

## Workplace Bullying: An Investigation of Social Psychology

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### Abstract

The paper attempts to match psychological theories with the patterns found in the behaviour of those who bully and those who are bullied. The article draws parallels between the study of bullying and the study of aggression in general by highlighting the areas in which the two can be linked and those in which the two phenomena remain distinct. It will also focus on social interactionist theories of aggression (Felson&Tedeschi, 1993; Lawrence & Leather, 1999) in particular to investigate whether an understanding of bullying behaviour can be gained by using this approach.

**KEYWORDS:** Social psychology, bullying, aggression, workplace

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### Introduction:

Early views of aggression focused on instincts within the individual which drove him or her to act in a hostile and possibly violent manner (Lorenz, 1966). Other approaches paid more attention to the behavioural component of aggressive acts (Buss, 1961). In such cases, aggression was defined as the delivery of noxious stimuli from one organism to another. The understandings and perceptions of those actors involved in the interaction were afforded little or no explanatory value. Similarly neither the situation in which the aggressive act takes place, nor the participants' understanding of it, are paid attention in behaviourist models. From a social interactionist perspective, however, it is precisely these understandings and perceptions that are central in the explanation of violent and aggressive behaviour. The intentions, expectations, beliefs and judgements of those involved are given priority in such explanatory models, together with the prevailing environmental context which provides a setting in which the behaviour is framed (Leather & Lawrence, 1995; Lawrence & Leather, 1999b). Siann (1985) offers a useful definition of aggressive behaviour. She maintains that four conditions must apply in order for an act to be deemed aggressive. First, the person intends to carry out the behaviour, therefore an action that results in accidental harm cannot be described as aggressive. Second, the behaviour takes place within an interpersonal situation characterized by conflict or competition. It could be argued that this conflict or competition is a subjective perception of the situation and would involve at least one of the actors understanding the context of the act in such a manner. Third, the behaviour is performed intentionally to gain greater advantage than the person being aggressed against does. In this way some form of instrumentality is clear. Fourth, the person carrying out the behaviour has either provoked the conflict or has moved in on to a higher degree of intensity. As a result, there is a sense of initiating or escalating the conflict. Bullying has also attracted a variety of definitions. Rayner&Hoel (1997), for example, define bullying within five main categories:

- 1 Threats to an individual's professional status - in the work context, this may include public humiliation, having ideas derided, accusation of mistakes;
- 2 Threats to an individual's personal standing - this may include insults and teasing, or spreading rumours;
- 3 Isolation - this could involve withholding work-related information or prohibiting access to opportunities for development;
- 4 Overwork - this would include more than simple high workload as part of the job. Instead this may involve the setting of impossible-to-meet deadlines or extreme pressure to produce work;
- 5 Destabilisation - this can include a lack of recognition or reward for good work, removal of responsibility, and changing remits of the individual's work.

Rayner&Hoel (1997) also maintain that the victim must actually feel harassed by these activities and that their work must be affected as a result. Additionally, they stipulate that bullying must be a repeated and frequent activity. While bullying is often a repeated activity, it is also important to consider the impact of single bullying episodes on the victim. Randall (1997) for example, takes issue with including repeated behaviour in any description of bullying. He suggests that bullying behaviour may only occur once but be of such intensity for the victim that the impact of the episode continues to affect their work and their interactions with the bully. The fear of future attacks may be sufficient alone to have a repeated and negative impact upon the victim (Randall, 1997, see also Hoel and Cooper in Chapter 1 of this book). Randall (1997:4) therefore defines bullying as 'the aggressive behaviour arising from the deliberate intent to cause physical or psychological distress to others'.

### **Workplace norms and Culture in Relation to Bullying:**

Knowledge of the norm or rule system of any organization is vital in evaluating two aspects relating to aggressive and bullying behaviour. First, if the normative culture is characterized by competition and hostility (Hoel& Cooper, 2000), aggressive and bullying behaviours are more likely to be perceived as a legitimate means to obtain goals (Siann, 1985). Hoel& Cooper assert that when levels of bullying are exhibited from the top of the organization down through the ranks, it is likely that bullying tactics are also being 'cascaded' downwards, thus perpetuating the bullying norm. Second, knowledge of any norm system is vital in evaluating whether a rule has been broken and identifying the 'injured parties'. In many escalatory aggressive encounters, it is this component that can lead to a perception of wrongdoing resulting in retaliatory behaviour on the part of the victim or the victim's representative (Tedeschi&Nesler, 1993; Lawrence, 1998). In escalatory models of aggression and violence (excluding bullying behaviour), then retaliation or redressing behaviour can be seen in the context of a developing aggressive episode (Novaco& Welsh, 1989, Lawrence & Leather, 1999; Cox and Leather, 1994). Knowledge of the norm or rule system of any organisation is vital in evaluating two aspects relating to aggressive and bullying behaviour. First, if the normative culture is characterised by competition and hostility (Hoel and Cooper, 2000), aggressive and

