

Custom and Practice:

An exploration of the role and influence of culture on workplace bullying

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ABSTRACT

The modern workforce is complex and diverse, providing different perspectives and bringing together multiple strengths which can create synergies. As national and organisational cultures provide a lens through which workplace interactions and behaviours can be perceived, interpreted, and experienced, it is important to have perspectives which appreciate and value differences. Seeing the lack of diversity tolerance has been identified as a factor in workplace bullying scenarios, gaining a deeper understanding of the triggers for these behaviours is useful in terms of both research and practice. For research, different cultural perspectives provide new unexplored areas to consider, and for practice the identification of factors that can mitigate or be used in the amelioration of the behaviour.

Keywords: workplace bullying, interpersonal behaviour, organisational culture, values

INTRODUCTION

Globalisation has led organisations to compete beyond their traditional boundaries by diminishing borders. This has changed the dynamics of competition, where the future cannot be accurately forecast. The ever intensifying pace of organisational change has been linked to inappropriate and negative workplace behaviours such as workplace bullying (Georgakopoulos, Wilkin & Kent, 2011), with some stating that these behaviours are at epidemic levels (Aquino & Thau, 2009).

The reasons behind bullying behaviours can be complex and interrelated, and linked to the characteristics of the targeted individual or the perpetrator (Baillien, Neyens, de Witte & Cuyper, 2009); one determinant which may have intrinsic influence on negative behaviours is culture. Research advocates that cultural beliefs, values, associated behaviours and norms of conduct (i.e. custom and practice) may also bear influence on the prevalence of, and the manner in which individuals perceive and respond to inappropriate behaviours (Tepper, 2007). This contention, backed by cross-cultural research (e.g. Kernan, Watson, Chen & Kim, 2011) suggests that culture plays a moderating role in workplace bullying scenarios. The aim of this paper is to explore the role and influence of culture, organisational and national, on workplace bullying; these discussions are useful for both research and practice. For the former, identifying key influencing factors will be beneficial in

better understanding the complexity and categorisation of the antecedents of the negative behaviour. For the latter, this knowledge will be helpful in managing and ameliorating bullying in the workplace.

WORKPLACE BULLYING

Scholarly understanding of workplace bullying originated in Scandinavia in the 1980s with the work of Leymann who used the term mobbing to describe this negative behaviour (Duffy & Sperry, 2007). Much of workplace bullying research has focussed on refining the construct and understanding its causes and consequences (Balducci, Cecchin & Fraccaroli, 2012). Scandinavia and the UK have emerged as leading research in the field, however, scholarly efforts in bullying and mobbing research have also grown across the globe, including through the efforts of researchers in Australia, New Zealand, South Africa, the European Union and Japan (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel & Varita, 2003). Awareness of bullying as a workplace issue has now spread beyond the Western world and has attracted investigations across the globe (Power *et al.*, 2013). The disciplines in which bullying is studied are as diverse and varied as the terminology and include management (Neuman & Baron, 2003), psychology (Keashly & Neuman, 2005), sociology (Hodson, Roscigno & Lopez 2006), anthropology (Davenport, Schwartz & Elliott, 2002), and organisational communication (Tracy, Lutgen-Sandwick & Alberts, 2006). Regardless of significant advancements in the field, workplace bullying is still seen as a subjective behaviour which requires further research in new and diverse ways, for example using qualitative research in the interpretivist paradigm.

There are similarities and differences in the definitions of workplace bullying. While Salin (2003a) suggests social exclusion and harassment of the targeted individual, Lutgen-Sandvik and Sypher (2009) support the notion of mistreatment detrimental to the individual's health such as verbal abuse, offensive conduct, and work interference as bullying. Salin (2003a) and Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2011) conclude that repetition, negative events and behaviours form central characteristics of bullying, whilst Caponecchia and Wyatt (2009) contend that unreasonability is also a core theme.

