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Considering Cultural Fear and Anger in Anti-bullying Programs

"Hi, I am Bob"

In a short education movie, we see a brown guinea-pig in a treadmill. When the guinea-pig steps out of the mill for a while, it sees another guinea-pig with an all-white fluffy fur. Whitey gives our brownie an enticing glance, then takes off in its own treadmill. Our brown immediately goes after the white one. The treadmills function like wheels moving the guinea-pigs forward. They follow a road, than hills, then even wobble over obstacles. They go faster and faster. So fast, we see Pisa, Venice, Athens, Japan, San Francisco and Paris race by. And again Greece, others, it becomes a blur. The treadmill goes so fast, brownie cannot handle it anymore and is thrown out – against a glass wall.
The camera zooms out, and now we see that we are in a room with a slideshow of holiday posters of different destinations. The guinea-pigs are in different glass cages, each with their own treadmill which does not move from its place. Then the credits appear.
Just when we think the film has ended, the camera shows the room again. A person comes in the room and takes the whitey out of its cage, and to the happiness of our brownie, puts whitey in the same cage. The look inquisitively to each other. Then whitey comes forward and introduces itself: “hi, I am Bob”. The scene ends with a freeze of a shocked brownie.

The 3-minute film is a funny and light way to introduce the concept of prejudice to students. It shows that you can easily be fooled by appearances and our own prejudices (expecting fluffy whitey to be female and hunting brownie to be male) can also create expectations that may not be realistic. So far, all nice.

But now imagine these guinea-pigs are 15 years old students. They are in the school yard, or are making fun at each other in your class. What would happen when a Daniel fancies Alex but Alex suddenly turns out to be boy also? Or slightly more realistic, when Alex unexpectedly tells his best friend Daniel he is gay?
It is very likely that heterosexual male students will be just as shocked as brownie. But the follow-up may be more violent or escalate in bullying and social exclusion.

GALE
THE GLOBAL ALLIANCE
FOR LGBT EDUCATION

The development of the concept of "bullying"

Nowadays, we talk a lot about bullying. Worldwide conferences are devoted to it. As the director of GALE, The Global Alliance of LGBT[1] Education, I take part in these debates with the specific perspectives of homophobia, biphobia and transphobia. From these perspectives, I try to learn from the great program-developers and researchers that came before me and still dominate the stage, because the history of combating “bullying” is not yet that old – it has a history of about 40 years. Before that, there was “violence” among school children, but different forms of violence were not distinguished. There was no analysis of the process of school-based violence and teachers had no clue on how to prevent it. The only thing people thought you could do was punish the violent student and comfort the victim. But research showed increasingly that punishment does not work, and worse: the main effect of punishment is that students keep having the same behavior, but they make sure it is not seen any more by adults. Punishment shifts the problem, but does not solve it. Nor does comforting help very much when students are repeatedly attacked.

The first to change this was the Norwegian researcher Dan Olweus. In the 1970's he studied ‘mobning’, as school violence was labelled in Norway and discovered that ‘mobning’ did not consist of accidental conflicts between students but there was a social mechanism at work. He defined "bullying" as:

A person is bullied when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other persons, and he or she has difficulty defending himself or herself.

To be able to combat bullying (‘mobning’), he wanted to analyze this process. He distinguished perpetrators, victims and later also different types of ‘bystanders’. In his theoretical framework, perpetrators are youth who behave in an a-social way; they try to get what they want by hurting others. He theorizes that victims are not strong enough to fight this, which is also why they are chosen as victims. Usually there are others involved, the bystanders. The bystanders are not always passive. Some of them restrain the victim, others cheer and encourage the perpetrator. Others again just look, but by doing nothing, they condone and normalize the situation. Some may be inclined help the victim, but have to

[1] Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender

assess the risks to themselves before acting up. In the program Olweus developed, he emphasized that an effective anti-bullying approach should have a combination of interventions targeting both bullies, victims and bystanders. He expects that when students understand the bullying process, that the bully and bystanders can be coached to learn more “pro-social” behavior, while the victim should be taught how to have more self-esteem and act more empowered.

This probably does sound relatively obvious. That obviousness shows to what extent the Olweus theory about bullying has become more or less common knowledge, at least among teachers and counselors who are active in combating bullying. A series of other anti-bullying programs have taken over all of some of the concepts Olweus developed. All of them have in common that they focus on the promotion of self-esteem and pro-social behavior, and take the interaction processes in hallways and classrooms into account.

