Bullying No Way! research summary

Title: The salience of social referents: a field experiment on collective norms and harassment behaviour in a school social network

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Introduction

Collective social norms describe the norms that arise in an organisation, such as a school, and influence important patterns of behaviour and cognition over time. Recent theory and research has suggested that the problem of widespread and cyclical harassment in schools is driven by students’ perceptions of a school-wide social consensus or collective norms supporting harassment.

While there is evidence of the power of social norms over an individual’s judgement and behaviour, there is little research about how individuals identify these social norms.

Social norms theory suggests that certain members of a social group - termed social referents - play a disproportionate role in reinforcing, and in potentially shifting the norms of the entire group.

Two types of social referents are described in this paper. The first type is a widely known individual with many ties across the network resulting in their behaviour being frequently observed across situations in the school community. They are often respected and seen to be popular and this, combined with their reach across the social network means that their behaviour may be seen as representative of the collective group identity.

The second type of social referent is the leader of a subgroup or clique, such as a friendship group in a school. A clique leader’s behaviour is frequently observed by clique members because they interact with each other more often than they do with other students in the school community.

Research

The goal of the research was to understand whether social referents can significantly shape their peer’s perceptions of norms in their school and as a result, change behaviours.

The research also tested the way in which cues from social referents are conveyed to their peers through everyday social interaction, rather than interaction shaped by institutional factors such as shared classes.
The research was conducted in a small public high school where teachers had observed high levels of harassment among students in previous years. In response to this, the school invited the Anti-Defamation League (ADL) to run an intervention program, *Names can really hurt us* (NAMES).

Early in the school year, researchers used a four-part survey containing questions about demographic information, relationships with other students at the school, personal beliefs about and experiences of harassment at the school, and perceptions of collective social norms related to harassment at the school. The survey and a social network analysis were used to map the entire social network of the school, thus identifying students who were social referents at the school.

A subset of these social referents were randomly assigned to an intervention program called *Names can really hurt us* (NAMES). Intervention social referents participated in two training sessions to prepare for a whole-school assembly. They wrote essays about their experiences of harassment, as either an individual who had been harassed or individual who had harassed others. Five of the social referents were chosen to read their essays to a whole school assembly. Other intervention social referents created a skit featuring types of harassment common in the school and ways of speaking out against harassment. A representative from ADL spoke about the roles of bystanders, allies and perpetrators and the effects of harassment. In an open microphone session at the end of the assembly, twenty-four students from the audience chose to speak about their experiences with harassment. The entire student cohort then discussed the assembly in small groups facilitated by the intervention social referents and adult supervisors. Various follow-up events during the school year reinforced the association of the intervention social referents with anti-harassment messages.

**Results**

Improvements in perceived collective norms about harassment were accompanied by significant decreases in harassment behaviours and increases in anti-harassment behaviours.

The research found that over the school year, students with more ties to intervention social referents:

- were less likely to perceive that their peers see conflict as “normal” or consider harassment to be a desirable behavioural strategy
- were significantly more likely to report incidents of harassment
- were significantly less likely to report personal trouble with harassment
- were significantly more likely to be nominated by teachers as students who defend other students from harassment and who do not contribute to a negative environment
- had fewer disciplinary infractions involving harassment or poor behaviour more generally
- made significantly more purchases of wristbands, which were used as public displays of support for anti-harassment behaviour.
An unexpected result was that both widely known and clique leader intervention students influenced perceptions of collective norms, suggesting that social referents do not need to be widely connected across network subgroups to influence perceptions of the school community.

Intervention social referents significantly changed their peer’s perception of the collective norm that harassment was typical in their school. However, they did not influence students’ personal beliefs about harassment being a problem at school or their beliefs about the emotional harm of harassment. Therefore, the best strategy for interrupting the pattern of harassment behaviour is to alter students’ perceptions of these collective norms, rather than addressing their personal values or beliefs.