Bullying may occur in different ways in different contexts. The negative behaviours may include verbal as well as physical intimidation, social exclusion, unjustified intrusion into individual work arena, excessive yet unreasonable work demands, unwarranted public confrontation, vicious task

evaluation in the guise of managing performance, and undermining an individual amongst other behaviours (Omari, 2007). These acts may be personal (e.g. being insulting and critical) or employment associated in character (e.g. withholding information), or may comprise exclusion and social isolation (Cowie, Naylor, Rivers, Smith & Pereira, 2002).

Perpetrators of workplace bullying can come from an array of backgrounds. In order to fully comprehend the nature of the behaviour, it is essential to understand the mindset of the individuals concerned. In today's fast paced world, fierce competition and the need to achieve success at any cost dominate the psyche of many workers (Salin, 2003b). It can be suggested that within the existing organisational settings of amplified work pressures, bullying may be a response to the level of competition and work intensification (Omari & Paull, 2013) and the need for survival (Salin, 2003a).

Given globalisation and fierce competition for scarce resources, bullying may be viewed as a survival and advancement strategy (Rossouw, 2013). In order to succeed in a competitive environment people may resort to basic instinct: 'survival of the fittest' (Omari, Paull & Crews, 2013). Bullying arises when those who are forceful enough to drive themselves and others to achieve targets are considered to be above censure from the perspective of the organisation (e.g., Omari, 2007). Further, as a tactic, the perpetrator, by sabotaging the work performance of a colleague may try to advance their own position (Salin, 2003b). This portrays the perpetrator as a better performing individual providing them with advantage over others whilst perpetuating the negative behaviours in the workplace.

Research has consistently illustrated that bullying in the workplace is correlated with heightened pressure and stress levels (Burnes & Pope, 2007). In some instances victims further respond aggressively or violently towards the perpetrator, leading to a "destructive cycle" and "reverse bullying" (Omari, 2007, p. 142). In a spiralling development, such hostility may even gradually become naturalised, taken for granted and accepted as a norm of workplace conduct (Hearn & Parkin, 2001), and an inherent part of the organisational culture. Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf and Cooper (2003) suggest that both supervisors as well as peers may indulge in bullying, while they further advocate that targets of bullying are usually less authoritative than the perpetrators and hence, commonly unable to protect themselves. This points towards the role of power in workplace bullying scenarios.

As a consequence of workplace bullying, targets suffer from behavioural, physical, psychological, monetary and social consequences, and organisations are challenged with mounting absenteeism, turnover, and declining levels of performance and productivity (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). In addition, targets report reducing effort, taking time off to avoid the bully, or leaving the organisation. As an outcome, productivity and profit reduce (Harvey, Heames, Richey & Leonard, 2006) and the image of the organisation is adversely affected.

On an individual level, victims suffer from extreme stress and other related ill effects such as anxiety, depression, sleep disturbance, loss of self-confidence, and a sense of helplessness (Bechtoldt & Schmitt, 2010). The consequences of bullying on the victim can manifest as a number negative health conditions such as clinically relevant anxiety and depression (Hogh, Gemzoe Mikkelsen & Hansen, 2011). Investigations have established that workplace bullying is associated with increased strain, pressure and stress for those involved (Burnes & Pope, 2007). It can therefore be said that workplace bullying results in high, and avoidable costs, at both individual, and organisational levels.

CUSTOM AND PRACTICE

Culture is a prevalent concept (Taras, Roney & Steel, 2007), and although being very commonly used, appears not to have a widely accepted definition, with some being of the opinion that the number of definitions are only on the rise (Hofstede, 2001). The notion of culture, like workplace bullying, is subjective and open to interpretation and influence of contextual factors. Culture may be defined as shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of important events that result from common experiences of members of collectives and are transmitted across age generations (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman & Gupta, 2004). Like nations, organisations also have cultures. Armstrong (1999) contends that organisational culture is the pattern of values, norms, beliefs, attitudes and assumptions that may not have been articulated but shape the ways in which people behave and get things done; that is, 'custom and practice'. At the core of the behaviours and their interpretations are values, referring to what is believed to be important about how people and organisations behave (Armstrong, 1999); these form the building blocks for both national and organisational cultures.

