

University: a bully-free environment?

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Abstract

The literature on bullying is vast and has been studied in depth in relation to schooling and the workplace. However, bullying does not cease on leaving compulsory education and resume in the workplace yet there is a marked absence of published work regarding undergraduate student-to-student bullying in university. This particular context is unique in that university straddles the space between school and the workplace. This theoretical paper explores possible reasons for this omission through consideration of two approaches to bullying in universities. The first is a critical approach that sees drivers for research as 'top down', where subtle resistances orientate academic disciplines, research approaches and foci to serve interests of Government and corporate policy makers in the protection and maintenance of their own positions of power. Examination of how power is exercised through complex interactions between the different stakeholders across the three contexts will seek to explain possible reasons for this gap within bullying literature.

The second approach is that of appreciative inquiry. This method views the issue as a comparatively positive one in that bullying in universities is not such a problem as schools, and explores the ethos of collegiality and social justice that characterise university life. Examination of institutional features through an appreciative lens offers a departure from traditional pathological and the less influential systemic view as causations of bullying and may reveal aspects of university experience that encourage a bully-free environment. This may go some way to explain why the bullying research community have not afforded similar inquiry than that of bullying in schools and the workplace.

Key Words: Bullying, university, undergraduate students, research, school, workplace.

1. Introduction

Despite a considerable body of bullying research, far less is known about student to student bullying at undergraduate level in the context of

university. The phenomenon of bullying has been examined by various disciplines and from differing theoretical perspectives yet any attempt to apply such theory to student to student bullying in the university context has, as yet, not been afforded any significant level of attention. This is despite a growing acknowledgement that massification of higher education; market orientation and resultant competition across institutions is changing the climate within university to a more user-led service where an expectation of value for money is altering the behaviour of students. These tensions coupled with the political drive to widen participation and encourage an increasingly diverse student body warrant investigation into the effects upon the student experience. Arguably it is unethical to drive forward recruitment policy without considering the impact upon the students (Archer, 2007) and the extent to which bullying is a feature of the modern day university experience. Given the body of research relating to bullying within faculty, which is seen to be rife (Lewis, 2004, Lipsett, 2005) and the increasing prevalence of students' expressions of dissatisfaction and even aggression towards academic staff (Lee & Hopkins-Burke, 2007), this further raises questions as to the puzzling omission of literature regarding student to student bullying in universities. If research suggests that bullying occurs across certain relationships and at particular levels within universities, it may follow that the potential for a climate that encourages student to student bullying also exists. Literature relating to student experience in higher education is replete with assertions that social relationships are pivotal influences in a student's decision to remain at university (Martinez and Munday, 1998., Yorke, 2004., Beard, 2005 for example). Therefore in the interests of institutions' retention and persistence rates, inquiry into the possible occurrence of student to student bullying is warranted.

A survey of students' experience (NUS, 2008) reported 7% of students had experienced bullying; 79% of these students stated that this involved a fellow student but had not been reported to the institution. This is a common difficulty associated with any attempt to investigate bullying which depends to a certain extent on self-reporting, and the definitions or attributes of bullying used in surveys (Kelly, 2006). Therefore the percentage of students experiencing bullying at university may in reality be higher and necessitate further investigation. Alternatively it suggests that our institutions can be regarded "perhaps not as bully-free but as bully-lite" (Duncan, 2009) in which case, are we to assume that bullies leave their bullying behaviours at the gate or do not 'make it' to university at all? Or is it university context itself which is not conducive to bullying between students? If this is the case, we may have much to learn in terms of the ways in which the university environment structurally and operationally encourages a climate where bullying is unable to thrive. However, in the first instance, exploration of those factors that orientate researchers in their scholarly inquiry is a

necessary step in exploring the apparent ‘silences’ or ‘blind spots’ (Lawson, 2009) in existing bullying research.