bullying behaviours are more likely to be perceived as a legitimate means to obtain goals (Siann, 1985). Indeed as Hoel & Cooper assert when levels of bullying are exhibited from the top of the organisation down through the ranks, it is likely that bullying tactics are also being 'cascaded' downwards, thus perpetuating the bullying norm. Second, knowledge of any norm system is vital in evaluating whether a rule has been broken and identifying the 'injured parties'. In many escalatory aggressive encounters, it is this component that can lead to a perception of wrongdoing resulting in retaliatory behaviour on the part of the victim or the victim's representative (Tedeschi & Nesler, 1993; Lawrence, 1998). In escalatory models of aggression and violence (excluding bullying behaviour), then retaliation or redressing behaviour can be seen in the context of a developing aggressive episode (Novaco & Welsh, 1989). This approach utilizes Novaco & Welsh's model (1989) and contextualizes interpersonal dynamics with the social and physical environment. The model points out that following an initial event which may have been sparked by some triggering factor (time pressures, innate hostility and so on), both participants in the interaction will consider what to do next. If person A decides that the triggering event is the responsibility of person B, and that person B has been malicious and intentional in making the event occur then, in an escalatory model, person A may have feelings relating to anger, frustration, etc. These feelings lead person A to make decisions about what to do about the situation. If he or she decides to retaliate in some way, then the actions of person 1 become the trigger for person B. Person B then goes through the same process and the incident escalates, with both parties attempting to 'win' as the other 'loses'. In such models, there is the assumption that both parties are relatively well matched in terms of the variables important for that encounter. If the interaction is likely to become physically violent, then a 'match' relating to physical power will be important. If the interaction is related to social positioning, then a 'match' in terms of status is assumed. However, in bullying situations, the presence of 'matched' adversaries cannot be assumed. This is particularly the case when it is considered that 75 per cent of bullies are likely to be their victim's manager or boss (Hoel & Cooper, 2000). The escalatory model also assumes retaliation as a chosen behavioural option. However retaliation is not the only means open to the victim and, in the bullying context, retaliation may not take place owing to a variety of forces. Tedeschi & Nesler (1993) outline a range of alternatives open to a victim of aggressive behaviour:

- a. The victim may reappraise the norm violating behaviour. For example, the victim may excuse the behaviour as merely the result of the excessive demands of the situation if the action was seen as the result of a legitimate goal. However, bullying behaviour is not usually the result of a person acting for the common good. The victims may, at least initially, not speak out or deal directly with the bully, for fear that they will be perceived as not 'playing the game' or not helping the team to achieve its goals. If the case of the bullying boss is considered, the victim may believe that attempting to comply with unreasonable deadlines may be acceptable within the overall goal of the organization, particularly in periods of high job insecurity. Once again the prevailing norms may have some influence here, particularly if the victim witnesses others tolerating the same behaviour.
- b. The victim may decide to demand some redressing action from the wrongdoer. A refusal to comply with this demand may intensify the conflict, further resulting in an escalation into a more aggressive encounter, though many victims of bullying

fear this escalation and are concerned about the escalatory nature of the interaction. This is particularly the case if there is a power imbalance between the bully and the victim.

- c. The victim may decide to punish the 'wrongdoer'. The aim of the punishment is usually to deter the person from performing similar actions in the future and/or to redress the power relationship between the two parties.

Thus the issue of power and instrumental aggression is an important consideration for those studying the process of bullying.

### **Power, Position and Aggressive Bullying:**

Power - or rather the existence of a power imbalance - often appears in definitions of bullying (Olweus, 1991; Bjorkqvist, 1994). Brodsky (1976) also perceives bullies as manipulating their colleagues or staff in order to achieve power or privilege, pointing out that some positions of power include the remit to inflict actions on others which could be perceived as aggressive. For this reason it can be seen that, for some managers, the use of bullying tactics to achieve organizational goals is simply perceived as a means to an end. As discussed elsewhere in this volume, this kind of approach has serious flaws, as a bullying style of management can have a range of negative impacts on the organization and on those within it. The use of bullying to achieve some goal indicates the extent to which bullying behaviour can be seen as an instrumental activity. In many published books and articles about aggressive behaviour and violence, the dichotomy between instrumental aggression and affective (sometimes termed emotional) aggression is made (Berkowitz, 1993). The difference between the two types of aggression is traditionally understood in the following manner. Instrumentally aggressive behaviour may be viewed as that which is deliberately chosen, planned and employed with the primary purpose of achieving a specific goal. Here, the aggressive act is used merely as a means to an end. Affective aggression, however, is usually described as behaviour which is not planned necessarily, but which is rather a response to an unpleasant or stressful situation or encounter (Berkowitz, 1993). According to the social interactionist framework, the beliefs, expectations and normative environment of the individuals involved are of paramount importance. Knowledge of these beliefs and perceptions can help us to understand why aggression was chosen above all other options, for example, laughing the situation off, allowing an apology to be made, etc. The blame attributed to individuals for aggressive incidents may crucially depend on an understanding of the motivational basis of the 'aggressor's' behaviour.

