

DEFINING WORKPLACE BULLYING IN INSTITUTIONS OF HIGHER LEARNING

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Abstract *This study aimed at exploring the definition of workplace bullying as psychological violence among academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. The methodology for this study was the qualitative research approach, with an overarching intention of making meaning out of respondents' definition of the phenomenon of workplace bullying which they had experienced. Data for this study were collected through a semi-structured interview on 20 academic staff members of the aforementioned institution. Data analysis was done through the iterative and inductive methods of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Results of the study highlighted the following rubrics in respondents' definition of workplace bullying as psychological violence: abuse of status, covert and or overt negative behaviours, premeditated intention to impose one's will and suppress that of others, devaluing others, and causing harm to the victims of bullying. Workplace bullying can thus be described as negative group dynamics which has characteristics that are diametrically opposed to those of positive psychology. Workplace bullying impacts negatively on, and compromises organisational effectiveness and efficiency, employee physical resilience, intellectual stimulation, emotional balance, family harmony, self-esteem, self-image, and self-actualisation.*

Keywords: *Workplace Bullying, Tertiary Institutions, Status Abuse, Covert Or Overt Behaviours, Suppressing Others' Wills, Devaluing Others*

INTRODUCTION

Workplace bullying is an inclusive umbrella term which has historically been interchangeably used with words such as mobbing, abuse, harassment, etc. This fairly novel concept is thus at an embryonic and transitional stage, justifying the multifarious conceptualisations accompanying attempts to elucidate its central stage in contemporary workplace issues. In other words, defining the concept of bullying remains a thorny and controversial point. An initial point of divergence among researchers is that the term, workplace bullying, is represented by other terms in different settings: for example 'mobbing' is adopted in lieu of workplace bullying in France and Germany (Leymann, 1990, p. 120; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996, p. 221); 'harassment' is the coinage of 'workplace bullying' in Finland (Bjorkqvist, Osterman & Hjelt-Back, 1994, p. 175); American researchers speak of 'aggression' (Baron & Neuman, 1998, p. 450) and 'emotional abuse' (Keashly, 2001, p. 241); researchers in Australia (Sheehan, 1999, p. 59), the United Kingdom (Rayner, 1997, p. 201) and Northern Europe (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996, p. 192), are those who use the term 'workplace bullying'. Abusive behaviours generally distinguish depersonalised bullying from capitalist labor process, (neo) Taylorised work organisation and organisational control (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2009).

The myriad of alternative terms used interchangeably for 'workplace bullying', is a function of the inherently

contextualised attributes given to the phenomenon in specific countries. It is in this light that 'workplace bullying' in Germany would have a connotation of harassment by many bullies (Leymann, 1990, p. 120; Zapf *et al.*, 1996, p. 221), whereas research focus in North America has been geared towards violent workplace behaviour (Baron & Neuman, 1998, p. 450).

Workplace bullying definitions coined by practitioners, unions and private-sector organisations are less specific, and highlight types of bullying behaviours and their negative consequences on victims. For Work Safe Victoria (2006), workplace bullying involves repeated, inconsiderate action, targeting one or more employees and having negative impact on employee health and safety. In like manner, the Andrea Adams Trust Fund (1997) considers bullying to involve irresponsible, insulting, despising, and humiliating actions from hierarchy which abuses power and position. The effects on the victims are that they develop anxiety, lose self-confidence and could experience physical and mental distress symptoms.

Legalistic definitions of the concept of workplace bullying as formulated by The Swedish National Board of Occupational Health (1994) and Commission des Normes du Travail (2006), subsume the definition of workplace bullying as follows:

Marginalising employees through persistent negative verbal and, or non-verbal behaviours, which compromise the former's rights, self-image and general health.

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It is worth also noting that in defining workplace bullying, national cultures which highlight the interplay of materialism, individualism, paternalism, humanism, hierarchical plurality, and spiritualism should be taken into consideration (Kakar & Kakar, 2007; Sinha & Tripathi, 2002; Sinha, 1982, 1994, 2008).

Despite the realisation that workplace bullying is a multifaceted and contextualized concept, Rayner & Keashly (2005) propose that the following five variables cut across most experiences which employees describe as bullying: experiencing negative behaviour; relentlessness of negative behaviours; experiencing negative physical and/or psychological symptoms; and self-labeling as bullied.

The above mentioned criteria involved in the definition of workplace bullying are only working definitions aimed at making the concept operational in research, even though controversies persist as to which of these variables are uniquely displayed in the phenomenon of workplace as opposed to other forms of negative workplace behaviour (Rayner & Keashly, 2005, p. 282).