2. Power/lessness of the researcher.

Perhaps the most immediate question in determining the gaps in bullying literature is to what extent institutional avoidance plays its part. As Kuhn suggests, some inquiries are just too problematic to be undertaken (cited in Gergen and Gergen, 2003). Researching bullying requires sanctioning by senior faculty and may be viewed as too ethically or methodologically problematic. It may also be viewed as potentially counterproductive in terms of marketing and student recruitment.

University research activity is also driven by the pursuit of funding resulting in institutional compliance with funders’ desired research objectives. The competition for research funding is increasing as more universities aim to become research-intensive and such a drive determines institutional research priorities. The Government has significant control over levels of research funding and through this orientates research foci. This may be to legitimise areas of state policy and practice, or not to fund research deemed educationally experimental or politically radical but also to use research to mediate the interests of other powerful groups (Martin, 1998). To research student bullying in universities may conflict with political drives to widen participation and therefore may be viewed by Government agencies and research councils as potentially ‘courting trouble’. However in the workplace context bullying research offers an antidote to potentially harmful effects. Here, bullying may carry litigious threat and can also impact upon productivity and absenteeism; all of which have cost implications to industry and raise concerns with trade unions. In this context, it is therefore in the interests of stakeholders to fund bullying research to drive forward legislative protection of both employees and the corporations themselves.

In the school context, Smith *et al* (1998) point to the research/media relationship where each on their own is not sufficient to generate governmental response in the form of funding and interventions. Combined, bullying research and media focus on bullying in schools present a force that has the power to evoke significant public concern and therefore responsive government action. However, response and intervention are mediated carefully in the interests of wider stakeholders. To view bullying as anything other than a pathological phenomenon would require a revision and change of the social and environmental structures and practices within schools as they currently operate. This would be a burdensome task with implications of accountability and apportioning of blame upon governmental ministers, education administrators, educators and parents alike. The need to circumvent political disturbance means that the medicalisation of human experience offers much appeal as it suggests moral and political neutrality

(Summerfield in Rosen, 2004). It is therefore politically safer to pathologise bullying. It is also clearly easier to address as an individual problem than giving consideration and action to the less tangible sociocultural perspectives (Duncan in Rivers et al, 2007). It is here that we shall consider paradigmatic dominance within the bullying research community as a possible contributory factor to the gap within the bullying research literature.

3. Paradigmatic dominance and professional legitimisation.

The traditional pathological view of bullying is firmly embedded across the bullying research literature. Viewing bullying as a within person phenomenon and idiosyncratic in nature legitimates the view that it is an inevitable feature of our schools and workplace that can only be moderated through implementation of ‘curative’ interventions and anti-bullying strategies. Psychology seemingly presents a monopolistic authority on the phenomena of bullying. As some disciplines are closely tied to particular professions, it is in the interests of the educational and organisational psychologist to remain within the boundaries of their discipline thereby securing their position as experts and sustaining a continued need for their professional knowledge. As Martin (1998) asserts:

Professions are founded on control over skills and knowledge. They use this control to extract resources from society. In other words, professions are engaged in an exercise of translating skills and knowledge into economic rewards and political power.

To acknowledge more sociological perspective of bullying or allow for an interdisciplinary perspective may weaken the market position, professional status and stronghold of the research field. The idea of interdisciplinary approaches are not new but are met with reluctance and avoidance (Martin, 1998) and disciplines continue to be territorial (Hegarty, 2009). Research studies tend to give scant reference to the social/environmental factors of bullying in educational contexts. There are occasional acknowledgements of the environmental and structural influences but the individualistic model prevails. Yet we only have to look at literature with a focus on bullying in the workplace to see a significant shift in perspective. Though still weighted in the pathological arena, there is a greater readiness to consider the structural/environmental influences often through the lens of organisational psychology. If the reason for scholarly evasion of bullying research in universities is due to an assumption that our universities are ‘bully-lite’ then scrutiny of this environment may not sit comfortably within a pathological framework. Perhaps as Kuhn (cited in Gergen and Gergen, 2003,p.8) asserts:

Paradigms can insulate the community from those socially important problems that are not reducible to the puzzle form because they cannot be stated in terms of the conceptual and instrumental tools that the paradigm supplies.

