

Bullismo at School: a New Frame for Old Behaviours

Rosalba Perrotta

How to cite

Perrotta, R. (2019). Bullismo at School: a New Frame for Old Behaviours. [Italian Sociological Review, 9 (2), 269-287]

Retrieved from [<http://dx.doi.org/10.13136/isr.v9i2.280>]

[DOI: 10.13136/isr.v9i2.280]

1. Author information

Rosalba Perrotta
University of Catania, Italy

2. Author e-mail address

Rosalba Perrotta
E-mail: rosalba.perrotta@gmail.com

3. Article accepted for publication

Date: January 2019

Additional information about
Italian Sociological Review
can be found at:

About ISR-Editorial Board-Manuscript submission

Bullismo at School: a New Frame for Old Behaviours

Rosalba Perrotta*

Corresponding author:
Rosalba Perrotta
E-mail: rosalba.perrotta@gmail.com

Abstract

The *sensitizing concepts* of Symbolic Interactionism are particularly useful to analyse and solve social problems. To understand the phenomenon of bullying we can consider it through the lens of concepts such as: *definition of the situation*, *frame*, *moral panic*, *deviant career* and so on. 'Bullismo' is, in Italian, a new word, but school aggressiveness is nothing new: behaviours which are now put into the *frame* of bullying were, in the past, tolerated or accepted; we can find testimonies of these attitudes in memories, autobiographies and novels. Mass media shows bullying as something new and terribly dangerous, driving public opinion towards a reaction of *moral panic* that amplifies it. To block *deviant careers* we must look at the phenomenon through rationality and not through exasperated emotions. We need better knowledge of the different *definitions of the situation* of the interacting parts, in order to neutralize the negative *self-image* of the offender and appeal, through both *role-taking* and behaving as *looking-glasses*, to the positive aspects of his/her *self*.

Keywords: bullying, Symbolic Interactionism, moral panic.

1. Sensitizing concepts of Symbolic Interactionism and social problems

The sociological approach named by Blumer (1969) Symbolic Interactionism can offer important contributions to the analysis of social problems. Symbolic Interactionism originated in the USA, along with Pragmatism, between the end of eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century and it aimed at creating a better society through the reduction of its problems. Key pieces of research within Symbolic Interactionism focus on

* University of Catania, Italy.

phenomena that have generated social concern and also offer important contributions to the analysis of deviance. There are studies on immigrated peasants (Thomas, Znaniecky, 1918-20), hoboes (Anderson, 1923), unadjusted girls (Thomas, 1931), taxi dancers (Cressey, 1932), professional thieves (Sutherland, 1937), the counterproductive effects of total institutions (Goffman, 1961) and the repression of marijuana (Becker, 1963).

The reality that we see, according to Symbolic Interactionism, is a consequence of *definitions of the situation*. Individuals do not react automatically to social stimuli, but interpret them before reacting. To understand the meaning of their behaviours it is therefore necessary to plunge into their world and to grasp the narratives through which they give sense to their experiences.

Symbolic Interactionism provides a vast amount of concepts, named by Blumer (1969) as *sensitizing concepts*. These are of great help in analysing social reality¹. *Sensitizing concepts* sharpen our gaze: they correct our optics which have been affected by the distorting lens that socialization has put before our eyes, and allow us to have images of reality free of stereotypes and prejudices².

I will use here some *sensitizing concepts* of Symbolic Interactionism to consider how the problem of 'bullismo' in Italy is exposed in public opinion and opposed in a way that can be counterproductive. Additionally, I will show the usefulness of some of these concepts (*definition of the situation, island of meaning, frame, role-taking* etc.) in preventing problems and in planning strategies to solve them (see Auguste, Briggs, Vreeland, 2014).

The term 'bullismo' is used in relation to persecutory behaviours towards persons in a weak position, mainly made by students, or schoolchildren, that often act with the support of a small group of peers. The impact of these persecuting behaviours is sometime amplified through photos and videos on mobile phones and then diffused on social networks. The consequences of bullying can be very serious, and there are cases in which victims have committed suicide.

The 'bullying phenomenon' is the consequence of a new *definition of the situation* (Thomas, 1972 [1931]: 331) and of new *social constructions* (Berger,

¹ In *Cornici, specchi e maschere* (Perrotta, 2004), I analyze the main concepts of symbolic interactionism. For this, see also the 'Glossario' in *Un cuore di farfalla* (Perrotta, 2009: 442-456).

² The importance of the gaze for social scientists is underlined in the title of *The Sociological Eye*, by Hughes (1971). Agar, in *The Professional Stranger* (1996), draws attention to the fact that researchers must look at reality as if they were strangers, in order to grasp it without the conditioning lens that socialization has put before their eyes.

Luckmann, 1966). A different way of looking at reality allowed the *island of meaning* 'bullying' to emerge (see Zerubavel, 1993, [1991]: 21; 1999, [1997]: 65). The bullying phenomenon has been created from the gathering together of pre-existing behaviours which were then referred to with a term that previously did not exist in the Italian dictionary.

Once put into the *frame* (see Goffman, 1974, Zerubavel, 1993 [1991]: 11) 'bullismo' such behaviours, which previously did not attract any attention or were put into the *frames* 'jokes' 'youth exuberance', 'knowing how to gain respect' (this happened also in the army with 'nonnismo' and at university with 'goliardia'), became a source of fear and concern in Italy.

