PSYCHOLOGICAL WARFARE AT WORK:
THE DESTRUCTIVE CYCLE OF RECIPROCAL BULLYING

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognised as a significant threat to the psychological well-being of employees in a wide range of industries. While the common image of bullying involves an anti-social "bully" infringing a "victim's" expectations of workplace respect and dignity, this paper explores situations where members of a dyad bully each other. This phenomenon is explored using findings from a qualitative research project using multiple methods to investigate bullying in the Australian Public Service. Characteristics that differentiate such reciprocal bullying from unilateral bullying are discussed. Our conclusions reflect on the difficulties faced by staff in disentangling personal and professional relationships in the context of a highly formal and hierarchical organisational use of power.

Keywords: workplace bullying, workplace aggression, psychological warfare, interpersonal relationships.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years research in management, psychology and related disciplines has focussed increasing attention on abuses of interpersonal power in the workplace. A wide range of terms has been used to describe behaviours that can have detrimental effects on employees, including bullying (Lewis 1999: 41), mobbing (Leymann 1990; Zapf 1999), workplace violence (Atkinson 2000), psychoterror (Heine 1995), emotional abuse (Noring 2000), workplace harassment (McMahon 2000), psychological harassment (Luzio-Lockett 1995), incivility (Andersson & Pearson 1999), moral harassment (Di Martino Hoel & Cooper 2003), nonsexual negative interpersonal behaviours (Keashly Trott & Maclean 1994).

These behaviours, collectively called bullying here, represent a newly recognised workplace safety issue involving a wide variety of negative acts such as:

> " … persecuting or ganging up on an individual, making unreasonable demands or setting impossible work targets, making restrictive and petty work rules, constant intrusive surveillance, shouting, abusive language, physical assault and open or implied threats of dismissal or demotion" (Stone 2002: 660).

Bullying is increasingly a business issue for private and public sector organisations as business environments become more complex, dynamic and competitive. Bullying is likely to affect not only individual employees but also the internal environment of an organisation. For example, bullying might reduce the quality of work-life in a business unit or alter the 'psychological contract' (Davidson & Griffin 2003) linking employee contribution to work conditions. Such aspects of the work environment affect employee satisfaction, productivity and efficiency (Stone 2006), and many theories of worker motivation indicate a fundamental need for security in the workplace (McShane & Von Glinow 2000).

Although bullying is increasingly recognised as a serious problem for organisations, its complexity is not widely understood. A common perception involves a 'bully', an antisocial aggressor, harming an innocent 'victim' in a scenario of unilateral and unprovoked aggression. While this form of bullying is clearly evident, a recent empirical investigation of bullying in the Australian Public Sector uncovered significant evidence of repeated bullying between members of a dyad or group. In this situation, identifying 'bully' and 'victim' was not straightforward, even where one party was more frequently, overtly or intensely the aggressor. The term 'psychological warfare' was used by one respondent, and seems to convey the essence of such continuing, multilateral aggression.

In this paper we examine such 'reciprocal' bullying, exploring its differences to the more widely acknowledged 'unilateral' bullying. Reciprocal bullying has been reported in a number of prior studies (Einarsen Hoel Zapf Cooper 2003; McCarthy 2003; McCarthy & Rylance 2001; Rafferty 2001), but there are few investigations of its unique characteristics and consequences. We report results from a larger exploratory study of bullying in the Australian Public Service (see Omari 2007).

A number of questions are raised by reports of reciprocal bullying. Can a 'perpetrator' and an 'aggressor' always be identified? To what extent do management practices encourage this type of bullying? Does it always involve active aggression? What is the role of imbalances in organisational power? How are personal relationships, such as friendships, involved? The data reported here did not

provide definitive or precise answers to these questions, but did raise hypotheses worthy of further investigation.

