Bullying Allegations from the Accused Bully's Perspective

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Research on workplace bullying to date has relied predominantly on self-reports from targets and bystanders, largely ignoring the contributions of other stakeholders such as the alleged perpetrator. This study aims to close this gap by focusing on the perspectives of the alleged perpetrator and examining the background of the bullying allegations, the types of behaviours labelled as bullying and the perpetrator's justification of their behaviours. Twenty-four managers who were accused of workplace bullying were interviewed for this study, and a thematic analysis of the interview transcripts was undertaken. Many participants reported a highly stressful workplace, including ambiguous roles, staff shortages and high levels of conflict, as well as inappropriate social behaviours being carried out by others in addition to themselves. A number of participants viewed themselves as targets of bullying by their staff, and others defended their behaviour as legitimate performance management.

Introduction

The study of workplace bullying is no longer a new phenomenon, as the last two decades have seen widespread research into the topic. Despite this, research from the perpetrator's perspective has only recently begun to emerge in the literature, and what we know about workplace bullying is largely derived from the perspectives of the target or bystander. Most studies have focused on bullying behaviours from the perspective of the target, and there appears to be very little research that gives the perpetrators' explanation of their own behaviour, or indeed the behaviour of the target. However, some of the more recent research from the perspective of the perpetrator suggests that focusing only on accounts of bullying from the targets' perspective may not provide a balanced picture of the phenomena. For example, a number of authors have suggested that job insecurity makes it more likely for workplace bullying to occur because targets are less likely to challenge unfair and aggressive managerial treatment (Hoel and Salin, 2003). However, from the perspective

of the perpetrator, De Cuyper, Baillien and De Witte (2009) found that the relationship between workplace bullying and job insecurity was stronger when perpetrators were highly employable, suggesting that perpetrators are more likely to bully if they are able to get another position more easily. This example illustrates how scientific knowledge in relation to how job insecurity influences bullying behaviours has been advanced by including both the targets' and the perpetrators' perspective. The tendency to rely on self-reports from targets, and to a lesser extent witnesses, while ignoring the views of other stakeholders has been identified as a significant gap in the research (Coyne *et al.*, 2003; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2007; Rayner and Cooper, 2003). The current study aims to address this imbalance further, by focusing specifically on the perceptions of managers who have been accused of workplace bullying. We aim to examine the background of the complaint made against the alleged perpetrator, the allegations themselves, and the reasons that accused perpetrators gave for the behaviour of which they were accused.

In examining why individuals are accused of bullying, it is important to note that the term 'bullying' needs to be approached with caution. This is because it is often not clear whether the term is being used to describe behaviours which, although interrelated, are not necessarily bullying (Branch, 2008; Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2009). Although there are a number of definitions of bullying in the scientific literature, there are three specific elements that distinguish bullying from other conceptually similar constructs. The first is that bullying involves the repetition of negative behaviours (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). The second is that there is a power difference between the target and the bully. The third key feature of bullying is that behaviour has the potential to harm the target (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996). Unlike some other forms of conflict, harassment or even violence, bullying is not a one-off event, but is viewed as an escalating process where the target is placed in a more and more inferior position over time (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). Therefore, the main concepts underlying the term 'bullying' are as follows:

> harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label of bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003, p. 15)

While it is recommended that anti-bullying policies and complaint procedures contain clear definitions of workplace bullying (Richards and Daley, 2003; UNISON, 2003), employee accounts of bullying have been found to be much broader than the recognized definitions of workplace bullying that are based on the key criteria described above. Employee accounts of workplace bullying suggest that the term is used to describe a wide range of behaviours and relationships, including negative organizational interactions that are not necessarily personal interactions. Employees categorize a number of negative workplace experiences under the wider umbrella of 'bullying' (Lewis, Sheehan and Davis, 2008). These experiences include systemic concerns such as unrealistic case loads, feeling continued pressure to perform, as well as other organizational systems or processes which negatively affect the way employees carry out their jobs (Lewis, Sheehan

and Davis, 2008). This wider use of the term 'bullying' as a description of discontent is supported in research by Liefooghe and Mackenzie-Davy (2003, 2010), who found that employees do not limit themselves to a recognized definition of bullying, but call a number of organizational practices and conflicts bullying. Employee definitions of workplace bullying have also been found to omit the persistence, frequency and power imbalance that are key criteria in workplace bullying definitions (Saunders, Huynh and Goodman-Delahunty, 2007). In particular, in situations of organizational change where subordinates lose formal or informal privileges, these unpopular changes may be labelled as bullying (Zapf, 1999a). This loose interpretation of 'bullying' has implications when allegations are made by employees who may be disgruntled with management decisions and organizational changes, or report interpersonal conflicts as bullying. This may lead to over-reporting of non-bullying conflicts labelled 'workplace bullying'. One avenue for employees to complain about workplace conflicts and unpopular practices is to use workplace bullying complaint procedures, and label discrete behaviours and workplace conflicts as bullying.

