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Nexus between preventive policy inadequacies, workplace bullying, and mental health: Qualitative findings from the experiences of Australian public sector employees

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ABSTRACT: Public sector organizations have been shown to have high levels of workplace bullying, despite widespread adoption of zero-tolerance policy. Given the level of harm that stems from bullying, it has been suggested that it might be one of the most serious problems facing modern organizations. The qualitative findings from a large cross-sectional study of public servants in Australia are reported in the present study. The results highlight palpable mental distress and illness stemming from exposure to workplace bullying. This distress was exacerbated by failures in prohibitive workplace procedures. Reporting bullying through formal organization processes did not lead to resolution of the problem; it instead highlighted feelings of powerlessness and mistrust. In light of the findings, we suggest that an alternative discourse is required, one that gives attention to enhancing employee resilience and self-healing behaviours to the emotional trauma of workplaces. Organizations might be better placed investing resources in fostering the resilience and emotional intelligence of their workforce, rather than continuing to invest resources in prohibitive policies that fail to address the problem. Employees should be supported to prioritize responsibility for their own mental health, rather than an overreliance on organizational responses.

KEY WORDS: emotional trauma, employee resilience, workplace bullying, zero tolerance.

INTRODUCTION

Bullying in the workplace has received widespread international attention over recent decades, and is acknowledged as a costly human resource issue across industry sectors. Bullying continues to challenge policy makers, with evidence that the widespread adoption of preventive workplace policies has done little to mitigate the problem (Mikkelsen et al. 2011; Stagg & Sheridan 2010). In light of growing evidence that bullying can pose a serious threat to the health and mental well-being of employees who are directly or indirectly exposed to bullying (Einarsen & Nielsen 2014), there have been increasing calls for effective mental health interventions, as well as preventive measures.

Workplace bullying

Although there is no definitive set of behaviours that form workplace bullying, it commonly involves acts such as verbal aggression, spreading rumours, humiliation, sabotaging another’s work or making their work life difficult, and placing individuals under undue pressure (Hutchinson et al. 2010b). Bullying is also reported to include acts such as stalking, using social media to humiliate or denigrate, damage to professional reputation and career assignment, and social isolation and exclusion (Gilani et al. 2014). The use of work tasks or organizational processes and procedures to cause harm to individuals has led to the characterization
of organizational forms of bullying, in which organizational dynamics and power structures are enmeshed in the constellation of hostile acts experienced by victims (Hutchinson & Jackson 2015).

Influenced by organizational psychology and organizational behaviour theory, early models of workplace bullying explained the phenomenon in terms of escalated interpersonal conflict or as a feature of individual personality (Leymann 1996; Zapf & Einarsen 2005). Studies that have focused upon organizational conditions, such as work design, workplace procedures, and organizational change and restructure have provided alternative insights into the occurrence of bullying (Estryn-Behar et al. 2008; Salin 2003; Woodrow & Guest 2012). In contrast to individual or conflict-based interpretations of bullying, these studies highlight the manner in which institutional dynamics and workplace social relations have considerable influence over the occurrence and experience of bullying. In focusing upon the social construction of bullying, attention has been drawn to features of organizational climate, such as trust (Yildirim & Yildirim 2007) and the tolerance of a misuse of authority (Hutchinson et al. 2009).

Workplace bullying can also be sustained through work culture; that is, where more than one individual engages in abusive behaviour towards a victim or victims. This form of group bullying has been termed ‘mobbing’, and creates a particularly destructive team dynamic. A defining characteristic of bullying is that the behaviours form a repeating and patterned constellation of hostile or hurtful acts that are cumulative in nature. The cycle of hostility and counterproductive behaviour that manifests as bullying also has a ripple effect across organizations. These flow-on effects can erode the workplace ethical climate and quality of organizational life (Bulutlar & Unler Oz 2009; Skogstad et al. 2012; Vardi & Weitz 2004), as well as impact productivity, job performance, and the efficiency of individuals (Samnan & Singh 2012). Over time, these behaviours erode a victim’s perceptions of self-worth and capability, while at the same time, undermining social supports, performance perceptions, and work team relationships (Cassidy et al. 2014).