Conflict has been described as an inevitable part of human relationships (e.g. Bagshaw 2004; Kaukianinen Salmivalli Bjorkqvist Osterman Lahtinen 2001), and one with severe impacts; its effects may persist long after the conflict itself has ceased (Keashly & Nowell 2003: 348). The emotional problems created by reciprocal bullying are likely to be profound, and may in themselves contribute to other forms of bullying: Zapf and Gross (2001) consider unsolved conflicts create fertile grounds for bullying. Others note that when bullying continues over time it becomes more socially acceptable in a workplace (e.g. Einarsen Hoel Zapf Cooper 2003; Hoel Rayner Cooper 1999; Rayner Hoel Cooper 2002). Therefore it is crucial researchers understand the nature and significance of bullying in which both parties actively maintain a relationship based on 'warfare'.

METHODOLOGY

The larger study on which this paper is based involved eleven APS agencies in Western Australia. Four agencies volunteered to participate in all stages of the study, while individuals from other agencies volunteered for one or more stages. A triangulated research design was used to improve the reliability and validity of the data, based on four research methods.

First, three focus groups were held with twenty-eight participants from four agencies, providing information on the nature of behaviour considered as bullying and on its causes and consequences. Attendance at these sessions was voluntary. These focus groups provided a contextual frame for the study.

Second, a survey examined the agencies' climate and culture, and the rates and nature of bullying. The last few pages of the survey provided space for respondents to recount stories of bullying (either as victim, bystander or alleged perpetrator): fifty-four volunteered stories, some more than one. Some stories were brief but many were extremely detailed, spanning multiple pages.

Third, semi-structured interviews with three HR managers and two policy makers in these organisations provided insight into the APS culture.

Fourth, individuals who had been verbally or formally accused of bullying were invited to provide their perspective in unstructured interviews; ten alleged perpetrators volunteered. It should be noted that 'alleged perpetrators' were not targeted or approached directly: the survey form invited staff accused of bullying to contact the researchers to provide their side of the, word was also spread through informal networks within the public sector. These interviewees were simply asked to recount their story.

The findings reported here are primarily from the focus group, interviews and survey. In these, participants were asked to recount incidents of bullying. No definition was supplied, and therefore the findings provide a completely subjective view of bullying.

The survey yielded a response rate of 37%, representing 219 usable questionnaires from public sector employees in 11 APS agencies across Western Australia. There is some ambiguity in the response rate as the number of surveys dispatched to the agencies was based on figures provided by the organisations; absences, turnover and other staffing issues mean it is likely fewer were actually received and the actual response rate is likely to be higher than 37%. The sample appears to have demographic representation broadly similar to that of the Australian Public Service (APS) at the time of the study, in terms of age, gender, and having English as a second language.

FINDINGS

Findings from the focus groups, interviews and survey are discussed together here for reasons of space. We concentrate on illustrating three themes that question traditional notions of bullying: the difficulty of identifying a 'perpetrator' and a 'victim' or 'target'; the fine line between management and bullying; and the subtlety of this form of bullying.

Difficulties in Identifying Perpetrators and Victims

Cause-effect relations are not always simple in bullying incidents. For example, Zapf (1999) makes the interesting point that a victim displaying "anxious, depressive and obsessive behaviour" may be showing both an effect of bullying and a cause of it; such behaviours may invite attention from potential bullies. From a clinical psychological perspective, such behaviours can be related to personality styles that have self-destructive tendencies towards seeking out domination by, or even psychological hurt from, others, (e.g. Shostrom 1967).

The concept of codependence, stemming from the work of psychologists such as Cermak (1986), can be usefully associated with such behaviours[i]. Hannabuss (1998) speaks of a 'bully-victim dyad' relationship of co-dependency built up over time through complex social interactions in which the perpetrator learns that taking on an aggressive stance brings success, while the victim adopts a more submissive role to avoid confrontation. These behaviours become a continuing social dynamic, in which it is likely that both victim and bully face psychological harm.

