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How can we prevent and reduce bullying amongst university students?

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Abstract

While it has long been recognized that bullying occurs at school and in the workplace, recent research confirms that bullying also takes place among university students, including undergraduates, post-graduates and doctoral research students. In the UK, the National Union of Students (NUS) alerted staff and students to the issue in a series of reports but it is not confined to the UK. Authors in the book edited by Cowie and Myers (2016) present cross-national findings on the theme of bullying among university students (Pörhöla et al., 2016). In this article we discuss the urgent need for interventions to prevent and reduce bullying in this context. We also indicate the areas where little or no intervention is taking place, notably in the field of university policy.

Key Words

Bullying, Behaviour, Cyberbullying, Interventions, University Students

How can we prevent and reduce bullying amongst university students?

Introduction

Before we review the relatively small literature on bullying among university students it is helpful to consider the much larger body of research into school bullying (for a recent review of European research in the field of school bullying see Schultze-Krumbholz et al., 2015). The most widely-used definition of school bullying is the one originally proposed by Olweus (1993) which identifies three core components:

1. There is an intent to harm or upset another student;
2. The harmful behaviour is done repeatedly over time;
3. The relationship between bully/bullies and victim/victims is characterized by an imbalance in power.

Since then, researchers have identified differences in how bullying is perceived and defined, depending on the age of the child, young person or adult. Young children have less differentiated perspectives on bullying and are more likely to focus on physical bullying rather than psychological or indirect bullying (Smith et al., 2002). Furthermore, there appear to be wide cultural differences in how bullying is defined, interpreted, encouraged or discouraged by children and young people (Currie et al., 2012) and by adults in the workplace (Jacobson et al., 2014).

Again in the context of school bullying, Salmivalli (2010; 2014) has highlighted the *social* nature of bullying by identifying a range of participant roles that go beyond the relationship between bully and victim and locate bullying within the wider setting of peer group dynamics as a whole. Salmivalli (2014) points out that, to a large extent, bullying is a social phenomenon since bystanders are usually present during an episode of bullying, whether online or offline. These bystanders often supply the bully with social rewards such as laughing and cheering at the victim's discomfort and humiliation. In this way, whether

wittingly or not, the bystanders reinforce the bullying behavior in their role as spectators of the 'drama'. There are a number of reasons why bystanders do not intervene to help the victims (Salmivalli, 2010). First, bullies are often perceived positively by the peer group so bystanders worry that they may become victims themselves if they intervene. Second, a form of bystander apathy comes into play since, if no-one else is intervening to help bullied peers, there may be a perception that the majority approve of the bullying behavior. Finally, those who bully usually select vulnerable targets, such as those who have low status within the group so there may be little perceived benefit in going to the assistance of this particular peer. Salmivalli (2014) indicates the potential power that the bystanders have to reduce or prevent bullying since frequently they feel that bullying is wrong. At the same time, Salmivalli et al. (1996) found that around 17% of school pupils had the participant role of defender. These were children who felt empathy for victims and wished to do something to support them. Salmivalli argues that it may in fact be more productive to mobilize the peer group rather than try to change the bullies, as she and her colleagues have done successfully in schools in the Finnish KiVa anti-bullying programme (see, for example, Saarento et al., 2014). Salmivalli's intervention to train bystanders in the use of safe strategies to help victimized peers is also relevant to the context of bullying at university.

The nature and incidence of bullying at university

Bullying among university 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; revealing personal information about a person that was shared in confidence (Cowie & Myers, 2016). Taken in the context of the university setting, due to the age of the university students (that is, they are young adults rather than children), some of these behaviours can be considered a hate crime within the UK as well as some other European countries, a point we will return to later when we discuss how to deal with the problem. For the students who are the targets of such bullying behaviours,

the experience is unpleasant and distressing in the short term. However, for some there are longer term negative consequences for their mental health and their academic career.

The need to take account of the social contexts in which bullying takes place is emerging in the studies of bullying among university students. In line with Salmivalli's (2014) findings, Pörhöla et al. (2016), in a pioneering ongoing cross-cultural study of bullying at universities in Argentina, Finland, Estonia and US, found some commonalities across countries. The most common type of bullying was reported by women students in all four countries in the form of unjustified criticism, belittling or humiliation related to studies. Male students in Finland and Estonia reported slightly lower rates of bullying of this type. However, by contrast, male students in Argentina reported that the most frequent types of bullying involved abuse, name-calling and threats, while their US counterparts reported mocking or criticism related to personal qualities (appearance, religion or social class). In contrast to school where high-flyers are often the target of bullying, university students in all four countries reported that it was academically weak students who were belittled for their lack of achievement. Studies like these indicate the necessity of viewing bullying in its social and cultural context and in the unique setting of the university whereby it is an adult environment where people have chosen to study.