From literature, the researcher thinks that workplace bullying can be summarised as dysfunctional interpersonal and organisational dynamics which presupposes frequent, overt and, or covert premeditated negative behaviours. Negative behaviours come from 'bullies' who target the 'bullied' in order to consciously or unconsciously cause physical, psychological, social, and organisational harm. For the researcher, workplace bullying can thus be described as negative group dynamics which has characteristics which for him are diametrically opposed to those of positive psychology. In other words, the researcher thinks workplace bullying impacts negatively on, and compromises organisational effectiveness and efficiency, physical resilience, intellectual stimulation, emotional balance, family harmony, self-esteem, self-image, and self-actualisation.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES

The primary aim of this study is to describe, explain, and determine the influence of workplace bullying as psychological violence on the psychological wellness of educators in the National University of Lesotho (NUL). Furthermore, this study sets out to evaluate the prevalence, sources, and forms of workplace bullying in NUL, analyse how staff cope with workplace bullying, and develop a workplace bullying and psychological wellness model for effective management of the phenomena under study.

PREVALENCE OF WORKPLACE BULLYING AMONG ACADEMICS

The main research gap which motivated this study is based on the realisation that research on workplace bullying among

university academic staff has not been very prolific and the case in point is that no such research has been conducted in the National University of Lesotho in particular. Paradoxically, there are pertinent reasons why research on workplace bullying in academic institutions should have been highly prioritized among researchers:

Workplace bullying among academic staff of university institutions is unique and clearly differs from what obtains of the same phenomenon in relation to deviant student behaviours in classrooms and on campus (Braxton & Bayer, 2004, p. 5).

Second, collegiality plays a very important role in interpersonal relations and it impacts faculty sustainability (Norman, Ambrose & Huston, 2006, p. 350).

There is an extensive literature on conflict and misconduct in higher education (Cameron, Meyers & Olswang, 2005, p. 253; Euben & Lee, 2006, p. 250), which emphasizes on the propensity of workplace bullying occurring within this setting.

University academic environments are deemed to have propitious organisational features for workplace bullying to occur (Neuman & Baron, 2003, p. 59; Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 90).

As it stands, workplace bullying is therefore not an estranged phenomenon from the tertiary sector and could even be considered an integral part of the hierarchal structure of higher education institutions. This is confirmed by a 2007 study which found that 72% of workplace bullying in university institutions involved a harasser ranked higher than his or her victims (Zogby International, 2007). Secondly, workplace bullying in institutions of higher learning is also often veiled by 'a blanket of silence', which effectively screens it from public notice (Bullied Academics Blog, 2009). Thirdly, according to Westhues (2006, p. 55), university settings are 'hotbeds' for bullying.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen to guide the research design and methodology of this research because it facilitated the description of workplace bullying as psychological violence experienced by academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. Secondly, qualitative research described the world of workplace bullying and staff psychological wellness as personal experiences through 'natural language'. Thirdly, qualitative research increased the probability that the individual provides his or her own version, view, account, and expression of their own 'world' of workplace bullying. Lastly, qualitative research provided a framework for an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals made of their original and authentic experiences related to workplace bullying as psychological violence. The purposive sample

for this study comprised 20 members of the academic staff in the National University of Lesotho. There are two reasons why purposeful sampling was chosen for this study. Firstly, the choice of purposive sampling was in respect of the qualitative principle of appropriateness, i.e. having participants who are articulate, reflective, and willing to share their experiences with the researcher (Morse, 1991, p. 27). Secondly, purposive sampling was based on choosing participants who represent information-rich cases from whom the researcher could learn much in relation to the issues under study (Patton, 1990, p. 69). Twenty academic staff members of the National University of Lesotho constituted the purposive sample on which the semi-structured interview was administered. Among the respondents were two females and 18 males, in the categories of three associate professors, nine senior lecturers, and eight lecturers. The ages of the respondents range from thirty three (33) to fifty five (55) years.

Data were collected through a semi-structured interview and analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to enable the researcher to understand how individuals make sense out of their major life experiences using a double hermeneutic. IPA was chosen because it elicits from respondents' accounts, a detailed and "substantially rich" depiction of the phenomena under study, from phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 11). Secondly, IPA favours the use of semi-structured phenomenological interviews for data collection and highlighting of potentially grey areas which structured and rigid formats will not adequately uncover (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 11). Thirdly, data analysis using IPA focuses on making in-depth appraisal of the phenomena of workplace bullying and psychological wellness through its triple pronged methods of analysis, that is phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 11).

DISCUSSION

Participants' views, understanding, and definitions of workplace bullying concur with those of the following researchers who define workplace bullying as having the following characteristics: repetition of negative behaviours, duration, escalation, harm, attributed intent, unfriendly work environment, power disparity, poor workplace communication (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002, p. 25; Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007, p. 850; Namie, 2003a, p. 4; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008b, p. 100).

