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School bullying and bare life: Challenging the state of exception

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ABSTRACT

Despite a vast amount of research into school bullying and the widespread implementation of anti-bullying policies and programs, large numbers of students continue to report that they are routinely subjected to bullying by their peers. In this theoretical article, I argue that part of the problem is that there has been a lack of critical discussion of the theoretical foundations upon which such studies are based. Drawing on recent theoretical contributions within the field of school bullying, the work of anthropologist James C. Scott, and the work of philosophers Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, I take particular issue with the notion of power that has long been a foundational pillar of bullying definitions. Utilizing a Foucauldian understanding of power, I argue that rather than focusing on the power imbalance involved in bullying relations, focus instead needs to shift onto the role that bullying plays in power relations. Reimagining Agamben’s figure of homo sacer as a victim of school bullying, I consider the ways in which some individuals are reduced to bare life and forced into a state of exception whereby social laws are no longer deemed applicable. The article concludes with a discussion of how this state of exception might be challenged.

KEYWORDS

School; bullying; power; exclusion

Introduction

Despite decades of research into school bullying and the subsequent implementation of anti-bullying policies and programs in schools, large numbers of school-aged students continue to report that they are routinely subjected to bullying from their peers (Menesini & Salmivalli, 2017; Modecki, Minchin, Harbaugh, Guerra, & Runions, 2014). Despite the extensive focus on the problem and campaigns to raise awareness and to ‘stamp out’ bullying, bullying remains a key issue for schools. So much so that large sums of money are paid out for the privilege of utilizing popular anti-bullying programs and information packs (Flygare et al., 2011; Persson, Wennberg, Beckman, Salmivalli, & Svensson, 2018). School bullying persists despite research suggesting that many school-aged children perceive bullying to be wrong (Thornberg, Birberg Thornberg, Alamaa, & Daud, 2016). How can we understand this apparent paradox? Walton has suggested that the theoretical foundations upon which bullying research and associated practices and policies are based are ‘fundamentally flawed’ (Walton, 2011, p. 134). In line with Walton, I argue that part of the problem is that many bullying...
researchers have tended to focus on conducting more and more empirical studies of bullying without adequately questioning the theoretical foundations upon which their studies are based. As Eriksson (2001) has argued, the field of school bullying research is strewn with exclamation marks yet is notable for its lack of question marks. Too few questions have been asked of it. As Walton has suggested, perhaps it is time to ‘stop our industry, take a step back, look at the problem in broad contexts rather than micro-moments, and go back to the drawing board’ (Walton, 2015, p. 30). In this theoretical article, I seek to do just that. Drawing on some recent theoretical discussions of bullying researchers, the work of anthropologist James C. Scott, and the work of philosophers Michel Foucault and Giorgio Agamben, I focus in particular on the question of power, which has long been central to bullying definitions but the formulations of which have been under theorized. In doing so, I discuss the importance of difference to power relations and consider the ways in which certain individuals may be cast out and placed in a state of exception wherein group norms and social laws cease to apply. I conclude the article with a discussion of how such a state of exception may be challenged.

The question of power

In approaching the question of power that is central to school bullying, it is useful to start with the issue of discourse and the ways in which certain ways of understanding gain the status of truth. A consideration of different definitions of bullying highlights how the very notion of bullying has been contested within a discursive field imbued with power relations (Walton, 2005b). In what was perhaps the first study of bullying in the United States in the late 1800s, bullying was defined in the following way:

Cases of tyranny among boys and girls from college hazing and school fagging down to the nursery. Cases where threats of exposure, injury, or imaginary dangers were the instruments of subjection and control (Burk, 1897, p. 336).

Here, bullying is understood in terms of threats that provided the means through which some boys and girls could control the behavior of others through their subjection. Seventy-five years later, the Swedish term for bullying (mobbning) made its first appearance. The conceptualization of the term was put forward by Heinemann, who drew on understanding of the English term ‘mob’ and formulated it as ‘the group’s collective aggressiveness towards an individual or individuals who provoke or attract its anger’ (Heinemann, 1972, p. 7, my translation). Inspired by ethological understandings of animal aggression, Heinemann placed the focus on the reactive behavior of groups to perceived outside threats.

