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Bullying amongst University Students in the UK

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This study with 20 university students examined perspectives in three different participant roles: the perpetrator, the target and the bystander. The purpose of the exercise was to resolve the outcome of an alleged incident of cyberbullying using a social network site via the means of a restorative conference. The findings suggest that the power of the peer group needs to be fully understood if cyberbullying, is to be tackled efficiently. The bystanders tended to blame the victim and were reluctant to intervene, the victim felt let down and marginalised by peers' indifference and hostility, and the bully failed to realise or understand the consequences of their actions. The study offers ideas for strategies and policies to address the issue of cyberbullying with university students.

Keywords: Cyberbullying, University Students, Perpetrator, Target, Bystander, Peer Support.

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Introduction

This article describes a replication of an earlier study of bullying amongst university students (Myers and Cowie, 2013) and a re-exploration of the qualitative data gathered, with a particular focus on emotions, wellbeing and social competence. Raw data, previously unpublished, are presented here to illuminate the argument and to demonstrate the role play method used.

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Although there is a large literature on school bullying and on work place bullying, for some reason there are scarcely any studies on bullying amongst university students in the UK. This is surprising since forums such as 'The Student Room',[2] highlight the growing problem of bullying amongst university students with disturbing accounts of the long-term damage to self-esteem, academic achievement and emotional wellbeing experienced by some students. This is confirmed by Isaacs, Hodges and Salmivalli (2008) who found damage to emotional health and wellbeing experienced by those who were long-term victims of bullying from childhood through to young adulthood. Being a victim of cyberbullying emerges as an additional risk factor for the development of depressive symptoms in university students (Aricak, 2009). Similarly, Schenk and Fremouw (2012) found that college student victims of cyberbullying scored higher than matched controls on measures of depression, anxiety, phobic anxiety and paranoia.

In one large survey of 2805 Finnish university students, Lappalainen, Meriläinen, Puhakka and Sinkkonen (2011) found that around 5% reported being bullied either by a fellow student or by a member of staff. Around half of the bullies and half of the victims in this survey reported that they had been involved in bullying incidents before they left school. This continuum from school to university was especially prevalent among men in the study. Curwen, McNichol and Sharpe (2011) surveyed 159 female and 37 male undergraduates who admitted to having bullied a fellow student at least once since coming to university. The survey revealed that most of those who were bullies at university had a history of bullying at school. Although again the incidence was lower than at school, it did exist and bullies tended to target victims who were passive and less likely to retaliate. As the researchers speculate, the fact that many of these young adults had stable bullying characteristics suggests that there are strong benefits to them arising from this kind of behaviour. Furthermore, victims may remain silent through embarrassment and bystanders may reinforce the aggressive behaviour by remaining detached from the target.

Much research focuses on the individual aspects of bullying by exploring the characteristics of bullies and victims, but this fails to recognize that the group has a powerful influence on individual behaviour. While an understanding of the personal aspects of the bully-victim relationship is important, it only addresses part of the issue. Bullying involves more than the individuals directly involved since it is experienced within a group of peers who adopt a range of participant roles, whether as active agents, targets, bystanders or defenders, and who experience a range of emotions. (For a recent review of the participant role approach in bullying see Salmivalli, 2010).

Following the trend amongst researchers to explore the recent phenomenon of cyberbullying, a few studies found that the problems also exist amongst university students. For example, Kenworthy (2010) carried out an online survey of 452 US university students, inviting those who had experienced cyberbullying to respond. In this sample, the majority did not report it to anyone and only 14% indicated that their formal complaints had resulted in disciplinary action against the perpetrator. The more effective coping strategies included limiting exposure and accessibility online; less effective coping strategies were characterized by direct contact with the

2 The Student Room (www.thestudentroom.co.uk),

perpetrator. Those who coped least well were students for whom the bullying met the legal definition of *cyberstalking* and those who were being bullied by a former dating/intimate partner. One aspect concerned students' confusion about the seriousness of cyberbullying since some considered it to be simply a prank rather than a crime. Similarly, Bennett, Guran, Ramos and Margolin (2011) found evidence of hostility, humiliation, exclusion and intrusiveness by means of electronic victimization in friendship and dating relationships.