Much of the work on adult and workplace bullying has revealed that bullying behaviour does appear to have a strong instrumental component. Correlations have been found, for example, between bullying and insufficient work control and high levels of role conflict (Einarssen et al., 1994). This implies that bullies may see their activities as maintaining control over their colleagues or staff. Brodsky (1976) has indicated that bullying behaviour may be related to the need to attain power or privilege - either formally by the gaining of reward and promotion, or informally by the power obtained from generating terror among co-workers. According to Randall (1997:7) 'it is hard to find instances where bullying has not involved an imbalance of

power in favour of the bully'; a point supported by Olweus (1993). Therefore as instrumental aggression is usually used to establish or maintain some form of power over others (Tedeschi, 1983), it appears likely that bullying behaviour in particular can be understood instrumentally. In this way, by understanding what it is that bullies gain from their behaviour, an understanding of how to limit their need to bully others can be achieved. Because of this instrumental aspect of bullying, it may be that intention to harm the victim is not the primary goal of the bully in all cases (Hoel & Cooper). Importantly, and related to instrumental aggression, the social learning process of individuals may give some suggestions for the reduction of bullying behaviour. The nature of social learning and its role in aggression and bullying, therefore emerge as crucial.

### **Social Learning and Workplace Bullying:**

Individuals may begin their bullying 'career' in childhood where they learn that if they hit another child, they can make the child surrender their lunch money/sweets. In adults this bullying behaviour may become more 'sophisticated' and in the workplace less physically violent methods may be employed. Nevertheless, the principle is similar. The bully has learned that acting in certain ways results in reward. 'Reward' here is a slightly more complex concept and relates to conditioning models - otherwise known as reinforcement. Here a reward is something that increases the likelihood of behaviours being repeated. Therefore a reward could just as easily be the avoidance of a negative outcome. For example, a manager might realise that by emotionally blackmailing employees to work unreasonable hours, he avoids gaining the negative image of being an inadequate manager with a poorly performing team. According to Bandura (1978), this process is vitally important, particularly in the examination of aggressive and antisocial behaviour. Thus while the social interactionist perspective emphasizes the importance of 'rules' of social interaction in governing the way in which we deal with grievances and conflict, the social learning approach focuses more on the role of social development. Bandura's model (1978) goes further than simply using classical and operant conditioning models of reward and punishment for behaviour, however. He also maintained that the revelation that aggressive (or bullying) behaviour pays off can occur through direct experience (as in conditioning models) or by observing someone else using aggressive behaviour to achieve some goal. From this observation, Bandura argues that the child can assimilate the complex skills in the art of aggression and bullying by imitating the observed behaviour (or a form of it). This is known as 'modelling'. This approach is quite useful for an understanding of bullying behaviour, particularly in light of the instrumental component of much bullying. It is therefore essential that organisations are conscious of whether or not they are rewarding bullying behaviour through various mechanisms. For example bullying can be rewarded indirectly through the organisational culture (e.g. admiring talk of 'playing hardball' or circulating stories of organisational 'heroes' who were essentially bullies) or more directly through promotional strategies (i.e. promoting individuals because of the results they achieve - without considering how they were achieved). At first glance, social learning approaches and social interactionist models may appear to contradict each other somewhat. That is, social learning could be viewed as a strictly behaviourist approach

to bullying and aggression without the need to consider the cognitive processes occurring during the interaction. It is these cognitive processes which are so crucial to the social interactionist perspective. However, Bandura later adapted his social learning theory in the light of an increased emphasis on the individuals' interpretative processes. As a result, he indicated (Bandura, 1983) that a 'self-regulatory' mechanism is established within individuals which is the result of a set of learned, directly experienced standards of behaviour. This mechanism will mean that the individual can experience displeasure (or shame) at their own behaviour - even in the light of no external punishment. This displeasure is sufficient to prohibit the aggressive or antisocial action.

### **Bystander apathy:**

Examining bystander apathy, it is surprising to note that in Rayner's study (1997), 77 per cent of the sample had witnessed bullying at work. It is likely given this number that many individuals witness bullying and yet do nothing to confront the bully or step in to help the victim. Although this may appear a somewhat callous neglect of the well-being of their colleagues, there may be many reasons for the inaction. Firstly, if the bully is a manager, which they often are (Hoel & Cooper, 2000), then the witness may fear for their own position within the organization following retributive action by the bully. Secondly, the witness may simply fear becoming a victim of bullying. Thirdly, Rayner (1997) also reports that a recent job change on the part of the victim accounts for 51 per cent of the incidence of bullying. Therefore it is likely that, because the victim is new to the work group, they have had insufficient time to form support networks. As a result, a shared responsibility for the victim amongst the colleagues can result in no one colleague taking action on behalf of the victim. Organizations need to be particularly vigilant for bullying behaviour in such situations. Rayner (1997) also highlights the change of manager as a key period for bullying to begin. These periods of change therefore need to be identified as potential bullying 'hot spots' and organizational awareness should be increased around these times in order to reduce the incidence of bullying and the negative impact of bystander apathy.

### **Conclusion:**

The organization has a leading role to take in the reduction of bullying and it is essential that measures to combat bullying be implemented across every level. It is essential that a total and integrated organisational approach to bullying is accomplished in order to reduce its incidence and thereby the misery experienced by the victims of workplace bullies.

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