Both of these understandings of bullying provide useful insights into the problem and yet have largely been left by the wayside. Instead, conceptualizations of bullying have often been based on the work done by Olweus, who shifted the focus away from the group and onto the negative actions of individuals. According to Olweus, ‘A student is being bullied or victimized when he or she is exposed, repeatedly and over time, to negative actions on the part of one or more other students’ (Olweus, 1993, p. 9). Olweus has also pointed to the importance of three criteria for determining whether or not a situation is bullying: 1) the aggressive intention to do harm; 2) the repetitiveness of the actions; and 3) the presence of an asymmetric power relationship, which he equated with an ‘imbalance in strength’ (Olweus, 1993, p. 10).

There have been numerous variations and revisions of this definition, including Volk, Dane, and Marini’s definition of bullying as ‘aggressive goal-directed behavior that harms another individual within the context of a power imbalance’ (Volk, Dane, & Marini, 2014, p. 327). In this definition, there is no longer reference to the criteria of repetition, which has been problematized in relation to cyberbullying. It also explicitly mentions the power imbalance inherent in bullying situations and suggests that rather than necessarily involving an intention to do harm, bullying may be understood more broadly as goal-directed behavior. While this last point alludes
to a different way of understanding power relations, there has been little theoretical discussion of how to theorize power relations beyond the capacities of individual students. Vaillancourt, Hymel, and McDougall have pointed to the importance of ‘social power’, which they argue ‘reflects an interaction between the characteristics of the individual and the social context in which he/she operates’ (Vaillancourt, Hymel, & McDougall, 2003, p. 159). They distinguish between explicit and implicit forms of social power, equating explicit social power with size and strength, for example, and implicit social power with status and popularity. In doing so, they argue that ‘bullies’ are often disliked by their peers because of their reliance on explicit social power, although some are perceived as popular due to their ability to access implicit social power (Vaillancourt et al., 2003).

In their discussion of implicit social power, Vaillancourt, Hymel, and McDougall suggest that power is not simply an issue of size, strength, or greater number, but rather is connected to broader values that allow for the affordance of social status. In a similar vein, Rigby (2008) has provided a list of commonplace power differences that may enable bullying in schools. These include differences in physicality, number, confidence or assertiveness, linguistic ability, social skills, and status. These differences, however, do not explain why physicality is particularly important for boys or why girls are more ‘relational’ in their aggression, or why certain students have more allies, are more confident or assertive, are better with language, have better social skills, have higher status, or are able to impose their will on others.

Restricting conceptualizations of power to the level of individuals and their different capacities to bully has implications for how bullying is conceived and the strategies that are put in place to combat and prevent it (Walton, 2005a). Rather than understanding bullying as a particular form of aggression, clearly defined in terms of its criteria of aggressive intention, repetition, and power imbalance, the term bullying can be rethought as a discursive practice (Walton, 2005a). Understandings of bullying have been shaped in specific ways at the expense of other ways of thinking about the issue (e.g. as the instruments of subjection and control or as the reactive behavior of groups). This has influenced research into the problem, which has tended to focus on the negative aggressive behavior of individuals or groups of individuals, and anti-bullying work, which has largely sought to address that aggressive behavior. This has inadvertently served to draw focus away from the broader societal context and onto what Duncan termed ‘the new folk devils: “the bullies”’ (Duncan, 1999, p. 146). The broader context has been blurred out of the picture while individual ‘bullies’ have been emphasized as those whose behavior is contrary to acceptable social norms. As Ringrose and Renold (2010, p. 587) have noted, the bully/victim dichotomy not only has implications for how we understand the problem, but may also lead to those who are labeled ‘bullies’ reacting defensively and experiencing feelings of anger, shame, and anxiety. If, instead, we rethink the foundational notion of power upon which definitions of bullying are built, a different picture of ‘the bully’ begins to come into view.

Rethinking power through difference

In stark contrast to the formulation put forward by Olweus (1993), who equated power with strength, Foucault (1978/1998, p. 93) argued:

Power is not an institution, and not a structure; neither is it a certain strength that we are endowed with; it is the name that one attributes to a complex strategical situation in a particular society.

Not only did Foucault argue that power cannot be equated with the strength of an individual, but also he argued that power is strategic and contextually dependent. Rather than being something that an individual has, power is something that an individual exercises strategically in particular social contexts. As Foucault (1978/1998, p. 94) pointed out:
Power is not something that is acquired, seized, or shared, something that one holds on to or allows to slip away; power is exercised from innumerable points, in the interplay of nonegalitarian and mobile relations.

