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Listening to the bullies: An exploratory study of managers accused of workplace bullying

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Why talk to the bullies?

- What we know about workplace bullying is generally derived from the perspectives of the targets and witnesses of bullying.

- None of this research has focused on the bullies perspective

Research consistently points to a range of factors that contribute to workplace bullying:

- Organisational factors
- Social factors
- Personality and actions of target
- Personality and actions of perpetrator

Central questions in this study are:

- How do the accused bullies justify their behaviour?
- What are the antecedents to the bullying complaints?
- What are the consequences of being accused of workplace bullying?

Media Release

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New study seeks managers accused of workplace bullying

- Accused of bullying in the last two years
- Worked in a supervisory or managerial capacity
- Willing to be interviewed about their experiences and /or complete a survey

Participants

- Thirty (9 male and 21 female) participants completed a survey questionnaire and twenty-four of those participants agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Mixed Methods

- Thematic analysis undertaken of interview data

- Analysis of survey data
  - Demographic data
  - The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) (Lovibond & Lovibond, 1995)
  - Negative Acts Questionnaire – Revised (NAQ-R) (Einarsen, Hoel and Notelaers, 2009)

RESULTS:
Outcome of bullying investigations

	Percent of participants (N)
Found Guilty	26.7 (8)
Found Not Guilty	66.7 (20)
Unresolved / Not investigated	3.3 (1)
Missing Data	3.3 (1)

Theme 1:
negative organisational climate as an antecedent to complaints

- One of the major themes to emerge from analysis was that the accused bullies reported a working environment that was fraught with conflict, role ambiguity, and inappropriate behaviours.

negative organisational climate

- Many participants reported little support from higher management in relation to the conflicts they were experiencing and that support was withdrawn following the complaint against them.

- Participants described industrial issues such as heavy workload, staffing shortages, lack of clear roles, poor performance from subordinates, and significant workplace conflicts.

Theme2:
an inappropriate social environment

- An inappropriate social environment was also a strong theme to emerge from analysis.

- Participants described a social environment where inappropriate jokes, and “corporate sense of humor” contributed to complaints of bullying.

For example:

- *I am very professional when need be, but when there is no one in the office I kind of make it a very casual environment which is kind of how we achieve our best work…..Sometimes I can call it kind of like a pub environment for want of a better word because it is very laid back and casual" (Male manager in a private organisation).*

Theme 3:
blaming the victim (complainant)

the accused bully saw the complainant as:

- a bully themselves,
- poor performer,
- over reacting to a minor transgression (such as one off conflict),
- Reacting unreasonably to a reasonable managerial request or action

Some perpetrators justified their actions by attributing them to others:

- .*“ I asked someone to carry out tasks outside their job description because my manager required me to do this, and I have excessively monitored somebody’s work because I was asked by senior manager to do so”* (Middle Manager, Private Organisation)

- *“Because her behaviour was so bad I took disciplinary action against her…. including putting her on diminished work performance, giving her time frames to improve her behaviour, I used to have regular counseling sessions with her about her behaviour with other staff……. so she put in a complaint against me to our ethical standards unit and that started the process of investigation”. [female senior manager, public service organisation]“*

Theme 4:
the bully as the victim

- Some participants also described the complainants behaviour as bullying and saw them selves as the victim.
- Some reported that employees lodged or threatened to lodge bullying complaints against managers as a way of controlling, threatening, or manipulating them.
- Some saw the complaint against them as part of a bullying process and referred to other inappropriate behaviors that the complainant had carried out against them, but they had not reported

Victim or perpetrator?