Precipitating and perpetuating mental distress
It has long been held that the stress-related effects of bullying arise not only from exposure to unwanted hostility and abuse, but also from the repeated and patterned nature of the abuse and the power differential between the perpetrator/s. For some time, the impact of workplace bullying has been understood through general stress theories (Zapf & Gross 2001) and cognitive activation theories of stress (Ursin & Eriksen 2004). Employing stress-related explanatory frameworks to understand the burden of bullying on mental health, it has been theorized that over time, as an individual’s coping efforts fail, the ongoing physiological stress response stemming from exposure to ongoing hostility and threat can turn to anxiety. With continued exposure to bullying, the sustained stress response results in significant functional and emotional impairment and depression (Mikkelsen et al. 2011).

Alternatively, in recognition of the harm that can stem from repeated workplace abuse, others have employed cognitive trauma theory to explain the pathway between experiencing bullying as personally threatening and the emergence of mental health symptomology. Employing this framework, it has been theorized that bullying erodes perceptions of personal safety and the benevolence of others, shatters perceptions of life’s meaningfulness and control over one’s destiny (Reknes et al. 2014), and leads to increased feelings of vulnerability, worthlessness, fear, and anxiety (Einarsen & Mikkelsen 2003).

In a recent meta-analytic study, there was robust evidence of the harmful effects on employees’ mental and physical health as a result of bullying, including burnout and reduced job satisfaction and well-being (Nielsen & Einarsen 2012). Thus far, only a small number of studies have investigated the long-term relationships between exposure to workplace bullying and the development of mental health issues. Employing a 1-year follow-up design on a sample of nurses, Reknes et al. (2014) reported that exposure to bullying at baseline was predictive of increased anxiety and fatigue at the 1-year follow up. Similarly, employing a 5-year timeframe between measurement points in a large random sample of Norwegian employees, Einarsen and Nielsen (2015) investigated the longitudinal relationship between exposure to workplace bullying and mental health problems. After adjusting for baseline mental health status, sex, and job demands/job control, exposure to bullying emerged as a significant predictor of elevated levels of anxiety and depression at 5 years. Moreover, baseline symptoms of depression in men and women, and anxiety in women, were not predictive of exposure to bullying.

METHODS
The present study involved a large cross-sectional online survey of public sector employees in one state of Australia. The survey afforded respondents the opportunity to provide narrative-based explanations of their experiences of and exposure to workplace bullying. The survey also consisted of self-reporting on behavioural exposure items and responses to bullying. The inclusion of narrative responses within the survey offered the potential for deeper understanding of this complex and often personalized issue.
The qualitative findings from the thematic analysis undertaken on the narrative responses provided by respondents are presented in the present study.

The analysis of the narrative data followed the tenets of thematic analysis. Initially, the narrative data were extracted from the survey reports and saved as Word files, which were uploaded to the NVivo (version 9; QSR International, Melbourne, Vic. Australia) programme for analysis. The narrative data from each respondent were independently read and reread by members of the team. Words, concepts, phrases, experiences, and statements that revealed the detail of bullying experiences were identified, and a preliminary set of themes and their constituent foci were identified (Coffey & Atkinson 1996). This analysis sought to distil an understanding of respondents’ experiences, as well as the construction of shared meanings. The team then met to derive initial consensus on the interpretation and generate an agreed set of themes and initial constituent codes (Krippendorf 2004), after which one team member engaged in an iterative process of immersion in the transcripts and ongoing coding and refinement of the emergent themes. Through a process of data reduction, codes and themes were systematically condensed (Boyatzis 1998; Miles & Huberman 1994). This process continued well after thematic saturation had been reached. Following completion of the coding process, cross-member checking of the NVivo coding and analysis was employed to ensure audibility and confirmability in the final analysis (Miles & Huberman 1994).

