The nature and incidence of bullying in further and higher education

Most research on bullying has taken place in schools and we can gain a great deal of knowledge from this literature in terms of effectiveness of interventions for supporting victims. However, more recently, there has been an upsurge of interest in bullying among post-16 students, whether in further or higher education, for example, in Canada and in the UK.1–5

The most widely used definition of school bullying is the one originally proposed by Olweus, which identifies three core components:

i. There is an intent to harm or upset another student

ii. The harmful behaviour is done repeatedly over time

iii. The relationship between bully/bullies and victim/victims is characterized by an imbalance in power6

Cyberbullying has also emerged as a phenomenon at both college and university levels. Like traditional face-to-face bullying, cyberbullying involves the deliberate intent to hurt a person or persons through the electronic transmission of messages and images which target the victim(s) repeatedly over time.7

The problem has become so serious in the UK that Universities UK (UUK) has issued a report, Changing the Culture, on sexual violence, harassment and hate crime on campus, with a list of recommendations, emphasising prevention, that all universities should take on board.8 There is a growing body of evidence to suggest that there is some continuity in perpetration between childhood through adolescence and into young adulthood. In a retrospective study of 186 university students who admitted to bullying their peers, Curwen et al found that, although there was an overall decrease in the incidence of verbal and physical bullying between high school and university, a substantial proportion of the student bullies in their study had also engaged in bullying behaviour at elementary and high school levels.9 Chapell et al found that over half of the adult bullies in their sample had also bullied others during childhood and adolescence, and conclude that this history of bullying indicates long-term benefits so that the behaviour becomes entrenched and continues to be a successful strategy for improving the bully’s social status.10 Not only that, there is evidence that bullies are popular among their peers and that bystanders are often indifferent to the suffering of the victims.11

Bullying among post-16 students takes many forms and includes such behaviours as: spreading nasty rumours on the grounds of race, disability, gender, religion and sexual orientation; ridiculing or demeaning a person; social exclusion; unwelcome sexual advances; stalking; threatening someone, either directly or online; and revealing personal...
SUFFERING OF THE VICTIMS BYSTANDERS ARE OFTEN AMONG THEIR PEERS AND... BULLIES ARE POPULAR

...BULLIES ARE POPULAR AMONG THEIR PEERS AND... Bystanders are often among their peers and... bullies are popular.

Intra-group bullying is often experienced by vulnerable to attack through such forms of bullying are confirmed in a larger study (N=1,925) by Faucher sites the most common form of abuse. These findings and misogynist forms of cyberbullying, with the pernicious form of bullying because it can invade all anonymity of the perpetrators. Molluzzo and Lawler aspects of a target's privacy and because of the potential anonymity of the social media.

Bullying is not considered to be a particularly pernicious form of bullying because it can invade all aspects of a target's privacy and because of the potential anonymity of the perpetrators. Molluzzo and Lawler elicited responses from 121 undergraduates on their perceptions of cyberbullying.5 The students reported cyberbullying as a matter of great concern and were aware of the prevalence of homophobic and misogynist forms of cyberbullying, with the posting of harassing messages on social networking sites the most common form of cyberbullying.6 These findings are confirmed in a larger study (N=4,325) by Faucher et al, who also noted that women students were more vulnerable to attack through such forms of bullying as 'sexting', 'morphing', 'virtual rape' and 'revenge porn'.7 See also Phips and Young.8 In their study of US undergraduate students who were members of fraternities or sororities, Simmons and colleagues revealed discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards fellow students on the grounds of ethnicity and sexual orientation.9 In retaliation, it appeared that minority groups formed their own support networks and began organizing ways of countering and resolving the discriminatory behaviour that they experienced. Again, Björklund reported that university students are more at risk of being stalked than other peer groups.10 These findings demonstrate the different forms that bullying takes at college and university levels and also highlight the gendered nature of bullying at this level.11

In the context of HE, Piritala et al, in a pioneering ongoing cross-cultural study of bullying at universities in Argentina, Finland, Estonia and USA, found that the most common form of bullying was reported by women students in all four countries in the form of unjustified criticism, belittling or humiliation related to studies.12 In contrast to school, where high-flyers are often the target of bullying, university students in all four countries reported that is was academically weak students who were belittled for their lack of achievement. Studies like these indicate the necessity of viewing bullying in its post-compulsory social and cultural context where people have chosen to study. A number of surveys broadly confirm these findings; for example, Zalaquett and Chatters (in colleges) and Akholut & colleagues revealed discriminatory attitudes and behaviours as being told such disturbing cases of psychosomatic complaints, as well as academic difficulties.13 Research into the experiences of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) students confirms the negative effect of bullying on the mental health of targets. One National Union of Students (NUS) survey found that one in five LGBT students, and one in three transgender students reported at least one form of bullying on campus; many reported that they had to pass as ‘straight’ in order to protect themselves from homophobia and transphobia.14 Rivers and Valentine et al report on the extremely negative effect that such treatment had on the mental health of staff and students.15,16 In extremis, this could lead to suicide.

The role of counsellors in reducing and preventing bullying With such a range of negative, harmful and potentially life-changing behaviours occurring on a daily basis on FE and HE campuses, we now consider how counselling-based interventions could be used to tackle the problem.

