"Like Wolves in a Pack": Stories of Predatory Alliances of Bullies in Nursing

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ABSTRACT

This paper reports some of the findings from the first, qualitative stage, of a large national study of bullying in the nursing workplace currently being undertaken in Australia. The findings reported here reveal how relationships between bullies were embedded within informal organizational networks, resulting in a form of bullying that was predatory, co-operative, and planned. Operating within “predatory alliances” provided protection to bullies, and enabled abusive activities to be hidden within legitimate organizational processes such as performance review, disciplinary procedures and organizational restructuring. By identifying the previously unexplored role of informal organisational networks in condoning and perpetuating workplace bullying, this research has important implications for management and further research in this field.

Keywords: Bullying, Mobbing, Organizational Networks, Qualitative Research

INTRODUCTION

Over recent decades there has been growing recognition that workplace bullying is a pervasive and harmful feature of modern workplaces (Einarsen, 1999; Quine, 2002; Zapf and Einarsen, 2003; Dick and Raynor, 2004). Exposure to bullying results in lowered self-esteem (Randle, 2003), depression, anxiety (Quine, 2001), post-traumatic stress disorder (Mikkelsen & Einarsen, 2002), physical illness (Kivimäkia et al., 2003), financial loss and, ultimately, an inability to work (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003; McCarthy, 2003). The harm caused by bullying is not contained to individuals; extensive damage also occurs within organizations, with a correlation having been noted between bullying and staff turnover, intention to leave, lowered morale, reduced productivity and reduced organizational loyalty (Rayner and Cooper, 1997; Yamada, 2000; Quine, 2002; Zellars et al, 2002).

To date, attempts to define the nature and frequency of workplace bullying have largely been undertaken through quantitative surveys focusing on the identification of explanatory or motivating factors that determine whether individuals engage in, contribute to, or form perceptions about their experiences as constituting bullying (Leymann, 1996; Einarsen, 1999;...
Farrell, 1999; Quine, 1999; Zapf, 1999; Hockley, 2002; Edwards and Burnard, 2003; Randle, 2003; Zapf and Einarsen, 2003). Although research has more recently begun to consider organisational factors, such as micro politics, as a feature of the workplace that may foster individual or group bullying (Mackenzie-Davey and Lieftouge 2003; Salin 2003), current individual and organizational explanations have not begun to explore the role of informal organisational networks and their influence on the nature, incidence and prevalence of bullying.

THE CONCEPT OF INFORMAL ORGANIZATIONAL NETWORKS

It is now widely recognized that behind every prescribed or formal organisational structure exists various informal networks, and the formal relations depicted in organizational charts do not capture the ‘network of relationships that shape an organization’ (Nohria, 1992: 5). Over time, social networks evolve from ‘informal, discretionary patterns of interaction’ (Ibarra, 1992: 166) to more stable, ‘patterned, repeated interactions’ among individuals (Eisenhardt and Bourgeois 1988: 737). Informal networks frequently operate as ‘key channels’ for getting things done (Ibarra, 1992: 165), with the relationship between formal structure and everyday activities often being negligible (Tolbert and Zucker 1996). Current understanding focuses upon the uniformly positive outcomes that arise from organizational networks (Many Raab and Milward, 2003). Networks are viewed as valuable resources (McGuire, 2002) that foster strategic benefits (Hite, 2003) and alliances (BarNir and Smith, 2002), with positive effect. The benefits attributed to informal networks have included: innovation and adaptation to change (Gresov and Stephens 1993); collaboration (Cross et al., 2002); information dissemination and knowledge transfer (Cross, Parker et al. 2001; Hansen 2002; Reagans and McEvily 2003); increased job satisfaction; mentoring (Higgins and Kram 2001); and improved work performance (Galaskiewicz and Zaheer 1999; Collins and Clark 2003).

However, the focus of research and theorizing on positive or desirable network attributes has resulted in less understanding of their unproductive, destructive, and ‘invisible’ features (Cross, Borgatti et al. 2002: 26). This study of workplace bullying demonstrates that a focus...
upon informal networks has the potential to shed new light on the way many harmful acts of bullying perpetrated within organizations are not “one off” acts of deviant individuals; instead, they may be a function of an organised “dark-side” of informal networks that remain largely hidden, yet contributing significantly to seriously deleterious consequences for organisations and individuals involved.