Is homophobia bullying?

In the last decade, *homophobic bullying* has emerged as a specific point of attention. Bullying related to being lesbian, bisexual, transsexual or intersexual is not yet in focus, but there are grass roots groups advocating to also have specific attention for this. Recent research on LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersexual) bullying shows that in secondary schools, homophobic bullying is closely related to gender. Boys who behave "effeminate" are bullied most and name-calling commonly is used as a putdown for boys by associating them with effeminacy or softness and weakness.
The attention for homophobic and sexual orientation/gender-based bullying is relatively new and most regular anti-bullying programs do not really take this into account. It depends on the trainer, teacher or counselor whether they have attention for it, and how. Most surveys which measure the effect of anti-bullying programs do not ask about sexual orientation or gender identity, so we don't know to what extent generic anti-bullying programs are effective to combat homophobic bullying.

Researchers and authorities differ in their opinion as to whether homophobic bullying is similar to or different from general bullying, if it is a specific aspect of bullying and whether it should be explicitly integrated in anti-bullying programs. A few examples:

- Some governments, like the Irish and the Catalan governments have issued anti-bullying guidelines that explicitly make clear that homophobic, lesbian-phobic, bi-

phobic and transphobic bullying are an integral part of combating bullying in schools and give specific guidance on how to handle it in the view of wider societal norms at play.

- Other governments with national anti-bullying laws or guidelines don't mention LGBT related bullying. Some omit the topic because they think it is obvious sexual "abnormality" should be rejected and that bullying students and teachers cannot be blamed for being upset about deviant students upsetting the social order.
- Still, some other government do not include bullying of LGBT students and maintain that all forms of bullying are included in their generic guideline. For example, the Dutch government consciously omitted references to specific types of bullying in the 2012 anti-bullying law, although two of the three the widely publicized teen suicides that led to the law were related to homophobia. The government has stated that "teachers have to be sensitive to different issues as reasons for bullying".
- The US government states on their anti-bullying website that there are different categories of violence in schools. "Unwelcome conduct" towards someone who is member of a protected 'class' is called "harassment". Bullying *can* be a form a harassment, but harassment can also take other forms. By the way, the US government distinguishes currently only 6 protected 'classes': race, national origin, color, sex, age, disability, religion. Sexual orientation and gender identity were not included when I checked recently.
- Dan Olweus stated at the World Anti-bullying Conference in Stockholm (May 2017) that homophobic bullying is a *sub*category of bullying, while Christine Salmivalli said that although homophobic bullying is bullying, the impact may be more "escalated". Salmivalli added there are always norms at play in bullying, but homophobia should not be singled out as very specific; it is only one of the forms of bullying where social norms are at play.
- In opposition to this, another professor, Elizabethe Payne, said that heteronormativity is the root of *all* school bullying. When she was critically questioned as to whether she then also thinks bullying of overweight children (one of the most cited reasons by children to bully other is "being fat") is also heteronormative, she said "yes, many forms of bullying are based on marginalizing children who do not look or behave according to (heteronormative) cultural norms about how ideal men and women should look like".

Heteronormativity

Maybe this is the time to go into the concept of “heteronormativity”. For many outside the LGBT movement and related science, this is still a rather new concept that sounds radical and as a rejection of “normal” heterosexual identity.
“Heteronormativity” is short for “the norm of heterosexuality”, a concept coined in 1975 by the German feminist Allice Schwartzer in “Der kleine Unterschied un sein grossen Folgen” (“The Little Difference and its Huge Consequences”). In this book, Schwartzer analyzed the stereotypical gender roles that are ascribed to of different biological sexes, which commonly result in a marginalized position of women in society. In 1980, the US feminist Adrienne Rich took this a step further by proposing to speak about “compulsory heterosexuality”. She based this position on her analysis of the situation of lesbian women, which at the time found it almost impossible to image a life outside heterosexual marriage and making own sexual and relational choices. In 1991 the term heteronormativity was popularized by Michael Warner in “Introduction to a Queer Planet” and taken to have a meaning which was not only related to women but also related to homophobia (men).