The following five sub-themes were generated in relation to the definition of workplace bullying: abuse of status; covert and or overt negative behaviours; premeditated intention to impose one's will and suppress that of others; devaluing others; and causing harm to victims of bullying.

Abuse of status

According to Einarsen *et al.*, (2003, p. 10), workplace bullying is characterised by a priori power imbalance through which the bully uses power against others, thereby leading to a negative workplace climate (Di Martino *et al.*, 2003, p. 4; Salin, 2003, p. 1214). For the researcher, abuse of power goes beyond just power imbalance as much as it is an authoritarian management style which though fostered by power imbalance is not totally determined by the latter. Abuse of power for the researcher and as confirmed by participants is not about more power to some and less to others, as much as abuse of power entails more the degree of impunity and non-accountability of the bully in carrying out his or her bullying behaviours.

Camara for instance qualifies abuse of status as exploitation of hierarchical differences which implies

"Taking advantage of others in a disadvantaged situation and position, because one is in a senior-influential position with access to power, which is not conducive to a proper working environment. It may be physical or not, and the bully knows he/she would get away with such negative attitudes, actions, and behaviours."

Luther, on the other hand, considers the negative effect of abuse of status as

"Attempting to assert one's position and status in the workplace, thereby creating non-conducive working conditions which hinder and prevent others from maximizing their output, potential and zeal; a form of workplace bullying is heavy workload pressure which could reduce quality of work."

Abuse of power for the researcher in the context of this study could be due the following factors: no laws in Lesotho to specifically protect victims of workplace bullying; absence of an institutionalised legal framework that addresses workplace bullying (Yamada, 2007, p. 20); neoliberalist basis of university reforms which gives management mandate to carry out radical restructuring (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 136). Abuse of power in the context of university reform as characterised by the institution within which this study was carried out practically legitimizes abuse of power through an authoritarian management style, especially as participants declare that there is a hidden political agenda (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 136). Literature aptly confirms that power abuse in workplace bullying is a fundamentally unjust power dynamics characterised by impunity for the bully, violation of the basic norms of procedural and distributive justice, due to the absence of checks and balances against misuse of power on subordinates by hierarchy.

Covert and or Overt Negative Behaviours

Definitions of workplace bullying clearly highlight the inevitability of accompanying negative behaviours (Rayner & Keashly, 2005, p. 73). This is confirmed by Notelaers, De Witte and Einarsen (2010, p. 492) and Salin, (2008, p. 225), who state that for a situation to be categorised as workplace bullying, there must have been at least six months of exposure by victims to frequent and intense negative acts. In addition, workplace negative bullying behaviours can take covert or overt forms, ranging from subtle to physical and verbal forms (Ayoko *et al.*, 2003, p. 291; Baron & Neuman, 1998, p. 450; Bjorkqvist *et al.*, 1994, p. 175). Gravois (2006, p. 32) presents a model of negative behaviours in institutions of higher learning which begins with social isolation of staff, transits through harassment, petitioning of colleagues for various reasons, disciplinary action, and dismissal from the institution.

The researcher concurs with the preceding researchers that covert and or overt negative behaviours are the media through which the 'bullying intention' is expressed and experienced by the intended targets or victims. Findings of this study highlight the fact that covert and or overt negative behaviours experienced by the participants can include verbal and non-verbal aspects, procedural violations, and even outright abuse of status and associated power. This confirms the findings of Ayoko *et al.*, (2003, p. 291) and Baron & Neuman (1998, p. 450).

Two participants of the present study highlight the fact that workplace bullying can be considered as covert or overt negative behaviours. For David workplace bullying is defined from the overt perspective since he describes the latter as:

"...being asked, forced, coerced to do something that is not part of one's job description, and which does not tie in with one's professional expertise. Being called names in the case of expatriate workers."

For Jacqueline, workplace bullying entails both covert and overt negative behaviours. She says that workplace bullying is:

"Verbal and non-verbal harassment of an individual..."

Premeditated Intention to Impose one's Will and Suppress that of Others

Despite the fact that some researchers leave out intention as part of the defining characteristic of workplace bullying (Rayner *et al.*, 2002, p. 25), the findings of this study contradict that perception. On the contrary, results from the present study highlight the element of premeditation, consciousness, deliberateness which characterizes the

negative behaviours participants claim is part of the workplace bullying experience. These negative behaviours include among others the exertion of pressure on employees, forcing and coercing them to do something against their will.

The premeditated intention to impose one's will and suppress that of others is exemplified by Opondi, who considers workplace bullying to be a battle of wills and unilateral imposition of hierarchy's whims and caprices. To this effect, Opondi says workplace bullying occurs when:

"...certain things are forced and superimposed on the subordinates, even when the latter have different points of view or do not share the positions of hierarchy..."