Here, Foucault highlights that power relations always involve an imbalance, they are nonegalitarian, but the imbalance is not fixed, the relations are mobile. This has been illustrated by researchers considering the links between masculinity and the centrality of laughing, joking, and cursing, for example, whereby these uses of language serve to both identify those who are not part of the group and to reproduce social inequalities (Kehily & Nayak, 1997; Pascoe, 2013). As Pascoe (2013, p. 93) has pointed out, power imbalances are ‘constituted in and by the interaction itself’. A supposedly high-status boy, for example, may lose that privileged position dependent on his performance in the interaction, and may instead be positioned as ‘gay’, a ‘nerd’, a ‘loser’, and so on.

In this sense, then, a previously high-status student may become stigmatized and redefined as ‘different’. As Goffman (1963/1986, p. 5) put it:

… an individual who might have been received easily in ordinary social intercourse possesses a trait that can obtrude itself upon attention and turn those of us whom he meets away from him, breaking the claim that his other attributes have on us. He possesses a stigma, an undesired differentness from what we had anticipated.

Here, Goffman points to the importance of difference and the way in which perceptions of difference can draw the focus away from aspects of sameness. Discussions of the importance of difference to power relations have been surprisingly lacking in the field of school bullying research (Walton, 2015). Olweus has argued that the idea that students who are different in terms of appearance, ethnic background, or language tend to be bullied is one of the ‘common myths about bullying’ and that ‘personality characteristics’ and ‘typical reaction patterns’ are more important (Olweus, 2003, p. 14). In doing so, Olweus reduces difference to the individual level and fails to account for the ways in which difference underpins power relations, and hence those personality characteristics and reaction patterns.

Foucault’s argument that power is not held but rather exercised highlights its linkages and organizing function. Foucault argued that the exercise of power occurs through a net-like organization and that power must therefore be analyzed in terms of its circulatory status:

Power must be analysed as something which circulates, or rather as something which only functions in the form of a chain. It is never localized here or there, never in anybody’s hands, never appropriated as a commodity or piece of wealth. Power is employed and exercised through a net-like organization (Foucault, 1980, p. 98).

Foucault argued that the ability of individuals to exercise power depends on their location within the threads of this net-like organization in terms of a ‘system of differentiations which permits one to act upon the actions of others’ (Foucault, 1983, p. 223). These differentiations are determined by traditional, cultural, political, or legal frameworks, for example, and intersectional distinctions related to class, ethnicity, ability, gender, sexuality, and so on (Foucault, 1983). As Foucault (1983, p. 223) pointed out: ‘Every relationship of power puts into operation differentiations which are at the same time its conditions and its results’. The ability of some students to bully others is conditioned by such differentiations while the bullying serves to reinforce the system of differentiations that permits it to occur.

Rather than focusing on the negative actions of individuals, then, it may be more fruitful to focus on the system of differentiations that underpins those actions. As Pascoe has pointed out, rethinking the interactions involved in bullying situations in terms of ‘the reproduction of inequality frames them as normative rather than pathological behaviors’ (Pascoe, 2013, p. 95). As Bansel, Davies, Laws, and Linnell (2009, p. 66) have likewise suggested, ‘while acts of bullying are unacceptable, they are nonetheless reiterations of the dominant order, albeit excessive, rather than acts that run counter to that order.’ Rather than constituting the negative aggressive actions of evil-minded individuals who are hell-bent on causing pain and suffering, then, acts of
bullying can be rethought as ‘normative cruelties’, taken-for-granted practices that are invoked in the performance of everyday subjectivities (Ringrose & Renold, 2010, p. 575).

As Jacobson (2010a, p. 256) has suggested, the ‘dividing practices’ inherent in bullying interactions may actually mirror those dividing practices that are utilized within schools for the purposes of education, such as streaming, grading, testing, and so on. Such dividing practices may actually be learnt by students through the hidden curriculum of schooling. Through a discussion of Foucault’s notion of disciplinary power, Jacobson has highlighted the links between disciplinary training and the system of differentiations through which bullying is enacted. As he explained:

That is, my "A" only counts, if there are "Bs" in the class. And, of course in school, "As" are preferred. … Identity is found by how we stack up; the higher the better. In this light, one might argue that a bully has simply taken such discourse seriously (Jacobson, 2010b, p. 45).