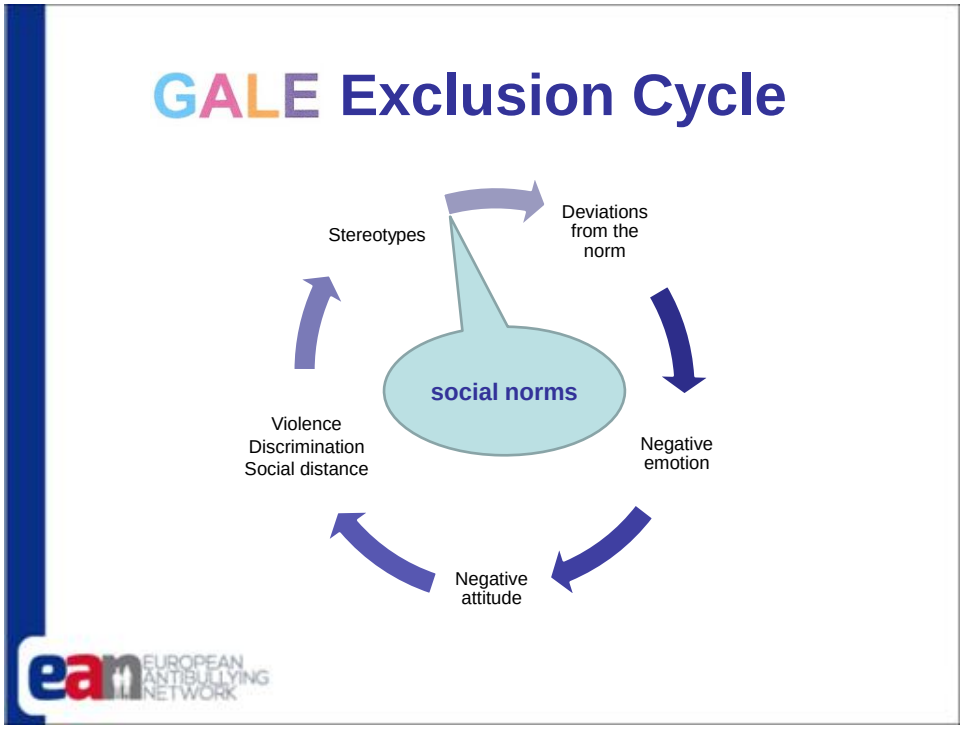
These books were mainly read in feminist and LGBT activist academic circles, but had not impact on teachers or schools. GALE attempted to change this. In the first decade of the 21st century, GALE proposed that for pedagogic purposes, the “norm of heterosexuality” could be described as being composed of four subsets of values and norms: fear and anger about non-normative sexual orientation, fear and anger about non-normative gender expression, fear and anger about non-normative relationships and sexuality and fear and anger about non-normative peer group behavior. In the classroom and school context these subsets are commonly experienced as one interacting set of values and norms guiding “normal” behavior. It is “normal” (read “according to the norm”, “normative”) to be heterosexual, a ‘proper’ man or a women and behave like that, the strive for a romantic everlasting monogamous heterosexual relationship with the ultimate purpose of procreation and establishing a biological ‘family’ bloodline, and to – at least publicly and ritually – adhere to the (sub)cultural standards of you peer group (nationality, ethnicity, culturally, religiously etc.).
From this description, it becomes clear that “heteronormativity” is not a radical criticism of heterosexual relations, but an analysis of a framework of stereotypical expectations that limits us all. It is not only about homophobia or transphobia, but just as much about how we view girls and boys, about how we all have relationships and sexual practices, and how we

deal with peer group pressure and exclusion.

Dealing with heteronormativity in class

GALE theorizes that when students (or adults) do not behave according to these norms, students and teachers who think in heteronormative stereotypes may experience an instinctive negative emotion: a *fight or flight response*. This pre-cognitive *emotion* is a survival mechanism we all possess, but which may be inadequate in an advanced society with a complicated set of task and status divisions like ours. The fight or flight instinct basically tells us to immediately fight or flee an uncomfortable and potentially threatening situation. Any breach of norms and standard expectations will be met with a fight or flight response which can be more or less violent depending on the perceived threat and the emotional ability to be able to deal with diversity. The most basic function of education relating to diversity and bullying should be to teach young people how to deal with their primal fears of “others” and new and unexpected situations.