Nowadays we can notice a new compassion for the sufferings of those who are weak. There is more capacity for *role-taking* and an empathic attitude that should open our hearts to the hope for a better future. But this is not always the case: dismay and the sensation of being at risk ('Where will we end up?') have permeated Italy's public opinion and directed it towards punitive measures, as if punitive measures were the only solution, or nonetheless the best. The voices of emotionality suffocate and devalue rationality giving ordinary people the idea that nothing can be done apart from punishing; there is the idea that we already know everything about bullying and that lingering on the analysis of it would be a useless and dangerous loss of time.

But what do we know about bullying? Mass media informs us about only some of its aspects: we are made to listen to the voices of the victims but we never hear the bullies' voices. Consequently, public opinion holds that bullies are devils to fight; listening to their voices could even appear a manifestation of indulgence: as if we were on their side. However, to prevent deviant behaviours and to respond adequately to them, Symbolic Interactionism states that we must know the *definitions of the situation* of all interacting parts³, we must be aware of the *narrative strategies* (see Smorti *et al.*, 2000) that allow for such behaviours to emerge.

The concepts of *moral panic* (Cohen, 1972), *amplification of deviance* (Young, 1971), *stigma* (Goffman, 1963) and *deviant career* (Becker, 1963) show how irrational fears, leading to punishment and ignoring the relevance of the different *definitions of the situation*, do not solve the problem but make it worse. The concepts of *role-taking* (Mead, 1966 [1934]) and of *self images* (James, 1950 [1890]) help us to understand the reality of the authors of bullying and could be of help in finding valid strategies to prevent and to counteract it.

³ For a recent contribution on the voices of 'Villains', see Rickard (2016).

2. Moral panic

The Italian mass media not only proposes news, stories and images of bullying behaviours over and over again, but it also shows them in a way that mainly appeals to the emotions. The newsworthiness of the phenomenon leads to a proliferation of newspaper articles, TV programs, blogs, and attracts the testimonies of famous people who state that they themselves were bullied at school (including the TV journalist Bruno Vespa, the actor Massimo Ghini, and the singer Elisa).

Videos spread through *social networks* by bullies proud of their deeds, and/or by the small peer group that supports them⁴, also appear on the news and on talk shows. Great visibility is given to the narratives of the victims and of their parents. In cases where victims have committed suicide, the farewell letters accusing persecutors also become very high profile.

We shall consider here how the subject of 'bullismo' is treated in ten articles of Repubblica.it, the Internet site of a popular left-wing newspaper, and in ten articles of ilGiornale.it, the Internet site of a popular right-wing newspaper, during the period of time that goes from March 2018 to the first half of July 2018⁵. I examined, in each journal, the last ten articles whose titles and texts referred to bullying behaviours; I have, therefore, excluded an article which defined 'bullying' in the title some behaviours that in the text appeared as robbery. I analyzed the articles on the basis of the Ethnographic Content Analysis (Altheide, Schneider, 2012), with the help of the *sensitizing concepts* of *Symbolic Interactionism* (*definition of the situation, labelling* etc.). It emerged clearly that the *definitions of the situation* proposed to the readers appeal mainly to emotionality and indignation, and that punishment (favouring *labelling* and *stigma*) is often considered the only solution, while other ways of preventing and counteracting bullying are not referred to. There is some difference between the left-wing Repubblica.it and the right-wing ilGiornale.it, as the articles analysed in the latter give some space to non punitive solutions, but the emphasis on punishment is, however, strong in both of them. In the lists below I indicate the author of each article, when the article has been signed (some of them are not), and the date of publication.

In the Repubblica.it, we have the following titles:

- *Turin, insults against the mother of the boy who died because of bullying* (Rocci, 7, 7, 2018)
- *Lucca, in the school-class of "bullies" other three boys are implicated and sent to September exams* (17, 6, 2018)

⁴ For a recent study on cyberbullying, see La Rocca (2017).

⁵ All the translations of the Italian texts quoted in this article are mine.

- *Bullying at school, parents and teachers pay for it. That's why their role is fundamental* (Eramo, 17, 6, 2018)
- *Pesaro, the class incites: "Burn the teacher". Students made to repeat the year and also investigated by the police* (14, 6, 2018)
- *Sixteen year old bully arrested by the carabinieri in the area of Milan. The charge: "Kicks, punches and hands to the neck at school"* (Carra, 7, 6, 2018)
- *Dictionary of bullying on line: write your word and tell us about yourself* (30, 5, 2018)
- *Florence, the "Ruler" method: an antidote against bullying* (26, 5, 2018)
- *Bergamo, disabled student bullied: arrested two sixteen year olds. "Speak and we'll beat you to death"* (De Ricciardis, 14, 5, 2018)
- *Ragusa, old man beaten to death: calls for legal proceedings for the two young bullies* (8, 5, 2018)
- *Facing up to the bullies. A training (and play) day for the little ones* (13, 3, 2018)

The articles mainly focus on the kind of harassment that the victims suffered and on the punishment inflicted on the bullies; very small space is dedicated to the prevention of the phenomenon and to other possible measures to respond to it. The article on the mother of the boy who committed suicide informs us about a torchlight demonstration and about the foundation of a society against bullying (Rocci). In *Bullying at school, parents and teachers pay for it* there is blame for the passivity of parents and teachers (Eramo) but for neither of these groups is it said what they could have done. Furthermore the article does not mention that they were not trained to respond to bullying.

The news mainly aims at generating indignation. The article on the 'old man beaten to death' (8, 5, 2018) tells us that he had for some time been a target for neighbourhood bullies who never missed the opportunity to harass him and mock him, and that two minors belonging to the 'gang' are charged with concurring in murder.

Even for offenses of a less serious nature, the better solution seems to be punishment: suspensions, having to repeat the year, and expulsions from the school, intervention of law enforcement agencies and of judicial authorities.

