ABSTRACT FORMS OF THINKING: ADOLESCENT BULLYING AND SUICIDE

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Abstract— Categorization is fundamental to human existence (Säljö and Hjörne, 2009). Essential as it may be this form of thinking has negative consequences. Bullying has become a public concern in the United States and the United Kingdom due to large scale shootings and suicides. King-Shaw (2008) maintains that adolescent who do not have the needed support from teachers, parents or friends may experience long term psychological problems or resort to suicide. A Change Laboratory (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013) was held with 35 immigrant school going adolescents. The results revealed that there is indeed a process of internalization of the social world but that it is personally transformed in order to arrive at a negative or positive form of sense making. The adolescents reworked the negative ways of perceiving their socio-cultural spaces and selves through questioning socio-cultural abstract forms of thinking.

Keywords— Abstract thinking; bullying; suicide; formative intervention, change laboratory

I. **Introduction**

Within this world migrant populations are continually confronted with unsatisfactory school results. The results at school become the primary category to determine their worth, in this way they become a simple commodity (Virkkunen, Newnham, Engeström and Nleya, 2012). This abstract form of thinking ignores the scholars' daily trials and tribulations that only too often lead to a loss of self (King-Shaw, 2008). Frequent bullying is just one of them. Bullying has become a public concern in the United States and the United Kingdom due to large scale shootings and suicides. In Switzerland bullying and immigrant populations has lacked researchers' focus in general.

II. **Theoretical concepts**

A. *Abstract to concrete forms of thinking.*

'Categorization is fundamental to human existence. It penetrates every context of collective social action and individual reasoning.

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We simply cannot describe, reflect on, or deal with reality without invoking categories and, thus indirectly, systems and traditions of categorization by means of which we render events and objects intelligible' (Säljö and Hjörne, 2009, p.153). In other words, they are essential in the 'doing' of social life (Wertch, 1991, 1998). In a study carried out by Van Ausdale and Feagin in 2002, children as young as 3 years old revealed racial attitudes, assumptions and behavior that they had acquired while interacting with their family, school and peer groups. Most of these were hidden from parents and other adults to such an extent that the parents of one of the children were perplexed stating that they promoted anti-discrimination and so did no understand how their child had adopted such attitudes. How people believe, or don't believe, identified reality can be traced, in part, back to the works of Baruch Spinoza, states Kahneman (2012).The initial socio-cognitive function is to believe that an affirmation is true prior to being able to believe that it is not true. The believing that it is not true requires more associative memory work (Kahneman, 2012). The former type of thinking is referred to as abstract thinking, and using Hegel's example, is the act of seeing 'nothing in a murderer except the abstract fact that he is a murderer and to annul all other human essence in him with this simple quality' (my translation, Kaufmann, 1997) (Newnham, 2013). Besides being a collective societal enterprise, this form of abstract thinking involves taking one isolated observable event or feature and interpreting 'a complex integral object as its homogenous instantiation' (Virkkunen and Newnham et al. 2012, p.3). Abstract thinking, seen in this way, is based on empirical generalizations and colors peoples' intentions, thoughts and acts (Virkkunen and Newnham et al. 2012). Things out there in the world become stripped of their complexity and are internalized as such. In other words empirical, classificatory abstractions stabilize knowledge thereby freezing and simplifying the constantly shifting and otherwise bewildering reality of human existence. On the down side of things, such abstractions, however, fence reality off from thinking providing only the fixed and stabilized concept in the consciousness instead of advancing more elaborated reflections on the identified object (Ilyenkov, 1977, p. 60).

B. *Disengagement and deidentification*

The use of hostile and negative words and other forms of threatening behaviour are one of the most frequent forms of violence and intimidation found within the school arena. Nicknames can be fun and at the same time one of the most insidious forms of violence to identify (Cozier & Dimmock, 1999). These authors suggest that the insults are hurtful as

they attack the personal values of the victim and socio-cultural perceptions of self worth. Steele (1999) argues that this form of social behaviour is framed in the problem of stereotypes, that is to say, the fear of doing something that would confirm the stereotype and encourage the aggressive behaviour. The victim has several choices such as: avoidance, rational confrontation, retaliation and some, social disengagement or suicide (Haynie et al. 2001). Another is the cognitive act of aligning him or herself with the stereotype and in so doing deidentifying with his or her former self. The total loss of self due to continual bullying follows with a loss of trust in the victim's internal and external worlds (King-Shaw, 2008). What follows is gang behaviour, lose of trust in the protection of the social system, the school system and in the worst cases their families. Such behaviour creates a viscous circle (Virkkunen & Newnham et al, 2012). Examples of such a socio-cognitive phenomenon are to be found in the works of Ogbu (2003). The Afro-American students disengaged from their university studies as they aligned with the abstract referrals that they received on a daily basis. Steele (1999) argued that such an action was a direct reaction to the emotional experience. The act of deidentifying can be sustained by other members of the same group who recognize the action. This then becomes a group norm which, due to the process of abstract thinking, reinforces the society's categorizations of this group and reinforces their disengagement.