Here, Jacobson not only illuminates the links between schooling and school bullying, but also suggests that bullying may have less to do with the one(s) being bullied than it does with the management of perception of those doing the bullying. As Jacobson has also put it, bullying can thus be understood as ‘a means of attempted self-construction through public domination’ (Jacobson, 2010c, p. 443).

Also drawing on the work of Foucault, Walton has suggested that ‘bullying can be reconsidered as an expression of power mediated by constructs of social difference and as a mechanism of social control’ (Walton, 2011, p. 140). This echoes somewhat the definition provided in the study of Burk, whereby bullying acts were conceptualized as ‘the instruments of subjection and control’ (Burk, 1897, p. 336). While the majority of school bullying researchers have started from the assumption that those engaging in bullying necessarily seek to cause harm, and that bullying involves a power imbalance, Walton’s suggestion opens the door for a reconsideration of the intention behind bullying and to a shift from the focus on the power imbalance in bullying to the role that bullying performs in power relations.

For Foucault, power is ‘a question of government’, where to govern means ‘to structure the possible field of action of others’, or to conduct the conduct of others (Foucault, 1983, p. 221). While Foucault argued that power relations are intentional, he also argued that power relations are non-subjective. As individuals do not hold power, which instead circulates within the system of differentiations, power is thus out of the control of the individual, meaning that the intentions and effects of power relations may be quite different (Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983; Heller, 1996). As Foucault put it, ‘people know what they do; they may even know why they do what they do; but what they don’t know is what what they do does’ (cited in Dreyfus & Rabinow, 1983, p. 187). If, then, the intention of bullying is not necessarily to cause harm, and may have more to do with the perception of others than the behavior of the one being bullied, how can we understand why some individuals are bullied and positioned as ‘other’?

Understanding power as something that circulates rather than something that is held by individuals allows for a consideration of the importance of group processes of inclusion and exclusion. The creation and maintenance of groups necessarily involves the inclusion of some and the exclusion of others. Exclusion and inclusion can thus be thought of as two sides of the same coin, whereby including some people in a group necessarily also involves excluding others (Wrethander Bliding, 2007). Søndergaard (2012) has argued that human beings depend existentially on being embedded socially and that this existential need creates a degree of anxiety that it may not be fulfilled. This anxiety, which Søndergaard (2012, p. 360) refers to as ‘social exclusion anxiety’, is ‘a fear that smolders beneath the surface when people interact.’ It is a fear that one may be excluded from the group and refused the rights afforded to members.

Søndergaard (2012) argues that a potential strategy for tempering social exclusion anxiety is through the manufacturing of contempt and the condemnation of another individual or group. In this way, then, the identity of the group can be strengthened through its distinction from
'others'. The boundaries of the group are reinforced in an attempt to maintain control and to regulate the social relations within the group. Søndergaard (2012) argues that, while this contempt production may temporarily assuage the fears of the group, it may also serve to exacerbate them and lead to feelings of anxiety turning into social panic. At this point, someone may be deemed as not fitting in, or ‘misfitting’, and designated as ‘odd’ or ‘different’ (Thornberg, 2018, p. 148). The designated ‘misfit’ is cast out, othered, and stripped of the rights enjoyed by group members. What are the implications of such positioning? In addressing this question, I turn to the work of Agamben (1998) and the figure of homo sacer. While Agamben was writing about the state and the governing of the populace, his ideas are nonetheless useful for understanding victim positioning. In the following section, I thus adopt his ideas and reimagine them in relation to school bullying.

**Social exclusion and the figure of homo sacer**

Drawing on ancient Greek terminology, Agamben has distinguished between two different forms of life: the ‘simple natural life’ of people (zoe), whereby they eat, sleep, and so on, and their socio-political life through which they are afforded rights of participation (bios) (Agamben, 1998, p. 4). Initially, zoe was confined to the home sphere (oikos) and excluded from the political sphere (polis). However, the increasing ‘ politicization of bare life’ meant that zoe was incorporated into the political sphere through a form of biopolitics whereby the simple natural life of individuals became a central focus of political strategies (Agamben, 1998, p. 6). In this sense, then, individuals can be understood as having two overlapping life realms: their simple natural life and the social life through which they are recognized as members of the social group and afforded the associated rights of members. Such rights are granted, however, and as such can also be taken away. If this occurs, the individual is stripped of their socio-political life (bios) and reduced to ‘bare life’; that is, the life of homo sacer (Agamben, 1998, p. 6).