The article on the sixteen year old boy who bullied some classmates (Carra) tells us that, suspended from school, he has been arrested by the *carabinieri*. In the article about the teacher threatened with a lighter, we read that the School council suspended the entire class and that "The two bullies were made to repeat the year and, being over 18, are being investigated by the prosecution of the Republic of Pesaro for violence and threat to a public official and for the interruption of a public service". The article *Lucca, in the*

school-class of 'bullies'..., about violent behaviours against a teacher, states that three of the students were punished with a low mark in Conduct and with September exams, and that for the other three 'it is not clear if they have to repeat the class or if they have to leave the school'. *Bullying at school, parents and teachers pay for it...* (Eramo) speaks about punishment: but in this case, it is parents and teachers that have to 'pay'.

Only three, out of the ten articles, provide information about initiatives that are different from repressing: one is about a workshop based on group conversations and role playing (13, 3, 2018); another is on the Ruler method and on emotional education (26, 5, 2018); the other informs us about an 'online dictionary' where it is possible to share personal experiences of bullying (30, 5, 2018). Even if some space is dedicated to non-punitive solutions, we must notice that the main message underlines the importance of punishment.

In *ilGiornale.it*, we find the following ten articles:

- *"Our daughter victim of bullies", parents denounce teacher and head teacher* (Baroncini, 14, 7, 2018)
- *Teacher threatened with a lighter, investigated two students in Pesaro* (Francesco, 14, 6, 2018)
- *Bullying and cyberbullying: how to counteract the culture of disrespect* (Lovatelli Caetani, 31, 5, 2018)
- *In the area of Brindisi, 12 year old boy hit by bullies ends up in hospital* (Carucci, 28, 5, 2018)
- *Reggio Emilia, 12 year old girl hit by group of girls in her class* (Bernasconi, 12, 5, 2018)
- *Avellino, a scolded student: teacher punched in the face* (Vasso, 9, 5, 2018)
- *Bologna, a bully student threatens his teacher: "My father will smash your face"* (Francesco, 9, 5, 2018)
- *Brindisi, student put upside down by bullies ends up in hospital* (Carucci, 9, 5, 2018)
- *Fedeli: "Threats and offenses to teachers inadmissible, strict sanctions necessary"* (Vigne, 29, 4, 2018)
- *Lecce, Public prosecutor stops Class council and listens to the victim of bullies* (Bernasconi, 28, 4, 2018)
- *Bullying in Pisa, student holds a toy weapon to the teacher's head* (Francesco, 28, 4, 2018)

These articles give us minute descriptions of the abuse imposed on the victims. In *'Our daughter victim of bullies...'* (Baroncini), a disabled fifteen year old student is mocked by schoolmates 'under the distracted gaze of teachers'.

In the case of the 12 year old boy hit by bullies (Carucci), ‘it seems that one of the bullies said “I’ll leave you dead on the ground” before striking the first punch to his upper ribs. Then the other bully, a young boy of Albanian origin, started punching him’. In the article about the interrupted Class council (Bernasconi), the case of a boy of seventeen is described who had been kicked and punched by some schoolmates. They also used his t-shirt as a sponge to clean the blackboard; the episode, filmed on a mobile phone, had then been diffused on the web. In the case of the 12 year old girl hit by other female students (Baroncini), the threats were: ‘We’ll wait for you out of school with scissors’. The student that held a toy weapon to the teacher’s head **‘humiliated him in front of the class**: he shouted to him to put his hands up and ordered him to put his head down as in a grotesque act of surrender’ (Francese, *bold as in original*). Aggressive acts carried out on teachers arouse special indignation. The article *Fedeli: ‘Threats and offenses to teachers inadmissible’* (Vigne) informs us that the Minister of Education Valeria Fedeli has declared: ‘we need strict sanctions’. She too is for punishment. In the article about the teacher threatened with a lighter (Francese) we read that the head teacher ‘began judicial proceedings. In the meantime the School Council reacted at once, **suspending the whole class with frequency** obligation and **making the aggressors repeat the year**’. In the case of the seventeen year old student who threatened the teacher with a toy pistol (Francese), we read that he has been suspended from lessons and that he has been formally charged. There is also a penal charge for the student who threatened his teacher stating that his father would punch him in the face (Francese).

In the case of the 12 year old girl hit and threatened by schoolmates (Bernasconi), we read: ‘The intervention of adults was immediate. They went to the *carabinieri* of Casalgrande to inform them’. In ‘*Our daughter victim of bullies*’ ..., Bernasconi tells us that the head teacher wanted to organize a constructive confrontation among the students, but the girl’s parents, considering this a belated initiative, preferred pressing charges. Also in the article about the interrupted Class council (Bernasconi) there is news about a school meeting to discuss the case, but we are informed that this was not possible: fearing that the victim could change his version because of the public confrontation, the judicial authority preferred to listen to him in private.

In *Bullying and cyberbullying: how to counteract the culture of disrespect* (Lovatelli Caetani) there is information about a conference against bullying in which the value of sport is emphasized. The speakers were: the Mayor of Savona, author of a book on bullying; some Members of Parliament, including a magistrate who had been the Undersecretary of Justice; the winner of an Olympic medal for judo; a member of the Postal police; and, a computer engineer.

In the articles here considered, and in the mass media in general, we find a great deal of intervention by the *carabinieri*, police and tribunals and no intervention by social scientists, least of all by Symbolic Interactionists.

