Workplace Bullying: critical reflections and the problematic of culture

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– a discussion.
Abstract

Discourses specific to bullying have focused on issues such as definition, frequency, motivation behind bullying and the part that power plays in the bullying dynamic. However, it can also be argued that bullying is a culturally created phenomenon, our understanding of which is in a process of continuous development. Forms of bullying can vary from one cultural location to another but it thrives in workplace cultures that are competitive, and dominated by autocratic management styles.

This paper does not seek to elucidate on bullying from the perspective of motivation to bully, types of behaviours, or its effects. This has been well delineated in previous conferences such as the 2002 Adelaide International Workplace Bullying Conference (see proceedings). Rather it seeks to function as a generation of ideas for discussion based on critique of the assumptions that underpin our understanding of issues such as power and control in the workplace and how they contribute to the maintenance of bullying cultures. Thus, it will explore what we understand by workplace culture and climate, issues of enculturation, conflict, power and empowerment and the implications these have for discourses on bullying. Finally, this paper calls for a process of consciousness raising specific to the culture of the workplace, as a vital step in the eradication of bullying.

Much research has contributed to our understanding of what constitutes bullying (see Leymann 1996, Vartia 1996, Olweus 1993, Adams 1992, 1994 and Einarsen et al
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1994). While some variances emerge between academic arguments, some significant similarities have contributed greatly to the development of our understanding of bullying behaviour, such as bullying as hostile and unethical communication targeted at another or others and as ‘systematic stigmatisation’ encroaching on the civil rights of another (Leymann 1996) or bullying as systematic mistreatment and victimising of fellow workers through repeated negative acts (Einarsen and Skogstad 1996). The debate surrounding workplace bullying has been developed into understandings of bullying as constituting an abuse of power (Rigby 1997, Farrington 1993), that those in weaker power positions may be more vulnerable to experiencing bullying (Zapf et al 1996), indeed even that bullying may be understood as the ‘exercise of power for psychological gratification at the expense of others’ (Martin 2001:6). Discourses specific to bullying also include exploration of the part culture and socialisation play in the bullying dynamic as is typified by Stainton Rogers argument (1992:2) that bullying is a ‘culturally created and continuously evolving idea…differently understood from one historical and cultural location to another’ and that bullying is fostered and maintained in workplace cultures that are competitive and influenced by autocratic management styles (see Mannix McNamara 2001, 2002).

Other recent attempts to define bullying have explored the question of subjectivity with regard to understanding bullying (see Einarsen 2000a) as it is difficult to hold one encompassing stance with regard to bullying. However, Einarsen’s (2000b) contribution that ‘someone persistently, over a period of time, perceives himself to be on the receiving end of negative actions from one or several others, in a situation where the one on the receiving end has difficulties defending against these actions,’ encompasses themes such as frequency, number(s) of perpetrators and issues of power and perception. Rather than engage in an exploration of bullying from the perspective of definition, manifestation, motivation, types of bully and victim as has been effectively delineated at the 2002 Adelaide International Workplace Bullying Conference, (see conference proceedings) this paper seeks to function as a discussion document. It seeks to explore some of the assumptions behind issues
such as power and control in the workplace, and organisational culture and climate as contributory factors to the bullying dynamic.

**Organisational Culture and Climate**

Organisations are understood in a multiplicity of ways. Overtly they may be understood in terms of how they are visually represented, the building, its contents, employees and so on. However, in practicality when one commonly refers to an organisation one is usually referring to a social network, its structure as well as its mission and culture (Handy 1993). Culture then is less tangible and yet is the most significant element in workplace quality and satisfaction. Simply defined it is the organisation’s personality, the product of shared values, beliefs, norms, priorities and expectations that inform the way the organisation manifests itself (West Burnham 1997). Senior (1997) offers us a pithy anchor for our understanding of organisational culture as simply *the way we do things around here*. Climate within an organisation describes peoples’ perceptions of what it is like in a given environment (Egan 1985). Cultures can be overt such as what is reflected in the stated mission of the organisation, or they may be covert, which are the unnamed cultures of the workplace. In other words, that which is not immediately evident and can be perceived through the ‘undiscussed’ elements in an organisation, such as what is taken for granted. ‘Undiscussable’ issues are generally sensitive and usually avoided in the public forum and can function as an important window on the dynamic of fear in the workplace (Ryan and Oesterich 1998:80).