C. *Perezhivani*

Perezhivani in Russian refers to a lived experience encompassing social conditions of development, those overarching experiences that develop a person's personality and that are integral parts of that person. Leontiev (1978) following on the works of Vygotsky (1978) purported that human beings personalities are the sum total of all of those activities in which she or he takes part. Vasilyuk (1991) drawing on these works discussed the cognitive process as being an activity of living experiences. When a person deidentifies from his or her past activities he or she loses his or her life map. This he termed as a crisis. Vasilyuk argues that it is possible to overcome such life crisis as long as the values of the individual remain unquestioned. However, as we can distinguish from the authors works above this may not be the case for certain persons that have undergone repetitive and prolonged bullying. Vasilyuk (1991) as did Alibrando (2007) purported that for people to find their way back to a place where life made sense they needed guidance with allegorical figures symbolic of truth and reality onto which they could secure their beliefs and values. Engeström (1987) developed Developmental work research and its Change laboratory methodology in order to provide people, undergoing extreme levels of tensions due to inconsistent life messages, with tools to redesign their activities to one that was free of existing tension. This methodology has to date been applied in work

environments. The use of it in a social activity is the first of its kind.

D. *Problem statement and empirical context*

Although the suicide rate of youths in Switzerland has declined over the past few years the numbers are still high. Furthermore, reports of excessive bullying in schools frequented by immigrant populations are on the increase. In 2005 a similar project as this was commissioned by the Swiss organization that actively fights against all forms of racism. The project was discussed in an international venue in 2011 and I was asked to conduct the project discussed here in town situated on the border of France and Switzerland. The project took place in 2012 within a school that was heavily populated by immigrant youths and stereotyped as being violent and out of control. 35 youths were chosen to participate in the formative intervention project which lasted 8 months.

III.   **Methodology**

The Change laboratory is a formative intervention tool kit designed by Yrjö Engeström (1987) and his colleagues from Helsinki. Its design supports qualitative transformations and the expansive learning of the participants of an activity or of collaborative activities. It is generally deployed to overcome historical contradictions experienced as tensions by the participants in a work environment. In this case it was used to facilitate the participants, 35 school going adolescents, own agentive transformation of stereotypes, and its concordant behaviour, learned within their socio-cultural milieu at a young age (Devine, 1989). The expansive learning cycle is composed of six principle steps: chartering the situation or questioning; analysing and searching for a new solution; formation of a new objective and motive; application of the new objective and consolidating and reflecting on the new model. The formative intervention began with establishing the need state (step one). The scholars were asked to complete a questionnaire adapted from the works of Crozier & Dimmock (1999). One week later the scholars were given a disposable camera and asked to take pictures of people that they felt were different. They were provided with a message for the person being photographed. Once the photos were developed the scholars gathered together where, in turn, they presented their images stating why they had taken them. The listeners could comment on their reflections. This process was filmed and at the next meeting punctuated video clips were projected back to the participants for further comments and reflections.

A. *Empirical analysis*

The responses to the questionnaire were tabulated. The most common form of bullying involved insidious remarks that were hard to define and the victims found hurtful. The insidious nature of the remarks made it difficult for the victim to respond, leaving them with a feeling of hopelessness