The fear of bullying generated through the mass media has as a consequence a situation of *moral panic*⁶ (Cohen, 1972). Examining the reactions to *Mods* and *Rockers*, violent groups of teenagers belonging to the British proletarian class active during the 60s, Stanley Cohen explores how the mass media, giving emphasis to the relevance and the danger of the phenomenon, created *folk devils*: stereotyped targets for the fears and the malaise diffused in public opinion. They are targets towards whom potential *moral entrepreneurs* could easily move their crusades (Becker, 1963).

Being an exasperated fear, *panic* is not the best tool to counteract the behaviour we want to fight. Giving visibility and relevance to the role of the Villain, a reaction of panic facilitates the *amplification of deviance* (Young, 1971).

Hunt (1997) notices that the term *moral panic* lacks the neutrality that should distinguish scientific concepts: it is not value free because of its negative connotation, and can so be used to delegitimize some fears implicitly saying: 'This isn't really a serious danger'. The negative connotation in 'panic', particularly regards the prevalence of emotions on rationality. An exaggerated fear that leads to irrational reactions does not help in counteracting danger. Attributions of exaggeration are implicit also in concepts such as *stereotype* and *prejudice*. The social analyst must therefore bring into the arena the aspects of the studied phenomena that justify their use.

The aggressive behaviours put into the frame 'bullying' are shown to the Italian public as something new and terribly dangerous, to counteract only through repression. This message generates *moral panic*, an exaggerated fear that does not help in preventing or controlling the phenomenon but risks aggravating it. A panic that will extinguish itself, making people forget the problem, when the wave of social alarm calms down and bullying behaviours are not newsworthy anymore (see Cohen, 1972).

3. Old wine in a new bottle

In Italy, among the general public there is the idea that we are heading towards a new barbarian era. Having forgotten about, or not knowing, the

⁶ *Moral panic* connected to cyberbullying is considered in Waldron (2014). The sensitizing concept *moral panic* is useful for the analysis of different problematic social phenomena. Toscano (2016), for instance, applies it to the hikikomori, Japanese young people that stay in their rooms in isolation just in the company of their computers.

abuses and cruelties toward weak targets which were previously socially accepted, and even approved (black pedagogy, prejudices against gay persons, discrimination of handicapped persons and so on), there is the tendency to consider 'bullismo' as something new and particularly disturbing.

A new barbarian era.

Is it really that bad?

A greater sensitivity towards disadvantaged members of society has led to the gathering together of certain kinds of behaviours which has resulted in a new *island of meaning*. Behaviours which in the past were thought to be of no great cause for concern to the extent that they could even be considered constructive are nowadays defined in a different way and are enclosed in the frame 'bullismo'.

The Italian term 'bullismo' has been created directly from the English language. In the past 'Bullismo' did not appear in Italian dictionaries. We could find only 'bullo', with a meaning that is different from the meaning this word has nowadays.

This is the definition in the 1971 edition of the Devoto-Oli:

Bullo (*sett. bulo*) s. m., *region.*

1. Teppista, bravaccio; *come agg. Aria b., sfrontata, spavalda*. 2. In senso non cattivo, ganimede; di persona che per la vistosità dell'abbigliamento diventa ridicola

That is: 1. Hooligan, braggart; *if used as adj.* shameless, arrogant. 2. In a not negative meaning, Ganymede; a person that becomes ridiculous in consequence of his showy way of dressing.

There is in the term a generic meaning of bravado but we have no reference to abusive behaviour against schoolmates. Therefore 'bullo' was, until some decades ago, used in Italy with the meaning of arrogant, of braggart, and had in itself a halo of mild comicality. This can be seen in Petrolini's popular character 'Giggi er Bullo' who is a funny braggart, someone who makes you laugh, as is Alvaro Vitali's character in the 1982 film *Giggi il bullo*. In the 1955 film *Bulli e pupe*, the 'bulli' are exuberant sailors; and in the 1992 TV program *Bulli e pupe* which copies its title, the 'bulli' are extrovert and lively boys. We must also consider that the original title of the film was *Guys and Dolls*: the Italian translation 'bulli', therefore, does not stand for 'bullies', but for 'guys' that is 'lads', 'boys'.

Words such as 'bullismo' and 'bullizzare' are new entries in the Italian language, and the old word 'bullo' has nowadays acquired a meaning similar to that of 'bully'. The word 'bulla', now used as the feminine of 'bullo', did not indicate, in the Devoto-Oli (1971) dictionary, a person but an object: the lenticular case for a talisman.

Today, we find in our language the old word 'bullo' with a new meaning, and new words such as 'bullismo' and 'bullizzare' have been created in analogy with the English language.

Is this the consequence of a new type of behaviour?

It does not seem so. Abusive behaviour carried out with the support of a small group of peers in the school context is no recent phenomenon. We did not have specific words to denounce it in Italian, and it did not appear in newspapers, but we can find records of it in the memories of the victims, in autobiographies and in novels.

What is very new is the rejection of this kind of behaviour, which was accepted or at least tolerated in the past. Mockery and behaviours that we today put into the *frame* 'bullismo' were once used by teachers as corrective strategies. Within school itself, there was violence and public humiliation: the use of the cane, for instance, the imposition of the hat with donkey's ears, and many other punishments of this kind. Beating and humiliating pupils was put into the *frame* of 'pedagogy', the 'black pedagogy' whose dangers are denounced by Alice Miller (1980). Abusive behaviours of pupils against their schoolmates were tolerated and sometimes even appreciated. They were put into the *frames* 'jokes', 'pranks', 'the art of winning respect', and were considered of educational value as it was believed that they would encourage the victims to develop a sense of self-defence and, in turn, to win respect. Also abusive behaviour against teachers is not a thoroughly new phenomenon as Fred Uhlman (2006 [1971]) shows in his novel *Reunion*.