Method

Participants were 20 university students, 17 women and 3 men, aged 21-30 years who had volunteered to take part in the research. They were invited to participate in the study during a social studies lecture on bullying at school and in the workplace. The research took place immediately after the lecture and the students were provided with the information that the study was: 'to find out more about the extent of bullying within universities in order to help researchers and university staff understand the issue and to do more effective anti-bullying policy making and practice'. Additionally, there was no compulsion to take part, they could leave at any point and of those who volunteered none opted to withdraw from the study

The researchers emphasized that no real names were to be reported. They took time in introducing the research activity in order to create a supportive environment. At the end of the session, the whole group took part in a full debriefing process to ensure that no-one remained 'in role'.

We divided the students into three groups: 'Alex', 'Chrissie' and 'Peer Group'. The students were given the following role play scenario and invited to assume their assigned roles within their groups.

- Alex is a popular boy at university and is actively engaged in student politics and the campaign against tuition fees; he has a lot of friends;
- Chrissie has agreed to help Alex with his work, she has a few friends and is a first class student;
- Alex wants Chrissie to write his essay for him;
- Chrissie has refused;
- Alex has posted nasty comments about Chrissie on Facebook, questioning her sexuality, her popularity and her reputation;
- The rest of the degree cohort are turning against Chrissie as a consequence of Alex's actions;
- A restorative conference is needed to sort out the problem.

Data Collection

The purpose of the exercise was to resolve the outcome of this alleged incident of cyberbullying using a social network site. Participants were asked to engage in a restorative conference in their respective roles of 'Alex', 'Chrissie' and 'Peer Group'. This is common practice in the restorative approach. First established in New Zealand in the context of indigenous involvement with the criminal justice system, this is a mediation technique that follows a principle of reintegrative shaming (Braithwaite, 1989) (see McLaughlin et al., 2003 for a detailed discussion of the adaption, evolution and nature of restorative practice in Western Society). The offender (in this case Alex) has to face the victim (Chrissie) in discussing the offence/incident with all related

parties until an outcome is reached where all those involved are satisfied. The students were asked to answer the following questions:

1. What is your perspective on the situation?
2. What is your view of the target and perpetrator?
3. What is your solution to the problem?

Each group summarized their views on a flip chart, examples of which can be seen in the figures below and then were invited to speak about their concerns, issues and outcomes. The groups each took a turn, defending their point of view and this continued until all parties were satisfied with the outcome. The debriefing activity took place once the conflict was resolved.

Analysis

As we can see from the raw data presented in Figures 1 and 2, the participants really engaged with the task in hand. We have decided to present some of the raw data as there is often limited opportunity to do so in hardcopy journals and it gives a sense of the emotions and genuine involvement that the students had in their respective roles.

The analysis of the material generated within the groups was carried out using a qualitative approach to elicit themes and a coding system was developed. Awareness of researcher feelings, insights and interpretations, together with decisions regarding methodology, data analysis and ethical dilemmas (Miles and Huberman 1994) were noted. These issues were discussed regularly by the two authors.

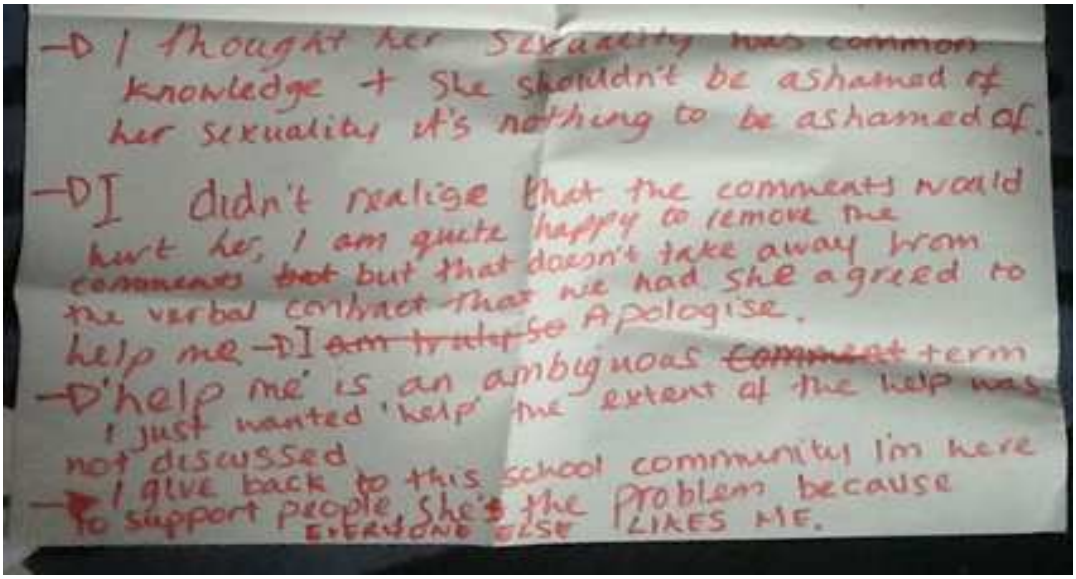

Figure 1. An Example of the Data Collected Results of Group: 'Alex'