A number of surveys have investigated the different rates and patterns that bullying at university takes but it is difficult to say with any certainty what the incidence of bullying among university students actually is as there are wide variations in reported prevalence rates and to whom the incident has been reported, for example, to another authority such as the police rather than to the university itself. There are a number of possible explanations for the discrepancies in the reported rates of bullying in the different studies. Researchers differ in the criteria they use, for example, whether the participant was bullied once, twice or more frequently, or whether the bullying occurred during the last week, the last month, the last term or the last year. Definitions vary and some studies only focus on cyberbullying rather than on

bullying in general. Some studies differentiate amongst programmes of study area, with medical and nursing students appearing to suffer the highest rates of bullying. For example, Farley et al. (2015) found around 50% of medical students reported being cyberbullied during their training. This could be due to the competitive nature of medical degrees and it would be interesting to see how these bullying behaviours continue into the medical profession. By contrast, Lappalainen et al. (2011) in a survey of 2,805 Finnish students found that only 5% reported being bullied by a fellow student or a member of staff. Around half of victims and half of perpetrators had been involved in bullying at school, which demonstrates the continuity of bullying behaviours from one stage in life to the next.

Cyberbullying

More recently, cyberbullying has emerged as a phenomenon at both school 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 (Kyriacou and Zuin, 2016). There is a large overlap between face-to-face bullying and cyberbullying, both for bullies and victims. Cyberbullying potentially reaches a much larger audience (through, for example, social networking sites) and postings can be viewed repeatedly, with extremely disturbing consequences for the targets, including insomnia, depression, anxiety, suicidal thoughts, self-harm and, in rare cases, suicide (Sourander et al., 2010). The anonymity of the cyberbully is a powerful component. Kyriacou and Zuin (2016) argue that this anonymity results in desensitization of prosocial values and empathy towards another person and ultimately in a process of moral disengagement since the cyberbully does not meet face-to-face with his/her target. Thus there is less likelihood that the cyberbully will experience social disapproval or intervention on the part of bystanders.

In the context of university, Zalaquett and Chatters (2014), investigated cyberbullying among 608 US university students (149 males and 459 females), and found that 14% reported being

cyberbullied 1 to 3 times; 2.6% 4 to 6 times; 2% 7-10 times; additionally, 28% reported having a friend who had been cyberbullied. In a survey of cyberbullying among a sample of 254 Turkish university students (73 males and 173 females) (8 did not reveal their gender) (Akbulut & Eristi, 2011), the most frequent instances were blocking in instant messaging programmes (42%); inviting people to social applications that included gossip or inappropriate chat (34.7%); sending messages imposing religious or political views (25.6%); cursing people (25.8%); excluding people from online groups (25%); hiding identity (21.6%). In this study, the researchers found no effect with regard to age, programme of study or extent of internet use. By contrast, in a survey of cyberbullying among 1,733 Canadian university students (26% male and 74% female) (Faucher et al., 2014), strong gender differences emerged. The overall prevalence of cyberbullying in the past 12 months was 24.1%, to include being bullied by another student they knew, another person they did not know and a faculty member. Despite the variation in prevalence rates, all of the studies highlight that bullying and cyberbullying is a very real problem and that there appears to be no centralised policy to understand or tackle the problem. In the next section we explore the social and cultural contexts in which bullying at university is most likely to flourish and return to the boundaries between bullying and crime, more specifically hate crime.

Gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation aspects of bullying

Within the UK, the National Union of Students (NUS) (representing the voice of all students enrolled at university) became increasingly concerned about behaviours that were happening on a daily basis on university campuses up and down the country with little or no guidance for action from the authorities. It was NUS that began to flag up the need for bullying to be addressed after the students themselves raised concerns. As a result, NUS carried out surveys and focus groups into incidents of bullying, discrimination and hate crime. (NUS, 2010; NUS, 2014; Phipps & Young, 2013)

One survey that NUS commissioned identified a culture of *laddishness* at UK universities (Phipps & Young, 2013). Laddishness was defined as:

"…a pack mentality evident in activities such as sport and heavy alcohol consumption and 'banter' which was often sexist, misogynist and homophobic. It was also thought to be sexualised and to involve the objectification of women and at its extremes rape supportive attitudes and sexual harassment and violence" (Phipps & Young, 2013, p.53).