The journalist and television presenter Bruno Vespa, interviewed by Silvia Toffanin in the TV program *Verissimo*, has spoken about having been bullied at school (in the 1950s; Vespa was born in 1944). An article by Emanuele Ambrosio (20, 11, 2017) in SuperGuidaTv reports on the story:

During the interview, Bruno Vespa, watching a video about his life, remembered a **dramatic moment of his infancy**. The well-known Rai 1 journalist, confessed that he was a victim of bullying during his school years (...) Vespa said that he had been bullied by a young schoolmate, the son of an important family of his city. The journalist underlined that the teacher did not help him but took the side of the 'bully' (...) **A really terrible moment** in his life...

In recent years, the high profile nature of 'bullismo', has led many people in show business to talk about their own analogous experiences. In an online article by Ambrosio (28, 4, 2015), the actor Massimo Ghini states: 'I too, during middle school, was the victim of a bully, an older boy. A difficult situation of authentic sadism'. In Today.it (24, 10, 2016), the singer Elisa says:

'I have been victim of bullies, music rescued me (...) at elementary school two schoolmates bullied me every single day'.

Going back to a period when the word 'bullismo' did not yet exist, we can find a testimony of student persecution in *Le rondini dell'Orfeo*, published in 1965, an autobiography by the anglist and musicologist Gabriele Baldini, second husband of the writer Natalia Ginzburg. Speaking about the secondary school (ginnasio-liceo) that he attended in a private institute of Rome in 1930s, Baldini (in Petrignani, 2018: 241-242) says: 'To be sincere, the only thing impressed in my memory about the five years spent at the Christian Brothers' is the systematic persecutions by my schoolmates'. And he adds that it was only his passion for music and cinema 'that prevented the cruelty of my schoolmates at the Gymnasium from undermining and breaking once and for all my fragile little person'.

At that time, these abuses did not seem unjust to him: 'What is particularly sad is that this unhappy situation did not drive me to hate my persecutors, in a later interior debate with my conscience, there was in me in some way the persuasion that those persecutions were, at least in part, justified'.

In the novel *Reunion*, Fred Uhlman (2006 [1971]) writes about Hans Schwartz, a student of the Karl Alexander Gymnasium in Stuttgart from 1932-33. Hans states that there was in the school, 'the cowardly cruelty which so many healthy boys show towards the weak, the old and the defenceless'. A cruelty that hit particularly Herr Zimmermann, one of his teachers: 'we despised him because he was kind and gentle and because he had a poor man's smell – his two roomed flat probably had no bath – and he was dressed in a much patched, shiny, greenish suit which he wore during the autumn and the long, winter months (he had a second suit for spring and summer).' (Uhlman, 2006: 12).

One of the students, Prince Hubertus Schleim-Gleim-Lichtenstein, 'was so stupid that even his princely descent couldn't save him from being a laughing stock' (Uhlman, 2006: 17). Towards the end of the novel it is Hans Schwartz himself, being Jewish, who becomes the target of mockery, and not only of his schoolmates. When, justifying his reaction towards a student that had insulted him, Hans explains to the teacher: 'He told me to go back to Palestine', the teacher answers him with a smile: 'but that's not an insult, my dear Schwartz! It's sound, friendly advice. Sit down, both of you. If you want to fight, fight outside as much as you like' (Uhlman, 2006: 98).

In the novel *Die Vermierungen des Zöglings Törless*, written in 1906, Musil minutely describes the continual violent behaviour of some schoolmates against one of the students of an important military college in the Austro-

Hungarian empire. An extremely sadistic persecution that ends up with the expulsion of the victim from the institute.

In the novel *Alias Grace* by Margaret Atwood (2011 [1996]: 200), based mainly on the memories of the main character, Grace, who had lived in the first half of 1800, there is a story that shows us that humiliating weak pupils (in this case young girls) was considered a normal pastime.

They told about how the boys pushed over the privy at the back of the school while one of the girls was in it, and they hadn't warned the girl, but watched along with all the others, and then they felt wrong about it afterwards. Sally said it was always the shy ones like that who got picked on, and Nancy said yes but you had to learn to stand up for yourself in this life; and I thought that was true. (Atwood (2011 [1996]: 200).

A joke that has as its target some shy little girls. A joke we would nowadays define as cruel, that was supposed to have pedagogical value because: 'You had to learn to stand up for yourself in this life'.

Abusive behaviour, as we can see, is no novelty. What is new, what has changed nowadays, is the general attitude towards disadvantaged groups. Mockery of gay people and those with disabilities are not accepted anymore. These mockeries were in the past considered inoffensive, and there were sketches and jokes in the repertory of comedians that would not be nowadays approved of. Consider, for instance, the famous sketch about the stutterer enacted by Walter Chiari (1924-1991)⁷, a very popular Italian comedian perceived as a nice guy, 'un bravo ragazzo'.

Racism, homophobia, sexual harassment, violence against women and against children are today severely condemned, at least by mouth. There are in Italy institutions such as 'Telefono Rosa' and 'Telefono Azzurro' (associations that help women and children victims of violence) that were not imaginable one hundred years ago, when what we now call 'violence' was put into the *frame* 'means of correction'.

Indignation towards behaviours that cause pain presupposes for this pain to be seen, to be put into focus. This does not happen too often. Bullies' abusive behaviour remains in many cases ignored, and only the publicity connected to punitive reactions, or to a tragic event like suicide, takes it out of a *frame* that shows it as no cause for concern or at times even constructive, and drives it into the *frame* 'bullying'.