National culture

Much of the research on workplace bullying has been undertaken by scholars who have investigated a variety of abusive behaviours at work, such as aggression, mobbing and harassment (Branch, 2008). It is noteworthy that the impact of the cultural context on the individuals' comprehension of workplace bullying has largely been omitted in most instances (Anderson & Bushman, 2002). Some studies contend that bullying may be viewed differently depending on the dominant culture's acceptance of various power and hierarchical structures (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010). Here, a qualitative research methodology would serve researchers well by providing in-depth, rich data from which key influencing factors in different cultural settings can be unearthed.

Theories of national culture have grown from anthropological, sociological and psychological perspectives and are based on dominant value systems of different groups including: motivational goals; leadership behaviours; and interpersonal communications and relationships. Steers, Nardon and Sanchez-Runde (2013, pp. 423-427) have developed a composite model of culture based on the work of the trail-blazers in the field (e.g. Kluckohn and Strodtbeck in the 1950s; Hofstede in the 1980s; Schwartz in the 1990s; Trompenaars in the 1990s; Hall in the 2000s; and House et al. in the 2000s). This framework summarises the main differences in national culture view of five dimensions: Power distance: hierarchical – egalitarian; Social relationships: individualistic – collectivist; Environmental relationships: mastery orientated – harmony orientated; Time and work patterns: monochronic – polychronic; and Uncertainty and social control: rule based – relationship based.

Power differentials are more marked in hierarchical settings where control and mastery reside with one group or the other. These environments are more focused on command and control, and those of lower status often accept their predicament. In egalitarian settings there is an expectation that power is more equitably spread, and that dominance by one group or another is not a given right (Vega & Comer, 2005). In some cultures, bullying is seen as a mechanism for task accomplishment, while there are other cultures that see it as deplorable (Salin, 2003b). Societies high in power distance are inclined to acknowledge that power differences exist amid individuals, while societies with low power distance tend to accept that individuals have relatively equivalent power (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010).

Evidence suggests that workers from low power distance cultures (e.g. Australia) will respond more negatively to workplace bullying than workers from high power distance cultures, like Singapore (Loh, Restubog & Zagencyk, 2010). This may be due to an individual's own perception towards domineering behaviour from others at work. Workplace bullying, therefore, is more commonly found and less discouraged in organisations with close work cultures and high power distance than in those with open work cultures and low power distance. Organisational culture has therefore been found to be an influencing factor in workplace bullying scenarios (Notelaers, de Witte & Einarsen, 2010).

In collectivist cultures, the power of the group is more important than that of an individual resulting in generally lower power distance settings. Here, Jacobson, Hood and Van Buren III (2014) postulate that bullying may be more group based, and by exclusion, and used as a form of ostracism.

Conversely, Seo, Leather and Coyne (2012) provide evidence that there may be more protections available for targets in collectivist and relationship based settings due to higher group cohesion.

In a mastery-orientated cultures, most employees will respond to challenges and personal incentives, and will strive for success. Whereas, employees in more harmony-orientated cultures will more likely focus their attention on building or maintaining group welfare, personal relationships, and environmental sustainability. The latter will likely be more responsive to participative leadership and more sceptical of proposed change and competitive tactics which may escalate to negative workplace behaviours such bullying.

Time is a fluid notion for those from polychronic cultures, people with this orientation tend to mix their work and personal lives and address many problems and issues concurrently. This approach is often difficult to reconcile for people from monochronic cultures who are far more sequential in their approach, and place much focus on task accomplishment in a timely manner (Steers, Nardon & Sanchez-Runde, 2013). It is easy to see how workplace conflict can arise in circumstances where a line manager and employee come from cultures with different time orientation.

