

PREFACE

I was bullied.

Like many others, I have a story to tell.

A story to fashion and refashion, depending on the reason it comes to mind and to whom I am recounting it.

Unlike many others, I have no horrific incident to narrate, no turning point in middle or high school for which I am still seeking closure. Although I sat at a distance from the popular lunch table and was rarely invited to parties, I had a coterie of close friends. While I might have felt pangs of exclusion and can still name classmates who found something about me they could snicker at, I don't really remember their words. My few, close friendships insulated me, and luckily, none of those friends betrayed my trust.

Instead, my traumatic experience of bullying occurred after the tumultuous school years, when I was an adult. And it is more than likely that this book was prompted by my need to make sense of that experience.

Yet even now, as I sit in front of my computer and contemplate sharing this story, I feel a faint inner quaking. I imagine *her* reading the words and reviving her campaigns of subversion. I can *feel* the exaggerated eye roll that curdled my confidence, the one that preceded a contemptuous “*Ohhhh pleeeeeeeassse*” (followed by a condescending commentary on my choices or a twisted re-visioning of my actions and intentions, all rounded off with the names of everyone who agreed). At the same time I imagine my friends today, shaking their heads and sighing, “Ugh, why do you still let her bother you? *Who cares* what she might say? Really, what *can* she do at this point?” (And I know what they aren't saying—get over it!)

And they are right. So how do I explain my distinct, ongoing unease?

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Mostly I don't. I pour another glass of wine and change the subject, because it is embarrassing to admit that my heart still pounds at the thought of running into her; that she still, somehow, provokes anxiety in me; and that, like someone with post-traumatic stress disorder, I only manage the distress I feel, no longer expecting equanimity.

Undeniably, any lingering stress is compounded by its own illegitimacy. Like many victims, I learned not only that the psychic devastation I experienced was invalid but that ongoing reverberations reflect my own inadequacy. Owing to this, my experiences remain shadowed by shame. Troublesome memories of my own complicity in victimization feed the recurring echoes of trauma. How did it all get so out of hand? How did a relationship become so toxic as to reduce a promising doctoral candidate (who had lived and lectured internationally) to a depressed, inadequate shell of her—of my—former self? What could have caused me to view accomplishments as inconsequential and self-image as fraudulent? How did I come to believe that the angry, insecure woman I was reduced to was my true self, unmasked at last? What were the weapons that destroyed confidence in my intelligence and professionalism and the hopes and aspirations that fed them?

In exploring my own story, I have come to write a social story of bullying—an academic narrative to be sure, yet one informed by incessant poking and probing at psychic wounds and by scrutiny of the grounds for their healing.

INTRODUCTION

In the late 1990s a rash of shootings—eight separate incidents occurring between October 1997 and May 1999—stunned the nation. Beginning on October 1, 1997, when Luke Woodham killed his mother and then went to school, where he gunned down nine classmates (killing two), the tragedies continued with Michael Carneal's rampage in Paducah, Kentucky, where, on December 1, 1997, he killed three and wounded five; Joseph Todd's killing of two in Stamps, Arkansas, two weeks later; Mitchell Johnson and Andrew Golden's March 1998 shooting spree, which killed five and wounded ten in Westside, Arkansas; Andrew Wurst's April 25 killing of a teacher and wounding of three students at a dinner-dance in Edinboro, Pennsylvania; Kip Kinkel's murder of his parents and subsequent school cafeteria rampage, during which he killed two and wounded twenty-five in May 1998; Dylan Klebold and Eric Harris's horrific April 1999 carnage at Columbine High School, which killed thirteen and injured twenty-four; and T. J. Solomon's May 20, 1999, shooting and injuring of six at Heritage High School in Conyers, Georgia.¹ The epidemic appeared to have run its course—for the moment. But what had caused it? What should and could we do to prevent another tragedy?