RESEARCH DESIGN

Reported here are results from the first stage of a much larger, mixed method study. This first phase involved in-depth, semi-structured, qualitative interviews exploring nurses’ experiences of being bullied. Twenty-six respondents were recruited from two Australian organizations: a rural and a metropolitan Area Health Service. Analysis of the interview transcriptions was undertaken using the constant comparative method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) and the NVivo software program (Richards, 1999). At the completion of the analysis, fifteen categories and sub-categories were refined, from which six major themes emerged. What is presented here is the theme depicting the strategies employed by bullies to organise themselves into “predatory alliances”, which provided extensive opportunities for bullying within the two organizations.

INFORMAL NETWORKS AS “PREDATORY ALLIANCES”

The narratives reported here reveal the embedded nature of the “predatory alliances” within the formal structures and processes of the two organizations. They were so deeply embedded, that they were largely imperceptible to those involved, while serving to enable and perpetuate abusive behavior and activities. We focus here on two key aspects of the operation of these alliances to detail the manner in which the loyalty that existed within these “alliances” provided considerable protection for bullies and how their abusive behaviors were both tolerated and rewarded within the organizational context.

By working together in what were described as ‘cliques’ (Vanessa, para 162; Joan, para 185; Amanda, para 56); a ‘cult’ (Therese, para 156); the ‘trifecta’ or ‘daily double’ (Rowena, para
an ‘old girls club’ (Therese, para 250), a co-operative, deliberate, planned and destructive form of bullying was perpetuated. The “predatory alliances” of bullies described by respondents were constituted by small groups of individuals who were linked to one or more senior managers who were influential within the network. These senior managers were described as the ‘big’ bully (Linda, para 197) or the ‘gatekeeper’ (Deborah, para 103). It was revealed how the ‘big’ bullies acted as ‘boundary spanners’ (Cross and Parker, 2004: 77), providing critical links between the numerous “alliances” of bullies across the organization. These bullies had associations with other senior bullies in other “alliances”, which were linked across a number of work-teams, and who played a pivotal role in sustaining and proliferating bullying across the organization.

**Concealment of Bullying**

The narratives revealed how bullies who were nurse colleagues, or nurse and non-nurse managers, worked together in “alliances” to mask or hide their ‘alegitimate’ (Mintzberg 2003: 51) behaviour through the co-optation of legitimate systems and processes. This effectively rendered the working of the “alliances” imperceptible to those on the “outside”. Describing how bullies in “alliances” were able to pervert organisational processes it was said that ‘They do what they like, write their own rules, and work together’ (Susan, para 26) and they ‘do things constantly that are not found out’ (Helen, para 111). For example, respondents recounted meetings being convened behind a façade of legitimacy, which served as opportunities for abusive behaviour, hidden from the view of others. Speaking of such a meeting, Helen told how her manager, in the presence of others, intimidated her:

**Helen:** … She just raised her arms, as if she was going to hit me, and she just yelled at the top of her voice … She actually yelled, raised her arms and said, "I’m gonna do what I want to do. It's none of your fucking business” … I’ve seen the process of actually having three managers with you, that you’re actually outnumbered. And they would actually change things; you know that wasn’t said … [their] behaviour was behind closed doors (para 4 and 46).
This passage reveals the processes of bullies acting together as a group, tolerating and hiding abusive behaviour, falsifying accounts of meetings and, yet, providing an outward appearance of legitimacy and due process, while concurrently perpetrating extensive abuse on their chosen target. The shared group norms of the “alliances”, and the loyalty that existed between members, ensured the abusive behaviour was kept “hidden”. Helen, targeted repeatedly through this form of behaviour, described it as:

**Helen:** Quite a frightening experience, because I was really alone. And it was like they were wolves, a pack of them. … I didn’t have anyone. I was there alone. … (para 169).

The ‘predatory alliances’ were seen to shape what was considered “acceptable” misuse of legitimate authority, providing bullies with a cloak of organizational legitimacy for their actions. Operating in the knowledge that they were protected, often by those of authority, bullies were able to work outside of organizational policies and procedures making the work lives for their targets very difficult.

The experiences reported by respondents in this study also shed light on the manner in which emotional abuse was hidden within legitimate organizational processes, such as performance review, disciplinary procedures and organizational restructuring. Wendy described how she was targeted for “removal” from her position by an alliance that co-operated together to make unsubstantiated accusations towards her of poor performance, attempting to destroy her professional reputation through public denigration and humiliation. Similarly, Deborah recounted “performance management” and “disciplinary meetings” as a means of providing a cover of official legitimacy for ongoing bullying. She recalled being told at one of these “meetings” how the “alliances” of bullies co-operated together to ensure she was watched and followed while at work:

**Deborah:** They said, “We’ve got so and so out there keeping an eye on you”.


Researcher: Did they say that to you, or did someone else say that?

