

Painfully Sad Stories of Bullying: Now What?

A review of the film



Bully

(2011)

Lee Hirsch (Director)

Reviewed by

[Michael B. Greene](#)

The film *Bully* has received as much attention for its associated ratings “war” as it has about its content or message. When it was first reviewed, the Motion Picture Association of America gave the film an R rating because of language, that is, repeated use of a specific four-letter word. After much fanfare and outcries from a wide spectrum of celebrities, the appeal by the movie’s distributor to downgrade the rating was denied. In response, the Weinstein Company released the film without a rating. Subsequently, Harvey Weinstein decided to edit out some of the offending language in order to secure a PG-13 rating, a move he made to enable a larger audience to see the film. I reviewed the PG-13 version.

Bully is a documentary that portrays the lives of five young people who were chronically bullied. Two of the young people committed suicide, Tyler at age 17 and Ty at age 11. Tyler’s story is conveyed through home movies and interviews with his parents, and Ty’s story is conveyed through an interview with his former best friend and his parents.

Kelby is a 16-year-old open lesbian from Tuttle, Oklahoma. Kelby is spunky and charming, characteristics that belie her prior three suicide attempts and her self-cutting. Alex, a 14-year-old from Sioux City, Iowa, is repeatedly called “fish-face” and is frequently pummeled by fellow students. Alex has gotten to the point where he doesn’t think he feels anymore. The last portrayal is of Ja’Meya, a 14-year-old African American girl who got so fed up with her peers’ verbal taunts that she took her mother’s gun and pulled it out on the school bus to scare her peers in a desperate attempt to get them to stop bullying her. The school bus had a camera, and this incident was recorded (unbeknownst to Ja’Meya). Ja’Meya was charged on more than 40 felony counts.

Each story is portrayed from the perspective of the victims, their friends (if they have any), and their families. The brief clips of the schools and officials are far from flattering. The statements and interchanges with a self-righteous assistant principal at Alex’s school were, appropriately, met with deep groans of outrage by viewers during my two viewings of the film. Similarly, the sheriff in Ja’Meya’s town of Murray County, Mississippi, makes an astonishingly racist comment on camera, indicating that Ja’Meya’s conduct could have been justified only if she had been whipped. Glimpses of bullying behavior and some of the kids who bully are shown, but none of these kids is interviewed in the film.

Within the five stories, there is some diversity by gender (two girls and three boys), by race (one African American the rest White), by age (11 to 16), and by other characteristics that the bullies targeted (geekiness, sexual orientation, and appearance). Nevertheless, four of the portrayed young people live in the Bible Belt, a place where lifestyle and personality differences are not well tolerated. Alex lives in Sioux City, Iowa, a conservative hub. The parents knew their towns’ cultures, and they knew their kids were in trouble. Ty’s father reminisces about his family’s multigenerational history in Perkins, Oklahoma. He knew when his son had pushed past the town’s acceptable norms of behavior. Kelby’s entire family was shunned in the community and at church after she had come out as a lesbian. Tyler’s father said he was wearing a target on his back. Similarly, Alex’s father warned him that if he let the bullying go on, he’d become a punching bag.

The self-stated purpose of the film is to raise consciousness about bullying and to start an antibullying movement (see <http://thebullyproject.com/indexflash.html#/story>). Indeed, this film has been compared to *An Inconvenient Truth* in terms of its underlying purpose of getting the public and educators to rally around the issue of bullying. The film is engaging, frustrating, and heart-rending. Audiences leave the movie theater shaking their heads, revved up, saying how sad the movie is. The film is highly successful in illustrating and illuminating not only the pain caused to the victims of bullying but to the victims’ families as well, an aspect of bullying that is not well-addressed in the literature.

From statements made by the film’s director and producers, as well as from the tone of the film itself, it is clear that the success of the film should be judged on whether it raises consciousness about the problem of school bullying and, further, whether it changes the way bullying is addressed in schools.

As with all documentaries, the particular is used to illustrate the general. One of the key questions, then, is whether these particular stories are received as reflections of “us” or “them.” One question the film raised for me, one that has not been addressed in the literature, is whether bullying looks and feels different in low-tolerance and low-diversity schools than it does in diverse urban schools.

Only one type of bullying is illustrated in the movie: direct face-to-face verbal and physical bullying. Cyberbullying (Kowalski, Limber, & Agatston, 2012), a growing problem that has been linked to several well-publicized suicides, is neither portrayed nor mentioned. Neither is relational bullying, a non-face-to-face form that includes rumor mongering and ostracizing peers (Swearer, 2008). So will these forms of bullying be ignored by audiences eager to get schools to do more about bullying?

Even if audiences understand that the film reflects a universal problem, what can or will they do? Only tidbits of clues are given in the film that could help guide the public. Obviously, insensitive administrators, like the one filmed at Alex’s school, need to be trained or fired. Kelby talks about how she would not have made it without her small group of friends, one of the few known protective factors (Bollmer, Milich, Harris, & Maras, 2005). A town hall meeting following Tyler’s suicide is shown in the film, and both students and adult community members appear highly motivated to make sure this kind of thing never happens again. Vigils were held in memory of those who committed suicide as a result of intolerable bullying. At the end of the film, the idea that “it all starts with one” is presented. Bullying is a complicated phenomenon, and the remedies are very complex.

As moving as this film is, I’m simply not sure what this film can add in terms of rallying the public and the educational community to do something productive. Since 2001, nearly every state in the country has passed an antibullying law, and the publicity around Tyler Clementi’s suicide has been ubiquitous and moving. My fear is that the public will demand that schools adopt “zero tolerance” policies for bullying, a misguided if not harmful idea (American Psychological Association Zero Tolerance Task Force, 2008). In fact, evidence-based programs designed to reduce bullying are moderately effective at best, and these programs are expensive to adopt (Ttofi & Farrington, 2009). School climate change initiatives show promise, but much more research is needed in order to make definitive claims about their impact on bullying (Greene, 2008).

Kelby acknowledges that it’s going to require many people and action at multiple levels to change the current climate around bullying. This film is certainly an important step in the right direction. Kelby is certainly correct in acknowledging that it’s going to require multiple efforts by multiple people to change the consciousness that has led to the unacceptably high rates of bullying and to the tolerance of bullying in schools as a rite of passage.

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