Counselling support and staff training Student health services are alert to the outcomes of bullying, but they are already overstretched by the problems of students that face when leaving home for the first time to make the transition from school to college or university.22 Clearly, counsellors are trained to offer one-to-one support to the victims of bullying, but they could go further by training other colleagues. In the context of sexual bullying, Luca argues that more staff training is necessary to help protect students and lecturers from sexual harassment and inappropriate support.23 The majority of universities have a personal tutor system, but there is no training for tutors or for lecturers and little guidance on how to deal with bullying, if it is even reported. If a student does disclose an incident, the lack of practical, central, information available to tutors is leaving those who come forward further distressed and is resulting in a reluctance on the part of students to tell anyone anything about their problem. Furthermore, there is a need to heighten awareness among staff and students of the potentially damaging effects that bullying can have on both targets and perpetrators. But this process would be enhanced through active support from the authorities in partnership with student counselling and health services.

TRAINING STUDENT BYSTANDERS AND COLLEAGUES Some anti-bullying work has already been done in colleges and universities, in particular through the voluntary work of students in a variety of peer support roles, such as peer mentors and befriending new students in halls of residence. Giovanzola and Maliki-KiosLoizou document the development of peer support systems at the University of Athens where students are trained in empathy and active listening as well as basic communication and counselling skills to address such issues as adjustment to college life, separation from family, loneliness and relationship difficulties.24 Yet, despite their effectiveness, such systems are seriously implemented in European universities. Well-designed peer support systems at primary and secondary school levels have been shown to be effective in alleviating the suffering of victims of bullying.25 The most effective systems seem to be those that are embedded in a whole-school policy.26 Similarly, it would seem that peer support systems at college and university levels would benefit greatly from being part of an institution-wide policy to reduce and prevent bullying.

Unfortunately, this overall commitment to addressing the issue of bullying among students is not evident in most universities.27,28 However, bystander training is one of the key recommendations made by the UUK Taskforce on bullying, and the evidence for its effectiveness at university level.29 College and university counsellors potentially could play a key role in this process by offering training to their peer supporters, students, staff and an all-staff workplace bullying policy. In this context, it will be important for students to challenge bullying when they experience it and to demonstrate alternative non-violent ways of dealing with relationships.

Anti-bullying policies The UUK Taskforce recommendations are timely in making recommendations which, it is to be hoped, will become embedded in all college and university policies and codes of practice. These exist in some universities, but student perception is that the authorities provide very little protection.30 It is essential to consider systemic influences on bullying that may be embedded in the culture of the university. Shariff and DeMartini, in confirmation of NUS surveys, argue that cyberbullying (such as posting offensive material online) appears to be rooted in a laddish culture typified by such bullying behaviour as ‘slut-shaming’ as a mechanism for subduing women as well as LGBT students.31

...BULLIES ARE POPULAR AMONG THEIR PEERS AND... Bystanders are often among their peers and...
As they argue, the behaviour is the symptom, not the root of the problem. From this perspective, counsellors could play a significant part in heightening awareness of the systemic influences on bullying in FE and HE and by their involvement in changing the whole culture of the college/university from ‘laddishness’ to one that is more person centered.’

This process of cultural change requires cooperation and understanding among all members of the academic community – lecturers, researchers, senior management and healthcare and counselling professionals. To achieve this change, the college or university authorities need to fund and resource such a whole-institution approach. All the evidence from schools indicates the absolute necessity of an institution-wide approach involving the integration of all policies and interventions if reduction and prevention of bullying are to be achieved.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue, colleges and universities need to have much greater awareness of the emotional, social and cognitive risks to the student body of on-campus bullying, with counselling and healthcare staff having an influence on the development of policies and interventions to reduce and prevent it. Counsellors’ unique knowledge of the student experience and of the major mental health risks posed by bullying has the potential to be an invaluable resource for strategic planning. Rather than denying the problem, as seems to be the case at present with a lack of coherent policy, it is essential for college and university authorities to engage in an open process of dialogue and debate if any progress is to be made. There is also a need for colleges and universities to put in place a range of systems to address the issue, such as counselling resources, peer support and bystander training as well as systems for promoting empathy and inclusion across the university. Such interventions should take account of up-to-date psychological knowledge about the importance of positive social relationships during the critical lifespan transition from adolescence to adulthood that the majority of FE and HE students are undergoing. Counsellors, with their in-depth knowledge of the processes through which individuals integrate or fail to integrate into the networks of the student community, have the potential to play a critical role in preventing such cruelty and discriminatory behaviour from continuing unchecked. Such behaviour, as research demonstrates, continues into the workplace, and consequently bullying must be tackled across the lifespan.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Helen Cowie: an Emerita Professor at the University of Surrey and Fellow of the British Psychological Society, specialises in the fields of cooperative groupwork, in the context, the prevention of bullying and the promotion of emotional health and wellbeing in children and young people.

Recent publications include From Birth to Sixteen (Routledge, 2012), and (with co-editor: Carrie-Anne Myers) Bullying Among University Students: Cross-National Perspectives (Routledge, 2016). h.cowie@surrey.ac.uk

Carrie-Anne Myers is a Senior Lecturer in Criminology and Sociology at City University, London. Where she researches and publishes in a number of key fields: school violence and bullying, victims, victimology and criminal justice policy, and gendered criminology. Recent publications (with co-author Helen Cowie: University Students: Cross National Perspectives (Routledge, 2016) and School Bullying and Mental Health: Risk intervention and Prevention. (Routledge, 2017). carrie.myers.1@city.ac.uk

UNIVERSITY & COLLEGE COUNSELLING [SEPTEMBER 2018] BULLYING

[16]