If bullying is reducible to a within-person phenomenon, then it follows that the potential for bullying may be present in any context. A systemic view of bullying may therefore offer much by way of explaining the phenomenon of bullying. A systemic view of bullying sees that bullying cannot be reduced to individual behaviour or to the single function of an institution. Bullying is climatically inherent in a context through systems, policies and practices that legitimise bullying behaviours as a means of control and as such can be outcome or output driven or inadvertently encouraged through the modelling of bullying behaviours and practices by those at different levels of organisational or social hierarchy. Denial and avoidance of the existence of bullying or ineffective response mechanisms also feed into the cultivation and maintenance of a bullying culture.

However, as yet, sociologically-orientated researchers into bullying have also seemingly overlooked the undergraduate student experience. University is a context which appears to pose contradictions when applying bullying theory. It is unique in its nature and position within the life course and spans both educational, workplace contexts and wide spectrum of people and practices. What follows is an exploration of those characteristics of university organisation and practice that are not conducive to a climate of bullying. This may offer possible explanation of the identified gap in the bullying literature.

4. An appreciative view of university

If we suspend any belief that bullying is a feature of student communities within our universities and move away from the traditional problem-based inquiry approach to bullying, it may prove informative to explore those characteristics and features of university which influence a climate where bullying is unable to thrive. In the spirit of appreciative inquiry, the discussion shall explore ‘what gives life here’ (Cousin, 2009) in an attempt to move away from a deficit-orientated approach of negation, criticisms and diagnoses (Cooperrider, 2008) and identify the strengths and positive aspects of the university environment which facilitate a climate of which bullying is less likely to be a feature.

At first glance, it would seem that the university environment is not conducive to bullying and appears to be a ‘bully-lite’ environment. Acknowledgement is made here that the appreciative aspects of university

study are perhaps less clear-cut than they were prior to the marketisation of universities and resultant consumer culture (Molesworth *et al.*, 2009). However there are still features of university that differ in nature than those of the school and workplace.

The hierarchical nature of many schools which is known to encourage bullying (Yoneyama and Naito, 2003), is less likely to be a feature of university experience at student level. Also, in the main, there is no compulsion to attend or the rigid disciplinary expectations and procedures that are characteristic of schools and many workplaces. The non-compulsory learning environment of university serves to encourage student self-regulation. Non-completion of assessments does not result in university-imposed punitive measures as are applied in schools. Similarly absenteeism and low or non-productivity in the workplace can also result in disciplinary action. At university, it is only the student who will 'lose out', have 'wasted their own time' and incurred debt with no academic gain.

For many students, university is a transformative experience; a time of personal re-evaluation and a re-alignment of personal beliefs, values and perspective to fit the new environment with which the student interacts. Mezirow (1978) describes adult learning as undergoing 'perspective transformation' where:

If the culture permits, we move toward perspectives which are more inclusive, discriminating and integrative of experience. We move away from uncritical, organic relationships toward contractual relationships with others, institutions and society.

Unlike school where imparted knowledge is generally expected to be passively accepted and absorbed, at university unorthodox thoughts are explored, critical thinking encouraged. Debate and the critique of viewpoints challenge the student to view their world from previously unexplored perspectives. For many students this is an environment unlike any they have experienced before. Despite school and workplace policy statements espousing claims of tolerance and valuing of diversity and promoting respect, tough managerial styles translate to the bullying of employees (Lewis, 2004) just as teachers use bullying as a means of classroom management (Yoneyama, 2008). The university experience can offer a real sense of mutual respect across student to student and tutor/student relationships. Notions attached to university of social justice and collegiality serve to maintain a multi-layered culture and the promotion of tolerance of diversity, equality and the 'rights' agenda which permeate through the campus both through subject teaching and such principles modelled by lecturers. It is important to acknowledge here the contentions surrounding whether social