In the present study, there were a number of respondents reported stories in which it was not clear who was the bully and who the victim. For example, one HR practitioner was keenly aware of how a subordinate was bullying him, and that the subordinate also felt bullied:

> *"I had made HR decisions directly affecting a staff member and the person's responses via e-mail contained accusations, inflammatory comments and indications of retribution and payback. As indicated I was not bothered by the e-mails but I can clearly see that they constitute bullying. The speed, content and constant bombardment with demanding emails for a period of time was a concern. I can also see looking at the bigger picture that the person sending the emails also felt that they were being bullied by me, because of the power I had used and the decisions I had my in my HR role."*

McCarthy (2004: 179) cites an example of a more extreme nature: "In one case, both the recipient and the alleged perpetrator left the employer believing the other was the perpetrator, and each later initiated legal action against the employer". In such cases, assuming both sides' views have some substance, it is unclear how to use the labels 'perpetrator' and 'victim'.

Management or Bullying?

The possibility that management processes and action may be perceived as bullying because they impinge on a worker's sense of dignity and respect has been raised (Standen & Omari 2007). McCarthy (2004) gives the example of managers who alienate staff by describing them as poor performers, to the point where the subordinate files charges of bullying. Through such lack of sensitivity in giving feedback, managers may be inadvertently but actively leading an employee towards reduced performance and increased feelings of alienation and dissatisfaction. Neuman and Baron (2003: 190) report a "substantial and growing literature suggesting that perceptions of unfair (insensitive) treatment, on the part of management and/or co-workers, often serve as antecedents to workplace aggression and violence". In such situations staff may retaliate, a process sometimes referred to as 'upward bullying' (e.g. Branch Sheehan Barker Ramsay 2004).

Our interviews showed how managers' responses to such complaints can exacerbate a staff member's negative reaction, beginning a destructive 'vicious circle' (Figure 1). While the reasons for such escalation was not always completely clear, they generally showed a lack of coping resources in the subordinate. In some extreme cases there was a suggestion of a developing or pre-existing psychological condition such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem or personality disorder, although the nature of the study prevented confirmation of this. In either case, managers' inability to predict subordinates' lack of coping resources could be described as a lack of sensitivity or empathy.

Of particular interest was the frequent identification of performance management as a source of bullying by both superiors and by subordinates. The alleged perpetrators interviewed in this study were all identified as a result of a performance management process. Individual's identifying themselves as victims of bullying also reported a very large proportion of incidents resulting from performance management.

The difficulties of conducting performance management may be in part due to recent emphasis in the APS on not 'carrying' individuals regarded as poor performers in quality or quantity of work. This focus on 'accountability' was particularly resented by some long-term employees who felt they were

being 'picked on'. Further, it appeared that management performance often raced ahead of effective supporting policies and training, leaving managers ill-prepared and under-supported in an already difficult situation.
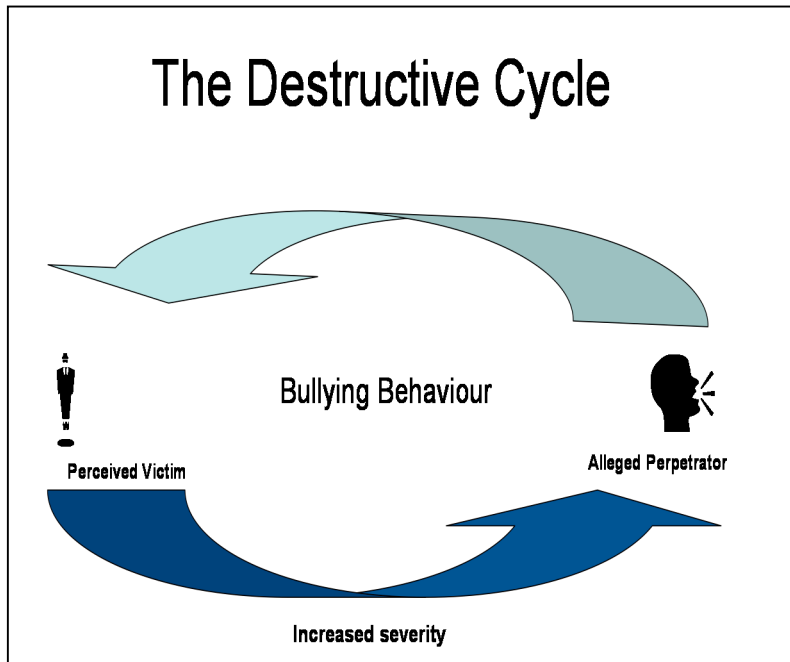