Recruitment
The sample was recruited from the membership of a large public and private services union in one state of Australia. Membership of the organization includes administrative staff employed in public sector health and allied services, schools, community services, local government services, as well as general staff in universities. The larger proportion of members in the organization is made up of public sector employees. An email invitation to participate in the survey was forwarded to members, with the survey hosted on the Qualtrics survey platform (Qualtrics, Provo, UT, USA) for a 2-week period in late 2012. Prior ethical approval for the project was obtained from the human research ethics committee of the university.

RESULTS
A total of 3345 completed surveys were obtained, of which 798 respondents provided extensive open-ended, narrative responses. These responses comprised in excess of 60,000 words of text. Analysis of these responses identified five themes related to responses to reports of bullying and the impact on mental health and well-being. These themes were: (i) mistrust in organizational responses to tolerated bullying; (ii) mental ill-health triggered by bullying; (iii) poor organizational responses exacerbate mental ill-health; (iv) workplace climates of adverse emotions; and (v) experiences of abuse and the effective use of power.

Theme 1: Mistrust in organizational responses to tolerated bullying
The most common theme within the narratives was a lack of faith that the employing organization would protect employees who reported workplace bullying. Indeed, there was a strong perception that institutions not only tolerated bullying, but would shelter the perpetrator against allegations of bullying. The following comments capture the essence of this theme:

Workplace bullying is reported, but nothing eventuates, as managers and supervisors are protected, and of course ‘don’t do anything wrong’. HR (Human Resources) is there to protect the employer and not the interests of the employee; therefore, HR follows their guidelines. So only tick a box as to ‘yes we have done this’.

The strategies that our organization has in place simply pay lip service to managing bullying on the workplace; everyone (at higher levels) is well aware that bullying is a serious issue in my workplace, that we are losing good and valuable staff because of this, but because everyone is too afraid to make their issues formal, so nothing is done.

Theme 2: Mental ill-health triggered by bullying
Mental health repercussions of being the target or witness of bullying behaviours, or working in an environment where workers were aware that colleagues were bullied and negative behaviours were tolerated, was a strong theme in the narratives. Emotional and psychological problems were common flow-on effects of workplace bullying. These were recounted by respondents to include acute anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, and attempted suicide. A number of respondents described anxiety responses on entering their workplace or being on stress or sick leave as a result of bullying. In the following excerpt, one worker who had experienced years of belittling comments from a group of colleagues told of experiencing anxiety for 3 years before she left her workplace:

I used to hate going in to where these women were if no one else was around. I suffered anxiety attacks. I used to feel physically sick with worry about going into work.

Four others recounted: ‘As a direct result (of sustained bullying), I’ve been suffering recurrent stress, anxiety,
depression, and suicidal tendencies’, ‘I have been medicated and was suicidal many times’, and ‘I suffer anxiety attacks at night’, and of ‘reaching the point of contemplating suicide and being put on antidepressants’.

The following comment captures the extent of potential harm and the lengthy road to recovery:

I was diagnosed as PTSD (post-traumatic stress disorder), finally, after being driven nearly to suicide. I could no longer work and was fired. We left the state. It took me 5 years and extensive therapy to recover sufficiently to be able to function in an organizational environment and to learn how to control the PTSD and anxiety attacks.

Theme 3: Poor organizational responses exacerbate mental ill-health
A common theme among the narratives was a lack of faith that the employing organization would protect employees who reported workplace bullying, or even respond effectively to complaints about bullying behaviours, should they be reported. Indeed, there was a common perception that institutions not only tolerated bullying, but would shelter the perpetrator against allegations of bullying. The following comment captures the essence of this theme, as well as the repercussions of inaction:

Even though I reported the bullying several times, I was either ignored or the situation was minimized. When action was finally formally taken by me, the process was delayed until I gave up for my health and I left to another area. Others had also made complaints about this person and were also ignored.

Many respondents reported that they had sought to follow the organizational procedures to respond to bullying, but were met with indifference, delay, and denials that bullying existed:

Seven staff were affected by the bully, all complained, but nothing was done. Two left from the stress, one had to go on parental leave early to get away, as it was affecting her pregnancy, and another one has gone on antidepressants.