Rule based cultures apply the same principles to all in a universal manner, that is, there is the rule of law and exceptions are not to be made otherwise it may lead to deviant conduct. Relationship based cultures, on the other hand, take contextual issues, including relationships, into account in making

decisions and acting (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 2012). In some cultures this can be seen as giving preferential treatment, unfair advantage and even nepotism, in effect resulting in an in-group out-group situation, where those in the out-group may be seen to be treated unjustly and unfairly.

The earlier cited composite cultural framework demonstrates the plurality of the nature of culture. All existing cultural frameworks are distinguished by their very distinct, yet practical typologies and terminologies as developed by their creators; this may indicate the role of perception in the classification of cultural frameworks. It can also be said that culture, and its perception, are subjective in nature and may vary from an individual to an individual, and from a place to a place. Here, again, in departing from the norm, qualitative research methodologies can provide valuable insights into key influencing and interpretive factors.

Organisational culture

The models of organisational culture are many and varied. Deal and Kennedy (1982) defined organisational culture as 'the way things get done around here'. This model classified culture based on different types of organisations centred around: the way in which feedback is received; the way members are rewarded; and the level of risks taken. O'Reilly III, Chatman and Caldwell (1991) later contributed a seven factor model to capture the essence of an organisation's culture considering aspects such as: innovation and risk taking; attention to detail; outcome orientation; people orientation; team orientation; aggressiveness; and stability.

Whilst the characteristics suggested by O'Reilly III, Chatman and Caldwell (1991) focus on organisations' employees and the role that they play in the formation of workplace culture, the cultural framework suggested by Deal and Kennedy (1982) lays more emphasis on the organisations' role in forming the workplace culture and its subsequent influences on the respective employees. This contrast may suggest the diversity of views on culture that have emerged from different perspectives.

The prevalence of bullying at a workplace also depends upon the various individual cultural variables in the organisations. For bullying to occur, certain antecedents must be in present (Salin, 2003b). The enabling factors can provide fertile grounds for bullying, making the environment conducive to the

negative behaviour. Organisational culture was found to be one such enabling factor and may play a significant role in the prevalence and perpetuation of workplace bullying (Omari, 2007). Workplace bullying may also be seen as a by-product of global economic environments. For example, research indicates that environmental factors, such as globalisation and liberalising markets, and an ever-increasing struggle for efficiency and performance related reward systems may lead to an increase in bullying social and cultural traditions (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008).

Individual cultural backgrounds, in association with certain distinctive characteristics, may lead to an environment wherein workplace bullying is grossly overlooked, or even implicitly condoned. Studies suggests that organisational cultures aggravate the dilemma when their leaders encourage or fail to understand workplace bullying or dismiss it as tough management (e.g. Georgakopoulos, Wilkin & Kent, 2011). Other studies (e.g. D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010) contend that the role of the organisation is critical in determining the outcome of the targets' coping response. These findings imply that organisational culture plays a vital role in the occurrence or prevention of workplace bullying.

Bullying in work settings can also be viewed as the consequential manifestation of different mindsets. Workplace bullying is opportunely viewed as a dyadic predicament between individuals (bully and target) (Johnson, 2011). Often bullies are reported to rise to the top, as their dominance is generally misconstrued as leadership (e.g. Omari, 2007); this makes them stand out from the others in the workplace. Subsequently, some organisations may tacitly view bullying as proficient means of accomplishing objectives (Salin, 2003b).

The creation of an harmonious and ethical environment has to commence from the top, and be role modelled by the organisation's senior employees and leaders (Mayer, Kuenzi, Greenbaum, Bardes & Salvador, 2009). Management styles described as 'tough', 'no nonsense', and 'hard as nails' are often applauded in boardrooms and are code words for a bully boss. Ambitious employees and potential bullies identify and master these manoeuvrings to evolve into full-fledged bullies (Glendinning, 2001). This in turn results in tacit approval of the negative behaviours as legitimate management action. 'Tough' management, hence, may be projected as a euphemism for bullying (McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003).