GALE posits that fight or fight responses that are ignored or supported, will lead to negative and excluding *attitudes*. GALE sees “attitudes” as “frozen emotions that are covered up by cognitive arguments”. Pedagogically, it is essential to understand that arguments follow emotions and that emotions almost never are a consequence of arguments. The didactic ‘proof’ for this is that *explaining* discrimination and social exclusion to students in a cognitive way rarely has any impact. To teach more effectively, teachers and caretakers should touch on the underlying emotions first, an when these have been dealt with to some extent, a more rational (cognitive level) dialogue may follow. But by then, a large part of the pedagogic work to instill a sense of tolerance already has been done.



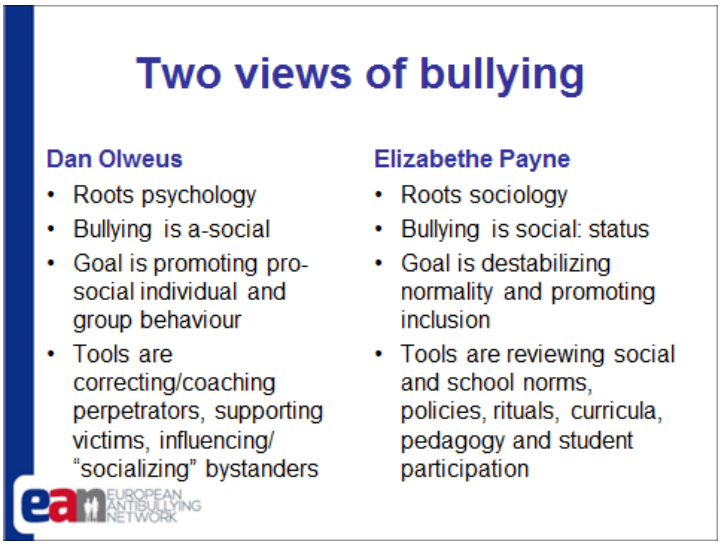
The ultimate result of ignoring or even supporting negative attitudes is negative *behavior*. Negative behavior like bullying gets most attention when is has a high level of violence and it is perceived to be an injustice. But in the context of homophobia, a large part of the negative behavior is "normalized" name-calling ("fag"), gender policing ("sissy", "that's so gay") and social exclusion. Such behavior is often not seen as unjust or violent, but as innocent "jokes". Rather than using traditional survey questions on homophobia which usually ask for attitudes framed as cognitive opinions, GALE advices to measure such less visible LGBT-phobia by asking questions about social distance ("suppose a fellow student is perceived to be gay[2], would you… be friends, sit next to each other in class, have lunch together, share a room during camp") and about social support ("suppose a fellow student is bullied because he is gay, what would you do: nothing because it is his own fault, nothing because I would fear they would bully me as well, I would interfere as long as it does not put my position at risk, I would interfere even when it would put my position at risk).

Olweus and Payne

In view of this analysis, it is clear that I am inclined to agree more with Elizabethe Payne than

[2] This question can also be rephrased for lesbians, bisexual, transgenders and for race and other marginalized groups

with Dan Olweus. But let's look a bit deeper into the ways Olweus and Payne look at bullying.



Olweus seems to see bullying through a mainly psychological lens. The basic aspects of the situation is that we are dealing with a bully who has not learned adequate social behavior, and although Olweus never calls bullies "a-social", he does talk in terms of teaching bullies "pro-social" behavior. The other side of the coin is that victims of bullying are also seen as having inadequate social skills; they "have difficulty defending themselves" and therefore need to be "empowered". The dynamic of the bullying situation is further complicated by more or less a-social "bystanders" who also need to be "socialized". To maximize the anti-bullying program effect, a combination of psychological interventions is needed to influence bully, victim and bystanders. In sum, the goal of an Olweus-like anti-bullying program is to promote pro-social group behavior.