As noted by another respondent, the act of reporting bullying was seen to have negative outcomes for those going through the formal process:

The options available in the workplace for addressing bullying are quite limited, and I have observed that when people utilize the formal process, there is a good deal of suffering for them.

Theme 4: Workplace climates of adverse emotions
Respondent narratives described the lived experiences of staff working in an environment characterized by adverse and traumatic emotions in response to a bullying culture that was seemingly pervasive and impervious to mitigation. There was often an ongoing chain of events, with respondents detailing a cumulative reaction that cycled through disbelief, disappointment, anger, betrayal, powerlessness, and hurt. The experience of ongoing trauma ran deep and lasted for many years in some cases. One respondent detailed their situation a number of years after a bullying complaint had been lodged:

I now find myself in a helpless situation and am unsure if I should contact the union....I am at work constantly feeling sad, isolated, and unable to express how one truly feels because one doesn’t know who to trust.

The narrative responses detailed personal distress, which was described in terms of ‘emotional scars’, ‘shattered confidence’, ‘physically and emotionally exhausting’, ‘destroyed self-esteem’, ‘burnt up and sleeplessness’, ‘crying every day’, and ‘turning into a banana’. Many also reported that their levels of family and social functioning were also diminished. Respondents affected by bullying recounted feeling increasingly drained of personal resources, and an increasing inability to cope with bullying behaviours at work. It was described that the emotional impact from bullying extended beyond the person at work to impact upon work colleagues and family members. These flow-on effects were described as significantly deleterious, particularly for the family. Three respondents recounted this experience: ‘My children and partner are suffering, as is my health’, ‘I am now on strong medication, and my work and family life have changed’, and ‘That time of my life was something I would never wish on anyone. At the time, it destroyed me in more ways than one’.

Theme 5: Experiences of abuse and the effective use of power
Many respondents described organizational power as a central mechanism for bullying behaviours, particularly holding positions of authority within a hierarchically-structured organization. The following narrative captures this sentiment:

Generally, the bullies are the ones who will get promoted, which then provides them with more authority and power, which usually increases the bullying. It is very difficult for staff who are bullied by managers to take any action.

Indeed, the very competition to gain power and organizational positioning was identified as a contributing factor to bullying behaviours: ‘At the moment the public service is going through a major restructure, so bullying is rife as people jockey for position and power in a climate of fear’.
Where power through responsibility and duty of care could be enforced by senior management to stop bullying behaviours and protect subordinates, it appears to have been uncommon:

Executive managers deny a problem exists and refuse to investigate complaints. Nobody is regulating the bullies, as they are supported by the people in charge. The bullies are being protected by the people that (sic) have the power to do something about it.

Interestingly, where respondents were able to resist bullying behaviour, it was through the use of personal power, either individually or collectively: 'I was able to overcome the bullying of my supervisor by empowering myself to stand up to her’ and:

At the time of the bullying by a manager, it was really upsetting and (I) knew that there was nothing that could be done, as she was known for the bullying of others. It wasn’t until after a number of people finally worked up the courage to say something that something was done.

**DISCUSSION**

Collectively, the findings from the thematic analysis situates workplace bullying in a system tolerant of bullying, where victims have limited faith that their organization will respond to bullying. Consequent hopelessness and powerlessness underpin the findings of serious mental ill-health found in the present study, and highlight how damaging workplace bullying is to the well-being of employees. The repercussions on the physical and mental ill-health of those who experienced bullying in the present study resound strongly with the existing body of literature on workplace bullying (Nielsen & Einarsen 2012), as does the prevalence of such behaviours, which the Australian Productivity Commission Inquiry into bullying (2012) suggested rates of bullying in excess of 15%.

The findings reported here also suggest that formal organizational responses to reported workplace bullying give rise to mistrust of the organization, which exacerbates the stress and trauma of the bullying. Rather than preventive policies creating a ‘holding environment’ in which workers feel safe, these findings suggest that these policies are in part creating the conditions for further victimization and exacerbation of the mental distress already generated by the bullying. Such views towards these widely-adopted preventative policies (Yamada 2015) are echoed elsewhere, including the negative impacts on staff well-being (Woodrow & Guest 2014).

