Consideration of ombudsperson Jacqueline Schoone (January 2021)

Social safety in the coronavirus era

Are we seeing increased social safety in the coronavirus era?

Ever since 16 March 2020 we have been working from home, have stopped teaching in-person classes and have spoken to our colleagues on the phone and in video calls. We will continue to teach online and work from home for quite some time. For this reason, it seems fair by now to speak of the 'coronavirus era' rather than of the 'coronavirus crisis'. This period has intensified trends which had been ongoing for some time, but has also raised new questions: how do we ensure that our staff and students remain engaged in their work or degree programme, and what impact is the crisis having on our emotional wellbeing?

Some of the questions I have been wondering about recently, partly in response to the reports I have received, are the following:

• Does inappropriate behaviour continue online? Are people being harassed in the same way, and to the same degree?
• Do online teaching and working from home have certain characteristics and consequences that affect behaviour – both proper behaviour and inappropriate behaviour?

I sought to find answers to these questions, so I spoke to people and read articles on the subject of social safety in the coronavirus era.

Social safety during the coronavirus crisis: the figures

Ever since the coronavirus crisis began, the University of Amsterdam (UvA) has been conducting a study (the 'crisis monitor') on the impact of the coronavirus restrictions on staff and students' wellbeing. Respondents have reported a significant increase in academic pressure and workload. Students are having a hard time striking the right work-life balance, and are encountering academic pressure because of the switch to studying online. Nearly half of our students are concerned about their emotional wellbeing, the health of their friends and relatives, and their progress towards their degrees. Staff are reporting a significantly heavier workload (47%). The main issues reported by staff are a disrupted work-life balance, having to adjust to working online, loss of focus and a heavier workload due to care duties. Both our students and our employees would like some more clarity on their future. With regard to online teaching, the majority of students and staff indicated in our survey that this is going well, but satisfaction rates are dropping slightly. Many academic staff members mentioned that they were having difficulty continuing to conduct research.

Social safety in times of coronavirus: a few reflections

The situation in which we work has changed completely. Our usual team dynamic has been disrupted. People have been given the opportunity to temporarily withdraw from people and unpleasant situations on the work floor. If they

were experiencing problems on the work floor before – let's say, with colleagues, fellow students, team members or a supervisor – they may now experience a sense of reprieve. Does inappropriate behaviour stop when people are working from home, or are we actually seeing an increase? In this chapter I will discuss particular aspects of working from home and cyberbullying.

The difference of working from home
- No non-verbal communication and emotion
- Communication is business-like; everything is on topic.
- Conversations and discussions are less likely to take a turn for the worse, but on the other hand, there is an increased risk of misunderstanding.
- There is no social lubricant: no jokes, no positive non-verbal cues, no empathy.
- The more you arrange things by email, the more direct communications will get, and the more likely they are to result in conflicts.
- The more staff feel they are being 'seen', the greater their awareness and understanding of their own responsibility, and the more they will want to do the right thing.

Cyberbullying
However, should we assume that inappropriate behaviour and bullying end at the physical boundaries of the office environment? Needless to say, online bullying existed before the coronavirus crisis. There are various types of cyberbullying.[1] The main characteristics of cyberbullying (as opposed to regular bullying) are anonymity and the feeling that you can get away with anything because you can assume a different identity online. When people are online, they are more often willing to do or say things that they probably wouldn't do or say in real life. People lose their inhibitions on the internet. They are emboldened by the fact that they do not have to express their views and are not immediately confronted with other people's judgement. One reason why cyberbullying is becoming increasingly common is because very little is done to stop it, often nothing at all. In a regular bullying situation, the other person's response – referred to as social and affective feedback – impacts the bullying behaviour. In online bullying, there is no such feedback on the consequences of their actions on the victims, and people are more likely to engage in behaviour that transgresses social and ethical standards. Cyberbullying on the work floor happens for several reasons. One of the main reasons is a stressful work

environment. A stressful work environment is an environment in which:
- employees feel that they have a heavy workload, are asked to perform conflicting duties or are not sure what their tasks actually are;
- the manager or supervisor has an authoritarian leadership style and focuses only on the work at hand;
- employees argue a lot with their colleagues;
- employees experience a great deal of insecurity as regards the future of their jobs;
- organisational change is taking place.

