

When I hear the term “bully” I cringe because I know what typically will follow will be another set of labels that someone-- usually an adult--is going to give to the actions of others. In the 1960’s Stephen Karpman described what he called the drama triangle--placing individuals in three boxes on three points of a triangle and labeling them persecutor, victim, and rescuer. More commonly today, people use labels like bully, enabler, and bystander. Often these labels aren’t sufficient, so researches have identified different types of bystanders, bullies, and victims. When researchers can’t fit people into their neatly labeled categories they begin to categorize even more, and we end up with even more boxes and more labels-- aggressive bullies, passive bullies, false victims, perpetual victims, etc.

I do not take issue with the premise that people do not have the right to interfere with the safety of others. I also agree that there are times when people attempt to affect others-- their actions, their thoughts, their feelings--with what I would call coercion and others might call controlling behavior. I take issue with the thinking behind the boxes and labels. The whole idea that someone can place me or others in a pigeon hole by simply watching my (or another person’s) actions and, in some cases only minutes of these actions, is to me abominable. This infers that by watching someone I can understand his or her motives, have the right to judge these motives, and to take actions based on my somewhat arbitrary labels that I have assigned. I believe you cannot tell what someone else is doing or thinking by looking at what he or she is doing. The only way you can begin to understand a person’s intent is to ask. We don’t need to rescue folks because, people have the ability to act in their own best interests and can learn to stand up for themselves. For me these beliefs create dissonance with the practice of boxing and labeling.

Three criteria are often used in identifying behavior as bullying: repeated, intentional, and power based. Using these three criteria and much of the information on bullying, a person might conclude that some of the great revolutionary leaders throughout time were, in fact, bullying. Think for a moment about Mahatma Gandhi or Martin Luther King Jr. and ask, did their actions fit the criteria of bullying behavior? Were their actions **repeated** and carried out over time? Were they **intentionally** attempting to threaten or assert their ideals over those of someone else (threaten the establishment)? Could their actions be viewed by some as negative, and lastly, did they operate from a **power base** where they acted from either a perceived or real imbalance of power (although politically they may not

have had power, did they have the power of the common people, of sheer numbers or some might say morality)? For me this points out the bigger issue of boxing and labeling which can take the action of one person and skew his or her intent. I agree with the actions of Gandhi and King; I believe that what they did changed the world in ways that I wanted it to change. If I was a high ranking British official or a southern farmer who survived by viewing blacks as inferior, would I feel the same way? Boxing and labeling is a matter of perspective. It gives permission to one individual to judge someone else and his or her actions.

If we want to guarantee the safety -- physical, emotional and psychological-- of all people, then the focus needs to be much larger than “is this bullying”, “what type of victim do we have”, “what type of bystanders are there,” or “what type of bullying is this”. The questions we need to ask are: What type of a society do we want? How do we want to treat each other? How do we want to be treated by others? These are the big questions-- the questions we need to ask in small groups, families, classrooms, schools, businesses, countries, and perhaps the world; we need to ask these questions and come to agreement on the answers. When we do, we can ask the even bigger question that Glenn Smith often phrases “Who would you like me to be when you aren’t being the person you said you wanted to be?” A pamphlet on bullying that I recently examined said it best; if we want to guarantee the safety of all we need to “take time to listen and take time to talk”. Boxing and labeling seem like a waste of precious time