The figure of homo sacer is drawn from old Roman laws where it was used to refer to someone ‘who may be killed and yet not sacrificed’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 8). In this sense, then, homo sacer was positioned outside the protection of both human law and divine law. Homo sacer is in a symmetrical position to that of the sovereign. While the sovereign is the one who governs over the populace, homo sacer is the one over whom the populace may act as sovereign (Agamben, 1998). According to Agamben, the figure of homo sacer is thus not the same as zoe (simple natural life), but rather is enforced bare life; that which is excluded from the rights of bios, and left at the mercy of others.

Drawing on Germanic and Scandinavian historical contexts, Agamben compares the figure of homo sacer to the periodic figures of bandits and outlaws; perceived wrongdoers who were excluded from their communities, were no longer afforded the protection of law, and could thus be killed with impunity. They were dehumanized and hybridized, as wolf-men or werewolves, whose place was neither in the natural realm of wolves nor in the social realm of humans. As Agamben (1998, p. 69) put it, ‘the life of the bandit is the life of the loup garou, the werewolf, who is precisely neither man nor beast, and who dwells paradoxically within both while belonging to neither’. In other words, their life was neither social life nor simple natural life, but rather bare life; a ‘life without peace’ to be lived in a ‘state of exception’ wherein human and divine laws were no longer deemed to apply (Agamben, 1998, pp. 69–70; see also Agamben, 2005).

Reimagining the figure of homo sacer as the victim of bullying, the individual who is deemed as having committed a social wrongdoing is banned from participating as a recognized member of the social group. They are ‘othered’ and are forced to dwell in the social realm without being permitted to participate on a par with their peers. Through this othering process, the individual is stripped not only of their social rights but also of their dignity and their status as fully human. They are dehumanized and rendered hybrid, as that which is not quite human, and can thus be
subjected to behavior that would not otherwise be considered acceptable by the members of the group. The social laws that proclaim that one should not bully are no longer deemed to apply in relation to that individual, as they are placed in a state of exception (Agamben, 1998, 2005). The individual is not simply excluded from the group. Rather, they are included through their exclusion. They provide the ‘other’ in relation to which the members of the group are contrastingly defined. In this state of exception, the social life of homo sacer is stripped of value and positioned as a ‘life unworthy of being lived’ (Agamben, 1998, p. 138). The victim of bullying is thus reduced to the status of bare life, whereby their social execution is no longer deemed to be a punishable offense by the members of the group (Agamben, 1998).

The power relations have thus shifted to one of domination, whereby power is abused and those involved in the bullying go ‘beyond what is legitimately the exercise of power’ (Foucault, in Fornet-Betancourt, Becker, & Gomez-Muller, 1987, p. 119). Each negative action, whether it be a glare, sigh, negative comment, laugh, threat, push, kick or punch, constitutes ‘a symbolic gesture of domination’, which serves to actualize and reinforce the prevailing hierarchical social order and reduce the possibility of resistance on the part of the one being bullied (Scott, 1990, p. 45). As Duncan (2013) and Eriksson (2001) have noted, the compulsory nature of schooling also serves to restrict the bullied individual’s ability to exercise resistance, as they are juridically forced to remain in a state of inclusive exclusion. They cannot physically extract themselves from the bullying situation.

Foucault argued that where there is power, there is also resistance, as power and resistance are two names for ‘the capacity to create social change’ (Heller, 1996, p. 99). While the possibility of resistance is significantly curtailed in a relation of domination, the possibility of resistance remains (Foucault, 1978/1998). As Scott (1990, p. 45) has explained:

"Relations of domination are, at the same time, relations of resistance. Once established, domination does not persist of its own momentum … it generates considerable friction and can be sustained only by continuous efforts at reinforcement, maintenance, and adjustment. A good part of the maintenance work consists of the symbolization of domination by demonstrations and enactments of power."

In relations of domination, resistance commonly takes less direct forms, such as strategies of avoidance, subtle forms of dissent, or the provocative behavior that is supposedly characteristic of so-called provocative victims (Scott, 1990). More direct public forms of resistance will likely be construed as ‘an act of defiance’ that breaches ‘the normative order of domination’, and will probably lead to more open conflict (Scott, 1990, p. 203). If not allowed public outlet, the frustrations engendered by a relation of domination may build up over time until they find outlet in expressions of violence, such as physical reprisals or even extreme cases of bloodletting such as school shootings (Schott, 2014; Valentine, 2014). Resistance may also find public expression through the exercising of power over one’s own life through acts of suicide or attempted suicide (Agamben, 1998; Valentine, 2014). In such tragic cases, the life of homo sacer may no longer only be deemed a life ‘devoid of value’ by those doing the bullying but the one being bullied may also adopt this perception of self.

