

Managers in the firing line:

Contributing factors to workplace bullying by staff: an interview study

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ABSTRACT

Workplace bullying is a phenomenon that is attracting increasing interest from researchers throughout the Western world. To date, most of the research into workplace bullying has focused on managers and colleagues as the perpetrators of bullying in the workplace. By contrast, little is known about ‘upwards bullying’, where managers are the targets. We argue that in order to more fully understand workplace bullying as a whole, the phenomenon of upwards bullying requires research attention. In the present study, upwards bullying was explored in interviews conducted with 24 managers from public and private organizations, with the data coded and arranged thematically. Results indicate that potential contributing factors towards upwards bullying include the current work environment, change within organizations and power issues. We recommend that organizations identify the occurrence and processes of upwards bullying as important steps in developing comprehensive workplace bullying policies.

Keywords: power; upwards bullying; workplace abuse; workplace bullying

Despite an increase in research into workplace bullying in recent decades, the major focus has been on ‘downwards bullying’ with some recent attention on ‘horizontal bullying’ (Lewis & Sheehan 2003). Thus, relatively little is known about managers who are bullied by their staff, a process described as ‘upwards bullying’ within this paper, and why this form of bullying occurs. While it is legitimate that the predominant focus of research has been on managers as the perpetrators of workplace bullying (British studies have consistently found those in superior positions to be perpetrators of workplace bullying, Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia 2003), we contend that, in order to fully understand the broad phenomenon of workplace bullying, upwards bullying requires our attention. Such a focus has potential to impact on our

theoretical understanding of workplace bullying, and to highlight important recommendations for managers, staff and organizations.

Despite limited usage of the term 'upwards bullying' (Lewis & Sheehan 2003; McCarthy, Henderson, Sheehan & Barker 2002; Rayner & Cooper 2003), there does appear to be general agreement in the literature that managers can indeed be the targets of workplace bullying from their staff (e.g. Zapf et al. 2003). For example, Hoel, Cooper and Faragher (2001) found in their study of the impact of organizational status and workplace bullying that 6.7% of respondents had been bullied by staff. Furthermore, prevalence studies into workplace bullying have identified the occurrence of upwards bullying as between 2% and 27%, with a mean of 11% (see Zapf et al. 2003). However, cases of upwards bullying are reported in the literature rarely (Rayner & Cooper 2003) and are often presented anecdotally or as single cases (see Braverman 1999, for example).

The purpose of this paper is to explore the contributing factors of upwards bullying by presenting the findings from an exploratory interview study conducted with 24 managers. These managers had either experienced or witnessed upwards bullying or discussed their general understanding of the current workplace environment for managers. A theoretical conceptualization of the contributing factors of upwards bullying using existing theoretical frameworks, in particular power and dependency (Bass 1990; Emerson 1962; Mechanic 1962), will now be presented to refine existing assumptions and approaches to workplace bullying.

Workplace Bullying

The term workplace bullying has been described as a global concept that incorporates harassment, intimidation, and aggressive or violent behaviors (Hadikin & O'Driscoll 2000). As a result, workplace bullying is related to a plethora of concepts focused on behaviors that treat colleagues, managers, supervisors, clients or suppliers in an inappropriate manner. Thus, the definition of workplace bullying needs careful consideration in order to separate it conceptually from various other counterproductive workplace behaviors. Workplace bullying encompasses a particular set of circumstances, behaviors and outcomes as set out in the following widely accepted definition.

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process it has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g. weekly) and over a period of time (e.g. about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal 'strength' are in conflict. (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2003: 15)

This definition is considered conceptually sound because it encompasses the key elements of workplace bullying. First, workplace bullying behaviors are usually defined as inappropriate or unreasonable behaviors (Einarsen & Raknes 1997; Gorman 1999; Hoel & Cooper 2001; McCarthy 1996; McCarthy, Sheehan & Kearns 1995). Examples of such behaviors include ridiculing people, keeping a constant eye on another's work, questioning another's professional ability, spreading damaging rumours, and explosive outbursts and threats (Bassman 1992; Rayner & Hoel 1997; Zapf & Einarsen 2001). While specific negative consequences for the recipient are assumed (Randall 1992), this element is not considered a necessary condition for inclusion in a definition of workplace bullying (Einarsen 2000) and is implied rather than stated in the above definition.

Second, definitions of workplace bullying emphasise that inappropriate behaviors occur persistently or regularly over a period of time (Einarsen 2000; Einarsen et al. 2003; Einarsen & Mikkelsen 2003; Hoel 1997; Smith 1997). According to Hoel and Cooper (2001), “the long-term nature of the phenomenon is one of the most salient features of the problem” (p. 4). In fact it is the regular occurrence of the perpetrator’s actions that places bullying behaviors apart from one-off actions like a violent assault (Ryland 2001). Third, the definition reflects the idea that both the intensity of the attacks and the negative effects on the target increase over time (Einarsen & Skogstad 1996; Leymann & Gustafsson 1996; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper 2002).