According to this survey, bullying behaviour is embedded in a culture that glorifies violent, disrespectful attitudes towards women with widespread sexist and misogynist behaviours to include such activities as initiation ceremonies designed to humiliate, 'geeks and sluts' parties, 'slag and drag' parties, the sexual pursuit of female freshers (sometimes termed 'seal clubbing') and 'slut drops' (where males students offer female students a lift home but leave them miles from their destination). There are also a number of websites that encourage offensive online sexist banter. While most students claim to be tolerant of diversity as individuals, the pressure from the peer group may be so strong that it is difficult to stand up for victims of bullying.

Another survey (NUS, 2014) found that 1 in 5 lesbian, gay and bi-sexual (LGB) students and 1 in 3 transgendered (T) 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. Similarly, Valentine et al. (2009) reported on the experiences of LGBT students and staff in universities. In this study 49.5% of LGB students reported having been treated negatively by other students and 10.4% reported being treated negatively by their lecturers. When it came to more serious incidents of physical and sexual assault, 6.7% of LGB and 11.3% of Trans students said they had experienced physical abuse at the hands of peers; 3.7% of LGB students and 8.6% of Trans had experienced sexual assault. Overall, one fifth of LGB students and one third of Trans students said they had taken time off from their studies due to their treatment at the hands of peers.

Simmons et al (2016) in their study of US undergraduate students who were members of fraternities or sororities revealed discriminatory attitudes and behaviour towards fellow students on the grounds of ethnicity and sexual orientation. In retaliation, it appeared that minority groups formed their own fraternities and sororities, so perpetuating rather than resolving the discriminatory behaviour that they experienced. Again, Björklund (2016) reported that university students are more at risk of being stalked than other young people, with rates of 11% or over. These studies demonstrate the different forms that bullying takes at university and also highlight the gendered nature of bullying at this level.

Disability and bullying: When bullying becomes a hate crime

Very little research has been done on the effect that having a disability has on bullying at university but there is qualitative evidence in the NUS surveys to demonstrate that disabled students face similar levels of exclusion and discrimination as LGBT students. Purdy and McGuckin (2015) discuss the consistent finding that, at school level, children with disabilities are much more likely to be the targets of bullying. This aspect of bullying continues to be neglected in the research literature on school bullying (McGuckin et al., 2010) and is scarcely mentioned as an issue at the level of university.

One potential reason for this omission could be that to attack someone on the grounds of their disability is against the law and would become a criminal issue rather than an internal matter within the university. According to the UK government services and information website https://www.gov.uk/report-hate-crime; "Crimes committed against someone because of their disability, gender-identity, race, religion or belief, or sexual orientation are hate crimes and should be reported to the police."

Hate crimes can include:

- threatening behaviour
- assault

- robbery
- damage to property
- inciting others to commit hate crimes
- harassment.

The definition of hate crime parallels the definitions of bullying. However, if an individual experiences such attacks on a university campus, because they are adults they may choose to involve the police. Thus a 'bullying' matter can easily become a criminal matter. If it is under investigation by the police, the university cannot act until the police investigation is completed and relevant outcomes are reached. This highlights the argument that understanding the social context of the university is crucial if we are to unravel its complexities. At school young people are powerless against the authority and rules of the school. At university, where the students are young adults, victims have freedom to choose which authority deals with a problem and, if the target feels the university does not have the power to intervene, or if they feel it warrants the police and intervention of the law, there is the freedom to report the matter outside the university. There is a growing literature on the relationship between targeted violence and hate crime on the ground of disability (see Clement et al., 2011) but research that takes account of the context of the university has yet to be carried out.

Interventions

There clearly is a need to highlight the problem of bullying at university. We are not suggesting that everyone who goes to university is going to be involved in bullying and the majority of students will have a contented and successful time for the duration of their studies. Nonetheless, as the research indicates, there are groups of vulnerable people who might think that university is not going to be like school or college and such behaviours do not exist. But they do. And strategies need to be implemented to help everyone deal with the

problem. There are a number of interventions that have been shown to have some impact in alleviating the distress of bullying.

Peer support

Some pioneering work has already been done in universities, in particular through the voluntary work of students in a variety of peer support roles, such as telephone counselling, and befriending new students in halls of residence. 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 (Cowie, 2011). The most effective systems seem to be those that are embedded in a whole school policy (Salmivalli, 2014). Similarly, it would seem that peer support systems at university level would benefit greatly from being part of a university-wide policy to reduce and prevent bullying. Unfortunately, this overall commitment to addressing the issue of bullying amongst students is not evident in most universities (Campbell, 2016; Sullivan, 2016).

Furthermore, universities need more systems in place to identify the issue at an early stage and have clear lines of communication for reporting it. The introduction of a peer support system which focuses on bullying and student conduct would help. Giovazolias and Malikiosi-Loizos (2016) document the development of peer support systems at Athens University where students are trained in empathy, active listening as well as basic communication and counselling skills to address such issues as adjustment to college life, separation from family, loneliness and relationships. Yet despite their effectiveness, such systems are scarcely implemented in other European universities.