Deborah: No, they told me…

Researcher: They being the senior manager, and who else?

Deborah: Another manager too.

Researcher: So they told you that you were being watched?

Deborah: Mmm. (para 62).

The strategies used by these bullies, such as intimidation and verbal threats, have been extensively reported in bullying literature. What is new is our identification of the way bullies worked cooperatively together in long lasting “alliances” within informal organizational networks. Further, we claim that, by working together in “alliances”, bullies were able to pervert the organizational processes that had been developed specifically to encourage the reporting and appropriate management of bullying. Although both workplaces had high profile policies and procedures in place to manage bullying, numerous incidences demonstrated that the “alliances” enabled the co-optation of the reporting processes and, as a result, legitimate reports of bullying were minimised, ignored and denied.

**Bullies Protected and Promoted**

The stories of respondents also recounted how “alliances” between bullies operated to ensure the protection of those who were bullies, to the extent that “serial bullies”, with extensive histories of abuse and harm to occasioned ‘to many different people’ (Helen, para 60), were considered ‘untouchable’ (Deborah, para 10) by respondents. Recounting just such a situation, Yvonne detailed how she tried to assist a colleague who had been relentlessly attacked by two bullies. These bullies were also part of an “alliance” known to have bullied Yvonne’s colleague, and others, over an extensive period. Here she explains how she tried to help her colleague who had been “ganged-up on” by the bullies and who, a few days later committed suicide:

Yvonne: Yeah, there’s one thing I would like to relate to you and it’s kind of upset me terribly [tearful]. … It’s just such a sad story … She was a girl that I didn’t even know that she suffered with um ah with depression. … and, er, she had been bullied by these people. [crying, drying her eyes, slow quiet voice].
And I rang her and said, “Monica that’s awful. You don’t have to put up with it. Can we do something about it?” and she wouldn’t [loud sigh]. “No. Yvonne,” she said. “I don’t want to go there.” She said, “They’re too nasty.” She said, “It will only make it worse when I come back to work” (para 298).

Following this tragedy, it was revealed that the complaints of bullying had been trivialised and minimised by a more senior member of the “alliance”, effectively providing immunity for the perpetrators. Although this more senior member of the “alliance”, a manager in the organization, was reported to have received numerous formal complaints about the severity of bullying leading up to this incident, it was reported that the manager subsequently said, ‘I had no idea that this was happening’ (Yvonne, para 319). The co-operative workings of the “alliances” provided protection to bullies, ensuring that reports of their abusive behaviour were minimised, ignored or denied. In addition to being “protected” by those more senior in the “alliances”, bullies were also frequently “rewarded” with promotion (Wendy, para 474; Susan para, 208; Deborah, para 105). Donna recounted her experience of seeking assistance from her manager to address the bullying that had been occurring in her work team. She later realised that this same, recently promoted, manager also had an extensive history of bullying:

**Donna**: I just feel like, [pause, has been crying] and I didn’t realise that she’s number one in the [group]. I didn’t realise that. I didn’t realise I was telling the person who was the number one bully [rocking backwards and forwards, twisting a tissue in her hand] I would never have-, I would-, I would have tried to avoid that at all costs-, had I known that. I felt like I said things to her-, that dug me in deeper … I just feel like she quotes that time so many times with me … I just feel like, like she’s watching me. Like I just dreaded a morning shift during the week-, and she was on my back. … (para 30).

Donna recounted being forced into submission by a constant barrage of bullying episodes that followed her disclosure. In an organizational environment where an “alliance” controlled
appointments, promotions, and the reporting processes, she was unreasonably labelled as unsuitable; not 'cut out for the job', and not 'tough enough' (Donna, para 123). She was also, eventually, transferred to a position outside of her area of expertise making her work life even more difficult. These narratives reveal a form of unethical behaviour that required cooperation among several actors in the network. This behaviour has been identified as a feature of strong cliques that may act unethically and without fear of retribution (Brass, Butterfield and Skaggs, 1998).