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[1] Researcher Nancy Willard distinguishes the following types of cyberbullying:
Flaming: Having online 'fights' using electronic messages with angry and vulgar language, for example in 'chats'
Harassment: Repeatedly sending offensive, rude and insulting messages
Dissing: Sending or posting cruel gossip or rumours about someone to damage their reputation
Outing: Sharing someone's secrets or embarrassing information, images or videos online
Trickery: Tricking someone into revealing private information, which is then shared online
Exclusion: Intentionally excluding someone from an online group, for instance, by not talking to them in a group chat situation
Cyberstalking: Repeatedly sending messages (by email or on social media) that include threats of harm or are highly intimidating.

How inappropriate behaviour manifests online in higher education
- Socially isolating a colleague or fellow student by not inviting them to online meetings, or by deliberately ignoring the emails they send.
- Ignoring staff or students during online meetings by either not giving them the floor at all or not allowing them to speak for very long, or by blocking them in meetings.
- Gossiping about a colleague, lecturer, supervisor or fellow student in the privacy and comfort of a private chat room, or bullying colleagues or fellow students in a group chat.
- Supervisors or lecturers making 'funny' or derogatory comments on an employee or student's home situation during an online meeting.
- Harassing a colleague or fellow student with constant messages in a chatroom, on WhatsApp and/or by email.
- Lecturers or bystanders ignoring or making light of discriminatory, sexist or racist remarks in meetings or teaching situations, and failing to condemn them.

- Sharing personal and confidential information, photos or videos of a colleague or fellow student with other colleagues in an online meeting.

The problem may be caused by negative emotions. When people find themselves in a stressful work environment, they are more likely to experience negative emotions. These may either be vented online in the form of cyberbullying, or they may result in someone who happens to be feeling bad at that moment being regarded as an easy victim for online bullying.

Aggression in times of coronavirus
Could the coronavirus crisis result in greater insecurity and tension, and therefore in inappropriate behaviour? Some people will not be having their basic needs met as well as otherwise: their need for autonomy, connectedness and a certain amount of control over the situation. We are restricted in our liberty to meet others if, how and when we please. We feel close to our families, but may not see quite as much of the other people we love. We may feel like we are not in charge of the situation. Although the coronavirus crisis is bringing out the best in many people (take, for instance, the many initiatives undertaken by people to help people who are struggling), it is eminently conceivable that some people may be feeling tense, nervous and frustrated, and therefore may be behaving more irritably or aggressively than usual.

Social cohesion
Our organisation is a social community, in which people choose to commit 100% to the UvA. Social cohesion is born when people are attracted to the goals and values of an organisation. If employees are allowed to grow into a position, they know they are being appreciated, and that they play a valuable role within their organisation. Social cohesion is related to the work climate. A safe work climate is generally accompanied by strong social cohesion. These things do not just disappear when we start working from home or working online. However, now that regular moments for interacting are lacking, and now that in-person communication has all but disappeared, the connectedness between employees and the organisation is under strain. Social lives as related to work and degree programmes have all but disappeared. People are increasingly relying on their private networks (partner, parents, family, circle of friends). International students, staff from abroad and staff and students with relatively small personal networks may feel more affected by the loss of interpersonal contacts at work or on campus.

Examples of social safety (and a lack thereof) at the UvA in the coronavirus era

I have lately received several indications that I may be able to relate to the way we are working and studying at present. These indications are sometimes fresh reports, while others are new facts regarding ongoing cases.