⁷ *Balbuzyente col tic*, <http://www.lyrics-youtube.com/lyrics/walter-chiari-balbuzyente-col-ticflv-axuffNgT5vI>

This also happens because many victims prefer to remain in the shadows. They may think they deserve the abuses inflicted on them, or they may be too ashamed to denounce the aggressions. As we have seen, Baldini wrote: ‘there was in me in some way the persuasion that those persecutions were, at least in part, justified’.

There is still the idea that being the target of bullying implies admitting personal failure, as a consequence many victims prefer not to denounce it. In the online article in which Ambrosio (20, 11, 1917) speaks about the bullying imposed at school on Bruno Vespa, the title is: *Bruno Vespa confesses: ‘I have been a victim of bullying’*. We also read: ‘The well-known journalist of Rai 1, confessed that he was a victim of bullying during his school years. A shocking confession by the journalist...’ We have in the title the verb to confess, and in the text we find ‘confessed’ and ‘confession’: words that we would consider appropriated for the aggressor are here applied to the victim, denouncing the halo of shame connected to being abused.

In Bernasconi’s online article (ilGiornale.it, 28, 4, 2018) we read that the seventeen year old hit by his schoolmates and who had his t-shirt used as a sponge to clean the blackboard had not told his parents or his teachers about the aggression, and that his mother only found out about it when one of her son’s friends, in order to help, had sent a video of the aggression to her mobile phone, ‘but still then the boy minimized it’.

Teachers, on the other hand, often tend to ignore such events, they prefer to turn a blind eye. Franberg and Wrethander (2012) highlighted in their study that only 4% of teachers had responded to episodes of bullying. Auguste, Briggs and Vreeland (2014: 15) say: ‘Teachers are more focused on educational issues and how students learn versus knowing where and when bullying occurs, who bullies, and who is being bullied’.

For adults who are witnesses of bullying, minimizing or turning a blind eye is much easier than intervening. This is partly due to the fact that this is often how it was dealt with in the past, and partly because they are not trained to cope with the problem. In the online article ‘*Our daughter victim of bullies, parents denounce teacher and head teacher*’ (Baroncini, ilGiornale.it, 14, 7, 2018), the teachers are accused of having assisted the bullying with a ‘distracted gaze’. Finally, as we have seen in the novel *Reunion* (Uhlman 2006 [1971]: 98), when Hans complains that he has been insulted by a schoolmate, the teacher closes his intervention with the following words: ‘Sit down, both of you. If you want to fight, fight outside as much as you like’.

4. Blocking deviant careers: role-taking and the looking-glass self

Franti, one of the characters of *Cuore*, a very popular Italian novel by Edmondo De Amicis (1886)⁸, is the well-known example of an abusive student. His extreme negativity makes him similar, for certain aspects, to the current conceptualization of the word 'bullo'. Even though, in Franti's case, there is not the support of a small group of peers that is typical of bullying: Franti acts alone.

Arrogant and violent, he is the quintessence of evil: he behaves cruelly for the pleasure of cruelty. Made to repeat the year and then sent away from school, De Amicis (page of Tuesday 25th October and page of Monday 6th March) informs us that Franti may end up 'all'ergastolo' (a life sentence). What makes Franti similar to the 'bullo' of our days is the fact that he, like them, is not contextualized: we know very little about him, about the ambience he belongs to, about the values he has been socialized to. We do not know what are his *definitions of the situation*. De Amicis only shows us all the terrible things he does, he tells us that he is a wicked boy, and that he will be punished as he deserves (see Eco, 2017 [1963]: 81-92).

Franti is Evil that makes Virtue stand out. He is the Monster, the Villain easy to detect that we can fight and win. We are afraid of monsters but we need them. Monsters, paradoxically, make our reality stronger and reassure us: a monster is the enemy we can fight, the scapegoat to whom we can attribute all sins. We need the 'Villain' because it is only when he/she is identified that we are able to defeat evil. Legends, fairy tales, dramas, western films in which Good Guys get a prize and Villains are punished have a reassuring effect (Klapp, 1962: 179).

In the image of the 'Bullo' and in the narratives about them we can perceive the ghost of Franti: similar to Franti, the 'Bullo' is an anomalous and wicked character of whom we know little or nothing at all. He is a frightening young person that must be neutralized through suspension, making him repeat the year, expulsion from school, and maybe 'Pergastolo', that is: a life sentence.

The 'Bullo', like Franti, is completely 'different' and people want to keep him away. They are not interested in knowing his *definitions of the situation*, the values he has been socialized to. They do not want to know what kind of *self image* he has, they are not interested in understanding what drives him to play

⁸ *Cuore* has been translated into many languages, it has inspired two films (directed by Coletti, 1947, and by Scavolini, 1973), TV series of manga produced by Nippon Animation (1981), TV series directed by Comencini (1984).

the role of the negative hero in the *theatrum mundi*. To listen to his voice would be considered useless and even dangerous, like being on his side.

But punishing and labelling do not correct him, they drive him, on the contrary, toward a *deviant career*. Labelled as a 'Bullo', fixed into a negative identity, ostracized and isolated from 'normal' students, the abusive pupil is pushed toward *secondary deviance*, he is oriented toward a *deviant career*.

Once someone is cast into the role of Villain, it is difficult to grasp the complexity of his/her *self*. The negative image does not allow to put into light the positive aspects that could give him/her a better place both in his/her *self esteem* and in the *theatrum mundi*.