Imposing one's will and suppressing that of others represent for the researcher of the present study, conscious and voluntary behaviours which imply a high degree of premeditation. This is confirmed by the findings of other researchers to the effect that bullies are motivated in their negative acts by a conscious intent to exert control over victims (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 415; Namie & Namie, 2000, p. 55). The fact that the bully repeats the negative acts, is motivated by a deliberate intention to victimize, humiliate and embarrass selected victims, stands out for the researcher as proof of premeditation to impose the bully's will and suppress that of the victim.

Devaluing others

The researcher's definition of devaluing in relation to his analysis of participants' experiences of workplace bullying, implies negative perceptions and behaviours, amongst which are the intention to deride, disdain, demean, ignore, marginalize and treat as worthless both staff and their work. This is in line with Campbell & Groenbaek (2006, p. 60), who found that workplace bullying depersonalizes the employee by de-valoring both his/her work and identity. Steinman (2003, p. 48) also confirms the fact that workplace bullying harbours the characteristic of devaluing employees. The bully's intention to devalue the bullied is for the researcher a prolongation of the previous sub-theme, i.e. 'the premeditated intention to impose one's will and suppress that of others.' In other words, when the bully has the intention to impose his/her will on others, that intention for the researcher logically implies the necessary undermining and thereby devaluing of the victim.

Devaluing others is demonstrated by quotes from two participants, namely Ivo and Raul, who respectively say that workplace bullying entails devaluing others. For Ivo, devaluing others means:

"Belittling one in the presence of others; undermining you in whatever you do; trivializing both the person and his/her work, as if both are useless, and of no value..."

Raul concurs that workplace bullying devalues others since he considers bullying to be:

“Inappropriate, intimidating, and unprofessional demeaning of subordinate staff and colleagues, usually not based on facts, but on presumption and prejudice...”

Causing Harm to Victims of Bullying

For the researcher, the logical end result of abuse of status, covert and or overt negative behaviours, the premeditated intention to impose one's will and suppress that of others, and devaluing others, is to cause some degree of harm to the targets of the preceding bullying sequence. In other words, workplace bullying generally has negative impacts on its victim's physical, psychological, social, occupational, and even economic wellbeing (Lutgen-Sandvik, *et al.*, 2007, p. 850; Vartia, 2001, p. 65). The deleterious effects of workplace bullying are multiple as seen in the excerpts of the present study's participants. They report and confirm the findings of researchers that workplace bullying causes harm to victims at the physical, psychological, moral, and occupational dimensions. The participants of this study go beyond findings in existing literature by stating that workplace bullying is a violation of human rights, which for this researcher makes workplace bullying to have a criminal connotation according to the participants. Epanty clearly highlights the diverse domains in which workplace bullying can cause harm in the bullied, when he says that workplace bullying is the:

“Deliberate, premeditated, overt actions meant to achieve known or hidden agendas, while in the meantime inadvertently and or advertently causing psychological, moral, physical and spiritual upsets in employees.”

IMPLICATIONS OF RESEARCH FOR SOCIAL POLICY AND PLANNING

There is urgent need for government in partnership with all stakeholders of higher education to enact anti-bullying policies, and to empower staff through positive psychology coaching for maximising staff resilience and creativity in the face of taxing academic and professional activities. For the researcher, the conception, planning, implementation, and evaluation of anti-bullying policies for the National University of Lesotho shall be based on the inclusion of all stakeholders of the higher education system. Inclusive dialogue will increase global ownership of the anti-bullying process, thereby facilitating dissemination, understanding, and adherence to the clauses of such a project. It is not excluded that the expertise of those who have successfully conceived and implemented anti-bullying policies will be welcome in order to attempt 'reinventing the wheel'.

CONCLUSION

For this researcher, defining workplace bullying still remains a complex task, since it is a multidimensional, relative, and contextualized organisational phenomenon. Nonetheless, in response to our first research question which was 'What is workplace bullying?', we can define the concept of workplace bullying from the findings and context of this study as follows: 'it is the frequent, premeditated intention of management, colleagues, students, within the context of university restructuring, to impose one's will and suppress that of others, through covert and, or overt negative behaviours, under cover of impunity, for the devaluing of victims in a generally toxic workplace atmosphere.' Workplace bullying can thus be described as negative group dynamics which has characteristics that are diametrically opposed to those of positive psychology. In other words, the researcher thinks workplace bullying are negative workplace behaviours which impact negatively on, and compromise organisational effectiveness and efficiency, physical resilience, intellectual stimulation, emotional balance, family harmony, self-esteem, self-image, and self-actualisation.

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