Types of bullying: predatory bullying and conflict escalation

Two main types of bullying have been identified in the research. These are bullying as predatory behaviours and bullying as escalated conflicts. Einarsen (1999) described predatory bullying as when the perpetrator has an intention or a perceived intention to harm a target. In predatory bullying, the target may be attacked because he or she belongs to a certain out-group, such as a sole woman working in a male-dominated industry. In this type of bullying, the target has not initiated the conflict, but is attacked because of their characteristics, or because they are a scapegoat for unpopular decisions or actions (Einarsen, 1999). Some early studies suggest that predatory bullying occurs as the result of the psychopathic or tyrannical personality of the bully (Ashforth, 1994; Field, 1996). Popular literature with catchy titles such as *Snakes in Suits: When Psychopaths go to Work* (Babiak and Hare, 2006) or *Working with Monsters: How to Identify and Protect Yourself from the Workplace Psychopath* (Clarke, 2005) can serve to encourage the view that bullies

have psychopathic tendencies, describing lists of specific diagnostic criteria and making suggestions with regard to what you should do to address the 'workplace psychopath'. However, both the accuracy and the ethics of this approach have been questioned by researchers (Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2007). Specifically, it is argued that this perspective not only serves to stigmatize and vilify alleged perpetrators, but is inconsistent with the evidence-based occupational health and safety approach that has been recommended to both prevent and manage workplace bullying (Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2007; Dollard and Knott, 2004).

Workplace bullying has also been studied from a conflict escalation perspective, where bullying can be viewed as a process of escalating conflict which develops from multiple causes related to target, perpetrator and workplace (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). Bullying has been described as a certain subset of conflicts (Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2009) which is typically triggered by a conflict situation. According to Leymann (1996), bullying occurs when conflict escalates to a point where one person (the weaker of the two) is stigmatized and becomes the target. As the conflict continues to escalate, the target is finally expelled from the organization. Research by Zapf and Gross (2001) supports this conflict escalation approach to workplace bullying and found that workplace bullying typically escalates over a period of time, either in distinct stages or as a continued increase in bullying behaviours. However, it was not always the perpetrators that escalated the conflict, but at times the targets who carried out retaliatory, provocative or threatening behaviours themselves (Zapf and Gross, 2001).

Explaining workplace bullying from the accused perpetrator's perspective

While the overall research is inconclusive with regard to the hierarchical status of the perpetrator (Zapf *et al.*, 2010), a number of studies suggest that workplace bullying is more frequently enacted by individuals in more senior positions (Cowie *et al.*, 2002; Hoel, Cooper and Faragher, 2001; UNISON, 1997). However, more recent research suggests that upwards bullying, that is bullying of managers by their subordinates, may be an under-explored phenomenon (Branch, 2008; Branch, Ramsey and Barker, 2007, 2008).

Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen (2009) found that being a target of bullying, regardless of the frequency of bullying behaviours, strongly predicted involvement in bullying others, with greater exposure to bullying increasing the probability of bullying others. Similarly, De Cuyper, Baillien and De Witte (2009) highlighted the view that reciprocity is part of the bullying process, with the interface between target and perpetrator sometimes blurred. Together, these studies suggest that, at times, targets may be perpetrators, and perpetrators themselves may have been targets. Clinical studies have also drawn attention to the often blurred boundary between perpetrator and target (Tehrani, 2003), with other studies suggesting that perceptions of bullying in the workplace may be partially a function of the target's attribution style, rather than objective reality (Martinko *et al.*, 2009). While these findings fit with the conflict escalation approach to workplace bullying, they also highlight the often nebulous boundary between perpetrator and target that early studies focusing on the target's perspective have failed to acknowledge.