Figure 1: The Destructive Cycle of Bullying at Work

It appeared the staff member being managed felt him/herself to be a 'victim' and saw the manager as a 'bully' in recognition of the power imbalance between them. They tended to label the performance management process as harsh or unfair. At the same time, the victim's responses to this were interpreted by the manager as bullying, causing them to increase pressure for performance. The subordinate would in turn respond with increased pressure on the manager. Such responses were often passive aggressive behaviours such as undermining, avoiding work (e.g. with leave), sarcasm, recruiting others into factions and so on. The labels 'victim' or 'bully' become difficult to apply in this 'power struggle'; who began it often appeared a moot and unproductive question.

An interesting feature of these incidents was that managers reported subordinates behaviour as far more severe than subordinates reported managers' bullying. Self-reports of subordinates tended to corroborate the seriousness of their reactions; they felt caught up in a web of inappropriate or unfair behaviours, citing a range of causes from self-confidence or poor health to excessive power

imbalance, management pressure, management incompetence and management intolerance of diversity (see Omari, 2007). However, not many reported their own psychological state a reason for the perceived maltreatment by management.

Conversely, managers often explained bullying events without acknowledging problems in the management environment; rather they alluded to vague psychological factors in the subordinate, such as: "*issues in personal life*", "*inappropriate fit to the organisation & values*", "*psychological imbalance*", "*paranoia*", "*deficient performance (quality & quantity)*", "*absenteeism*", "*unusual behaviour, prickly*".

This focus on the faults of others is characteristic of a 'power struggle' dysfunction in human relationships. Examples of this are found in the work of clinical psychiatrists and psychologists such as Kets de Vries (1991, 2001) and Hirschhorn (1990). For example, Hirschhorn shows how organisations mirror family environments, with management exerting parental authority over dependent subordinates who may respond with child-like active or passive aggressive behaviours. Similarly, de Vries finds in the 'dark side' of individual leaders a re-creation of childhood responses to power imbalances, such as a narcissistic desire for control which may be easily exerted over employees but which requires more subtle manipulations to obtain power over superiors or external agents. Gender, age and physical appearance may contribute other sources of power that individuals use to gain power in dysfunctional relationships.

These difficulties with power are, of course, not always as extreme as the pathological cases described by these authors. Some managers in this study did acknowledge the difficulty of deciding whether the 'victim' was indeed unwell or whether their own behaviour or perceptions were at fault, and the difficulty of discharging their organisational duty of care for the subordinate. They felt constrained by the organisation's rules of privacy, unable to defend themselves publicly and unsupported in the challenging role of 'change agent'. One described this situation as being "*hung out to dry*".

Managers' reactions varied from little concern, for example in those who believed they were in the right or had good intentions, through to strong expectation that their career would be ruined. The

latter reported feeling disbelief, anxiety, stress and 'devastation'. It appears that becoming involved in psychological warfare provides a strong test of managers' own coping resources.

In particular, the general contrast between managers' and subordinates' perceptions of the 'cause' of these incidents shows managers lacked awareness of employees' perceptions of their own role in responding to external environmental pressures, organisational culture or specific organisational initiatives such as performance management. In reality, of course, environments do affect employee's psychological health, sometimes in serious ways (see Felson 2006). Attributing cause and effect in such contexts is not simple. It is well known that individuals lacking an internal locus of control tend to attribute negative outcomes to others, or the environment (Rotter 1954). Whilst subordinates may be as likely as their managers to do this, it may be easier for organisations to improve the self-awareness and empathy skills of managers in an attempt to reduce reciprocal bullying.