justice exists or can ever be truly achieved in reality (Furlong, 2009) but the stance taken in this instance is the notion of social justice and collegiality applied to the university experience as felt and seen through undergraduate student perspective. For many students, the spectrum of social groups, cultures, ages, black and minority ethnic groups, dis/abilities encountered at university is likely to be far more varied than the environments that they have experienced prior to their entry to university. It is a rich and diverse learning community that promotes and is perceived to be accessible to all and where wide ranging support is available to help individuals succeed in their studies. Whilst schools and workplace may be diverse in their populations, they are not as heterogenic as university student populations. Greater exposure to diversity positively influences students' cultural awareness and democratic citizenship thereby heightening their knowledge and sensitivity (Johnson and Li Lollar, 2002).

The dynamics within the university classroom display levels of collegiality that are not characteristic of many schools and arguably some work environments. University environments encourage collegiate relationships built on an open and free exchange of ideas, mutual respect and a sense of equality. Highly competitive cultures militate against the development of collegial relationships and can create power differentials which encourage bullying behaviours (Simpson and Cohen, 2004). The link between bullying and the imbalance of power is a central tenet throughout the bullying literature. For most students, study at university is essentially for individual gain be it personal fulfilment, increased employment opportunities and/or professional development. This reduces student to student conflict and whilst it is recognised that such conflict is likely to be influenced by other factors such as students' inequitable input to group activities for example, or perceived inequity in accessing study skills support, the over arching pressure of 'measurement' that is characteristic of the school and workplace, is largely absent at student level in the university context.

Perhaps one aspect of university that is markedly different to both school and workplace context is the element of 'choice'. In schools, children are subordinated into mass routines, discipline and control (Thornberg, 2008). Curriculum subjects, mode of study and most other aspects of school life are decided and imposed upon pupils despite legislative and policy espousal of pupil consultation in matters regarding themselves. The workplace too can present a restrictive environment in terms of choice-making. However, universities offer increasingly flexible programme delivery which allows students to adapt learning opportunities to suit competing personal demands, offers flexibility in timetabling and a range of curriculum options (Ramsden, 2008). If we believe that the appreciative aspects discussed here explain the view that bullying is not a feature of university, this begs the question as to why this context has not attracted

research inquiry to further our understanding of bullying in different contexts.

5. Conclusion

The discussion has sought to explain the absence of inquiry into student to student bullying in the university context within the bullying research literature. It appears that how bullying is recognised and responded to in varying contexts depends upon in whose interests the research serves.

Yet such self-serving interests are orientated by other powerful groups with a vested interest to seek, avoid or disregard inquiry into bullying in particular contexts not least the universities themselves. As the discussion has illuminated, research performance and productivity are now inextricably linked to market oriented institutions of higher education; a relationship that brings with it internal and external drivers of research direction in which, as Ordorika (2006) warns:

We need to be aware of the homogenizing effects of productivity driven policies, their impact on the narrowing of university goals and the detrimental consequences on the social responsibilities of the university.

Bullying is one such social responsibility. We need to find a way to balance the interests of different stakeholders or bullying will continue to be a social phenomenon that is legitimised through misconceptions, contradictions and hypocrisy. In this regard, the bullying research community have that responsibility. To avoid application of research to a particular context in order to avoid political disturbance or on the grounds that it does not sit comfortably within the discipline's parameters nor offers any gain by way of endorsement for 'experts' represents a disservice to those whose lives are blighted by bullying. It also restricts bullying research and discourse in moving forward and developing our understanding of this destructive social phenomenon. Extending Hoel and Beale's (2006) call for a broader more interdisciplinary approach to develop our understanding of bullying in the workplace; this paper also suggests a move away from the individualistic models to an interdisciplinary approach but applied to analysis of bullying across the life course. The application of appreciative inquiry approach, can facilitate understanding of the strengths of organisational structures and practices that militate against a climate where bullying can be sustained. What we may learn from our potentially 'bully-lite' universities can then be compared and applied over the bullying life course.

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