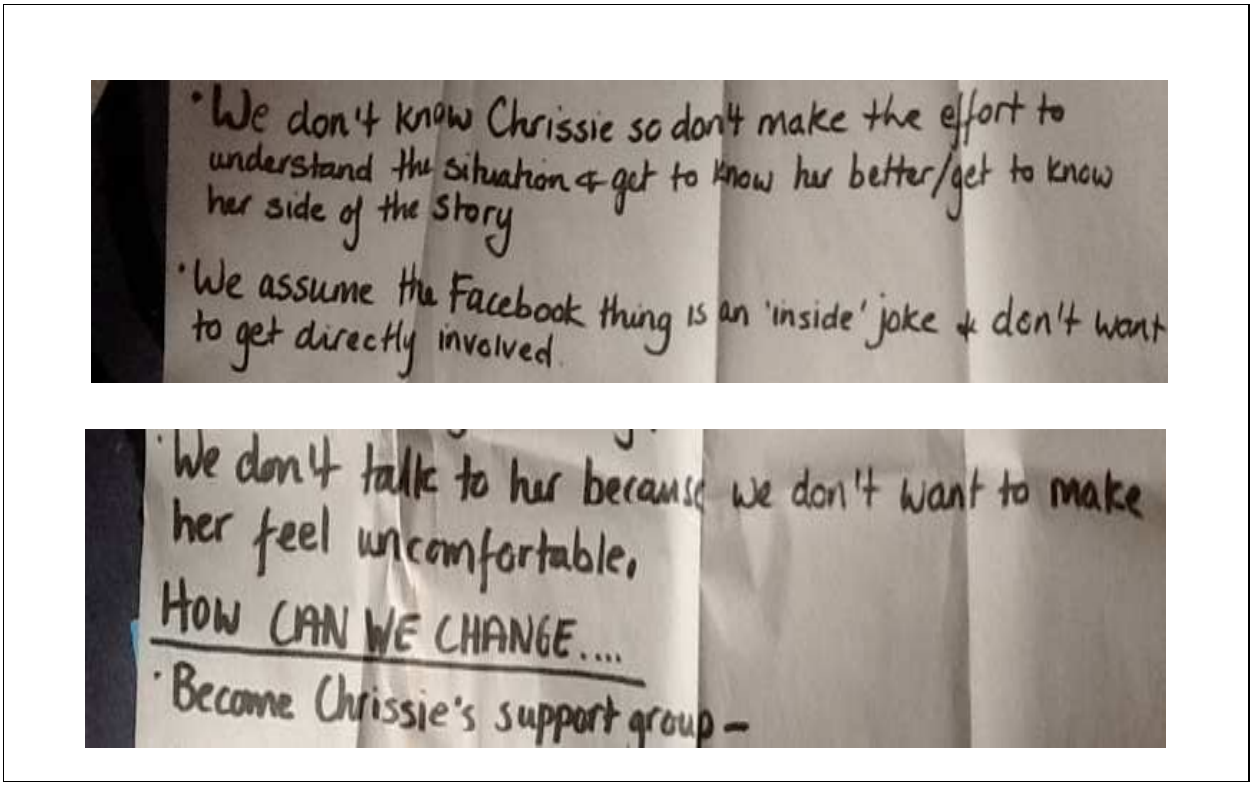

Figure 2. An Example of the Data Collected Results of Group 'Peer Group'

Results

All participants in group 2 'Chrissie' (100%) described the nature of the relationship depicted in the scenario as bullying and exclusion. They clearly identified the victim, bully and bystander roles. However, participants in groups 1 ('Alex') and 3 ('Peer Group') identified the scenario as 'just banter', 'only joking' and a 'bit of fun'

Bully – 'Alex'

All students that played the role of 'Alex' were angry at the claims made against them by those in the 'Chrissie' role and were astonished that their imagined character was being called into question. As one 'Alex' group claimed: "I give back to this university community, I am here to support people, she is the problem because everyone likes me" (A3) All students in the role of Alex had an exaggerated sense of their own self-worth to the group as a whole and the value of his imagined actions.