Studies have established that organisational cultures aggravate the crisis when the leaders either do not recognise workplace bullying or dismiss it as tough management (e.g. Georgakopoulos, Wilkin & Kent, 2011). The values and norms of the workplace determine how bullying is defined and the way in which staff construe situations (for example, as 'bullying' or 'firm management'), and whether bullying is acknowledged as a problem (Cowie et al., 2002). In some organisations, bullying and other forms of aggression are implicitly 'permitted' as the way things are done (Salin, 2003b), in effect becoming part of 'custom and practice'. Recent studies have indicated that bullies feel more encouraged to engage in bullying when they realise that organisational settings are conducive to the negative behaviour (Samnani & Singh, 2014).

It can be surmised that bullies can either be individuals (like an organisation's senior leadership, bosses, subordinates and peers); or they can be the organisations themselves, which through their framework of sly policies and directives tend to bully an individual worker or a group of workers. The latter implicitly induces that workplace bullying forms an unstated element of the organisational culture. There is also a growing acknowledgment that the workplace environment can theatre a role in promoting bullying at work (Hoel & Beale, 2006). Although management has diminutive control over the characteristics of an individual, except in staffing and promotion decisions, work environmental factors are under the control of management, who may wield substantial sway, for example, on reward systems and progression (Salin, 2003b). Bullying may go past maltreatment and become tacitly conventional, or even an encouraged aspect of the culture of an organisation (Cowie *et al.*, 2002). In such an adverse scenario, bullying at work may have an impact on customers and other stakeholders in the wider arena, such as suppliers, collaborators and the general society as a whole. This, along with the lack of remedial discourse, and a lack of alternative employment avenues, may incline the targeted individuals to believe that it is in their best interest to silently suffer this ill treatment.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

LaVan and Martin (2007) identify workplace bullying as an ethical concern. Increasing attention is therefore being paid to the prevalence of the behaviour and its consequences for individuals, groups, and organisations (Hoel & Giga, 2006), with many organisations having developed comprehensive

policies to reduce bullying (Cowie *et al.*, 2002). Organisations wishing to attract and retain key talent must be cognisant of the cultures created, and the standards of conduct that are condoned and role modelled, as bullying has been repeatedly shown to have unfavourable consequences for affected individuals, and wide ranging poor outcomes for organisations (Aquino & Thau, 2009) and beyond.

In result orientated work settings, the 'ends justify the means' approach is inculcated in the workforce. Such an approach is often rewarded by organisations, resulting in the accomplishment of the designated objectives; at times, at any, and at all costs. Research has indicated that employees are subjected to perpetual stress to constantly perform at high levels, this may be a trigger and lead them to resort to bullying behaviour towards fellow employees to achieve desired goals and objectives (Samnani & Singh, 2014). This contention is especially true in highly competitive environments, wherein individuals, to further their career may participate in detaching and obstructing their competitors' feats (Treadway, Shaughnessy, Breland, Yang & Reeves, 2013). In such an avaricious environment, the victimising behaviour of workplace bullying is slowly, yet progressively, establishing itself as a tacit convention.

Studies have suggested that bullying victims tend to psychologically restructure the bullying behaviour in accordance with their respective cultural perspectives (Maitlis & Sonenshein, 2010). Given it is understood that the prevalence of workplace bullying varies according to the worker's perception (Ireland, 2006), and is influenced by their cultural background (Moayed *et al.*, 2006), there is a need for researchers to investigate how cultural constructs initiate, facilitate, and even reward bullying behaviour (e.g. Lutgen-Sandvik, Tracey & Alberts, 2007). The proposed areas of research would benefit from new insights gathered through qualitative research, a methodology not often adopted in workplace bullying studies.

An organisation's stance is decisive in shaping the target's coping retort (D'Cruz & Noronha, 2010). Organisations with open cultures will have frankness as a key attribute of their working style, where issues may be openly discussed and possibly collectively resolved. This is significant as studies illustrate that bystanders also play a vital role in the bullying scenarios (Bastiaensens *et al.*, 2014) and that bystanders also suffer when someone is bullied in the workplace (e.g., Vartia, 2001). Therefore,

workplace bullying must be recognised as a problem for the entire work unit, and not merely as a problem of the target.