Aims of the study

As an exploratory study that focuses exclusively on alleged perpetrators, this research aims to elicit the views, perceptions and attributions of the alleged perpetrator, helping to bridge the gap between perpetrator- and target-oriented approaches to examining workplace bullying. The specific questions to be explored in this study are:

1. What behaviours have the accused bullies been accused of? Do these behaviours fit the recognized definitions of workplace bullying?
2. How do the accused bullies describe the complainants' behaviour? It is expected that some participants will describe complainants' behaviours as workplace bullying, and will identify themselves as victims of bullying.

Method

The thematic analyses undertaken in this paper are grounded in phenomenological epistemology, which seeks to understand the everyday experiences of research participants in order to gain a

better understanding of workplace bullying from the perspective and reality of the accused bully. Smith and Dunworth eloquently explain one of the reasons why we have chosen to use a qualitative methodology to examine the perceptions of the accused bully:

> Qualitative approaches are generally concerned with exploring, understanding and describing the personal and social experiences of participants and trying to capture the meanings particular phenomena hold for them . . . Qualitative approaches are particularly useful when the topic under investigation is complex, dilemmatic, novel or under researched and when there is a concern with understanding processes, not measuring outcomes. (Smith and Dunworth, 2003, pp. 603–604)

Sample

The study was advertised through radio and newspaper interviews, following a media release. Participants were self-selected and contacted the researcher if they wanted to participate in the study by completing a survey and/or attending an interview with the lead researcher. Because one of the objectives of the study was to examine the impact of bullying allegations of managers and the phenomena of upwards bullying, participants were eligible to participate in the study if they were working in a managerial/supervisory capacity and had been accused of workplace bullying in the previous two years.

Twenty-four participants agreed to be interviewed for the study. Participants were aged between 29 and 63, with a median age of 49 years. Approximately 37% were employed in the public service, including hospitals, schools and government departments, 33% in the private sector, 8% in local government and 20% employed by non-government agencies such as community-run child care organizations and charity organizations.

Interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with 19 of the participants who lived outside the metropolitan area. Five participants from the metropolitan area were interviewed face to face. These interviews were carried out either at the university or, at the participants' request, at their place of work. Interviews lasted approximately one hour.

The interview questions were based around a loose interview guide, which included a series of open-ended questions aimed at assessing the background of the allegations and the impact of the bullying allegations on the participants. Rather than a structured set of questions, the guide provided a list of areas that the researcher wanted to cover. It was important to the researcher that the interviews took on the quality of an 'informal conversation with a purpose' as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (1999), in order that participants were able to discuss sensitive issues relating to the bullying allegations made against them.

The interviewer aimed to elicit the participant's perspective as to why they were accused of bullying, and questions were designed to engage the participant in talking about various aspects of their complaint experience. The first question asked in all the interviews was 'Can you tell me how you came to be accused of workplace bullying?' The informal nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to deviate from the guide if a participant raised an important issue or provided an unusual answer to a question. The interviewer asked follow-up questions with probes such as 'Can you tell me more about that?' or 'There seems to be a discrepancy between what you said . . . and . . . can you tell me about that?' or 'What do you mean by . . . ?' All the interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Field notes or memoranda were also made by the researcher, in order to describe interesting or common issues that were uncovered while coding the transcripts, as outlined by Marshall and Rossman (1999).

Analysis of transcripts and coding of interview data

Interview data are typically analysed through a thematic analysis in order to identify key themes and categories common in the experiences of participants. To identify these themes, this study analysed the transcripts using a thematic qualitative method of enquiry suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). Unlike grounded theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1998), which uses an inductive theoretical approach to the interview data, the present analysis was driven by previous bullying research which identified specific antecedents to workplace bullying. This form of literature-driven analysis

Table 1. Phases of thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p. 87)

	Phase	Description of the process
1	Familiarizing yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas
2	Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating the data relevant to each code
3	Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme
4	Reviewing themes	Checking to see whether the themes work in relation to the coded extracts (level 1) and the entire data set (level 2), generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis
5	Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme
6	Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis, selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back to the analysis of the research question and the literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

endeavours to present the significance of the themes in relation to previous literature (Braun and Clarke, 2006). While it is acknowledged that this approach is influenced by the assumptions made in the literature, its strength lies in its potential for building on previous research and contributing a qualitative perspective on quantitative research findings that have reached similar conclusions. Themes and issues found in the qualitative data that have not been identified in previous research are also highlighted, and elements in the data that contradict previous research can also be brought to light and discussed (Mays and Pope, 2006). Braun and Clarke (2006) describe six phases of thematic analysis. These are illustrated in Table 1.