Counselling support and staff training

Student health services are alert to the outcomes of bullying (Luca, 2016) but they are already overstretched by the variety of problems that students face when leaving home for the first time to make the transition from school to university. In the context of sexual bullying, Luca

(2016) argues that more staff training is necessary to help tutors and lecturers listen to students and offer appropriate support. The majority of universities have a personal tutor system but there is no training for the lecturers and little guidance on how to deal with bullying, if it is even reported. There is clearly a need for more resources to provide adequate care for the targets of bullying and to recognise the 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 would require involvement on the part of staff and students across the university.

Anti-bullying policies and legal sanctions

Anti-bullying policies exist in some universities but student perception is that the authorities provide very little protection (Rivers, 2016). Kenworthy (2010), in a US survey of victims of cyberbullying, found that most did not report it; only 14% found that their complaint resulted in disciplinary action against the perpetrator. University authorities appear to be hampered by perceptions that bullying is just a prank that is not to be taken seriously; there is little evidence for nationwide policies across universities. Campbell (2016) reviewed policies in 20 Australian universities and found that only 7 specifically mentioned bullying. In the majority, the policy was not prominent on their website and was hard to find, indicating a lack of commitment to prevention and intervention. Where policies existed, they tended to be embedded in health and safety for employed staff rather than for students.

According to Campbell (2016), the lack of policies to address bullying is a potential time bomb if a bullied student should take the university to court on the grounds of the university's failure in its duty of care or the infringement of the student's right to be a full member of the university community. Within universities there is more emphasis on safety of staff than of students, with very little acknowledgement of the potential harm (physical and psychological) that bullying, in its different forms, can cause the student population.

It is essential to consider systemic influences on bullying that may be embedded in the culture of the university. Shariff and DeMartini (2016), in confirmation of the NUS surveys, argue that cyberbullying (e.g. 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. As they argue, the behaviour is the symptom, not the root of the problem. From this perspective, it is essential to improve public/legal education about the differences among freedom of speech, free expression, safety, privacy, protection and regulation. There is a fine balancing act between protection and over-regulation between public and private spaces and between freedom of speech and censorship, especially in a setting that professes actively to encourage discussion, debate and ideas. Once again there is no consistency in the development and implementation of anti-bullying policies at both an international and European level.

Conclusion

Overall, we argue, universities as unique organisations need to have much greater awareness of the emotional, social and cognitive risks to the student body of bullying at university, because in extreme cases where students drop out of their studies altogether, this has an enormous impact on their future career as well as their emotional health and well-being. Rather than denying the problem, as seems to be the case at present with lack of coherent policy, it is essential for university authorities to engage in an open process of dialogue and debate if any progress is to be made (for a discussion of the practical ways in which this might be achieved, see Sullivan, 2016). There is also a need for universities to put in place a range of systems to address the issue, such as counselling resources, peer support 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 undergraduate students are undergoing. In extreme cases, the universities should be alert to the need for more understanding of the point at which sanctions and

recourse to the law should be in place since some of the negative behaviour, such as bullying on the grounds of disability, is actually illegal and a hate crime. Students and staff should be given training and made aware of when such important boundaries are being crossed.

At present, interventions to address bullying are piecemeal and vary from one university to another. It is essential to take the issue seriously if universities are genuinely committed to the well-being and academic achievement of their students. All institutions have individuals who are vulnerable in some way and universities are no exception. Unfortunately, there is evidence for some continuity in being a target of bullying or a perpetrator from school to university (Pörhöla, 2016). It is highly likely that this continuity will persist into the workplace (Coyne, 2016). Clearly we need to have greater understanding of the processes through which individuals integrate or fail to integrate into the networks of the student community if we are to prevent such cruel and discriminatory behaviour from continuing unchecked.

The interventions need to be grounded in more accurate knowledge about the extent and nature of the phenomenon, to include large scale surveys of bullying and cyberbullying amongst university students as well as smaller-scale, in-depth qualitative studies. Research into the problem could be part of wider concern to address bullying across the lifespan from school, through university to the workplace. Universities at present pay lip-service to inclusion but, as the research shows, everyday life for many students who are vulnerable or culturally different or who do not fit in some way is unbearable. Universities need to be considerably more proactive in promoting a culture of tolerance and the celebration of diversity rather than the tacit acceptance of practices and behaviours that are rooted in prejudice and small-minded pressures to conform. Like other organisations, universities have a duty of care to all students, staff and visitors to the campus. As we argue not everyone is experiencing bullying on campus but for those that are there is a serious problem that urgently needs to be addressed.

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