Speaker

I’m located at the Gold Coast campus, and I have a research team there. And as Carolyn mentioned, the sorts of areas of research that I’ve been interested in over the years include things like aggression and bullying, which tend to go together, and prejudice and discrimination. I normally have a couple of ARC grants at the same time, and then have groups working on research projects in both. At present, although I’ve been working in those areas for perhaps, those areas there for the last 15-20 years, we’ve just started a new ARC funded grant on rejection sensitivity. On each of these projects I draw together people from international institutions, and so one grant at present is on bullying and aggression, and one of the senior participants on that is Professor Melanie Killen from the University of Maryland, and the new ARC project is on rejection sensitivity and that has a colleague from Columbia University, Professor Geraldine Downey. That’s all I want to say, not much.

A question that’s often asked of me is why children, because in fact, these sorts of topics are those that are typically addressed by social psychologists and I am a social psychologist by training. So typically social psychologists focus on social behaviours that are displayed by people and the interaction with others in social situations. So it includes those sorts of things, bullying, aggression, discrimination, but also loving and liking and forming relationships and so on and so on. But in fact, I’m what is called a developmental social psychologist because my interest is in particular in children and how children develop these different sorts of social behaviours, which are so happily displayed by adults. And so the question then becomes, well, why children?

Well the fact of the matter is that there is too high an incidence of these sorts of behaviours, bullying and aggression and prejudice and discrimination, in our primary and secondary schools, and the last major actual study that was done on prejudice and discrimination for example indicated that this sort of, these sort of attitudes and behaviour were on the increase. Much has also been said recently in a similar like about bullying between children, and particularly with the fairly recent advent of cyber-bullying, kids using mobile phones and computers and so on to deliver aversive messages to other kids, which has really added a whole new dimension or multidimensionality to bullying, because suddenly kids who are victims of bullying can’t escape. Whereas once upon a time it was a case they maybe were bullied in the school and perhaps after school heading for home, nowadays with the advent of this new technology, they can be reached any time during the 24 hours by other kids who want to get hold of them. And cyber-bullying is decidedly on the increase. What is a more physical or more direct sort of bullying kids have engaged in is probably at the same level. But I’ll come back and talk a little bit more about bullying in just a moment. So that’s a very good reason to sort of look at bullying, why it is that it is at an unacceptable level, these sorts of behaviours, and looks as though in several areas it’s on the increase.
But the next thing is that the behaviours, these sorts of behaviours if they are established in kids at childhood, there is every possibility that they are likely to continue with those sorts of behaviours in adulthood. And that being the case, it’s important to know about it from as early as possible. The other thing is that if it is the case that kids do develop these behaviours in childhood and they carry through to adulthood, well maybe a good place to start tackling them is in childhood rather than in adulthood. God knows we’ve not been very successful in reducing these sorts of behaviours in adults over many, many years. I mean one of the dramatic failures of social scientists and any other type of scientist is trying to reduce, for example, attitudes like prejudice and behaviours like discrimination. They have been around for a long, long time and we haven’t been very successful in reducing them. So that’s one of the reasons why I’m interested in working with children.

Of course, the other part is they’re small and they’re cute and I’m a grandfather and that’s all good.

But it’s also true that there is some importance to these sorts of phenomena. Take bullying, for example. Bullying is a phenomenon that most kids experience at school, either as victims or they do it, or they’re both victims and they’re instigators, okay? And it’s numbers like, some estimates have put it at about 80%, at some stage in school kids’ careers, they’ll do it or they’ll have it done to them. It’s also true that about 3-10% of kids are extremely victimised, they’re chronic targets for other children. It’s sort of like they arrive at school and they’ve already got a target printed on their front and back, and by God, they suffer it for the next, for their whole school career. And indeed, 5% of kids have been identified as bullies. Obviously these numbers vary from state to state, from city to city, from country to country, okay, so these are, they’re approximates. But all I’m doing is indicating to you the extent of the incidence. But it’s also true that while some kids may be chronic bullies, most kids at some stage engage in bullying. And as we know, bullying is now a workplace, or it always has been, a workplace phenomenon. And it’s not sort of something that kids do and they suddenly stop doing when they finish school, it carries on into the workplace. And indeed, as we know, it also carries on into households and it simply has another name. Boys display more direct bullying. Girls display more relational bullying, like exclusion, gossip, those sorts of things. And at school, most bullying occurs within grades.