Results and discussion

Most participants denied the bullying allegations that were made against them. Ninety per cent reported that they had 'never' bullied anyone, and 10% reported that they had bullied someone on a 'rare occasion'. However, 26% of the participants had the bullying allegations made against them substantiated. All participants reported that they had carried out some kind of negative workplace behaviours against others at some time during the previous 12 months. However, when describing the negative behaviours, they denied that these behaviours were a pattern of bullying but, rather, were reasonable, although unpopular, aspects of their role. For example, participants offered the following comments:

> I had to force myself to discipline staff, and would keep in mind that tolerating bad performance was

unfair on those staff who worked well. (Senior manager, education sector)

> I have criticized a staff member's work in relation to performance of their duties when I felt it was necessary to ensure work is performed. (Senior manager, public service)

> I asked someone to carry out tasks outside their job description and I have excessively monitored somebody's work because I was asked by a senior manager to do so. (Supervisor, nursing services)

These comments highlight the perceptions of some participants that, although they sometimes carried out negative acts or behaviours that were not liked by subordinates, from their perspective, these behaviours were reasonable within the context of the situation and were not bullying.

When asked, 66% of participants reported being a target of workplace bullying themselves, and 17.7% of participants reported being bullied several times a week to almost daily.

Four main themes were identified through analysis of the interview data. These were

1. the work environment as contributing to the allegation
2. many conflicts and unpopular practices labelled as 'bullying'
3. upwards bullying
4. consequences of being accused of bullying.

The last theme addresses a different set of research questions and is described more fully by Jenkins, Winefield and Sarris (2011). As illustrated in Table 2, these main themes were associated with various subthemes which identified several issues that contributed to the main theme. The main themes will be addressed in detail

Table 2. Major themes identified in analysis of interviews, and accompanying sub-themes

Major themes	Subthemes
• Stressful work environment as an antecedent to the bullying allegation	• Industrial environment • Social environment
• Different practices labelled 'bullying'	• Conflicts • Unpopular management decisions/actions • Unpopular organizational processes • 'Bullying' as harassment • 'Bullying' within the recognized definition
• The accused bully as a target/upwards bullying	• Complainant's behaviour as inappropriate • Boundary between alleged perpetrator and target blurred
• Consequences	• Psychological impact of allegation • Physical impact of allegation • Emotional regulation • Expulsion from organization

below, with extracts from interview data illustrating the main premise identified.

The work environment as an antecedent

A strong theme of a stressful work environment as an antecedent to the bullying allegation was found. The interviews highlighted stressful working conditions, which participants attributed to being outside their control. Some participants blamed these conditions for their aggressive behaviours. For example, one participant reported that, at the time the bullying allegation was made against her, she was performing a number of roles which she believed were outside her job description and were contributing to her behaving in an aggressive manner towards her staff. She described experiencing significant stress due to staff shortages and carrying out ambiguous and multiple roles. She said the following:

> I was also finding it a very stressful time. The workload was huge. My job really should have been done by two people and I was expressing that saying that that needed to happen. I was being told 'well that's not going to happen', then I started having to cover for doctors as well, so therefore I didn't have doctors in the emergency department, I didn't have doctors seeing mental health patients on the wards and I had to do both in each area. I also had the management aspect of my job and so I was sort of working long hours, I wasn't sleeping at home very well. I'd wake up thinking about work . . . People started to comment that I was getting aggressive and I said well what do you mean by that? They are saying oh you are just very short with us all the time

and I'm saying well I don't mean to be. (Nurse manager, found not guilty of bullying)

This example shows that the participant was working in a very stressful environment and did not appear to be coping with the pressure, staff shortages and the multiple and ambiguous roles that she was carrying out in a constructive manner. Her responses to the stressful working environment contributed to aggressive behaviours, and the bullying allegations that were made against her. In stressful situations where there is a high workload and a lack of time, the behaviours shown by managers may sometimes appear to be unfair, with too little explanation given for decisions and too little time for conflict-management strategies to be applied (Zapf and Einarsen, 2005). Furthermore, as illustrated in the transcript above, a lack of personal resources (Hobfoll and Freedy, 1993) and difficulty coping in a highly stressful work environment can contribute to inadequate, not well thought through behaviour which is perceived as bullying by subordinates.