(Steele, 1999). The scholars admitted that they received as many of these remarks as they gave to others. They mostly confided in friends and as many girls as boys were bullies and victims. The second highest form was that of spreading false rumours which they stated took a long time to eradicate as often the source was not known. Some stated that they had been a victim of the same rumour since preschool. Once again the score was fairly equal and help was found with a friend. Unkind remarks followed with a double score for the victims and help was sought once again with friends. The gender scores were even. Demeaning nicknames were similar in scores. The scores shifted however when it came to the last three questions: there were 70% of the scholars that suffered from verbal and physical threats meaning that there were some scholars that were bullying most of the others. The victims this time did not seek help from friends but turned rather to their parents. There were 10% more female victims than males. Being ignored was experienced mostly by the female gender, 30% and they did not confide in anyone. The nicknames referred either to their cultural background or their physical appearance. The verbal and physical threats ranged from sexual favours; material favours (giving them objects); renouncing the use of the victims home language; secrecy on if found committing an illegal act; territorial rights and gang rights. These findings support those of Ogbu (2003) and Steele (1999). King-Shaw (2008) maintained that with the adequate support system victims could find positive ways of dealing with bullying. However, the questionnaire responses revealed that only 10% of the cases were reported to school teachers. One male scholar wrote that he wanted to end his life as he was a victim of physical bullying by others scholars and that he could not sleep at night due to his fear. He wrote that the school headmaster had refused to become involved as it was outside the school grounds. He was afraid to tell his parents or friends for fear of implicating them in the problem. With his permission professional help was obtained.

The photographs in themselves did not illustrate anything in particular. Most images were simply of everyday people going about their everyday activities. Only two photographs out of the 340 clichés represented religious or skin colour differences. Despite the mundane images, heated discussions followed. The photographic discussions took place over 4 sessions.

Photo 6
Annaline: yes, that disturbs me (pause)she is stupid to wear a scarf everyone looks at us
Marc: It is you that is stupid, you wear cross around your neck and you think that is normal. Besides you wear braces on your teeth (pause) everyone looks at you when you open your mouth
Annaline: it is not at all the same thing
Batiste: My sister wears a scarf and we think that is fine (pause) she likes it very much and finds it pretty
Julie: No really Batiste, Annaline is right you think that women like it but it is not true, I do not like it at all

Batiste: it is not because you do not like it that all the others need to follow
Lauriane: I think that we should respect others differences and rather look at ourselves instead

Lauriane's reflection appeased the anger of the other scholars and they moved to the next photograph.

Photo 76
Marc: Look at that ugly woman she is wearing a bright green coat everyone thinks that she is ugly
Samantha: I have a coat that looks like that
Baptiste: you are ugly too that is why you wear it (laughter)
Samantha: did I say anything to you about your hair
Anais: she did not and I do not think that the lady looks ugly, she looks happy to me
Marc: that is because you wear such thick glasses that you cannot see anything why don't you shut up
Samantha: Marc why does it bother you what someone else wears?
Marc: what has it got to do with you?
Luc: Marc she is right why does it bother you?
Marc: shut up Luc I will get you after school
Samantha: we are here because of people like you? we want our school to be taken of the list (of being a down and out school)
The last remark left a silence in the class and Tibeau presented a photograph of a street vendor.

The remarks made of the images relied on categorizations and stereotypes and translated a lack of well being. The women scholars voiced their anger and pain at being continually insulted and treated as vulgar sexual objects. Many discussions ended in more elaborate forms of reflection, breaking the circle of abstractions relying on further abstractions (Virkkunen & Newnham et al. 2012)

The discussions were filmed and after the session the videos were viewed along with each scholar's questionnaire. The results were surprising; the scholars that had said to be victim of terms such as dirty whore, ravaged gay, etcetera used the same words to evoke their feelings for the image in their photograph. Equally, the scholars that received verbal harassment for their dress attire insulted the person in the photographs clothing:

Scholar 1
Monique wrote that her school friends insulted her by saying that she was a fat stupid without a brain. When she presented her images she remarked that, "she must have a problem in her brain, look how she is dressed". Monique addressed her other images in the same manner.

Scholar 32
Frèdèrique wrote that, "they say that I stink and that I am a fat gay piece of faeces". In his images he describes a young girl as being too fat, stupid and of smelling and of a young man as

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walking like an idiot, of being fat, too big and a slab of gay dirt.

Selected video clips were then project during the following 3 sessions. The scholars were given their questionnaire in return whilst they viewed themselves presenting their photographs. If scholars did not want their presentation to be viewed in public they were able to refuse and to ask to discuss it alone at a later stage. There were only three such cases, one being a young woman who was continually bullied by a group of young males and two females and she stated that she often thought of committing suicide. With her permission professional help was acquired.

