviewer asked why Mary left the class and changed schools it was quite natural and sufficient for Hannah to answer, “Well, she really didn’t fit in in our class. You should have seen her trousers! I don’t think she could have been happy in our class. She wore those trousers with wide legs!”

Artefacts and adjusted appearance in terms of hair style make up etc. function as a sign of respect for the community one is part of, or wishes to be part of. Together with so much else, they are an affirmation of the taste, values and priorities through which the more or less comprehensive community confirms reciprocal belonging. Questions of the correct brand of hair-wax for boys, of correct and incorrect ways of being funny or gross emo-bands are therefore hardly transient and indifferent.

They constitute positioning tools in the social-emotional landscapes in which the children manoeuvre and in which inclusion and marginalisation function as pathways and movements to which are attached both hope and fear. None of these markers do however carry any prefixed meanings. Meanings and prestige may be fixed for periods or they may change and fluctuate as part of the often volatile relational patterns among the children.

Such school classes are usually saturated by a high level of anxiety of social exclusion. As many of the kids we talked to, said: ‘It’s so exhausting to be part of a class of that kind’. And indeed it seems to be – no matter where in the hierarchy the child may have managed to position him- or herself - this year, this month or this week. Not only children who have been positioned as bullied, but also children

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positioned as bullies in earlier school classes would in the interviews tell about the relief they felt when leaving those classes.

**Anxiety of social exclusion**

As used in this paper, anxiety of social exclusion has nothing to do with social phobia, which has been developed as a clinical psychological concept focusing on the individual and on an individual psychological phobic state.

The term ‘anxiety of social exclusion’, as used here, builds on a social psychological and anthropological concept of human beings as existentially dependent on social embedment (Søndergaard, 1996, 2005b). Human individuals are dependent on belonging to communities: this basic assumption is highlighted in order to focus on the anxiety which arises when social embedment is jeopardised and the hope and longing to be part of a community is threatened (Rabøl Hansen 2008).

In this sense, anxiety of social exclusion constitutes a phenomenon developed in relation to social communities of belonging. It is an anxiety which smoulders in any social context when people have to function together.

The risk of being judged unworthy of the group, or of a little local group being judged unworthy to belong in the larger community, is a potential in any social context. It is of course not the only potential, since the hope of inclusion and the joy and pride at being included are also there. But the potentiality of being found unworthy is part of the mixture. And this potential brings with it an anxiety of social exclusion.

The phenomenon smoulders in real life among the kids in school and it is cultivated in many of the media products offered and consumed by the children – like reality shows (who is in and out, who is admired or victim of contempt), movies, shooter games etc.

The extent to which this anxiety is mitigated and absorbed into real life eagerness for inclusion, inquisitiveness about and openness to the possibilities offered by belonging, or else flares up as unmistakable anxiety about the ostracism to come dependents on many things. I will return to these many routes leading to a flaring up of anxiety later in the paper.

**Emotionality**

The markers of exclusion consist of rejection and contempt, of attacking and ignoring – and the emotionality associated have to do with meaninglessness, powerlessness,
shame, self-contempt, and with feeling socially threatened. But you may also see severe anger and a desire for revenge among the potential emotional effects.

The markers of inclusion consist of acceptance, acknowledgement and belonging – and the emotionality associated have to do with meaningfulness, dignity, self-confidence, and with feeling socially secure. But you may see other emotional effects too – such as arrogance, self-sufficiency, and cynicism – and even an increased anxiety of social exclusion if one’s own inclusion is obviously based on the exclusion of particular others.

In this sense and in this context a feeling of meaningfulness and dignity is an evaluating emotion connected with acknowledgement and legitimacy within the group.

If accordingly we look at a boy like Andrew, it’s hardly difficult to understand why Andrew feels the belonging to the gang of boys down by the station and taking part in their shady activities as more meaningful and productive of self-esteem/dignity than lessons at school, especially with Sharon, the teacher who is constantly criticising him and telling him off.

Sharon’s contempt for Andrew interact with a number of other forces in Andrew’s situation: He has been let down in his family (his father has left, his mother has had a break down), Andrew has over the past months been pushed to somewhere near the bottom of the school class hierarchy, school management doesn’t master complex understandings of a kind that would match complex social processes among the children – and so on. So there are many forces involved in the becoming of ‘current Andrew’ and Andrew’s current situation.

So - in Andrew’s emotional evaluation Sharon’s contempt need not compete for long with the gang’s mutual production of esteem and dignity before meaningfulness becomes associated with the gang down at the station rather than with school.

Production of contempt versus dignity
In this morass of markings and emotionality the concepts of respectively contempt production and dignity production may help us take some kind of bearings.

