Invoking human rights to stop ivory tower bullies

For those caught in the continual loop of a typical office job, the hallowed halls of higher education may seem a genteel place to work. A life dedicated to learning and instruction carries images of safe spaces of quiet reflection and respectful repartee with peers and students. The reality is different. Academia is highly competitive and uncompromising, and history has endowed it with a hierarchy that resists forces calling for its overhaul. Positions are protected, and the climb to tenure – academia’s version of total job security – requires policy-game-playing and negotiating its many unwritten rules. As a result, higher education can be a breeding ground for a malignant type of bullying that spreads below an epidermis of respectability. However, one specialist in studying workplace bullying is invoking the Universal Declaration of Human Rights to get academic institutions to stop bullying in its tracks.

Higher education institutions are not immune to workplace bullying. In fact, research shows that they can be virulent breeding grounds for a particularly pernicious form of bullying – one cloaked in popular perceptions of civility. In higher education, bullying is even delegated to subordinates. However, because workplace bullying inhabits a grey legal area, prosecuting cases is challenging. Dr Leah P Hollis at Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ suggests we should re-examine the social position of bullying from the perspective of the foremost authority on such matters: the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

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Dr Hollis’ research has uncovered an intricate web of bullying in higher education that capitalises on this blurred legal status. It typically flows down the hierarchy from tenured faculty members to junior faculty and across to non-faculty staff. It manifests itself in unreasonable deadlines, threats of budget cuts, the allocation of uncedy classes, last-minute class assignments, unjustified expectations of service, and minute-by-minute accounting of time. It is also less subtly delivered through shouting and insults. At a large degree, the faculty are the income generators for any higher education institution – they bring in the grants, the scholarships, and the fee-paying students. Therefore, they enjoy protected status – senior administrators and institution leaders are reluctant to bite the hand that feeds. As a result, higher education bullies and their networks of intermediaries can outlive executive administrators, and the path to power becomes evident for those lower down the ranks. Thus, bullying is baked into the system.

The outcomes of higher education bullying are more than systematic harassment. Hollis points to the wealth of research that has catalogued the very real mental and physical ill-health that discourses collaboration and teamwork and incentivises sick leave.

IT’S ALL ABOUT POWER

By definition, workplace bullying, such as that in higher education, is primarily based on a power differential. The bully typically has power over the target, and uses that power to demoralise those who cannot fight back. As such, workplace bullying differs from abuse rooted in racism or sexism because it can exist within a homogenous social environment – women can bully other women, African Americans other African Americans. This makes it harder to prosecute. For example, in the United States, any legislation that could be used to prosecute workplace harassment takes direction from the 1964 Civil Rights Act, which prohibits harassment based on a protected class – race, gender, religion, national origin, sexual orientation, and disability. This means the legal grounds are a little grey when, for example, a white woman professor intimidates a white woman junior researcher.

When it comes to research, bullying is an issue.

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She questioned 729 middle- to upper-level administrators such as directors, executive directors, deans, provosts, and vice presidents, as well as senior faculty members, including assistant professors, associate professors, and full professors. Of the respondents, 498 were women. The study is particularly pertinent – as women and people of colour often are in the least powerful positions, they are more likely to face workplace bullying.

Among the key insights from Hollis’ study was that 58% of the respondents reported being affected by workplace bullying either as a victim or a bystander, and 42% said they had been the victim.
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UPPING THE ANTE

With little seemingly done to curb workplace bullying in higher education, Hollis has decided to up the ante by drawing attention to the bigger picture: workplace bullying is a human rights issue. In a paper in the journal Policy Futures in Education entitled Universal Declaration of Human Rights: An argument for higher education to prohibit workplace bullying, Hollis argues that workplace bullying is an international issue that denies employees the inalienable right to civility and dignity.

Drawing on research into bullying in higher education worldwide, including in South Africa, Turkey, Taiwan, Japan, the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Nigeria, Hollis points out that workplace bullying is not limited to members of any protected group status. It is a human rights violation in its own class. She also points to the reams of research showing how workplace bullying permanently affects employees’ physical and mental health and destroys productivity. She quotes research from New Zealand that claims it mimics domestic abuse. It is endemic everywhere, and rare efforts to control it through national legislation haven’t worked. The first such law introduced in Sweden in 1993 placed the responsibility on supervisors to report and curtail bullying; little solace for subordinates bullied by supervisors.

Hence, Hollis invokes the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, specifically the affirmation that ‘all human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights, no one shall be subjected to torture or to cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment’ and ‘all are equal before the law and entitled without discrimination to equal protection.’ Given the clarity of the decree, and the unequivocal evidence that workplace bullying is cruel and degrading, it is hard to argue that it is not an egregious breach of human rights at an international level.

That it is so widespread in higher education presents a disturbing level of irony. Colleges and university campuses are supposed to be bastions of diversity and human rights ideologies. Furthermore, they have been the intellectual ignition points for social change on human rights matters, think opposition to the Vietnam War, fighting apartheid in South Africa, and calls for democratic reform in China. Hollis is calling for higher education institutions to now use that same ethical compass to steer their passion and focus inwards. In her words: ‘the need for higher education to counteract human rights violations has never been more vital.’

Research Objectives

Leah P Hollis is an international expert on workplace bullying. Her book, Human Resources Perspectives on Workplace Bullying in Higher Education (2021) examines structural issues that support workplace bullying.

References


Hollis, LP (2015) Bully university? The cost of workplace bullying and employee disengagement in American higher education. Sage Open, 0(0) 1–6.

Personal Response

What is needed for more higher education institutions to realise that workplace bullying is a human rights issue?

Ideally, higher education leadership should be empathetic to the pain and anxiety that targets of workplace bullying suffer. If an empathetic perspective does not motivate leadership, then the exorbitant cost of employee disengagement, which can cost upwards of $9,600 annually, should motivate leaders (Hollis, 2015). In the absence of an empathetic leadership or a cost saving motivation, higher education may operate like the K-12 sector regarding bullying. The tragic Columbine shooting in 1999 which left 15 dead, was the start of a movement to strictly prohibit bullying in schools. Now, all 50 states have passed legislation to prohibit K-12 bullying.

Behind the Research

Dr Leah P Hollis

Research shows that victims of bullying experience mental and physical ill-health, including post-traumatic stress, panic attacks, insomnia, and suicide ideation.