But a deviant career can be blocked. To interrupt it we need a process of *neutralization* (Plummer, 1975) made by *significant others* that deny the compactness of the image of Villain and, acting as *looking glasses* (Cooley 1956 [1902-22]), show to the deviants the positive aspects that they can cultivate in themselves. Through this process they help them to define *primary deviance* as no part of their nature, as something that they could overcome, and help them to see the complexity of their *self* (James 1950 [1890]).

Punitive reactions aimed at defending the value of school and education paradoxically humiliate the same value they want to defend. They deny, in effect, what school and university teach: what social scientists and educationalists say in school and university classes about *labelling*, *amplification of deviance*, *moral panic* is ignored and contrasted. It is as if our didactic system did not believe in the usefulness of the subjects that are taught, and in the value of the teachers that teach them, and found that it was, instead, more useful to revert to the traditional use of force, imposing stigmatizing punishments that aggravate the problem instead of solving it.

At the base of this attitude of surrender there is fear and discouragement expressed in sentences like: 'Where will we end up! We are hitting rock bottom!' It is a pessimistic approach which does not consider that the current indignation of abusive behaviours, which were accepted or tolerated in the past, bears witness to a new social sensitivity towards fragile subjects. It denounces this new concern towards abusive behaviours which, as we have seen, were either ignored or accepted in the past through affirmations like: 'Worse for him, he must learn how to defend himself', or: 'This is how society goes on: the survival of the fittest'.

5. Conclusions

In the messages diffused by the media about bullying, we rarely listen to the voices of social scientists. There is, instead, the frequent involvement, in

the role of 'experts', of: journalists, head teachers, magistrates, representatives of the forces of order. As consequence, the solutions to the problem tend to focus on repression and punishment. We listen to the victims' parents and, sometimes, to the victims themselves, but we do not know if anything is done for them. It is as if all they need to recover is the punishments given to the bullies.

In these messages, the voices of the bullies are ignored. We do not know their point of view, their *definition of the situation*, we assimilate them to stereotyped images of Villains that make them similar to De Amicis' Franti. The relevance of identity problems of young people in our society are generally ignored or minimized, and so are the social roots that promote their socialization to aggressive values. The messages of mass media focus on episodes that generate expressions of disdain in order to satisfy the public and make the audience rise. This leads to a *moral panic*, to a reaction of exaggerated and irrational fear, that is not useful to prevent or to solve the problem and that, on the contrary, makes it worse. The use of the *sensitizing concepts* of Symbolic Interactionism, as I have tried to show here, could help us to identify and analyze the different aspects and dynamics of bullying, and could so help us to organize more productive strategies for prevention and for intervention.

References

- Agar, M. H. (1996), *The Professional Stranger. An Informal Introduction to Ethnography*, 2nd ed., Emerald, San Diego.
- Altheide, D. L., Schneider C. J. (1996), *Qualitative Media Analysis*, 2nd ed., Sage, Thousand Oaks, 2013.
- Anderson, N. (1923), *The Hobo. The Sociology of the Homeless Man*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago; *Hobo. Il vagabondo. Sociologia dell'uomo senza dimora* (a cura di R. Rauty), Donzelli, Roma, 1997.
- Atwood, M. (1996) *Alias Grace*, Kindle edition, Anchor Books, New York, 2011, *L'altra Grace*, Ponte alle Grazie, Milano, 2008.
- Auguste, E., Briggs, A., Vreeland, L. (2014), 'Symbolic Interactionism and Bullying: A Micro-Sociological Perspective in Education', *Journal of Cross-Disciplinary Perspectives in Education*, vol. 7, n. 3, 10-19.
- Baldini, G. (1965), *Le rondini dell'Orfeo*, Einaudi, Torino.
- Becker, H. S. (1963), *Outsiders. Studies in the Sociology of Deviance*, The Free Press of Glencoe, Glencoe, 1963, *Outsiders. Saggi di sociologia della devianza*, II ed., Edizioni Gruppo Abele, Torino, 1991.

- Berger, P. L., Luckmann, T. (1966), *The Social Construction of Reality*, Doubleday, Garden City, N. Y., *La realtà come costruzione sociale*, il Mulino, Bologna, 1969.
- Blumer, H. (1969), *Symbolic Interactionism. Perspective and Method*, University of California Press, Berkeley, *Interazionismo simbolico*, il Mulino, Bologna 2008.
- Cohen, S. (1972), *Folk Devils and Moral Panics. The Creation of the Mods and Rockers*, MacGibbon, London.
- Cooley, C. H. (1902, 2nd ed. 1922), 'Human Nature and the Social Order', in: *The Two Major Works of Charles H. Cooley*, The Free Press, Glencoe, 1956.
- Cressey, P. (1932) *The Taxi-Dance Hall*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.
- De Amicis, E. (1886), *Cuore*, Rusconi, Milano, 2017.
- Devoto, G., Oli, G. C. (1971), *Dizionario della lingua italiana*, Le Monnier, Firenze.
- Eco, U. (1992), *Diario minimo*, Bompiani, Milano, 2017.
- Franberg, G., Wrethander, M. (2012), 'The Rise and Fall of a Social Problem: Critical Reflections on Educational Policy and Research Issues', *Journal for Critical Education Policy Studies*, vol. 10, n. 2, 345-362.
- Goffman, E. (1961) *Asylums. Essays on the Social Situation of Mental Patients and Other Inmates*, Anchor, Doubleday, New York, *Asylums. Le istituzioni totali. La situazione dei malati di mente e di altri internati*, Einaudi, Torino, 1968.
- Goffman, E. (1963), *Stigma*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs N.J., *Stigma. L'identità negata*, Ombre Corte, Verona, 2003.
- Goffman, E. (1974), *Frame Analysis*, Harper and Row, New York, *Frame Analysis. L'organizzazione dell'esperienza* (a cura di I. Matteucci), Armando, Roma, 2001.
- Hughes, E. C. (1971), *The Sociological Eye: Selected Papers*, Aldine-Atherton, Chicago, Ill., *Lo sguardo sociologico*, il Mulino, Bologna, 2010.
- Hunt, A. (1997), 'Moral Panic and Moral Language in the Media', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 48, n. 4, 629-648.
- James, W. (1890), *The Principles of Psychology*, Dover, New York, 1950, *Principi di Psicologia* (a cura di G. Preti), Principato, Milano, 2004.
- Klapp, O. E. (1962), *Heroes, Villains, and Fools: The Changing American Character*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, N. J.
- La Rocca, G. (2017), 'Social bullying. Un'analisi delle recenti pratiche di diffusione degli atti di bullismo', *Studi di Sociologia*, n. 2, 195-210.
- Mead, G. H. (1934), *Mind, Self, and Society. From the Standpoint of a Social Behaviorist*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, Ill.; *Mente, sé e società. Dal punto di vista di uno psicologo comportamentista*, Barbera, Firenze, 1966.
- Miller, A., (1980), *Am Anfang war Erziehung*, SuhrkampVerlag, Frankfurt am Main. *For Your Own Good*, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, New York, 1983; *La persecuzione del bambino. Le radici della violenza*, Bollati Boringhieri, Torino, 2007.

