Wednesday, December 3, 2014
6 - 7:30 p.m.
Museum of Northern Arizona

Facilitated by: Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

6:00 p.m.
Welcome and Introduction
Ms. Andrea Houchard, Director, Philosophy in the Public Interest

6:15 p.m.
Community Discussion
Dr. Jona Vance, NAU Department of Philosophy

1) What are some instances of bullying?
2) What is bullying? And how, if at all, does it differ from other things such as attacking someone or showing strength?
3) How does social position influence experiences of bullying and how the label “bully” is applied?
4) How should we respond to bullies? What values ground these responses?

7:20 p.m.
Closing Questions and Recap of Discussion

We are grateful for support from NAU’s W.A. Franke College of Business and the McKenzie Endowment for Democracy.
1) What are some instances of bullying?

**Classical school bullying**

Behavior by British schoolboys provides a classic example of bullying. According to contemporary sociologist—Randall Collins of the University of Pennsylvania:

- “Older boys were allowed to make a younger boy into a servant, carrying their books, cleaning their rooms, and generally deferring and taking orders…it often intensified into maliciousness, physical abuse, and commandeering the younger boy’s possessions.”
- Administrators at the time believed the system allowed the boys to learn discipline.

**Cyberbullying**

Online social networks have given rise to a new form of bullying via the internet. In cases of cyberbullying, a classmate or other network member may attack a person’s character by spreading malicious rumors or posting humiliating images or videos. Often the attackers are anonymous, which gives them a power advantage in addition to any they may already have. Here is one widely cited case.

- Rebecca Ann Sedwick, a 12 year old girl, committed suicide after receiving death threats from a former classmate through social media sites. The classmate began dating a boy that Rebecca had been seeing and had a negative response to their previous relationship. Eventually, the classmate turned Rebecca’s best friend against her. Other girls stopped being friends with Rebecca in fear of being bullied, making Rebecca increasingly socially isolated and powerless.

**Expanded use of “bullying”**

According to Randal Collins current use of the term “bullying” has expanded from its original use. Collins suggests it is now used to include various forms of aggression or exclusionary acts that do not have an asymmetrical power dynamic. These actions include:

- Someone being left out of activities, name calling, rumor spreading, teasing, making sexual comments, making threats, pushing or hitting. These things may tend to happen on a horizontal or “symmetrical” relational level where each party involved is equal in their means of aggression.

Collins argues that the term “bullying” should not be used in this expanded way.

2) What is bullying? And how, if at all, does it differ from other things such as attacking someone or showing strength?

The United States government defines bullying as an “unwanted, aggressive behavior among school aged children that involves a real or perceived power imbalance.”

Safe Workers, a workplace safety organization in the United Kingdom, offers a definition that applies to persons of all ages: “the use of superior influence or strength to intimidate. The purpose of this intimidation is to force someone to do something.” Abusive behaviors that can be classified as bullying are:

- Making threats.
- Dealing physical or verbal abuse, this also could include sexual harassment.
- Public humiliation of any form.
- Sending intimidating texts or emails, also known as cyber bullying.

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This informational handout was prepared by Kaitlin Baker, a visual communications major and philosophy minor at Northern Arizona University. The faculty supervisor is Dr. Jona Vance, lecturer at the Northern Arizona University Department of Philosophy.
University of Pennsylvania sociologist Randal Collins defines traditional bullying as “picking on network isolates.” According to Collins, bullying is an ongoing, asymmetrical relationship between two or more individuals.

- **Network isolates** are “victims who are lowest in the group status hierarchy, who lack friends and allies, and lack the emotional energy to defend oneself.”
- “Bullying is a repetitive relationship, the same bullies persistently domineering and tormenting the same victims.”

Bullying should be distinguished from showing strength. Showing strength need not have the negative aspects of bullying. One can show strength without threatening or intimidating.

3) How does social position influence experiences of bullying and how the label “bully” is applied?

Experiences of bullying differ by gender, age and possibly other factors.
- Boys and girls are bullied at about approximately the same rates.
- Boys are typically bullied only by boys.
- Girls are bullied by boys and girls.
- Girls typical experience difference types of bullying than boys do (see Figure 1).
- Children are more likely to be bullied in elementary school, less likely as they get older. However, cyberbullying remains constant throughout school (see Figure 2).

One explanation of these results is that girls and younger children typically occupy positions of less power and are therefore more often the targets of bullying.

How we label individuals as bullies may also be affected by their social position and other factors.
- Boys are 1.7 times more likely to bully others than girls are. However, sometimes their behavior is excused or explained away with the notion that “boys will be boys.”
- Younger children are more likely to be bullied than older children. However, sometimes a child’s behavior is excused with the notion that “kids will be kids.”
- Complicating matters, we might apply the term “bullying” to acts by children more readily than to similarly aggressive, repetitive attacks by adults on less powerful adults.

![Figure 1](http://www.stopbullying.gov/prevention/training-center/training-module-speaker-notes.pdf)
Figure 2

Age Trends in the Type of Bullying Experienced (NCVS, 2009)

4) How should we respond to bullies? What values ground these responses?

There are a number of strategies individuals and groups can adopt in response to bullies. Here are just a few:

**Reaching out to victims**

Bullying is caused by social asymmetries where one party has power over the other in some way. Reducing the number of network isolates through inclusion is one strategy for responding to bullying. Being supportive of the victim and inviting them to activities can aid in such a process.

**Reporting to authorities**

Another strategy is to report bullying behavior and take institutional action.

- In the case of students, there is a desire for bullies to be suspended from extracurricular activities, events, and school in general.
- Similarly, in the professional world, if a person reports bullying behavior to her employer, the employer can review the behavior and take appropriate action to ensure the health of the victim and the working environment.

**Embracing bullying and building character**

One controversial approach is advocated by comedian Chris Rock.

- Rock claims that bullying was “the defining moment of my life … it made me who I am.” He argues that being bullied helped him fuel his drive to succeed and be quick on his feet.
- However, Rock also notes the potential for harm. He says that without a source of love and support “you can be destroyed” by bullying.

The question for this section is a values question; it asks what we should do. When thinking through the options for how one should respond to bullying, it’s important to keep in mind the underlying values that may ground each option. Answering such questions well may require raising further values questions. For example,

**Is it more important to rehabilitate bullies, give them a punishment they deserve, or something else? Why?**

**Should children learn to fend for themselves in a hostile environment? Why or why not?**

**Sources**

- http://www.safeworkers.co.uk/fine-line-between-bullying-strong-management.html
- http://blog.pennlive.com/life/2013/10/kids_will_be_kids_but_bullies.html
- http://www.workplacebullying.org/2013/02/04/perps/
- http://www.huffingtonpost.com/jennifer-hicks/stop-saying-boys-will-be-boys_b_5979416.html
HOT TOPICS CAFÉ COMMUNITY COMMITTEE

The “hot topics” in the Hot Topics Cafés are selected by community members that represent diverse constituencies and viewpoints. We thank our committee for their participation.

*Voted on Fall, 2014 “Hot Topics.”

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*Coral Evans  
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*Jacque Gencarelle  
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*Barbara Hickman  
Superintendent, Flagstaff Unified School District

*Bob James  
Retired from Lockheed Martin Space Systems; Member, The Episcopal Church of the Epiphany; Member and Docent Museum of Northern Arizona; Adjunct Math Instructor Northern Arizona University; Member, The Boy Scouts of America—Silver Beaver

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