As well as the stressful work environment emerging as an important antecedent to the bullying allegations, inappropriate social interactions and behaviours by some participants also contributed to bullying or harassment allegations. For example, one participant described promoting a 'pub environment' at work. His use of what he considered to be humour, including drawing a penis on photos of a staff member and circulating it, and sending other inappropriate and homophobic photos and jokes to his staff, contributed to him being accused and found guilty of bullying and sexual harassment. Despite being dismissed

for his conduct, he appeared to have a very poor understanding of how inappropriate his behaviour was, and how it contributed to a stressful work environment. He justified his behaviour in the following words:

> [the] email which [*sic*] contained a colourful word or two. As you can see, 100% work related and not malicious in any sense. Some of the pure work related [emails] I think during the dismissal meeting they highlighted that I had used the word 'cock' which was just a general slang term that I call the other two guys in the office, so, and I've used that kind of language quite frequently over the past three and half years in working with the colleague, and no one has ever said or mentioned anything . . . 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. So we kind of do that via email or we do that verbally. 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 organization, found guilty of bullying and sexual harassment)

As illustrated in the case described above, the work environment promoted by the participant, who was in a managerial position, was inappropriate and unprofessional, and resulted in his dismissal after a bullying and sexual harassment allegation. Despite being dismissed from his job, and losing an unfair dismissal case that he brought against his employer, the participant displayed little insight into how his actions could contribute to a staff member feeling intimidated or humiliated. He reported not meaning to hurt anyone and did not believe that he was sexually harassing or intimidating his staff, as nobody complained to him directly about his behaviour.

This next case also illustrates a social culture where the manager's 'sense of humour' contributed to a bullying allegation being made against her. Her description of her behaviour illustrates a history of repeated inappropriate social behaviours that may have contributed to a hostile work environment. Despite this, she justified her behaviour as a 'corporate sense of humour':

> He also said that I was a 'sarcastic bitch'. He actually used those words. Which is unfortunately a reflection of my sense of humour that didn't work with him, but you know. I was aware of that and I often apologized. You know sometimes I would say flippant things but I was often very conscious 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. It is sort of a corporate sense of humour and a corporate language that is used. (Female manager in a teaching institution. Bullying allegation not substantiated)

As described, both of these participants were able to justify and normalize their behaviour, attributing the allegations of bullying to a complainant who was overly sensitive or exaggerating the impact of their behaviour. Both participants cited above defended their behaviour by stating that they did not intend to target anyone. They appeared to have little insight into how their humour or joking could contribute to a hostile or stressful work environment or a target feeling bullied.

Taken together, the transcripts reflected a theme where the work environment and an inappropriate social culture contributed to complaints of workplace bullying being made. This background has been identified in previous research that has found similar antecedents to workplace bullying (Hoel and Salin, 2003). These findings also support more recent studies that narrow the gap between target- and perpetrator-oriented approaches to bullying research, in that they show that, from the perpetrators' perspective, bullying develops and thrives in stressful work environments (Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen, 2009). However, this study goes beyond other studies by providing the accused perpetrators' justification of their behaviours within this environment, and suggests that some accused perpetrators have little insight into how their behaviour can at least contribute to a stressful workplace environment, or at worst be interpreted as bullying.

Organizational practices labelled as bullying

Participants identified a number of different types of conflicts that contributed to the bullying allegations made against them. Most of the conflicts were interpersonal, including conflicts with colleagues or subordinates and conflicts related to discrete behaviours or work performance. However, a number of complaints also referred to organizational processes or practices. For example, part of the bullying allegation made against the manager below was that she had not

reclassified a group of workers who believed they should be being paid at a higher level:

> it was about a fourteen-page letter signed by three administrative staff who were very aggrieved about their treatment . . . a whole series of things around unequal treatment. They felt that they should have been reclassified and weren't, they felt they hadn't been effectively listened to, failure to consult, and a whole raft of things. (Senior manager, health services. Complaint unsubstantiated)

> She was going on leave that following day and she sent me an e-mail that day with a list of things that I had done wrong . . . Even things that were nothing to do with me such as the car booking system that she didn't like, things that were totally irrelevant to the current situation. (Middle manager, private industry. Complaint unsubstantiated)

> It started off as questioning the culture of the organization . . . She was sort of saying you shouldn't be doing it this way, you should be doing it that way, and people didn't agree with that and so we sat down . . . (Senior manager, private organization. Complaint unsubstantiated)

As illustrated in the three transcripts above, some of the alleged perpetrators were not directly responsible for the concerns made by the complainant. They were being held accountable for organizational practices that they were not personally responsible for, such as failing to reclassify a group of administration staff, or the car booking system, and the way 'we did things as a team'. The nature of these complaints suggests that bullying grievance systems might be used by employees to complain about a range of behaviours that may not necessarily meet the definition of bullying, but describe a range of behaviours and relationships including one-off events, negative organizational interactions, team conflicts and organizational processes that negatively affect the way employees carry out their jobs.