When pushed on the subject of the derogatory comments posted on Facebook, all those in the role of 'Alex' were quick to blame 'Chrissie' with common responses summed up in the following excerpt: "I didn't realise that the comments would hurt her. She (Chrissie) is taking this too seriously." (A4) Therefore there was a clear case of 'victim blaming' occurring and being offered as a form of defence for those who had been 'accused' of bullying whilst in the role of 'Alex'. All of those in the role of 'Alex' accused 'Chrissie' of not

seeing through her promise of agreeing to help them with their coursework in the first place: "I am quite happy to remove the comments (from Facebook) but that does not take away from the verbal contract that we had. She agreed to help me with my essay"(A3). Some even went as far as blaming 'Chrissie' for misreading the situation and being over dramatic. As one 'Alex' group stated: "Help is an ambiguous term, I just wanted 'help' the extent of the help was not discussed and she has over reacted to an undefined situation" (A4). In both of these cases the 'Alex' groups are trying to justify and defend their actions, even though, when pushed during the restorative process, all students were aware of the severity of the offence of plagiarism within the university setting.

Through the process of the conference the outcome that was met for 'Alex' was he agreed to remove the comments from Facebook and apologise but only on the condition that he could be helped with his essay. 'Alex' resented the position he was put into in front of his peers. He saw himself as the wronged party. Those students in this role found it difficult to comprehend how they had bullied 'Chrissie' and were flippant with regard to the potential harm caused by posting comments about Chrissies sexuality. They still wanted help with their essay and still pushed for help with it as a positive outcome for themselves.

Bystanders – The University Peer Group

Those students who were assigned to the bystander role were also angry at the fact they were involved in the process at all and failed to acknowledge they had a part to play in the situation. The majority of students explained that they didn't really know 'Chrissie' so they did not really understand what the situation was and why it was happening. They had seen the posts on Facebook but were indifferent to them. This is summed up in the following observation: "We don't know 'Chrissie' so don't make the effort to get to know her. 'Alex' is our friend so we support him." (B3)

To the students in the 'Bystander' group, Alex was an admired, popular figure and there was a reluctance to support 'Chrissie' instead of him. The majority expressed a desire to remain uninvolved and neutral.

A number of the students commented that the posting on the social network site was banter, a joke and "just between the two of them". When pushed on the subject of 'Alex' insisting on 'Chrissie' helping him with his work, again this group acknowledged that it was academic misconduct, plagiarism and against university rules but there was a strong resistance to be involved on any level.

When questioned about their involvement with 'Chrissie' a number of the students in this role denied knowing her, they were aware of her, but didn't regard themselves as her 'friend'. As a result a number of those in this role wanted to be left out of the conference completely. There was a general indifference towards 'Chrissie', which is demonstrated in the following observation: "We don't talk to her, she is not in our group and 'Alex' is our friend. This situation is really between those two and they need to sort it out." (B4)

The outcome for those in the role of bystander was that they were displeased with the fact that they had been wrongly involved in the situation. They acknowledged the severity of potential cases of plagiarism

if ‘Chrissie’ had done ‘Alex’s’ work but the group overwhelming believed it was up to the two of them to sort out.

Of the three groups involved in the role play the views of those in the bystander role was the most interesting to witness. These students are all over the age of 18, registered for study at University, yet their opinions and remarks replicate the comments and views of children and young people in the extensive existing research into bullying and cyberbullying. The bystander apathy exhibited, even during an imagined scenario, was a dominant theme.

Victim – ‘Chrissie’

All students that played the role of ‘Chrissie’ were very unhappy and felt sad and victimized in this role. They stated that that they did agree to help ‘Alex’ with his work but not write the essay for him. Students in this role were astonished at how a simple agreement had got out of hand and they did not understand how it had come to the situation it had. This is reflected in the following: “I agreed to help Alex but not write his essay. It is not my fault he does not have time to write his essay but I cannot do his work for him as we could both be punished and thrown out of university.” (C3)

Those in this role felt unpopular and helpless as ‘Alex’ is popular and well respected within the University and student community and due to this popularity he has posted unrelated and irrelevant comments that have now become the most important fact within the dispute and it is actually about cheating. This was unanimously mentioned by those in this role as highlighted here: “‘Alex’ should not have posted those things about me this is nothing to do with the fact that he is asking me to cheat and do his work. It is not fair that he has done this.” (C4)

Those students in this role found it easy to empathize with a victim role and were able to discuss and acknowledge the consequences of cheating and plagiarism. Some even mentioned the impact that the post had had on their emotional health and their studies. Interestingly they were the only students who even mentioned emotional health and wellbeing when they were ‘in role’.