Payne criticizes this psychological view and says her approach is rooted in sociology. She looks to factors in the cultural environment, which to a large extent determine social and psychological processes. From this point of view, bullying is extremely social behavior: it is a fight for social status which does not only consist of individual choices in incidental situations, but which always reflect cultural and social power relationships. This is also why some old-fashioned parents and teachers say there is nothing wrong with young people fighting and bullying: they consider it as rites de passage and necessary experiences to get prepared for the hard world outside school. As far as I can see, Payne does not agree with this traditionalist interpretation. She stresses that although bullying is highly social, it is not

positive. Because it reflects traditional norms, it functions as a policing mechanism that ensures that youth is trained to repeat and transfer the same destructive behavior by socially excluding and degrading non-traditional and non-normative behavior. This is keeping society back from evolving and excludes large parts of the population (to begin with all women) from full participation in society. Individual or small group psychological interventions are not enough to combat these forms of cultural bullying. According to Payne, the main tools to combat structural forms of bullying should be to "destabilize normality" and to promote inclusion. The focus of anti-bullying programs should shift to reviewing social and school norms, policies, rituals, curricula, pedagogy and student participation of minorities relative to the majority.

Personally, I am not so fond of using jargon like "destabilization". Norms may sometimes be outdated and even destructive, but I reject the general notion that we could do without norms. I prefer to use positive labels like "creating space for a range of opinions and expressions". But still, the consequence is the same: the norm ("normality") should be flexible and wide enough to encompass a range of ideals, convictions and expressions.

The "world in a drop" perspective

Apart from the analysis of heteronormativity and its mechanism in school I described earlier, I think it would be helpful for schools to look at bullying and other youth behavior as layered phenomena where small events reflect larger social, cultural and historic processes. This is a pedagogic and didactic perspective I learned as a history teacher and is called "mundus in gutta" (the world in a drop).
In the pedagogy of history teaching, the "mundus in gutta" approach means that a teacher chooses one small daily episode to illustrate a part of history, and then uses this simple story to explain the whole situation including the wider social and cultural environment and the epoch that is reflected in this "world in a drop". This is similar to a 3-D image: it is not possible to reduce the image to one of even a thousand pixels; the whole image is reflected in every part in some way. This is the way teachers and schools should look at bullying and social competences: not as isolated events but incidents reflective of deeper and larger phenomena.

On the most direct observation level, the school can distinguish interactions. In the classroom, in the hallways, in toilets, but also the encounters with parents and others from the community. On this level we tend to see individual behaviors which may be backed up by certain attitudes and more or less developed skills, which all take place in groups mechanisms.

On a next level - which is less obvious because it is “normalized” through structure and rituals - the school can examine its own organization. These are partly codified in institutional rules and procedures, but partly also inherent in less clear ways like the school building, the way students sit in traditional classes (in rows with backs to each other), and like common educational habits that are taken for granted but may be less adequate or even ineffective. For example, habits like starting secondary school early and giving homework have been shown scientifically unsound and ineffective but somehow still prevail in most schools. It is also common to maintain a double standard by cognitively teaching young people about democracy but at the same time not to allow them any say in the school program or the way of teaching. All these organizational aspects create an environment in which youth are treated as irresponsible "not-yet-citizens" which should be “taught” and “controlled”. This s-called "childism" may entice young people to rebel and form their own ‘niche’ youth cultures – including its own expressions, rituals and power struggles – which puts them outside of the pedagogic influence and control of adults.

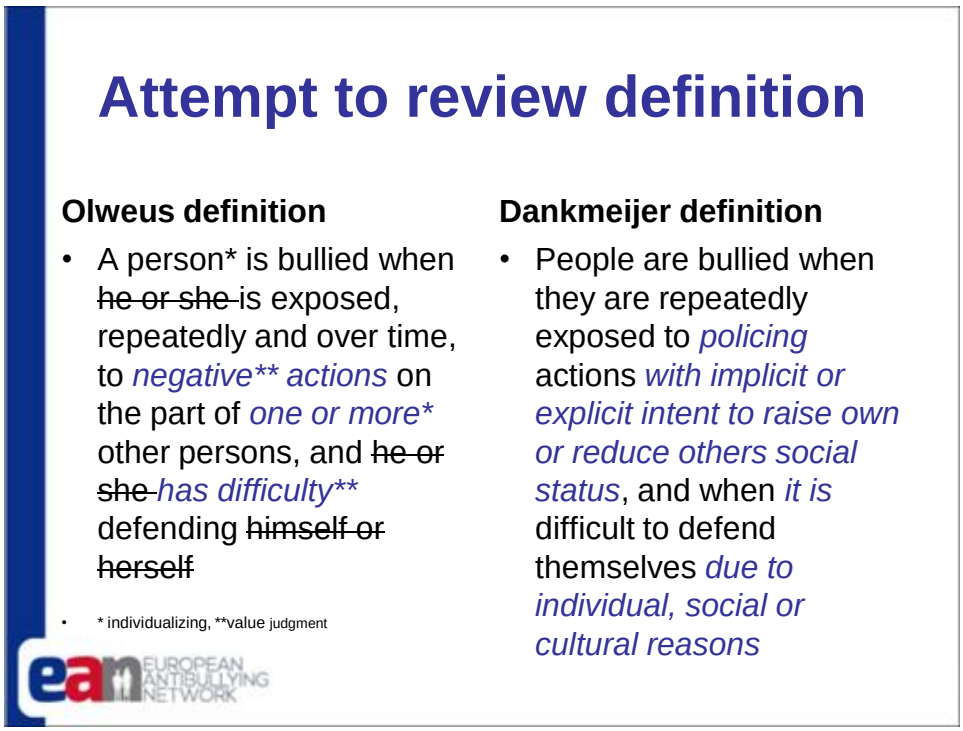
In turn these school cultures, which each contain their own student youth subcultures,