Have you been bullied at work over the last 12 months	N	Percentage
No	10	33.3
Yes, bullied very rarely	8	26.7
Yes, bullied now and then	5	16.7
Yes, bullied several times a month	2	6.7
Yes, bullied several times a week	2	6.7
Yes, bullied almost daily	3	10.0

When asked if she had been bullied, this participant said:

- *"Absolutely. Absolutely. Absolutely, Oh, and I think that most managers that are accused of bullying have, nearly 90% or more, 95% they will tell their story and if you understand the context there will be a group of persons in their team that displays intimidating or threatening behaviour. I have absolutely been bullied….."(HR Manager, Health Service)*

Another said:

- *“What we were discovering in that department was that they used bullying accusations as a way of stopping you from managing and it had developed into a bit of a tool so I was quite confident right from the beginning that there had been no bullying”* (Senior Nurse Manager)

Theme 5:
the bully is a bully

- a number of the accused bullies in the current study described carrying out inappropriate behaviours and had little insight that their behaviour was inappropriate

- justification of behaviour by accusing complainants as over reacting to reasonable managerial actions, or humor, jokes or discrete behaviours (such as ignoring them).

The bully is a bully

- *…she accused me of shouting at her too. …. I just want her to actually comply with our quality standards and procedures and policies…. I was accused of being a "dictator" by the HR rep. In my office! I couldn't believe it." (Middle Manager, Public Service)

The bully as a bully

- *He also said that I was a sarcastic bitch. He actually used those words. Which is unfortunately a reflection of my sense of humor that didn't work with him, but you know. I was aware of that and I often apologised. You know sometimes I would say flippant things but I was often very conscience that I didn't say anything personal about anybody and it was sort of jokes but there was never a target. They were never targeted at anybody. (Manager in Educational Institute)*

Picture sent to target by perpetrator
(Perpetrator did not view this as inappropriate)

Consequences of being accused of workplace bullying

- All participants reported psychological distress as a result of the allegations

- Many described ongoing mental health problems including being diagnosed with a posttraumatic stress disorder, anxiety and depression, including suicidal ideation.

- Half (50%) of participants reported taking time of work because of anxiety, depression, stress, or being diagnosed with a specific psychological disorder.

- Twenty seven percent (n=8) participants reporting taking up to 5 sick days during the investigation,

- 23% (n=20) reporting having more than two weeks off sick during the bullying investigation.

- At the time of the interviews three participants were either on, or were in the process of applying for workers compensation

Depression, Anxiety ands Stress Scale (DASS) scores

	Depression % (n)	Anxiety % (n)	Stress % (n)
Normal Range	26.7 (n=8)	23.3 (n=7)	26.7 (n=8)
Mild Range	3.3 (n=1)	0	16.7 (n=5)
Moderate Range	26.7 (n=8)	46.7 (n=14)	10.0 (n=3)
Severe Range	13.3 (n=4)	13.3 (n=4)	23.3 (n=7)
Extremely Severe	26.7 (n=4)	13.3 (n=4)	23.3 (n=7)

Other themes to emerge:

1. Emotional regulation
2. Loss of confidence in managerial ability
3. Concerns about reputation “ No smoke without fire”
4. Exit from the organisation

Conclusions

- This study confirmed previous research where the antecedents of bullying have been shown to be an interaction of the organisational culture, inappropriate workplace social system, as well as the behavior the target and the behaviour of the perpetrator.

- However, it is important to know that these antecedents have now been verified from the bullies accounts of workplace bullying.

- Many of the participants displayed little insight that their behavior was inappropriate, despite being found guilty of bullying
- However, results raise the question as to whether some accused bullies are victims and not bullies
- Making a bullying complaint may be one way that employees can bully their mangers
- Some complaints were about conflict situations, one off conflicts, organisational practices and reasonable management actions

- Using bullying grievance procedures may be one way that staff can complain about a wide variety of conflicts or behaviours that are not necessarily bullying – (organisations don’t tend to have conflict resolution policies or procedures)

- Bullying accusations have significant negative health and career consequences for the accused

Despite the exploratory nature of this study, and the limitations that accompany this type of research methodology:

- This is the first study that we know of that has examined the perspective of the accused bully in examining bullying complaints.

  Therefore, its exploratory and qualitative methods can be justified and the results of the current study can be regarded in as break in the long tradition of only listening to the victims' voice in workplace bullying research,

- Slides available on: www.aboto.com.au