The students in this role, although upset were also aggrieved too, which could be a demonstration of the fact they are older and not in a school environment. They were able to articulate reasons as to why Alex had made unreasonable demands and the repercussions it could have for both of their university careers.

During the process of the conference all of those in the role of ‘Chrissie’ wanted an apology and the posts to be removed from Facebook. These students were also the ones to suggest some level of group mediation so everyone, including the bystanders could get to know each other. As one group suggested: “Maybe we could all go out to the pub and have a drink and get to know each other to prevent issues like this arising again. We could even form a study group.” (C4).

Those in the role of Chrissie were the only group willing to take responsibility for their actions and for what had happened and try to resolve everything with a positive outcome. This leads to interesting questions about the central role of the victim in a bullying situation. Why should a victim take central responsibility? This is clearly an area that needs more research. For a more detailed analysis of the results see Myers and Cowie (2013).

Discussion

Although this was based on a fictional case study, the findings suggest that the power of the peer group and wider networks need to be fully understood if bullying/cyberbullying, is to be tackled efficiently at university level. The bystanders tended to blame the victim and were reluctant to intervene, the victim felt let down and marginalised by peers' indifference and hostility, and the bully failed to realise or understand the consequences of their actions.

The findings confirm Salmivalli's (2010) proposition that bystanders are 'trapped in a social dilemma'. Although they understand that bullying is wrong, and may wish that they could do something to stop it, they are acutely aware of their own needs for security within the peer group. Their inaction supports the bully and undermines the victim. Their feelings of shame and guilt are overridden by the need to belong in the group and keep the bully on side.

In the present study there was no demonstration of altruism in the bystander group until they were required to reach a resolution of the problem, at which point some recognition of the psychological distress to the victim became apparent.

The bystanders demonstrated that they admired altruistic behavior at a macro level, such as campaigning against tuition fees. However, at the micro level, they showed much less empathy for the feelings of a student who had been bullied by a popular student and, as a consequence, marginalised by her peer group. The fact that the bully was an admired figure meant that his unethical request for a fellow-student to write his essay for him was perceived in a much more lenient way than would have been expected. Thus, universities as communities have an important part to play in strengthening students' conceptions of right and wrong and in challenging behaviour that is oppressive and unjust.

The findings in the present study demonstrated the moral dilemmas faced by bystanders when they observe someone being bullied. The practice of peer support might give direction to the minority of bystanders' altruistic wishes to address injustices such as bullying and deliberate social exclusion in their university community (Schulman, 2002). This is the moral stance taken by those bystanders who – unlike the silent majority – are prepared to demonstrate publicly their dislike of injustice and oppression of vulnerable peers and, in the process, to enhance their own belief in the power of individuals to make a difference to others' lives – the quality of optimism (Seligman, Reivich, Jaycox & Gillham, 1995). Nevertheless, in the present study there was not a member of the bystander group who spontaneously broke the code of silence upheld by the student cohort.

Conclusions

There were some surprising observations arising from this study. For one thing the students expressed genuine feelings and emotions including anger, sadness, disappointment and rejection. Those in the role of Chrissie had the most explicit feelings of abandonment by their peers and were the ones who were most concerned about the ethical issues of asking a colleague to write and plagiarise an assignment. Those in the role of Alex offered disturbing levels of diffusion of the severity of the incident and responsibility. The

students in the role of bystander were the most interesting group. They were altruistic at macro level and admired Alex and his actions as a leader; however, they showed no ability to recognize that Alex's behaviour towards Chrissie was cruel, unethical and vindictive.

This small study demonstrates that the study of bullying is under researched at university level and one that clearly needs attention. It highlights the value of narrative methods and qualitative research since it gives us insights into the world of student inter-personal relationships. There is a perception that once in higher education the problems of bullying cease to exist, as students are perceived as having an idyllic existence. In reality, for some, this is far from the truth. This study highlights a need for empathy training at university level.

The dynamics played out during this study illuminates the understanding of social relationships during the transitions from adolescence to adulthood. The misconception that bullying does not happen at university needs to be considered and challenged. This also signposts that bullying happens across the lifespan.

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