Complaining about appropriate managerial behaviour

A major theme to emerge from the interview data was that most of the participants reported that the behaviour they had been accused of was appropriate in the circumstances. A number of participants reported a history of conflict with the complainant that resulted from their trying to manage poor performance or inappropriate behaviour, and thus the complaint against them came about because they were trying to manage a difficult employee. This is interesting to note, because in a study by Zapf (1999b) only 2% of bully targets said that their poor performance contributed to the bullying that was carried out against them. In contrast, the present study found that poor performance was a frequent issue, and from the perspective of the alleged perpetrator, attempts at managing poor performance contributed to a number of the complaints of bullying that were made. For example, one participant said the following:

> Because her behaviour was so bad I took disciplinary action against her, which meant I did a number of things including putting her on diminished work performance, giving her time frames to improve her behaviour, I used to have regular counselling 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 organization. Bullying complaint not substantiated)

Others reported that they were carrying out normal managerial duties, and were unaware of any conflict with the complainant prior to the bullying complaint:

> She said I was over managing her. She felt that I was unrealistic in what I was asking her to do. Time lines with things . . . I said 'Are you happy with what's in there?', 'Are you comfortable to sign off?' and she said 'Some of those time lines are really unrealistic.' I said 'Well o.k. What do you suggest is a realistic time frame? Come back to me with what you think is realistic.' And then a couple of days later she came back and said 'Oh no- no, I've had another look and I think those time lines are fine.' So that was one of the issues that she brought up with my manager that she thought I was very demanding . . . He basically said that my behaviour and performance is no longer acceptable and that I needed to consider my options. (Female senior manager, local council. Bullying complaint substantiated, but employer being sued for wrongful termination)

As described above, the participant did not believe that her behaviour constituted workplace bullying, and she considered her managerial style to be reasonable. Despite this, the complaint of

bullying against her was substantiated. However, she believed that the investigation into the allegations against her was biased, and reported being in the process of taking her employer to court for wrongful dismissal. It may be that her behaviour was what Ferris *et al.* (2007) refer to as 'strategic bullying', that is, a strategic attempt to manage and influence others by using tactics that a target might view as intimidating. Such 'strategic bullying' can be normalized as a reasonable method of influencing subordinates to meet organizational objectives (Ferris *et al.*, 2007), with some managers who use this 'tough management' approach having no insight that their behaviour is perceived as coercive or unreasonable. Some managers such as the participant cited above might therefore consider their behaviour to be 'normal and reasonable', while in fact it is intimidating in nature and a strategic form of bullying.

The accused perpetrator as a target/upwards bullying

Over half the participants believed that they were targets of workplace bullying themselves. Sixty-six per cent of participants reported that they had been bullied over the previous 12 months, with 24% of these managers reporting bullying at least on a monthly basis, if not more frequently. Furthermore, the descriptions of upwards bullying given by a number of participants suggests that managers may be targets of bullying from subordinates, but may be less likely to report they are being bullied than subordinates in similar positions. Participants reported being uncomfortable with complaining about being bullied by their staff, and many reported that managing inappropriate behaviour was part of their job. Some participants talked about bullying tactics being used by groups of staff to resist changes and unpopular management decisions.