Confirming the regularity with which bullies were promoted, Helen, Nerida, Chris, and Vanessa all described the promotion of individuals who had bullied them to acting senior positions. Another participant reflected on the promotion of bullies, saying: “The worse you behave, the more you seem to be rewarded [cynical laugh]. Like, you know, if you behave badly, you get promoted (Karen, para 534). Yvonne recounted the effect the promotion of a bully had on her work team:

Yvonne: And it - [Yvonne is hesitant, as she knows this information will disclose the identity of a “serial bully” implicated in the suicide of a colleague]...she’s one of the three … When she got the job [a promotion to manager], the reaction from the staff that have experienced it [referring to ongoing bullying] over the years, and know what happened over the years, they were terrified. They said, “My God, what is going to happen?” (para 351 & 355).

These narratives reveal that when individuals who bully are promoted in spite of their bullying behaviour, bullying can then become an accepted means of “success”. The promotion of bullies has also been reported by Einarson (1999), who detailed how bullying is more prevalent in organizations where bullies feel they are supported, or have implicit approval, from senior managers to carry out abusive and bullying behavior. We claim that, in addition to this, informal networks between bullies can act as a mechanism through which
bullying behavior can proliferate and flourish. The “alliances” identified in this study provided what Ibarra (1992: 174) has termed ‘protective coalition formation’, where the ‘systems of favours granted and owed, of mutual benefit and protection, and of connections invoked for the exercise of power’ serve to mask, foster and condone counterproductive behaviour (Ibarra, 1992: 172).

CONCLUSION

The predatory form of bullying described in this paper is different to that described in other studies on workplace bullying. Currently existing explanatory frameworks for predatory and group bullying inadequately capture the co-ordinated and co-operative nature of the bullying described by respondents in this research. By working together in “predatory alliances”, bullying was concealed, obscured, and deeply hidden by the operation of informal organisational networks. We have also recognised that that the structure of these networks enabled bullies to co-opt legitimate organizational systems which served to protect many of their predatory and abusive activities. The narratives presented show an aspect of the modern workplace that, to date, has remained largely invisible, hidden to even the ‘most vigilant observer’ (Jupp et al. 1999: 5).

When behaviours such as workplace bullying are rewarded by promotion into management, the potential for the behaviour to become “acceptable” and wide-spread within the organization is increased. In both organizations studied, promoting individuals with a known history of bullying led to the perpetuation of the bullying behaviour. Those in management who had engaged in bullying behaviour and been promoted themselves and were, apparently, willing to tolerate it from others. Working outside of formal organizational policies and procedures, bullies in “alliances” were confident they were protected by other bullies in positions of authority. This protection came from the ‘protective’ cloak of organisational legitimacy (Coleman and Ramos, 1998: 24) that was conjured to mask their activities. Research into deceptive sales practices in the insurance industry demonstrated how relationships within informal organizational networks provided the ‘mechanisms of diffusion
and facilitation’ (Mac Lean, 200: 193) necessary for the continuation of the behaviour. Similarly, in this context, the promotion of bullies provided opportunities that ensured the continuation of extensive workplace bullying.

The form of bullying reported in this study resulted in unprovoked, planned, aggression and cruelty, which participants reported ‘killed their spirit’ and ‘shattered their lives’. The unrelenting, calculated and deliberate nature of the bullying resulted in profound psychological harm, physical illness, and professional and financial destruction for many of those interviewed. The patterns of bullying also continued past the point where it was clear the psychological will and physical health of the targets had been broken. The behavior of white collar criminals also shows informal networks fostering behavior that ‘neutralizes’ any suggestion of involvement in ‘deviant’ or ‘unethical’ behavior, enabling morally wrong activities to be defined as normal and ordinary behaviour (Prasad and Prasad, 1998; Coleman, 1987; Coleman and Ramos, 1998). Similarly, the “alliances” of bullies reported in this study also sanitized the wrongdoing of their members (Keel, 1999), portraying the ‘shocking and horrific’ as ‘mundane and ordinary’ (Baumeister, 1999:113) and enabling perpetrators to commit, or contribute to, destructive acts, while expunging themselves of any responsibility for the outcomes. By achieving this, the bullies in alliances also succeeded in denying the validity of the claims of those they targeted.

These findings highlight the tension that exists between the formal and informal organizations and the ability of individuals to co-operate within informal networks that operate counter to organizational goals. The identification of informal networks as a contributory factor in condoning and perpetuating bullying within organizations requires further consideration. Workplace bullying can no longer be principally considered a discrete, isolated and random event that results from purely deviant individuals or poor work design. Instead, consideration should be given to understanding bullying as a systematic, planned and concealed behavior that can be hidden through co-operative informal networks and through the (mis)use of legitimate organizational structures, processes and routines.
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