Organisations with closed cultures have a fundamental level of social conformity as their integral foundation, this gives rise to high power distance, often resulting in stringent organisational hierarchies. In such organisations, individuals tend to unquestionably follow their bosses, and subjective inquisitiveness on superiors' decisions is not commonly accepted or appreciated. In high power distance settings, workers regard bullying behaviour from superiors as routine (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010). Studies also indicate that workers in high power distance cultures view bullying as a vindicated norm due to their acceptance of their superior's authority over them (Samnani, 2013). A typical form of institutionalised bullying has been noted in organisations with high power imbalances (Salin, 2003b). Herein, bullying behaviour is quietly overlooked by other organisational members, acknowledging it as a tacit constituent.

Cross-cultural issues have become relevant to the scholarly discipline of management (Taras, Rowney & Steel, 2007) with growth in immigration, multinational corporations, workplace diversity, and cross-border expansions (Ma & Allen, 2009). Research suggests that cultural influences play a significant role in bullying scenarios (Giorgi, 2010). As cross-cultural studies of workplace bullying are scarce (Jacobson, Hood & Van Buren III, 2014), it is worthy to question whether national culture influences employee responses to workplace bullying (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010), and if so, to what extent. Given the global environment and increasing diversity in the workplace, further studies focusing on the role of national culture in perceiving and experiencing workplace bullying will provide valuable insights into the management and amelioration of this negative behaviour.

The pressures of the global economy have increased the requirement for managers from one culture to guide work groups and teams composed of members from another (Tavakoli, Keenan & Crnjak-Karanovic, 2003). There is evidence from cross-cultural studies of workplace bullying that people are generally not comfortable with the notion of 'difference' and 'diversity', within, and between cultures (Omari, Paull, D'Cruz & Guneri-Cangarli, 2014). Growing diversity in the workplaces may therefore be related to increased occurrences of bullying behaviours. Bullies have been colloquially referred to

as equal opportunity abusers (LaVan & Martin, 2008). Recent studies have also shown that people from different cultural backgrounds have different reactions towards a bullying situation, both as a victim or a bystander (Loh, Restubog & Zagenczyk, 2010). The nature of the society, either individualistic or collectivist, may also have an impact on the rates of the negative behaviour with researchers (e.g., Seo, Leather & Coyne, 2012) reporting lower incidents of the behaviour in the more collectivist versus individualistic cultures. In terms of practical implications, an active stance towards diversity tolerance and management, and one that is role modelled by the senior leaders of an organisation is therefore a key to achieve harmonious and civil workplace relations. Organisations seeking to improve their competitive stance are therefore well advised to instil norms of behaviour that acknowledge and value diversity, and create cultures of dignity and respect for all.

In summary, diversity in the workplace has made it critical for organisations to ascertain the influence of cultural differences on different aspects of work (Kirkman, Lowe & Gibson, 2006). Researchers (e.g., Samnani, 2012) are of the opinion that there is a significant lack of investigation relating to the influence of culture on workplace bullying. In attempting to comprehensively investigate workplace bullying, it is vital to establish what behaviours the employees consider to constitute workplace bullying, wherein it may be apt to question whether they are the same across different cultures (Escartin, Zapf, Arrieta, Alvaro & Rodriguez-Carballeira, 2010).

CONCLUSION

Culture, national and organisational, act as lenses through which behaviours are perceived and interpreted; one's value system and fundamental notions of right or wrong, acceptable or unacceptable behaviour, shape meaning, and ultimately the interpretation of experienced behaviours. Organisations seeking a competitive advantage, harmony, and dignity and respect for their employees must be cognisant of the differing frames of reference, and where appropriate instigate educational and diversity tolerance programs to improve shared understanding of expectations and behavioural conventions. At the end of the day, individual and organisational values enacted through 'custom and practice' set the tone for appropriate and acceptable behaviours generally, and in the workplace.

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Custom and Practice:

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