A number of participants reported hostile and inappropriate behaviours from subordinates who later put in a bullying complaint against them. Other participants specifically described the complainant as 'a bully', and reported repeated inappropriate behaviours that were becoming increasingly difficult to manage. For example, the participant interviewed below describes the complainant's behaviour specifically as 'intimidating' and 'bullying':

His behaviour got worse and worse and I went to my manager for support and I said 'I have tried this, this and this and I have tried a lot of techniques to defuse his behaviour offering him support', and no matter how much I worked on emphasizing the good work that he had done, and try to make him feel more confident, but if I said anything that he interpreted as negative he would lose the plot. Yell, rant, rave, tell me I didn't know anything. Huff and puff; basically made derogatory, belittling comments to me (participant crying). Sorry, it still gets me emotional. In effect he was bullying me. He would try to intimidate me to do things his way. It was really bizarre. It was escalating to the point that he would throw a tantrum in the door to my office, he would stand up, stomp around, lean across my desk at me just about spitting in my face and then go storming out down the corridor flinging comments back . . . (Middle manager, private organization. Bullying allegation not substantiated, but reprimanded for an isolated aggressive act)

Another participant reported the following:

Many before you have tried. She has had warnings, she has had written warnings by the C.E.O., she has had other warnings and she has breached them. But she stays. It leaves you a bit disillusioned . . . The examples I was giving was how she dominated the office like in team meetings, what's the word . . . I can't remember the word I'm thinking over . . . she would make quite disparaging comments at times about others, and would be quite intimidating. No one would speak up and people were frightened of her. It was very obvious. (Middle manager, public service. Complaint not substantiated)

The two transcripts cited above describe some of the behaviours that participants reported were carried out against them. A number of participants described tying to manage an employee who was behaving in an inappropriate manner and who was also very intimidating.

All participants reported being treated negatively or inappropriately by their staff at times. Many described a range of inappropriate behaviours directed towards them, including swearing, spitting, yelling and other overtly confrontational behaviours that were repeated and intimidating, and contributed to anxiety. However, other participants appeared to use the term 'bullying' in a more liberal manner than the recognized definition. For example, when asked whether she

had been bullied, this senior manager said the following:

> 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. Unions will often do it, or union representatives in a workgroup, or you will find that when me and my counterparts, when we get together we will share stories, but there are frequently bullies in the workplace that are never identified as such but who often rally the troops and who make it very difficult for a line manager who is trying to manage the team. (HR manager, health service)

It is interesting that the participant cited above reports that she believes that 90%–95% of managers have been bullied by their staff. However, it is noteworthy that she used the term 'bullying' in a liberal manner, reporting that unions will 'bully', union representatives in a workgroup will 'bully', and staff who 'rally the troops' are carrying out bullying behaviours. Her use of the term 'bullying' illustrates the liberal way the term is often used and how 'bullying' is often used to describe negative behaviours, unpopular management practices or directions (including challenges by employees to unpopular management practices, as suggested in the transcript above), and conflicts that do not necessarily meet the recognized definitions of bullying in terms of repetitive behaviours, power difference between target and perpetrator, and potential to cause harm to the target. This more liberal use of the term 'bullying' has been found in other studies where the term 'bullying' has been used to describe negative behaviours, disagreements in regard to management decisions, and unpopular organizational processes (Lewis, Sheehan and Davis, 2008; Liefooghe and Mackenzie-Davy, 2003, 2010).

Despite some participants recognizing that they were being bullied, none had complained about the behaviour, but appeared to view it as something they needed to manage as part of their job. While some participants had requested assistance in managing a subordinate's behaviour, none had labelled the behaviour bullying prior to the allegation against them. Two participants reported that most managers do not complain that they are being bullied, because managing inappropriate behaviours from staff is, at times, part of their job. It appeared from the interviews that admitting to being a target of bullying by a subordinate implies that one is incapable of managing staff effectively:

> But I also had to . . . I felt like I had to show, as a team leader in the position that I am in, that I am strong enough to deal with something like this, even with the feelings that I had. I felt that if I had fallen apart then they might have looked at me a little differently and possibly thought 'maybe she shouldn't be in the team leader role'; and that I wouldn't be able to cope with it. (Manager, private organization)

The use of bullying tactics, including submitting a bullying complaint against a manager has several implications in terms of mental health and burnout in managers who may be attempting to deal with repeated ongoing negative behaviour, or subordinates who are bullying them (Jenkins, Winefield and Sarris, 2011). Whereas employees are encouraged to use complaint procedures to complain about bullying, managers may not interpret bad behaviour from employees as bullying and may not feel comfortable accessing avenues available to staff members. While employees may be members of trade unions, it is rarer for senior managers to have trade union affiliation. This means that unions may be more likely to support employees' perceptions of bullying than the alleged perpetrator's perception. It also means that managers may not have the support afforded to a number of employees who do have union membership. As illustrated in the transcript above, managers may not feel comfortable identifying themselves as targets, because they assume that they should be able to manage an employee's behaviour even if it is inappropriate.