The concepts open to an understand of varieties among the dignity projects which different children and adults strive to build up, and to the kinds of dignity deprivations they strive to avoid; it opens to analytic takes that applies to the understanding of both persons like Andrew, who seek the company of the gang by the station, and to a teacher like Sharon, who taunts him.
It is important to realise that different persons’ dignity projects may collide, and that the deprivation of dignity can hit hard. Contempt is quite poisonous. Finally, it is worth taking note that though pride at the success of dignity projects may create openness to the inclusion of others, it also carries the potential of blindness to the inclusion wishes of those who are positioned as unworthy.

**When things go wrong**
The feeling of dignity thus hangs together with the feeling of being accepted as part of something, of being included in a community. This has a close connection to the existential necessity of social embedment, of belonging.

But how come that the production of contempt and despise seems so easily activated in a group of children haunted by anxiety of social exclusion? Why would this kind of anxiety translate into that kind of further emotional effects?

Well, it seems as if contempt, condemnation and despise is capable of providing a temporary emotional alleviation for the discomfort connected with anxiety of social exclusion. If there is agreement in a group of children that some are odious, creepy and disgusting, whilst others are seriously cool, then it is possible to draw together in fellowship around the assessment that in this case it isn’t ‘us’ and what we’re interested in that is creepy. It’s not our cell phones, hobbies, tastes, ways of dressing, moving and talking which are despicable.

Perhaps this strategy may secure ‘us’ for a while. Perhaps ‘we’ can be so strong in ‘our’ shared contempt that we can ensure that the hunt for something to despise won’t hit on us and what we represent. Perhaps we can anticipate getting to fix the terms of what can be hit, thereby ensuring our own safety and taking care of our own long-term social belonging.

This is how the social-emotional manoeuvring seems to move. But as mentioned this alleviation seems only to be temporary. The anxiety of social exclusion which should be relieved by contempt production may gain further nourishment from that same contempt production. And an escalating anxiety of social exclusion calls for further alleviation and demands further efforts in the group to gain control.

It is in this context that the concept of social panic can become relevant. Whilst anxiety is merely latent there still seems to be a certain possibility of envisaging the inclusion of the relatively despised or at least a willingness to understand some of the others’ ways of experiencing the situation, themselves and others. When a despised
pupil weeps the ‘strong’ ones may feel compassion or merely dispassionate indifference.

As Marion says when she is asked whether she ever considers including Jack, who is said to cry every day, “You can’t help lonely boys”. Marion sees perfectly well that he has a hard time as the butt of the other boys’ constant rejection, but she doesn’t connect her ability to feel for him with the possibility of changing the situation by including him in her own set or simply giving him acknowledgement from her own position as a girl.

However, a movement seems to take place from this state of relative understanding to a situation in which the form of empathy which is productive of dignity closes down, contempt is strengthened and dehumanisation increases to a degree conducive to the kind of action we recognise as bullying.

As an undercurrent to this movement, anxiety of social exclusion has turned into social panic, thereby intensifying contempt production. The anxiety has intensified and seeks assuagement, the contempt production has sought for a target – and one day the focus of the group turns on that child who has been so annoying in just that way for such a long time. In that way the situation can deteriorate.

This can happen with or without words, as choreography of actions and movements in a group which perceives with one mind the opportunity to focus and translate the discomfort of their anxiety and to attack, with one mind finding it meaningful to direct their loathing and seek destructive control.

And at this point in the social-emotional manoeuvring the children may not even anticipate their bullying practice as illegitimate: The beating up of Peter may take place simultaneously with anti bullying being part of teaching in the class – the same children may be engaged in attacking and despising Peter along with writing essays about the illegitimate aspects of bullying among children. And if you get the chance to ask them, they will tell you that what they do to Peter has nothing to do with what others call bullying – they do it because he is despicable, he is a jerk. So what is the problem?

At this point in their processes Peter has moved beyond empathetic relevance to them. Whereas anti bullying teaching seems to only concern those among the children that are still positioned as within empathetic relevance.

There are a whole range of more particular mechanisms and processes involved as strategies of alleviation in relation to the discomfort of anxiety of social exclusion.
But I won’t enter further into those strategies at this point. I want to make space for one last analytical take in relation to this theorising of bullying.

**The intra-active forces**

This analytical take relates to the question from early in the paper about the many routes leading to a flaring up of anxiety of social exclusion, of aversion to and contempt for something or someone in a school class. So what can nurture anxiety of social exclusion so that it spills over into social panic and inflames the desire to abjectify (Butler 1999; Diken, B. & Bagge Laustsen, C. 2005)?

Many things can provoke this reaction, and not merely one singly but many forces interlocking with each other. Karen Barad (2007) talks about intra-action as a way to conceptualize ‘this interlocking’ in a way that emphasizes that such forces never work alone and independent of each other. They are transformed into each other, and in the encounter transform each other while enacting still new phenomena and new intra-active forces.