Exclusion from Zoom calls

A student of colour reported that it had been agreed that every student attending a particular Zoom seminar would be given some time to discuss their part of an assignment. The student who is doing the talking is then given 'full-screen time'. This particular student claimed that she had not been given a full screen whenever she was discussing the assignment she had been working on. Furthermore, her turn to briefly discuss her work always came at the end of each seminar. The student said that she felt this was exclusionary, unpleasant and emotionally stressful. The way she interpreted it, she (a dark-skinned woman) was being put at a disadvantage by other people (white people) because of the way she looks. This problem regularly occurred in in-person seminars, and now it was happening again in many Zoom seminars and in WhatsApp messages related to the Zoom calls. It resulted in the student giving those Zoom seminars where attendance was not mandatory a miss; in her own words, to protect herself from aggression. When we reviewed the case with the student filing the report, we arrived at the conclusion that online meetings tend to have a tight schedule, and to be more business-like than regular seminars. Lecturers are more 'dominant' in Zoom seminars than they are in in-person seminars. And they have to be, because students may switch off if Zoom seminars are not orderly. It is up to the lecturer to decide who will be given an opportunity to speak. Since lecturers cannot keep an eye on everyone and do not always see or correctly interpret non-verbal reactions, they are more likely to skip people. And it is harder in Zoom seminars for students to claim time or take the floor.

An example of a discussion that turned ugly

In his online seminars, a lecturer kept using the Dutch word 'blank' to refer to white people, rather than the more politically correct 'wit'. A student of colour commented on this and asked the lecturer to use the word 'wit' in future. The lecturer said he would do whatever he wanted in his own seminars. The other students attending the online seminar then went off at the student making the request: could the student please stop nagging, we're sick and tired of these

types of discussions, etc. No one intervened. The student said to have experienced this to be quite intimidating. The student regarded this as an example of rules of common decency apparently eroding online, with people clearly finding it much easier to engage in inappropriate behaviour online.

The increasingly heavy workload

An employee told me that the team in which she works seemed rudderless for a while now. There is no clear leadership, work pressure is unacceptably high, while there is hardly any communication, or communication is unclear. Now that everyone is working from home, the situation has grown even worse. There is no sense of connectedness with the organisation, and there is hardly any contact between the employee and her supervisor, other than emails outlining assignments. The employee experiences a lack of clarity in her life and feels isolated from her work environment. The work pressure is on the rise. The employee is afraid she may suffer a burn-out.

Lack of connectedness

A lecturer who is on the management team reported that the team had not had any meetings since April. The team had been experiencing social safety-related problems and conflicts well before the crisis began. Apparently, they were unable to establish the minimal (online) communication required.

Conclusion?

The stories I have just shared with you are just some of the indications I have received in conversations with both students and staff. More research is needed before being able to draw any hard conclusions. Judging from these indications, it seems fair to draw the conclusion that the coronavirus crisis and all the associated working from home and working online do not directly cause increased problems with regard to social safety. However, it is also fair to say that working from home and working online are not necessarily conducive to greater social safety. If these indications are anything to go by, the coronavirus crisis does not cause problems, but rather serves as a 'contrast agent' for problems and conflicts, in that it makes pre-existing patterns and problems in the organisation more visible, perhaps in enhanced form. One may also conclude that the way in which inappropriate behaviour manifests is changing. Eliminating inappropriate behaviour in this particular context will require other types of action.

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The coronavirus crisis does not cause problems, but rather serves as a 'contrast agent' for problems and conflicts, in that it shows up pre-existing patterns and problems in the organisation and makes them visible, with these perhaps exhibiting themselves in enhanced form.

So how can you contribute?

You can do your part to create or retain a safe work or study environment, even now, while working remotely.

What you can do as an employee or a student

- When dealing with colleagues, don't be tempted to think: 'It's hard for me to gauge the situation from here, so I won't take any further action.' If you are concerned about someone, ask them how they are doing. If you notice or hear about someone engaging in inappropriate behaviour online, address them about this. Should this type of behaviour appear to be ingrained, consult a manager, supervisor or confidential adviser on the right approach to take. Your role as a bystander (online) is crucial in addressing inappropriate behaviour online.
- If you have experienced any inappropriate behaviour online yourself, make a record of the offensive behaviour. Save the messages you receive, screenshot the group chats in which you encounter inappropriate behaviour, and write down when you felt treated poorly during an online meeting. This will help you when you report the behaviour to the confidential adviser or to your manager or supervisor, and will prevent it from coming down to your word against others'.