Continuing why is it important, well this is where it gets important, and it does link up with what things that Diego was talking about before. Kids who are chronic victims suffer rejection and isolation, they suffer depression, in the fullness of time it can also be associated with suicidal ideation and potentially suicide. Bullies themselves, they don’t get off scot-free, they tend to have low SES (socio-economic status) in adults, they tend to abuse their own children and they, it’s also a predictor of anti-social behaviour and criminality.

The sorts of issues that somebody like I am interested in, for developmental social psychology, are things like the pattern of behaviours that describe the development of
these different sorts of negative behaviours. We’re also interested in when they’re first
displayed by children, to whom and in what sort of circumstances. Whether or not the
expression of these sorts of behaviours change as kids increase in age. To what extent are
they due to nature and nurture factors, to bring in an old binary comparison. And what,
particularly for social psychology, an important issue is what sort of role do parents and
siblings and peers play in the expressions of these behaviours, as well as what sort of
motivations have children. In fact, importantly, what’s also left in there as a critical issue,
is how can we extinguish, if we could, these sorts of behaviours, or at least moderate
them, okay? Oh there he is.

In our research, we know, from our own research as well as from other research that
researchers have carried out, that kids show an early interest in other kids. I mean one
thing that’s taken a long while for psychologists to recognise and indeed up until 1995 in
a formal way, is that people, including children, have a great fundamental motivation to
belong and to be accepted by others. We now recognise that it’s a fundamental human
motivation. And you can see it in kids, by six years of age [0:09:46.3], by six years of
age, babies, infants are already oriented to other kids. They look at them, they peer at
them, if they can make a noise they’ll make a noise, they sort of wave their limbs around,
but they’re already orienting to them. And the story of childhood is how, progressively,
kids get together with other kids. You know, they might play in parallel, and then they
start playing cooperatively, and then they play fantasy play, and they are hugely
connected with others. So kids long to belong and be accepted by groups.

We also know that many negative incidents that involve children involve other children.
We’ve tended to look at bullies and aggressors in school playgrounds as being singletons,
like psychopaths wandering around the playground looking for someone to beat up. But
more often than not, we know that most of these sorts of incidents that occur involve
other kids, and not just singletons. We also know that kids have got an active and
growing intelligence, so it’s not as if they’re mindless in these sorts of behaviours. So the
sorts of things that we’re interested in finding out are how much kids’ negative
behaviours are influenced by their involvement and membership in social groups, why
might this happen, what are the limits to the influence of the group, and then to what
extent do kids tend to balance out the influence of their groups and their group
membership and the fact that they want to be involved or continue to be involved in these
groups. But how to balance these, against the competing demands of other adults and
other groups and other kids at school and so on.

And this is where their actively growing intelligence comes into play, we frame this
construct, we call it social acumen, think of it as an analogue to business acumen, where
what it refers to is kids’ understanding of how the social system works, okay? And so in
that sense, how do people learn what you need to do in order to be friends with other
kids, to belong to the group, not to be tossed out of the group, how to interact
successfully with other kids as well as getting along with other kids who are older and
younger and getting on with peers and school teachers and parents and so on and so on.
And then being able to use this knowledge to their own advantage, okay? And there’s
now a lot of research that we’ve been doing and other people have been doing that is just
starting to pinpoint all this accumulated social knowledge that kids have, and they use it. So, a simple example, kid arrives at school, he or she is late. School teacher says, “why are you late?” The kid gives one answer to the teacher, the kid gives another answer to other kids. “Why am I late? Well mum asked me to finish such and such.” Kids, “why were you late?” “Oh you know, I was riding my bike down the creek.” Now either of those could be true, you know, but kids use this to their own advantage. This is social acumen, okay? So that’s, along with these other sorts of questions, that’s what we’re interested in pursuing.

What makes doing research with kids good, cute, fun, workmanlike and so on, is the fact that there’s a lot of them. Two, somebody does the good work of collecting them together, we call them schools, which means you have access to them, okay? But it’s also tricky, because the little sods are growing in their intelligence from day one onwards, they’re growing their language, they’re growing their cognitive abilities, they’re growing their social knowledge. And yet we have to work out techniques so that we can sort of access what’s going on inside.

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