**The clash of values**

There is often within organisations the problem of ‘espoused culture’ versus ‘culture-in-use.’ This occurs when an organisation states its values explicitly (for example via mission/vision statements), but contravenes them in its actions. An example of which is where organisations state their workers are their most valuable resource but no care is given to them, their quality of work life (QWL) is ignored and bullying permeates in its place. This is problematic in that professionally, members of particular organisations are constrained by the culture and social organisation of the professional community to which they belong. They may not feel empowered to
make decisions with regard to bullying behaviours, which can leave them in a situation of frustration. The content of culture can be seen in how people act and what they say and do, in other words in the patterns of how people relate to one another within the organisation. Cultural rituals abound within workplaces often at the sub conscious level for many employees. These rituals can be perceived in simple things like who parks their car where every day? Who sits with whom for coffee? (Do people even have particular coffee cups they use?) Who sits with whom for meetings? Who dominates meetings and how? Who remains silent? How are decisions made? By whom? What communication patterns are employed to get people to do particular tasks... and so on? Such cultural micro rituals are particularly significant in professions such as teaching and nursing which are intensely hierarchical in their organisational structures (Mannix McNamara 2001).

**Enculturation**

New employees are generally socialised into the norms and culture by others and can quickly become ‘encultured’ into an acceptance of the beliefs, norms and cultural rituals of the organisation (often relinquishing some of their own norms and beliefs in the desire to become an accepted member of the group). Should the new employee not slot into the status quo of dominant cultural rituals, or choose not to relinquish norms or beliefs that are in conflict with those norms, their socialisation may become traumatic, fostering rejection from peers and often resulting in exclusionary and/or bullying behaviours from others. Organisational theorists have likened the organisation to an organic whole; if we accept such a comparison then each new employee changes that organic structure in a significant way (Corwin 1970). The problems emerge in hierarchical organisations where positions of rank and status stifle creativity and individuality and where enculturation into the status quo is the expectation for new employees. While cultures of hierarchal organisations (including those of power and control) regularly feature as factors in facilitating bullying at work it is imperative not to assume that all bullying occurs within the relationships of hierarchical power imbalance of manager/supervisor and subordinate as the past decade of research into workplace bullying has so clearly delineated. However, competitive work cultures, maintenance of status and image
and attempts to subjugate others in an effort to offset perceived threat regularly motivate bullying behaviour within the workplace. Rayner and Hoel’s (1997) five-category classification of bullying highlights implicitly the links between workplace culture and bullying. The categories include behaviours such as (a) threat to professional status, including belittling and public humiliation, (b) threat to personal standing, including personal insults and intimidation, (c) isolation, preventing opportunities for continuous professional development, social isolation and withholding of information, (d) overwork, including undue pressure, impossible deadlines (e) destabilisation, setting the person up for failure, assignment of belittling tasks, reminders of mistakes.

Higher levels of bullying have been reported in professions such as education, health care, public administration and banking (Zapf 2001). Suggested reasons for this vary from limited career pathway, promotion based on seniority rather than achievement and the problematic of work appraisal for the work of professionals such as teachers. It may also be more difficult to substantiate behaviours such as constant criticism, allocation of meaningless tasks in such professions and job security as ‘public sector employees may endure bullying in the interests of job security, as indicated by their persistence in jobs commonly earning less than those on private industry.’ Thus in effect bullying could be deemed the ‘dark side’ of job security’ (ibid: 18).

Conflict
Conflict within organisational life is often feared as something that needs to be avoided without recognition of its potential to be a healthy and dynamic feature of the workplace, through which progress can emerge. Conflicts may remain unresolved within organisations as a result of fear in dealing with conflict or simply a lack of skills specific to conflict resolution. However, unresolved conflict can escalate into workplace bullying situations that could have been avoided. Since the advent of much needed research and consciousness raising with regard to bullying in the workplace there is an increasing danger of the confusion between what is in effect conflict between employees, and bullying. The differentiation between what is bullying and what is not bullying as proposed by Einersen and Matthiesen (1994,
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2002) is helpful when discussing the problematic of bullying within the framework of organisational culture and climate. They offer us the distinction that ordinary everyday conflicts and struggles that emanate as a result of everyday human workplace interactions are not to be construed as bullying. While many may perceive this as common sense, in the misuse of the label of bullying that is becoming prevalent in many workplaces the importance of such a differentiation is becoming increasingly significant.

