



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

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Why listen to the bullies?

- What we know about workplace bullying is derived from the perspectives of the targets and witnesses of bullying.
- There has been no research that has interviewed / talked to the accused bully as far as we know

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:

- What was the background to the bullying complaints?
- What sort of behaviours were the perpetrators accused of?
- How did the accused bullies justify their behaviour and what was their response to the allegations made against them?
- What were the consequences of being accused of workplace bullying?

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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
- Statistical analysis of survey 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)

NAQ Results

- No differences in the Total NAQ (negative behaviours participants subjected others to) scores between those who had been found guilty ($M = 28.25, SD = 4.30$) and those found not guilty of bullying ($M = 27.33, SD = 5.04, t(24) = 4.46, p > .05$).
- No significant differences were found in the Total NAQ (negative behaviours that participants were subjected to) scores between those participants who had been found guilty of bullying ($M = 39.12, SD = 17.20$) and those found not guilty of bullying ($M = 37.00, SD = 11.91, t(24) = .36, p > .05$).

- While no statistical differences were found between the overall frequency of Total Negative Acts *perpetrated by* middle managers and senior managers, results indicated that middle managers subjected subordinates to significantly greater number of personal attacks (M=16.25, SD 4.00) than the senior managers did (M=13.81, SD1.83, $t(26)=2.16$, $p<.05$).
- No statistical differences were found in the frequency of work related negative acts perpetrated by junior and senior managers.

Theme 1:

negative organisational climate was a strong background in all the 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.

- Accused bullies described a background of:
 - industrial issues,
 - heavy workload,
 - staffing shortages,
 - lack of clear roles,
 - ambiguous job descriptions,
 - poor performance from subordinates,
 - and significant workplace conflicts.

Theme2:

an inappropriate social environment

- Accused bullies described a social environment where :
 - inappropriate (sexist) jokes were the norm
 - inappropriate “corporate sense of humor”
 - Inappropriate social behaviours occurred
 - sarcasm was viewed by the perpetrator as humor
 - A ‘blokey’ environment was encouraged

All 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 viewed the complainant as:

- a bully themselves,
- poor performer,
- over reacting to a minor transgression (such as one off conflict),
- reacting unreasonably to an appropriate managerial request or action
- being resistant to organizational changes

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

When given the definition of workplace bullying from the SA Occupational Health and Safety Act, 66% of participants reported being a victim of workplace bullying.

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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
- They justified their behaviour by accusing complainants as over reacting to reasonable managerial requests, and over reacting to 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)*

- *“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)*

This picture was
sent by a
perpetrator to a
staff member



In summary,

- Some of the participants were bullies, and some were not.
- Some may have been bullied by their staff.
- Whether they were found guilty or not, most were trying to manage departments under considerable stress, with a background of conflict, job ambiguity, and restructuring.

- Many participants behaved badly, but did not view their behaviour as bullying,
- The bullies had little insight into their inappropriate actions, normalized their behaviour and downplayed its effect on others blaming the complainants for over reacting to minor transgressions.

Consequences of being accused of workplace bullying

- All participants reported psychological distress as a result of the bullying allegations made against them
- 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 and 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)

- *“It affected me severely. I became suicidal. Seriously, I was devastated, mortified, and began to question what I had done, and to whom – it was the worst period of my entire life. I suffered a racing heart – my blood pressure escalated; I experienced my first ever panic attack; I had a continual pressure in my chest; I could not eat; I felt I could trust no-one; I became deeply depressed. [Senior Manager, Private Industry]*

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

Practical applications

- Organisations need to address the antecedents to bullying accusations, not just focus on policy and complaint management
- An OHSW approach addresses these antecedents as potential hazards that support bullying

- A conflict management approach addresses conflicts before they become framed or develop into bullying.
- Both these approaches (OHSW and conflict management) need to be incorporated into anti bullying programs in order to prevent bullying complaints.

- Slides of this presentation can be downloaded from:

www.aboto.com.au

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