The difficulties raised by managers in ascribing cause to subordinates' behaviour lead to problems in determining their own emotional and managerial response. If external factors or their own management roles were implicated, different responses would be considered. These issues suggest a need for greater levels of support, training and reviews for those conducting performance management.

Social and Organisational Power

An interesting element in some reciprocal bullying cases is the role of underlying social relationships. Considering the evidence noted above concerning the common role of 'power struggles' in family and other non-work relationships it is perhaps not surprising that workplace relationships become conflated with the organisational power imbalance between managers and subordinates. Subordinates reported a heightened sense of breach of trust or betrayal by managers with whom they considered they had a social relationship when management decisions went against them. Some managers, conversely, appeared to lack boundaries in many situations, giving staff the benefit of the doubt or taking their individual circumstances and personal life into account rather than formally managing the

issues. While motivated to help the subordinate, such failure to use management authority to set clear boundaries merely perpetuated the cycle of bullying.

The complex nature of such dyadic interactions is illustrated in a story recounted by a team leader who struggled with a conflict between her role as a mentor to a subordinate with difficulties in her personal life, and her role as a manager needing to remedy the subordinate's underperformance. The staff member seemed to encourage a personal relationship almost to the level of a parent-child relationship. However, the manager herself appeared as unhealthily needy, craving support from her own manager and peers.

CONCLUSION

Reciprocal bullying differs from unilateral bullying in the difficulty of ascribing 'perpetrator' and 'victim' roles. In our results, the prevalence of reciprocal bullying resulting from performance management reviews suggests it might be a response to a power imbalance that is perceived, paradoxically, by both sides as favouring the other. The party perceiving themselves an 'underdog' in terms of formal power resorts to active or passive negative behaviours, while the 'topdog' becomes frustrated at his or her inability to achieve their goals through the use of organisational authority and seeks to exert it even more. The resulting power struggle may continue with relatively little consequence, but becomes dysfunctional according to each party's coping resources.

From this hypothesised theoretical model we would predict that reciprocal bullying has the capacity to extend over time and to reach very serious consequences compared to many incidents of unilateral bullying, because both sides have and use significant power.

We propose that this phenomenon replicates elements of family and other relationships, and that where these also exist in workplaces, further entanglement of individual and organisational power may occur.

We were also struck by the pathos of these situations. Some cases of performance management-related reciprocal bullying were quite serious, with managers or subordinates reporting physical or

verbal assault, stalking, feelings of extreme anxiety, high levels of stress or physical health symptoms. Often both parties seemed to lack the resources to resolve the issue, prolonging the conflict and reducing their wellbeing. While managers (and less often subordinates) alleged the other party acted out of psychological 'illness', which we could not objectively corroborate, the continuance of the dispute showed participants lacked the skills to either determine if this was the case or effectively deal with it.

It seems likely that reciprocal bullying was to some extent exacerbated in the Australian Public Service due to both its inherently hierarchical use of power and to recent attempts to increase formal authority over 'poor performers. We would expect fewer instances of this phenomenon in flatter organisations or those run with less formality. However, the underlying issue appears to be less power imbalances per se than the preparedness of managers and subordinates to deal with its personal consequences. Training in interpersonal skills, improved selection processes and other forms of attention to the subjective and emotional consequences of management processes are needed as much as more policy or managerial interventions.

Understanding of these issues can be promoted in public discussions by recognising that

bullying can involve passive or indeed overtly friendly behaviours, and can occur in dyads where relations become 'codependent' on a complex series of interactions of aggressive or submissive nature, from which both parties gain psychologically. Our findings suggest significant difficulty in disentangling personal and organisational responses amongst employees and their managers.

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NOTES

i   We note that the relationship between codependence and related psychological phenomena is considered unclear by many academic researchers.