This series of school shootings woke us up to the paucity of cultural narratives that speak to violence, youth culture, and, as I argue in this book, *shame*. School shootings functioned as a prism, exposing and focusing attention on the nasty underbelly of social interaction. Early assessment of these tragedies made it clear that the usual suspects, with profiles grounded in class or race, were not responsible for the rampages. The shooters were not angry young men with histories of run-ins with authorities. Most did not lack material assets, come from broken families, or strike those around them as

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degenerate. None abused drugs or were characterized by their peers as mentally unstable (e.g., a loose cannon that had finally gone off).² And perhaps most surprisingly, none appeared to be looking to exact revenge. Often, in fact, the shooters were unaware of whom they hit—nearly all witnesses described the killings as random (Newman et al. 2004; Cullen 2009; Langman 2009).³ If stereotypes linked to deviance (economic or racial motivations), mental instability, and revenge are sidelined, how are we to make sense of these atrocities? What could possibly have motivated this level of violence, seemingly perpetrated by the kids next door? Behind the question *why* stood gunmen we *all* knew. Every school has Klebolds, Carneals, and Johnsons. Their very familiarity was—is—deeply disturbing and precludes formulaic answers. It precludes, even, a determination of whether they were acting, as both deviance and mental instability narratives would argue, or *reacting*, as revenge narratives would contend.

The day after Columbine, speculation by an ad hoc group of news personalities and psychologists identified the shooters as cultural deviants (emos,* hipsters, Marilyn Manson fans, and other assorted pathetic, antiestablishment wannabes) but soon moved to portraying the young gunmen as driven to extremes by humiliation, marginalization, and social disgrace. The killers were social outcasts, bullied and provoked beyond tolerable limits and goaded by violent movies and video games, lax parenting (and laxer-still gun laws), and Satan. By and large white, middle class, and unremarkable, all the young shooters committed unthinkable atrocities. But were *they* responsible? Or were they victims?⁴ Could the Sturm und Drang of adolescent culture in the late twentieth century produce a pain capable of provoking these rampages? Of motivating suicides?

Bullying narratives, which shifted responsibility from deviant subcultures (with inordinate influence over young white males) to normative behaviors within adolescent culture, made sense of the shootings and were quickly embraced and endorsed by the public. Numerous books (*Lost Boys*, 2000; *Odd Girl Out*, 2002; *Queen Bees and Wannabes*, 2002; *Rampage*, 2004) and movies (*Mean Girls*, 2004) delved deep into the violence at the heart of (male and female) adolescent culture. These early offerings and countless other books, movies, podcasts, TED talks, conferences, and symposia over the years have attempted to color in our (minimal, outdated) sketches of the social forces buffeting our youth.

Whether these analyses, in their detailed constructions of adolescent economies, have correctly assessed the motives underlying the school tragedies is,

* *Emos*, as it is used here, refers to shy, sensitive, angst-ridden teens. Clad primarily in T-shirts and jeans, they are critical of mainstream culture, even antiestablishment, and are often linked to a depressed or angry affect.

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at this point, a moot question. The fact is society has bought into the notion of bully cultures (despite lone voices that question the accuracy of the bullying rationale, with its simplistic good-versus-evil characterizations of behavior).⁵ Whether it is *the* driving force behind school rampages and teen suicides or simply links the horrific and inexplicable to familiar—and thus comfortable—cultural narratives (such as victimization or injustice corrected by a mythic lone rebel taking matters into his own hands) is no longer relevant. Bullying has become the cause du jour, linking shooters to an extant dynamic in need of reappraisal. The identification of common social markers (peripheral social status, effeminate behavior) coupled with individual personality traits (low self-esteem, depression, anger) placed emphasis on psychological factors (as opposed to economic, racial, or evil forces). This psychodynamic starting point, which called for elaborations to well-worn narratives, could account for the *recurrence* of rampages, as well as the similarities and differences in both shooters and communities. Psychologicistic rationales framed the tragedies in a way that offered the possibility of control while leaving the cultural world and our beliefs about its dynamics intact.⁶

Causal or not, bullying has been correlated with recent tragedies, drawing attention to the cruelties of adolescent culture and prompting the realization that social discourse has broken down around the commonplace experience of peer-related emotional violence. School rampages and teen suicides have become a gateway into the heart of adolescent—and cultural?—darkness.

If bullying was a problem at any of these now-infamous schools, as it is at tens of thousands of schools across the nation, why was it never addressed?

Discouraged? Censured? Reprimanded?