**Bullying prevention and the revaluing of lives worth living**

How might we challenge the state of exception and the positioning of some lives as ‘devoid of value’? As Jacobson (2007b) has pointed out, intervention programs often include a number of aspects, including information and awareness promotion, training, the use of incentives to refrain from bullying, and the use of surveillance to monitor behavior. The majority of programs seek to address and change the behavior of those involved in the bullying, whether directly or indirectly.

A number of studies have posed questions about the effectiveness of such anti-bullying programs in schools. Ferguson, San Miguel, Kilburn, and Sanchez (2007, p. 412), for example, found
that ‘anti-bullying programs produce an effect that is positive and statistically significant but practically negligible’. In their evaluation of anti-bullying program components for the Swedish National Agency for Education, Flygare et al. (2011) found that the provision of educational material to students may be ineffective in stopping bullying behavior, while special lessons about bullying can actually be counter-effective and lead to more bullying problems. Walton (2010) has pointed to a ‘problem trap’, wherein anti-bullying policies are ineffective precisely because the problem that they are seeking to remedy has been insufficiently conceptualized. As he puts it, most anti-bullying policies ‘strip away the underpinnings of socially produced fear related to social difference that give rise to bullying behaviour’ (Walton, 2010, p. 147).

Walton (2011) has argued that approaches to bullying that focus on the punishment and regulation of behavior have two major failings. Firstly, they situate the locus of the problem in the behavior and characteristics of individual children. Secondly, such approaches only pay attention to those bullying interactions which can be directly observed and reported, and thus fail to account for the underlying system of differentiations through which such interactions are enabled. Although such approaches to bullying serve to individualize the problem, they also strip those involved of their individuality by conceiving of them as certain types of ‘bullies’, ‘victims’, or ‘bystanders’ whose actions are disconnected from the social, institutional and societal contexts within which they are enacted (Valentine, 2014).

While bullying relations are identified by their imbalance of power, there is little focus on the power relations that underpin such interactions. As I have argued, power is not something that one has, but rather is exercised from various points in particular situations. The ability of some to exercise more power than others is dependent on their location within the system of differentiations, which is in turn reinforced through those exercises of power. The invocation of difference provides a means of distinguishing between ‘us’ and ‘them’ and is thus central to processes of inclusion/exclusion. The system of differentiations not only lays at the heart of social exclusion anxiety but is also invoked in the production of contempt and the casting out of an individual as ‘other’. Even when group members accept the general rule against bullying, the system of differentiations provides a referential framework upon which exceptions to the rule can be founded and within which the victim of bullying, or homo sacer, is located. In the state of exception, the power relations involved have morphed into a relation of domination, wherein the possibility of resistance is severely restricted.

How, then, might we challenge the state of exception within which victims of bullying are located? Firstly, we could allow more space for the critical examination of the system of differentiations that underpins understandings of difference and otherness. We could teach students not only how to relate to others but also to themselves without the need to engage in the domination of others (Jacobson, 2007a). Secondly, we could look for ways through which to facilitate the resistance of those being dominated. Not simply by telling them to inform about bullying or to take a stand against bullying, but by facilitating ‘social sites of the hidden transcript’ where the frustrations, anxieties and anger of those who are bullied can find expression (Scott, 1990, p. 120). Such social sites may provide an alternative political sphere (polis) where those who are bullied can interact away from the domination and surveillance of the ones doing the bullying, and may allow for the reclamation of those individuals’ social-political lives (bios). Rather than merely stating that bullying is unacceptable, encouraging students to speak out or stand up, and reprimanding those engaging in it, this two-pronged approach could help to challenge the state of exception, from above and below, and allow those who are bullied to once more be raised up from the level of bare life and recognized as fully human and worthy of dignity and respect.

**Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.
Notes on contributor

Paul Horton is a Senior Lecturer in Education at the Department of Behavioural Sciences and Learning at Linköping University, Sweden. He has previously written about bullying in the Danish, New Zealand, and Vietnamese school contexts, as well as numerous theoretical contributions. His current research focuses on bullying in Swedish schools and seeks to understand how it is related to the social, institutional, and societal contexts within which it occurs.

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