Adult Bullying: Perpetrators and Victims

by Peter Randall

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Reviewed by Helge Hoel

Hardly a week passes by without a radio or television programme highlighting the apparently growing problem of what has become known as 'bullying'. The novelty of the issue lies in the fact that such behaviour is apparently no longer confined to the school yard, but seems to extend beyond childhood and adolescence into the adult world. It is this realisation which has inspired the present book. According to the writer, the explicit aim of the book is to attempt to find solutions to the suffering of victims by raising awareness of the problem and trying to understand those factors which bring it about. In order to describe the phenomenon, two different arenas or locations of bullying are identified: the community, focusing on gang-violence and the 'neighbour from hell' phenomenon; the second location is the workplace, where sexual harassment and 'premeditated violence' are given particular attention. No one reading this book can escape the gravity of the problem and the impact it has on those exposed to any of the many 'faces' of bullying. The book is well written and the large number of case studies throughout successfully serve to bridge the gap between theory and practice.

However, the approach chosen for the book turns out to be a double-edged sword. In deciding on a wide scope for investigation the writer not only runs the danger of stretching the theoretical framework dangerously far—but what may possibly be gained in acknowledging similarities between diverse phenomena may be sacrificed in the loss of depth and insight needed to give each of these issues proper treatment. Consequently, it is not surprising to find that some of the best parts of the book are those where the concept of aggression takes a back seat. The section on sexual harassment is one such example. In a concise review of key literature in the field, the causes of sexual harassment, its manifestations in the workplace and issues relevant to its prevention are discussed within a framework of the interrelationship between power, sexuality and gender, without making any reference to aggression theory.

The central message of the book is that bullying is the result of relatively stable aggressive personality characteristics laid down in early childhood, which if not corrected, tend to establish a pattern of aggressive behaviour (or on the part of many victims, submissive behaviour) which tends to manifest itself in different circumstances throughout life. This is fascinating reading for anyone concerned with the rearing of children in general and childhood aggression in particular. This part of the book also benefits from Randall's knowledge of his material and broad experience from working with children as well as parents.

Few would question the suggestion that personality characteristics play a role in aggressive behaviour. However, Randall's strong emphasis on personality at the expense of circumstantial factors, appears to be out of step with the current dominant view within aggression research, which highlights the dynamics of the interaction between person and situation (eg, Geen, Baron). Such factors are acknowledged in the book, and factors such as selection, work-

environment quality and the role of management are given attention. However, by failing to keep distinct phenomena separate, the discussion tends to be rather general and, therefore, of less value to practitioners and academics alike. In other words, 'outsider' or third-party violence needs to be kept separate from violence on the part of so-called 'disgruntled' employees, and again separate from the persistent, relative long-term victimisation of one or more employees by a superior or a colleague. As the book fails to do this, the suggestions with respect to risk assessment and prevention, tend to be too general to be of much practical value to managers.

To summarise: despite the fact that the book raises a number of issues relevant to the problems of bullying, violence and aggression in different social settings, it can only be given a qualified recommendation.

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