The easy answer to this question is that it was never identified as an issue, let alone constructed as a *social* problem. No cultural claims were made about the deleterious effects of bullying (or the deviancy of bullies), and no contributing causal factors were identified. We had yet to acknowledge the full, devastating potential that psychological cruelty could tap and had yet to link legitimate *social forces* (including gossip, stigmatization, Othering, public shaming, and ostracization) to extreme, desperate responses. Even now, having determined (correctly or incorrectly) that bullying has consequences beyond individual well-being, we remain at a loss when challenged to address it—a difficulty that is, in no small part, linked to the inability to isolate behaviors and label them deviant.⁷

The complexities surrounding any attempt to define and address bullying, as well as respond to its victims, are rooted in much larger cultural shifts and the new social issues they trailed. Changes that long ago eroded homogeneous cultural authority, fragmenting morality, muddled the lines between right

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and wrong. Religious mandates and the unambiguous moral behavior and social responsibility they orchestrated were interrupted, their god weakened by growing diversity and overrun by the (secular) engine of progress. What did it now mean to transgress, and what would it take to atone and be forgiven? How and in what principles were morality, justice, and redemption now grounded? Progress signaled the twilight of traditional moral discourse. Redemption fell by the wayside, as justice came to be increasingly oriented around respect for the freedom and rights of the individual (see Sandel 2009).

Chapter 1 offers a cultural-historical overview of how we got here. It frames the emergence of bullying in a brief history of culture, emphasizing the underlying social forces and their relation to personal crises of meaning. Mobility, rapidly changing demographics, and industrialization converged, upending the transcendent religious authority that moored moral codes and oriented an individual's choices, actions, and sense of purpose and identity. Secular legal codes were concerned with protecting the right of the individual to assert personal tastes, preferences, and points of view, while public opinion (grounded in the import accorded to others' attitudes and sentiments) assumed responsibility for curbing preferences and dictating the *right* point of view. With greater and greater frequency, the vacillating court of public opinion (others) handed down judgments, meted out sentences, and oversaw compliance. Their opinions, no less than any religious branding of the flesh, inscribed inadequacies, reputations, and identity on the body, asserting dominion over minds and souls. To the extent that individuals were invested in others, moored to and contingent on their gaze, identity was tethered to their capricious impressions, assumptions, and speculations. And these were no longer guided by shared, overarching values.

Yet as David Riesman points out in *The Lonely Crowd* (1950), others came to afford the individual a sense of belonging and identity, providing a refuge from the psychological and ontological insecurity that followed the decentering of God and the moral universe. They safeguarded her from the meaningless and ennui that accompanied this displacement, which was compounded by abundance and the lessening of struggles for survival. Plenty and an ethos of consumption had further loosened her tether to a known world, one oriented by the necessity of production. The disequilibrium wrought by these radical economic and cultural changes was stabilized by others, but at what cost?*

* Michel Foucault considered "gaze" to be integral to surveillance and the regulation of power in society. For Foucault (who focused on the institutionalization of gaze and its articulation in systems of surveillance in his seminal *Discipline and Punish* [1975]), gaze is a relationship. It speaks to the distribution of power, self-regulation, and beliefs about knowledge (who gazes, and who is gazed upon?).

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Through an elaboration of the construction of self and the role of others in the search for meaning (on a cultural as well as a personal level), the problem of bullying is lent depth and perspective. In the wake of cultural upheaval, a waning of the possibility of redemption becomes singularly significant. The secular ramifications of this forfeiture, a consideration that emerges from the overview sketched in Chapter 1, orient the remainder of the book. As the chapters unfold, detailing the social forces that situate and maintain bullying, this potential—or its loss—looms large. In the absence of religious certainty, the crimes for which one is branded are shifting and unclear, and the possibility for expiation, reparation, and salvation, vague (who will redeem social sinners and on what grounds?). Yet it is precisely the promise of readmittance to the fold, the belief that belonging is once again possible—*hope* itself—that is missing from contemporary experiences of rejection, inadequacy, and shame.