teacher subcultures and managerial subcultures each and in combination reflect wider social and cultural values and restrictions, including the norm of heterosexuality.

Proposal for a reviewed definition

Taking all this into account, I wondered whether the definition of Olweus is adequate enough to encompass homophobic bullying, and in extension if it covers all forms of bullying that are based on instinctive *fight or flight* responses to perceived threats of the social norm and cultural values, like Islam phobia, anti-Semitism, xenophobia, racism, fear of refugees and disgust of Roma. I tend to think not.

So what is lacking in the definition of Olweus, and how can it be enhanced to include a "mundus in gutta" perspective?



First I looked at the definition Olweus formulated himself. I felt that the opening with "a person is bullied" is limited in the light of the example of homophobic bullying, which is often characterized by random name-calling of any boy who may be vulnerable to marginalization of his masculinity; it is often more gender-policing than targeted bullying of a specific victim. I decided to replace "a person" with the more neutral and open "people".

As a specialist in lesbian, gay, bisexual, *transgender* and *intersexual* education, I am highly sensitive to the limiting use of pronouns like "he" or "she", which force us to think in terms of relatively stereotypical images or 'real' boys and girls and which also deny the existence of trans and children and children with an intersexual condition. So I replaced the gendered pronouns by "they" (people).

I also got thinking about what "negative" actions are. In the context of homophobia, name-calling is usually not perceived to be intentionally harmful by students, and many teachers agree with students on this. I even coached a school where a gay student was bullied for months and finally pushed with his head in a toilet, with teachers watching the act. The boy left the school and in the exit interview, the involved teachers stated they did not see this as bullying or "negative acts" but as "boys will be boys" teasing. I get confronted with such events so often that I consider "negative acts" to be a value judgment on which people can have widely different interpretations.
Also, I felt that negative acts on the part of "one or more other persons" to be individualizing, as if bullying is similar with a conflict but only with the difference of negative (a-social) intent. I looked for a replacement that would capture the social status fight that Payne refers to. I chose for "policing actions with implicit or explicit intent to raise own or reduce others social status". This takes out the value judgment of "negative" actions. But of course "policing" is also an interpretation and therefore a possible value judgment. We may have to come up with a better definition of "policing".

I replaced "when he or she has difficulty" with "is difficult" because the original seems too individualizing in circumstances where structural power imbalances between social/cultural groups are at stake. And to stress this social and cultural wider context, I added "due to individual, social or cultural reasons".

I hope my analysis and proposal offers food for thought to bring the anti-bullying movement a small step further. The panel discussion during the World Anti-bullying Forum gave the impression that this may not be easy. Panelists offered a range of arguments against a wider view of bullying, ranging from "this will be too complicated to integrate in our surveys" to "this is a slippery slope, soon we will call all negative behavior bullying, and when everything is bullying the concept becomes meaningless". I felt that in some ways, even such a high level scientific discussion reflects a power struggle between established dominant voices and less

established minority voices. In the search for solutions for culturally determined power struggles, we need to look for structural ways to deal with our instincts and to regulate our behavior is justified ways. That is a challenge which should have consequences for how we deal with bullying.

This article is based on presentation by Peter Dankmeijer for the Annual Conference of the European Anti-Bullying Network (EAN) on 22 September 2017 in Città di Castello, Italy.