Video clip 16

Laina was a very slender person of Somali origin. She was often bullied as she could not participate in sporting activities due to prolonged periods of malnutrition. She felt inadequate and excluded from the other students. Her images represented normal everyday people but she referred to them as lonely and without friends. We viewed the discussion of her presentations and this was the result:

Jonas: hey Laina I often see you sitting on your own are you lonely like the people in your picture?
Matheu: they are not lonely we said so did you not hear it
Jonas: Laina said they looked lonely so she feels that they are lonely so what does it have to do with you do you know them
Matheu: no but it was a dumb question
Sandra: no it was not now that you say it I realize that Laina is often alone
Laura: that is why she sees other people that are alone
Laina: I have friends outside school
Annaline: what is wrong with people in school?
Laina: there are too many insults I cannot do anything about being thin and slow
Laura: well we could try to help you maybe you are good at other things that we are not good at so we can share
Jonas: I was as well saying that people were stupid and fat in my photos and some of you call me stupid and say that I have a banana around my stomach and should put it in my mouth
Carine: that is not nice
Jonas: no but we are all doing these not nice things and as we can see it hurts
Simone: we can do things another way why do we not find a way to help people that feel like us

The video session functioned as a primary stimulus for some and a secondary stimulus for others. Vygotsky (1987) maintained that humans were no like animals and they sought a secondary stimulus to solve contradictory problems. The act of distancing enabled some of the scholars to understand how the cycle of abstraction was reinforced both across the students and within the students.

B. *Discussion*

Cozier and Dimmock (1999) refer to insults that are painful and the identity of the person being threatened. During the Change Laboratory and within the project carried out in 2005, I became aware to what extend the painful insults were so strong and so important that the children incorporated them into their cognitive tool kits. They had incorporated them into their rational schemas of us and other. The written appeal to no longer attend school confirms Steele's (1999) affirmation that bullying leads to scholars' disengagement rather than the lower grades residing in a genetic cause (Ogbu, 2003). This study adds to others demonstrating that it is not only disengagement that ensues but that the use of the same insults towards others appeases the pain and sufferance felt when attacked, a pain too large to carry within their own value system (Alibrando, 2007). However, understanding and empathising is not enough this will not change the cycle of an eye for an eye. The scholars need to be provided with tools.

Change Laboratory methodology is a formative intervention method. It is not designed to change participants' actions by giving them best practice actions but rather provides means to find new ways of working within ones socio-cultural environment. The methodology provides the participants with a voice as does qualitative research thereby eliciting and empowering minority voices (Ungar, 2003) and in such actions requires the researcher/facilitator to account for his or her own biases (Kind-Shaw, 2008).

As mentioned in the introduction this text deals with expansive learning, with the transition of abstract forms of thinking to concrete forms of thinking. This process requires the participants' joint effort in designing a new form of collaboration that includes new concepts that mediate acts and thinking towards tension free environments. Breaking with the use of random categorizations refers to breaking with everyday forms of thinking. "(E)veryday thinking is based on the formal logical principle that a characterization of the object is either true or false" (Virkkunen & Newnham, 2013). Whilst the object is stabilized no questioning can be formulated. However, when tensions arise the contradictory nature of the object comes to the fore. Such was the case in the process discussed above. Scholars were initially not aware that they were functioning in accordance with historical socio-cultural scripts. Once they began to experience the tension of these scripts through the continual negotiation of secondary stimuli (questionnaires, photographs, video clips) they became aware of their collective destruction. The questionnaires, photographs and video clips transformed from being an artefact into an instrument. Vygotsky (1999) referred to this as double stimulation; the scholars had the task of completing the questionnaires, taking photographs and then describing what they saw. However, they were not aware that they were deploying the people photographed as allegorical characters symbolising their own pain. As the debates increased in emotional content the students experiencing (Vasilyuk, 1991) of their former situations changed, they began to manipulate

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the artefacts into tools (secondary stimuli), "I often see you sitting on your own are you lonely like the people in your photo". Jonas suddenly turned the artefact into a tool thereby agentively facilitating his move out of the box and to see the problem from a new direction. The scholars developed a help student centre for other students in the school they then proceeded to develop theatre and art groups as well as humanitarian fund raising weekends. This step is referred to as generalizing. The process of development began with a germ cell "help people that feel like us". This germ cell (Davydov, 1990) expanded into several new activities all still relating to the initial concept of helping people that feel like us. King-Shaw's (2008) work testifies to just how much people that have suffered from bullying require finding new ways of negotiating their life worlds. However, as this study illustrates, when the contradictions between and within the persons activities results in unsupportable tensions, and peoples' sense making becomes caught in a vicious circle of degenerating actions, a form of assistance is required (Engeström, 1987; Vasilyuk, 1991; Alibrando, 2003) to guide the persons through a process of questioning, designing and implementing new practices freed from former tyrannical behaviour.

Acknowledgment

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