Even though Zapf *et al.* (2010) in a meta-analysis of European studies on workplace bullying found that 9.7% of managers were bullied by their subordinates at some time (total n = 6783 targets in 40 samples), upward bullying is an underexplored area in workplace bullying research (Branch, Ramsey and Barker, 2008). The results of the current study suggest that a high proportion of participants considered that they were targets rather than perpetrators of workplace bullying. It is important for future studies to examine upwards bullying more closely in order to help identify the circumstances in which this might occur, as well as the effects of upwards

bullying on management decision-making, mental health and career longevity. By further investigating upwards bullying, we may come to a better understanding of the complexity of the phenomena and also be able to contribute better to the development of improved workplace polices and complaint processes that take into account the existence of upwards bullying.

Consequences of being accused of bullying

All participants reported severe mental health problems which they identified as being the result of the allegations made against them (see Jenkins, Winefield and Sarris (2011) for a full description of these concerns and other consequences of being accused of workplace bullying). Twenty-five per cent of participants were either dismissed or reported that they were forced to resign from their positions as a result of bullying allegations. The finding that a quarter of the participants left the organization was not unexpected and corresponds to results of other studies which suggest that expulsion from the organization is the final stage of bullying (Leymann, 1996; Zapf and Gross, 2001). Results also highlight how the boundary between victim and perpetrator can often be blurred. While early studies suggest that it is the target who is expelled from the organization in the final stage of a bullying situation, these results highlight that it is often difficult to distinguish between target and perpetrator. When predatory bullying occurs (sexual harassment could be considered a form of predatory bullying), the difference between target and perpetrator may be more easily distinguished. This is because the inappropriate behaviours of the perpetrator are often more visible, and the target has done nothing to provoke these behaviours, but is under attack because of their personal characteristics. However, in an escalated conflict, it may be more complicated as *both* the target and perpetrator may have behaved inappropriately at times as the conflict between them intensifies. In such situations, it may be that the first person to lodge a bullying complaint is labelled 'the target' and the respondent to a bullying allegation is identified as 'the perpetrator', when in fact both parties have a degree of culpability, as both have engaged in inappropriate behaviours during the escalation of the conflict. The implications of this are an area for further research.

Limitations

A major challenge in examining bullying from the perpetrator's perspective is the difficulty obtaining samples. The current study is one of the first that provides an in-depth analysis of the alleged bully's perspective. While we believe that convenience sampling is acceptable and has been recommended for examining phenomenological aspects of workplace bullying in new areas (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2007), we are aware that the descriptive nature and use of convenience sampling make the results of our study difficult to generalize. However, as the first approach to a relatively new area, we believe it is legitimate. As the data in the current study were obtained through self-report and interviews, biases and social desirability may be a problem. It is probable that participants gave answers and told their story in a manner that cast them in a favourable light. This is especially relevant, given the subject matter of the current study. However, one could also argue that targets are equally persuasive in recounting their perceptions of bullying. Therefore, research examining both targets' and perpetrators' accounts of bullying need to be aware of the social desirability bias and subjective nature of events. It is also likely that a high selection effect took place in this study. Participants who see themselves as innocent and as being victims themselves are probably over-represented, whereas participants who actually mistreated others out of revenge or because they wanted to eliminate a competitor are probably under-represented.

Conclusion

Despite the methodological limitations, this study confirms many of the facets of workplace bullying described from the targets' perspective in more representative workplace bullying research. In particular, it confirms antecedents to bullying as being a combination of organizational culture and workplace social culture, as well as perpetrator and target behaviours.

However, this study also raised doubts about the validity of some employee accounts of bullying, and suggests that lodging a bullying complaint through formal grievance processes may be one way that staff can express dissatisfaction with management as well as organizational processes. The descriptions of upwards bullying reported

by a number of participants also suggest that upwards bullying is a phenomenon that deserves further research, and that managers may be less likely to report they are being bullied by workers, until the bullying contributes to their managerial ability being questioned.

These findings highlight the sometimes ill-defined demarcation between being a target of workplace bullying and being a perpetrator, and support studies that report being a target of bullying itself is predictive of bullying others (Hauge, Skogstad and Einarsen, 2009). Finally, the results of the current study should be regarded as a break in the long tradition of primarily listening to the target's point of view in workplace bullying research, and call for more empirical research from the perspective of the accused perpetrator, including the consequences of being accused of bullying.

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