

Bullies

Bullying, as defined by Wikipedia, “is the act of intentionally causing harm to others, through verbal harassment, physical assault, or other more subtle methods of coercion such as manipulation [...] Bullying is usually done to coerce others by fear or threat” (<http://en.wikipedia.org/>, accessed 1 August 2008). Of course, as adults we tend to think of bullying as a school-age problem and seldom talk about it or how it affects our lives. Yet, although I might be in the minority, I think that bullying is a pervasive problem in academic research and that scientists seem to accept it without further comment or disapproval as though it were a normal part of life.

PhD students, as the most junior and vulnerable members of a research group, who lack the support of success and experience to carry them through difficult periods, are most prone to become the victims of bullies. Some older colleagues might simply be scathing or insulting when commenting on an imperfect experiment; others just remain silent to cow the newcomer into submission. Some are downright nasty, but that is unusual; peer bullying is more subtle. But this subtlety is what makes bullying in this manner so insidious: it can be dismissed by senior scientists as ‘professional criticism’ or ‘character building’; it is not.

Bullying also extends to defending dishonesty when claiming credit for the results that a junior group member has generated—after the supposed mentor had ignored the experiments while they were not working. In this case, PhD students are elbowed out of the way—figuratively speaking—and labelled as trouble makers if they complain that they are not receiving due credit. The bully gets a higher position on a publication than was warranted and the pre-docs have to labour even harder to move their careers forward. Sometimes, a senior laboratory member might even steal a project

from a junior member if it seems sufficiently advanced and promising for publication.

Of course, the line between a competitive atmosphere and one where actual bullying is tolerated is a fine one. It is often the case that the bully’s motives—the need to advance their own career—fall on the sympathetic ears of the laboratory head. There is a sense that ‘everyone goes through this’ and browbeating junior members is part of their training. Research science is certainly a competitive ‘sport’, which might explain why many successful scientists have ‘strong’ characters. But too much competition easily leads to a situation in which everyone suffers and the pressure stifles, rather than encourages, excellence.

This pressure is most prominent after an invitation to give an important plenary lecture: it creates an opportunity to excel and make one’s mark on the community, but comes with large amounts of stress. In such a circumstance, the pressure on those doing the experiments increases exponentially. Some laboratory heads become outright aggressive with their team, which gives rise to a cascade of bullying as unreasonable demands are made or implied: drop other activities, work non-stop, ‘borrow’ reagents from others—all is fair in love, war and science, it seems. Similarly, fears that a competitor is going to publish something that will scoop ongoing work can also turn the laboratory into a hostile environment where anger, implications of inadequacy and internal competition run rampant. It also presents an opportunity to deceitfully commandeer or swap projects on the grounds of greater efficiency if a senior team member claims that he or she can complete the work faster.

Group leaders who create or encourage such an exploitative environment also tend to bully editors or reviewers when their grant application or paper is rejected. I have many years of experience both with the selection

processes for grants and fellowships, and with the editorial procedures at scientific journals and, from what I have seen and read, the reaction of some scientists when their grant application or submission is rejected can be downright disgraceful. If they know that they are dealing with more junior people, they will emphasize that they are the expert and that the decision should not rest with ‘some ignorant editor’ who is not a ‘real scientist’ anyway. They will ridicule the referees who critically analysed their work; they will persist, bully and coerce until they get beyond the initial rejection.

Conversely, when such bullies make their case to a more senior colleague, they change their tactic from being offensive to chummy collegiality. No matter the tactics, this bullying is unfair and to the detriment of scientists who still have to establish their reputation, and to the vast majority of colleagues who gracefully accept the comments of an editor or reviewer.

I might be exaggerating the extent and seriousness of bullying in academic science, but its existence is undeniable. Science certainly needs a degree of competition and is genuinely driven by the incentive to be the first to discover; we are a competitive species after all. Nonetheless, we should consider the damage we inflict on one another and on research itself if we tolerate bullying. Academic science needs all types of characters; not only the dominant and aggressive ones, but also the pensive and quiet workers. More importantly, scientific research flourishes best in an environment characterized by mutual respect, tolerance and support, and where bullying has no place.

Frank Gannon

This Editorial represents the personal views of Frank Gannon and not those of Science Foundation Ireland or the European Molecular Biology Organization.

doi:10.1038/embor.2008.177