- Musil, R. (1906), *Die Verwirrungen des Zöglings Törless*, WienerVerlag,Wien/Leipzig; *The Confusions of Young Törless*, Penguin Classics, London, 2001; *Il giovane Törless*, Garzanti, Milano, 2009.
- Perrotta, R. (2005), *Cornici, specchi e maschere. Interazionismo simbolico e comunicazione*, Clueb, Bologna.
- Perrotta, R. (2009), 'Glossario' in Perrotta R. (a cura di) *Un Cuore di farfalla. Studi su disabilità fisica e stigma*, Franco Angeli, Milano, 442-456.
- Petrignani, S. (2018), *La corsara. Ritratto di Natalia Ginzburg*, Neri Pozza, Milano.
- Plummer, K. (1975), *Sexual Stigma. An Interactionist Account*, Routledge and Kegan Paul, London.
- Rickard, D. (2016), *Sex Offenders, Stigma, and Social Control*, Rutgers University Press, New Brunswick, NJ.
- Smorti, A., Ciucci, E., Smith, P. K., Brain, P. F. (2000), 'Narrative Strategies in Bullies and Victims in Italian Schools', *Aggressive Behavior*, vol. 26, n. 1.
- Sutherland, E. H. (1937), *The Professional Thief*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1937.
- Thomas, W. I. (1931), 'The Definition of the Situation', in Manis J. G., Meltzer B. N. (eds.), *Symbolic Interaction. A Reader in Social Psychology*, 2nd ed., Allyn and Bacon, Boston, 1972, 331-336.
- Thomas, W. I. (1931), *The Unadjusted Girl*, Little Brown, Boston; *La ragazza disadattata* (a cura di V. Romania), Kurumuny, Calimera, Le, 2012.
- Thomas, W. I., Znaniecki, F. (1918-20), *The Polish Peasant in Europe and America*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, *Il contadino polacco in Europa e in America*, Edizioni di Comunità, Milano, 1968.
- Toscano, G. (2016), 'Hikikomori: la paura viene dall'Estremo Oriente. Costruzione del disagio giovanile e dinamiche di panico morale', *Rivista Italiana di Costruttivismo*, vol. 4, n. 1, 63-82.
- Uhlman, F. (1971), *Reunion*, Kindle Edition, The Harvill Press, London, 2006, *L'amico ritrovato*, Feltrinelli, Milano, 2012.
- Waldron, L. M. (2014), 'Cyberbullying: The Social Construction of a Moral Panic', in (eds), *Communication and Information Technologies Annual (Studies in Media and Communications, vol. 8)*, Emerald Group Publishing Limited, 197-230.
- Young, J. (1971), 'The Role of the Police as Amplifiers of Deviancy, Negotiators of Reality and Translators of Fantasy: Some Consequences of our Present System of Drug Control as Seen in Notting Hill', in S. Cohen (ed.), *Images of Deviance*, Penguin, Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England, 27-61.
- Zerubavel, E. (1991), *The Fine Line. Making Distinctions in Everyday Life*, The University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1993.

Zerubavel, E. (1997), *Social Mindscales. An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1999.

Sitography

- Ambrosio, E., *Bruno Vespa confessa: "sono stato vittima di bullismo"*, SuperGuidatv.it, 20, 11, 2017. <https://www.superguidatv.it/bruno-vespa-confessa-sono-stato-vittima-di-bullismo/>
- Chiari, W., *Balzubiente col tic*, <http://www.lyrics-youtube.com/lyrics/walter-chiari-balzubiente-col-ticflv-axuffNgT5vI>
- ilGiornale.it, <http://www.ilgiornale.it/tag/bullismo.html>
- Repubblica.it, <http://www.repubblica.it/argomenti/bullismo>
- Redazione, *Elisa: "Sono stata vittima dei bulli la musica mi ha salvato"*, Today.it, 24, 10, 2016 <http://www.today.it/media/elisa-vittima-bullismo.html>
- Valenza, M., *La confessione di Massimo Ghini: "Sono stato vittima di bullismo"*, ilGiornale.it, 6, 4, 2015. www.ilgiornale.it/news/spettacoli/confessione-massimo-ghini-sono-stato-vittima-bullismo-1113487.html