Among the many forces which intra-act in the becoming of children’s relational praxes and patterns we find, for instance, the teachers and parents, the children’s past and current circumstances outside school, the history of the class, communications technologies, consumption of media products, physical frameworks and many others.

So just to give a few examples:

Teachers’ commitment and support in relation to the class’s attainment of norms, and teachers’ providing models for relational praxes, appears to have great significance when read across the *eXbus* empirical material. Deprived of continual qualified adult dialogue, this process seems to be a source of nourishment for anxiety of social exclusion.

The teachers’ authority strategies are significant constituent forces: if the teachers themselves make use of authority strategies containing elements which contribute to contempt production, then the anxiety of social exclusion and low tolerance will be exacerbated. Strategies which deny dignity by activating mockery, ridicule and humiliation may bolster up already existing contempt-producing praxes among the children, and sometimes may even initiate them: ‘Ann is a loser, and the teachers don’t like her either!’

However, the teachers’ authority strategies need not always be aimed at the same pupils as the children’s contempt production in order to function in this way. The power lies in the norm established by the strategy – the norm for what is acceptable in this class. And the norm can exacerbate social anxiety.
But the extent to which such authority strategies are constituent forces in relation to a raised level of social anxiety and potential bullying praxes depends on what they intra-act with. There will be other forces working in the school class with a variety of effects – some whose effect on the social anxiety is to neutralise, decrease or increase it.

If, however, contempt-producing praxes are also widespread among the parents of the class – aimed at each other, teachers, particular children – those forces may interlink confirmatively in the development of praxes and formation of norms which the teachers’ contempt-producing authority strategies contribute to, and this entire complex can intra-act with and give support to the relational praxes which the children use or are developing.

**Communication technology and media products**
Among these intra-active forces belong the material-technological means of communication and the concomitant circulation of social-emotional manoeuvring praxes enabled by text-messaging, chat and profiles on such sites as Speek, MSN and Facebook (Kofoed 2009).

These forms of communication technology also function as forces in the machinery. Reciprocal assessment can be speedily disseminated to a wide audience. And, perhaps because of the lack of a direct response, there is the tendency for the users of these forms of communication to ‘speak’ very clearly, with everything from “I love you, you’re my best friend, I can’t live without you”, to “You’re a filthy whore, die – now!”

Experiences from other contexts also link into the machinery. And these include the options for virtual training in relational praxes and in physical manoeuvring (as in shooter and strategy games on the computer: the sniper tactics and precautions, the violence of the soldier with the roller gun, the speed and deftness of the pilot manoeuvring above enemy tanks). They include the models for orientating and constructing the special types of narrative woven by participants in the virtual games.

The children cultivate experiences, physical skills and narrative structures in these games; they joke and play with and in allusion to the various options and praxes they encounter in real as well as virtual life.

A leisure-club computer room filled with boys playing *Counter Strike* may be completely saturated with contempt production. The boys cultivate contempt and play with it as part of the virtual battle on the screen. Phrases like ‘Get that faggot pig”
and “smash the mother-fucker nerd” whizz between players and bystanders. The contempt training for which the battle provides the framework involves plenty of play and reciprocal confirmation. However, it is by no means evident what this training and cultivation will contribute to the classroom culture in which the boys also participate: this depends on the intra-activity among the other constituent forces.

Nor are there simple causal connects here, only reciprocal movements and intra-actions: the children select from the online resources, using and transforming them, on the basis of the experiences, social-emotional praxes and relational practices by which they live in other contexts, including that of school. Media products are developed in the intra-activity among many other types of forces, but market forces, demand, and the producers’ own fascination and career praxes weigh heavily in this regard. The media products and experiences from virtual contexts are therefore intra-active in many ways, also in the other types of machinery and together with the other forces which constitute the children’s social relational praxes.

Wrapping up
The aim of this short paper has been to introduce a non-individualising thinking technology, by means of conceptualisations around:

- The idea of the many intra-acting forces
- Anxiety of social exclusion
- Alleviation strategies
- Increased anxiety => social panic
- Production of contempt
- Production of dignity

Instead of asking what is wrong with that boy or girl, this approach encourages a different kind of questioning, like for instance: what gives meaning to this or that form of action and those particular understandings and mutual evaluations in the those children’s situation?

If we proceed along that way, the generation of ideas in relation to intervention forms will give rise to other possibilities than those connected with the individualising thinking technology. A professionalization of praxis with respect to bullying will therefore not so much call upon further technical finesse but rather engage in a deeper understanding of the mechanisms and processes in this particularly complex social machinery (Søndergaard 2008).
**Bibliography:**


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