In a recent study of bullying among four hundred randomly selected health care professionals in Ireland (Breen 2004)\(^1\) issues of power and control emerged as a significant issue for participants. The study was conducted initially using Einersen’s\(^2\) Negative Acts Questionnaire (NAQ) where respondents could tick options such as not bullied (1), now and then (2), monthly (3), weekly (4) and daily (5). Once the data was collected via postal survey response rate of 45% (N=180) the frequency categories were combined to create three new experience groups as denoted by Hoel et al (2001) of; not bullied (1), bullied occasionally (2+3) and bullied regularly (4+5) Of the total sample 28.8% (n=52) reported having been bullied during the previous six months, with 24.4% (N=44) occasionally bullied and 4.4% (N=8) regularly bullied.

Phase two of the study involved qualitative research techniques such as focus group and interviews with participants who had and had not experienced bullying at work. Participants differentiated between their experiences of abuse in what they perceived to be formal power such as that of manager or superior using their power to control subordinates for personal gain, and informal power which they perceived their colleagues (peers) who engaged in bullying behaviour to have. This differentiation between different types of power raises issues around how we understand power and the part it plays in bullying at work.

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\(^1\) This study was carried out as research towards the award of an MA under the supervision of Patricia Mannix McNamara, University of Limerick.

\(^2\) The NAQ was utilised with the kind permission of Stale Einersen, University of Bergen, Norway.
Issues of Power

Power as the undercurrent emerges again and again in discourses specific to bullying and yet while the nomenclature of power has been used widely it is really since the emergence of reconceptualisations of power as proposed by Foucault (1980) and critical theorists such as McLaren (1995, 1989) and Giroux (1989, 1992) that we have begun to critically explore the implications of power in the formation of identity and relationships. Behaviourist approaches perceive power as an object, existing outside of one that one may use ‘over’ another in order to gain something. A gets B to do something that they may necessarily not have done themselves. This can be measured in the action that B takes as a result of A’s instigation. Thus A may be perceived to hold power ‘over’ B and this may have been accrued through professional status for example a leadership role or managerial status (see Lukes 1974). Thus power can be perceived in terms of cause and effect. Bachrach and Baratz (1962) have developed this understanding of power, as within social contexts, thus it becomes not only ‘power over but also ‘power to.’ Therefore, while A has the managerial power over B, B may chose to act or not to, thus power now can be understood to flow in two ways and can actually be negotiated. In reality we know it is not this simple, people may not feel they have the capacity to freely make the decision to say no. Lukes (1974) critiques the assumption that agents are free to act without the fear of reprisal within organisations and warns of the implications of ‘systemic power’ that can become imbedded and translate into ‘intuitional bias’ in that people are not aware of how their relationships influence them to either use power or be the objects of its use. The culture of the organisation holds within it implicit assumptions about power that are played out in the behaviours of its employees every day. Systemic power becomes institutionalised and sustained ‘by a series of individually chosen acts ...and also by the socially structured and culturally patterned behaviours of groups and practices of institutions’ (Lukes 1974 in McNiff 2001). Yet still power is perceived as hierarchical in nature and an object to be utilised and exerted over others. This understanding of power as exerted by one over another is a feature of the discourses of those who have experienced or witnessed bullying.
Foucault (1982) offers us an alternative understanding which may aid us in the support of those experiencing bullying and indeed in our work with organisations where bullying prevails. He rejects the understanding of power as reified. Rather he argues power is constituted in the relationships played out among people as they strive to construct their identities. Foucault (1982, 1997) reconceptualised how power can be understood. Rather than perceiving it as reified and external to people he likened it to capillary action that flows between people in daily interactions.