What you can do as a manager or supervisor

- During times of crisis, people like to hear from their leaders often. If leaders behave calmly and responsibly and show a high level of engagement, people feel encouraged and are more likely to believe that the situation is under control and will work out fine. So we advise you to be very aware of your own behaviour and how you come across to the people you work with. Also have a look at the connecting-people-remotely inspiration sessions.

- Differentiate. Different groups of people have different interests and wishes. The measures implemented and choices made by the UvA with respect to the coronavirus crisis will affect different types of people in different ways: people with children, caregivers, single people, PhD candidates, international students, foreign staff, students and staff members from underrepresented groups (people who experience obstacles due to ethnicity, sexual orientation, religion, age, gender), students and staff with impairment or autism, ADHD, depression or chronic illness. Different people need different types of trust, direction, connectedness and personal attention. Get in touch with your employees more often.
- Manage your employees' workload:
  - Reach agreement on when employees can reach each other and when they will be available for work. Be clear about expectations, and also about when no work is to be done and when it is time to quit working.
  - Enter into clear commitments with employees and teams on output and results. Make the targets manageable, quantifiable and specific, and discuss the results.
  - Inspire trust and clarity. If you notice that someone is seeking recognition or is insecure about whether they have done enough, actively confirm that they have and show your appreciation. Show people that, despite the distance, they and their efforts are far from going unnoticed, and that it is fine for them to call it a day when it is time to do so.
  - Do not reward people for going above and beyond. Many employees will feel inclined to work longer hours, so keep a close eye on signs that your employees are overcompensating because they lack trust and clarity.
- In your capacity as a manager or supervisor, contact your employees individually and in a positive manner, and ask them how they are doing and what they need to be able to perform their duties remotely as well as possible.
- Keep a particular eye on people who appear on the verge of slipping from sight or who do not contribute anything during online meetings. Explicitly grant them the opportunity to present input. Make very sure that you do not forget to invite anyone to online meetings, group chats, etc.
- If you witness any inappropriate behaviour, address those engaging in it. If you notice or hear about someone engaging in inappropriate behaviour online, address them about this. And if this type of behaviour appears to be ingrained, consult your manager, supervisor or the confidential adviser on the right approach to take. Your role as a supervisor is crucial in addressing inappropriate behaviour online.
- I mentioned before that the more staff feel they are being 'seen', the greater their awareness and understanding of their own responsibility, and the more they will want to do the right thing. You can do the following to ensure that your employees feel 'seen':
  - Use a weekly huddle or other type of team meeting to look everyone in the eye during a video call, to discuss the goals for the upcoming week and to ask everyone to assume their responsibility in achieving these goals. Don't overdo it, though, as this may backfire and cause employees to feel more distrustful.
  - Create moments of contact and thus a social control of sorts within the team by actively encouraging projects in which your employees or students are expected to collaborate. For instance, encourage smaller groups to have daily moments of contact via video calls – for instance, to have a daily huddle or to briefly talk to each other after lunch.
- Encourage employees or students to show and explain the results of their work to the entire team in some alternative way, for example by encouraging them to present the results they have obtained during the moments of contact.
- Provide more direction and frameworks; not in order to strengthen your hold on your people, but actually to help them. In times of crisis, people have a greater need for this. Also be sure to create informal kick-off moments and virtual coffee chats where topics are not necessarily work-related.
- Be explicit about the goal of the online meetings you schedule. Tell people why you are scheduling a meeting. What are you hoping to achieve? This will give people a better idea of what they will be expected to do.
- The inclination is to lead using a top-down approach. You should actually be trying to find out what someone needs in order to be able to do their job well.
- Try to be as transparent as possible with regard to the decisions you make. Explain things to your colleagues and be honest about your dilemmas and considerations.