Drawing on social exchange theory, it has been proposed (Blau & Scott 1962) that when employees feel valued, they are motivated to demonstrate positive attitudes and behaviours in the workplace. Related research has found that when organizational practices and the nature of workplace relationships send messages to employees about their value within the organization, work engagement is fostered; this in turn leads individuals to feel a sense of obligation and commitment to their employing organization (Rees et al. 2013). For respondents, their negative beliefs about the character of their employing organization were shaped by these experiences of fear and mistrust. This embodied perception of the workplace as a place of personal vulnerability, risk, or personal uncertainty was enacted through emotions and cognitions that were conveyed in the narratives. Fear is a universal and primitive human emotion that, within workplace literature, is most commonly associated with physical assault or verbal threats of assault. Trust in the organization to provide protection from assault and threats and to uphold ethical standards would potentially negate such primitive emotional responses through nullifying the threat. However, while trust in antibullying procedures was discernible in a very small minority of narrative survey responses, active mistrust was a dominant theme. Such widespread mistrust in the procedures can by itself encourage non-adherence to workplace policy and legislation, such as zero tolerance to bullying (Hutchinson & Jackson 2015).

The present study, alongside others, signals a need to shift our understandings of bullying away from being solely an individual or interpersonal issue (Leymann 1996), towards the more contemporary understanding that organizational factors of design and procedure also influence bullying behaviours (Hutchinson et al. 2010a). As noted in the introduction to this paper, bullying is commonly framed as an individual act, with the institutional context given inadequate attention. In contrast, our findings position bullying as an organizationally-mediated phenomenon. For respondents, bullying was constructed as a form of organizationally-mediated violence, occurring as both an individual and systemic form of abuse. This abuse was experiences as actual and symbolic, and located within the culture of what were largely public service institutions. Within the bullying contexts of this study, respondents’ fears were responses to emotional assaults and workplace reprisals enacted through mechanisms, such as delayed promotion, leave applications being rejected, or being portrayed as being inefficient to senior managers.

Within the power imbalances described in the present study, employees can become the victims of constructed discourses (Jergen 2001) that ‘talk into being’ a misrepresentation of their capabilities, leading to a real or perceived stalling of their career progression that serves as a stimulus
for their ongoing fear and experiences of hopelessness. Such constructed discourses equally contribute to the emotional toxicity of the workplace climates described by respondents, which was shown to extend into the social networks of those individuals, generating further negative ramifications of bullying behaviours. However, previous studies on workplace psychological trauma have shown that this spilling over a work-based emotional adversity into the social networks of victims can also be the catalyst to initiate help-seeking behaviours.

Of interest in this study was that those respondents who enacted some type of personal power within the bullying environments did not report experiences of mental ill-health. Within this context, personal power can be understood as controlling one’s own emotional journey and need attainment within an environment of significant social power that seeks to control others. This resonates with previous findings that explored emotional resilience and bullying in young people, with those able to distance themselves emotionally being less affected by bullying.

CONCLUSION

The regulatory and work safety framework that surrounds prohibitive approaches to workplace bullying have created expectations that such an experience will be dealt with effectively. As our study highlights, the reality for many workers will be that these policies and processes fail to adequately provide redress, leading to perceptions of mistrust and fear. The dynamics of disappointment and breached trust that result from failures to address reported bullying might play a key role in negatively impacting employees. It was evident from the narratives of respondents that organizational events lend themselves to an escalation of potential psychological harm.

Given the damaging personal toll on the mental well-being of those exposed to bullying and the systemic inadequacies in providing a rapid response to build employee safety, an argument can be mounted for alternate ways for employees to respond to workplace bullying. Powerlessness and passivity are evident in being the victim of bullying and in awaiting an organizational response to those behaviours. A complementary approach to the existing preventative policies is for individuals to assume greater self-responsibility for both being more resilient to bullying, through building enhanced premorbid well-being, and engaging in self-healing behaviours post-exposure to the emotional trauma of workplace bullying. The findings in the present study support such an approach, with those who enacted proactive responses reporting experiencing greater personal power.

REFERENCES