Power in itself, which has come to be understood often in negative terms, is according to Foucault neither good nor bad, in effect it is neutral. However, how power is played out in the everyday practices of people as they relate to each other is where the difficulties emerge. What this reconceptualisation offers us is the opportunity to rethink how targets of bullying understand what they perceive to be the absence of their own personal power. If we understand power to be negotiable and as existing in the relationship, as flowing between people as they interact, then in any given interaction the target of bullying is not without power as they may perceive themselves to be, but rather their perception of powerlessness may hinder their capacity to respond. Organisational theory traditionally understands power as an object derived from structures and utilised to encourage others to conform to the dominant practices necessary for the organisation to function well. However, power is present, in reality, in the micro practices that employees engage in every day.

Critical awareness of how power is played out in relationships of coercion may be a valuable first step in challenging climates where bullying prevails. Foucault’s view of power is encouraging for employees in organisations as it provides a window for one to reconceptualise one’s experiences of bullying. ‘Political orthodoxies, although powerful, are never monolithic. There are always oppositions, alternatives, resistances and creativities’ (Middleton 1998:3 in McNiff 2001).

**Empowerment**

Empowerment approaches are ontologically opposed to forms of oppression and exploitation. Empowerment can be understood as the fostering of autonomy and personal growth. This is often achieved through participation in collaborative interventions. It requires self-reflection, dialogue, action and commitment to
change. However, as with power, care is also needed in the assumptions we make about empowerment. For while one cannot empower another person, (it is not a benevolent gift that one person can bestow on another), one can create the environment through which a person is facilitated to become aware of the implications of their sense of powerlessness with regard to specific situations such as harassment and bullying. Through the process of consciousness raising, people can become aware of their sense of control of their work situations. Empowerment can best be understood as the process of supporting people to take control of their lives via successful tackling of a problem such as bullying, through provision of assertiveness training for employees in an effort to foster their defences against bullying (Randall 1997). While this support is given to employees it does not take the responsibility from organisations which need to be seen to be effectively dealing with the issue of bullying rather than simply placating it. The danger of focusing on developing assertiveness skills for targets of bullying and of employing empowerment strategies is that others in the organisation (such as employers) may assume that it shifts the focus from dealing with the bully and bullying behaviours. Conversely, such perceptions may further increase the sense of blame and inadequacy that bullies can engender in their targets. Therefore, it is vital that any empowerment strategies are in tandem with an obvious intolerance of bullying behaviour in the workplace and that the organisation is clearly perceived to be effectively sanctioning bullies and bullying behaviour. Empowerment in this situation means creating a positive and supportive culture and climate for people to work within. Empowerment processes can become an effective tool of organisational change and can aid in the fostering of a symbiotic relationship between employee and organisation, in that the organisation gains what it needs, a healthy and empowered work force and employee needs are also satisfied by the creation of a positive and collegiate work culture.

What can be done?
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The culture and climate of workplaces facilitate bullying behaviours. In an effort to create workplace cultures of collegiality, consciousness raising for both employers and employees specific to the impact of workplace culture on people's health and sense of personal security is vital. Such collegiate environments require a commitment to mutual respect and relationships characterised by reciprocity. Challenging dominant cultures within organisations is a daunting task requiring revisiting of an organisation's mission, and goals and communication practices but doing so provides an organisation with the opportunity to critique how it understands its function, issues of power and control, and most importantly its responsibility towards those who work within it. By critiquing the culture of the organisation a window of opportunity is opened for embedding best practice and policies specific to bullying and employee relations into the mission and vision of the organisation thus fostering a climate of empowerment and growth for those who work within it.

Conclusion

Organisations must take responsibility for bullying and also for those whose lives have been affected by being subjected to bullying. As organisations reinforce the dominant assumptions about power and control within their hierarchical structures they also maintain cultures of bullying and collusion. To change the culture of an organisation we need to reconceptualise our understanding of how organisations need to be structured to be effective and how power is constituted within the relationships of those who work within the organisation. Within many workplaces it is when the bullying occurs that attention is focussed in what needs to be done. Proactively, organisations should focus on prevention first by focusing on creating an empowering culture within the organisation within which bullying can have no place.
References