Chapter 1 outlines social theory that may be familiar to many readers, who may prefer to start with Chapter 2, which begins to discuss the social forces that sustain bullying. Chapter 2 opens with an analysis of the dynamics of sociation* that are simultaneously engaged (or co-opted) in support of bullying: gossip, laughter, stereotyping, and competition. These legitimate forms of social discourse have the capacity to marshal social power in the policing of group norms. They function in ways that construct social bonds and create solidarity, uniting even as they divide, signaling belonging even as they reject, and absolving even while threatening condemnation. Within this dual nature lie the seeds of hope. A full grasp of this potential will enable society to (re)employ forces of destruction in the (re)construction of self and relationship. This power—the ability to turn these discourses back on themselves—must be reclaimed.

Chapter 3 explores the destructive consequence of gossip, laughter, and stereotyping: shame. Shame is a social as well as a moral emotion whose power stems from the psychological and physiological need to belong. Through shaming, society censors its members, denying relationship and rejecting claims of belonging. The chaos and pain occasioned by public humiliation is often managed by anger or violence, oriented externally or internally. Aggression denies the break that is threatened by shame, while defending the coherence of the assumptive world, by *blaming* (other or self). Reactive, it responds to the anguish of social rejection with passionate attempts at damage control—or control by damage—aimed at the (internal) source or (external) cause of pain. Disruptive, even offensive, behavior is tolerated and perhaps promoted by a culture that denies shame and is thus incapable of holding out hope for its resolution. Awareness of the complexities that intertwine shame and rage did

* *Sociation*, according to Merriam-Webster's online dictionary, is a mode or process of social interaction, whether associative or dissociative.

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in fact surface in many analyses that attempted to make sense of school rampages. Despite this connection, response to these tragedies (extensive, costly school interventions) has not privileged shame. Shame remains hidden. It is an illegitimate, shameful emotion. And as long as it remains unacknowledged, bullying and victimization cannot be effectively addressed.

Chapters 4 and 5 respond to the social significances of shame and the rupture of connection outlined in Chapter 3. Recognition of the nature of the damage done by bullying—the disorientation caused by the severance of self-sustaining bonds to community—positions victims and orients attempts to redress their plight. If society truly grasps and acknowledges the pain and confusion caused by emotional violence and psychological abuse, it will quickly come to provide victims the space they require for mourning their loss of connection. In this model, *recognition* of a victim's need is itself inclusive, and its accommodation goes far toward supporting her attempts to renegotiate her relationship to the world. Social space given over to grieving in addition to sympathy protocols, including allowances made for grief work, are integral to her process and are discussed at length. In addition, the neuropsychological consequences of social rejection are considered: if factored into her overall state, as well as her capacity for response, what we now know about brain-firing *requires* grief paradigms.

Ultimately, her processing of social pain (grief work) affords her the possibility to *construct different self-narratives*—ones that, in repositioning Others, reposition self. Chapter 5 explores means by which she can find and (re)claim her voice, embracing her lack, her pain, her truth. In renarrating self, she begets significances for (and redeems) her pain, transforming the wreckage of shame into a story that connects past, present, and future (Martocci 2013). The potential for transformation—the promise reflected in caterpillars becoming butterflies, ugly ducklings becoming swans, a phoenix rising from the ashes—already exists in stories that circulate within culture. They can be readily appropriated by bullying-victim narratives to highlight and reinforce latent, imaginable, dormant, future possibilities.

In this re-visioning, both the community and bystanders are key. Chapter 6 attempts to tie up loose ends with regard to bystander responsiveness and begins to address the novel exigencies that attend the dynamics of sociation in cyberspace. Throughout these considerations it becomes clear that, despite the breakdown of cultural and moral authority, the preoccupation with self, and the legal enshrinement of individual freedoms, there remains an ongoing longing for community (see, for example, John Hewitt's *Dilemmas of the American Self* [1989], Robert Putnam's *Bowling Alone* [2000], Robert Bellah and colleagues' "lifestyle enclaves" [1985], Benedict Anderson's "imagined communities" [(1983) 1991], and Anthony Cohen's "communities of meaning" [1985]).⁸ This desire may have roots in our evolutionary history and be

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hardwired into our brains (a possibility explored in Chapter 3). Community, however vaguely it is constructed and defined, retains an ability to motivate personal behavior and coordinate civic action. *We*, as a community, have identified bullying as a social problem, and we, as a community and as bystanders, must learn *how* to become a condition of possibility for victims. What exactly is needed from us, as culture begins to script hope, redemption, empathy, and transformation into emerging narratives?