Fourth, the existence of a power imbalance between the two parties (Keashly & Jagatic 2003) is often regarded as an essential definitional component. Thus, when two parties have an equal balance of power the conflict would not be considered workplace bullying (Einarsen et al. 2003; Hoel & Cooper 2001; Rayner et al. 2002). Commonly, dependency on the part of the target is cited as a prime reason for a power imbalance developing, and for a target of workplace bullying to be unable to defend his/herself. Often a ‘power imbalance’ is the disparity in formal power between staff and their manager. However, power can also be derived from informal sources, such as contacts with influential people, an individual’s standing in the organisation, and knowledge of the other person’s vulnerabilities that could be exploited (Hoel & Cooper 2001; Rayner et al. 2002). The target’s powerlessness to defend his/herself could therefore be due to the formal and/or informal power structures in which he/she operates, or could be the result of the perpetrator’s continuing inappropriate behaviors (Einarsen 2000). Essentially, a power imbalance between two parties makes it difficult for targets of workplace bullying to defend themselves and is therefore an essential component of the definition of workplace bullying (Einarsen 2000).

In addition, there has been considerable discussion of a number of other elements that could be considered salient to the definition of workplace bullying. Notably, an important variation to the concept of repeated and regular acts presented in the definition is the notion of an ongoing threat. While this concept is not incorporated into any widely accepted definition, Zapf (2004) stated in his keynote address to the *Fourth International Conference on Bullying and Harassment in the Workplace*, that situations may occur in which a single event induces an ongoing threat to the target, and therefore could also be defined as workplace bullying. For example, a verbal attack on someone may induce a long-lasting fear that it or some other form of attack could re-occur. Rigby's (2001) research into schoolyard bullying supports Zapf's assertion by stating that "a one-off act of bullying is certainly possible and the threat of its recurrence can stay with some children for a long time" (p. 53). Following further academic research and debate, this concept may become incorporated into future definitions.

Furthermore, definitions of workplace bullying commonly focus on the perceptions of the target (Mayhew et al. 2004) and not on the intentions of the perpetrator (Sheehan, Barker & McCarthy 2004). Importantly, the intention of the perpetrator remains an unclear definitional aspect of workplace bullying (Keashly 2001; Zapf & Einarsen 2005). Concern over including the concept of intent in definitions of workplace bullying specifically lie with the practical implications of doing so. In essence, if someone accused of workplace bullying states it was not their intent to bully this could mean they may not be held accountable for their actions (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper 2002). The intention of the perpetrator, however, is important when interventions for addressing workplace bullying are being considered (Rayner et al. 2002). Additionally, most definitions of workplace bullying vary in the degree of importance they place on the contextual features of the environment (Keashly & Jagatic 2003)

and they are not made explicit in the present definition. Thus, the important and widely accepted defining characteristics of workplace bullying appear to be the persistent use of inappropriate behaviors, and the inability of the target to defend themselves due to a power imbalance (Einarsen 2000).

Upwards Bullying: Exploring Power, Dependency and Change

Typically, abuse of power is associated with both the organizational structure and the formal position of the perpetrator, where the authoritative position is commonly aligned with the bullying behavior (Einarsen et al. 2003; Keashly & Jagatic 2003). For instance, Ashforth's (1994) concept of 'petty tyranny' specifically focuses on the inappropriate use of positional power by managers. That is, staff members and employees are seen as vulnerable, while those in positions of power or authority, such as managers, are commonly identified as the more powerful perpetrators (Keashly & Jagatic 2003). While this is a reasonable framework for which there is supporting empirical evidence (for a review of the effects of workplace bullying see Einarsen & Mikkelsen 2003; Hoel, Einarsen & Cooper 2003), Keashly and Jagatic (2003) question the suggestion in the workplace bullying literature that power is *uniquely* related to an organizational position and its associated authority. Indeed, operationalizing power in terms of organizational position alone would limit our understanding of workplace bullying (Keashly & Jagatic 2003; Rylance 2001). Accordingly, Liefoghe and Davey (2001) have called for a broader understanding of power within workplace bullying research. Moreover, Salin (2001) suggests that research into "how superiors can be put into a position in which they cannot defend themselves and how bullying alters power relations" (Salin 2001: 435) is required.

In response, a detailed examination of the literature on power was conducted for the present research. Power is recognized as a multidirectional construct, which can be directed horizontally and vertically (Bacharach & Lawler 1980). In addition, power can be derived from a range of sources other than organizational position or authority. Alternative sources can include the control of information (Raven 1993), expertise (Bacharach & Lawler 1980; French & Raven 1959) and referent power (French & Raven 1959). Thus, the multidirectionality of power and the varying sources of power within organizations present further questions to the prevailing supposition in the workplace that power predominantly relates to a person's formal authority. Instead, Keashly and Jagatic (2003) suggest power can be defined as 'a process of dependency' (p.48).

In a truly interdependent relationship in the workplace, staff rely on managers for direction, resources and rewards, while managers are dependent on staff to be productive and fulfill the goals of the organization (Cook, Yamagishi & Donnelly 1997). However, problems arise when either party within this interdependent relationship denies or hinders the other in achieving their goals (Emerson 1962). For example, a staff member can acquire power when they withdraw an item valued by a manager (such as information or expertise) as a way of impeding a manager from achieving their managerial goals (Emerson 1962). Moreover, the power of a staff member is particularly significant when their knowledge, skills and expertise are difficult to replace (Bass 1990). It has been suggested that a manager's dependency on their staff (often some more than others) provides these staff with a form of power that they could potentially abuse (Keashly & Jagatic 2003). These behaviors could fit the definition of bullying if they are regular and persistent or pose an on-going threat. Therefore, just as a manager can abuse the dependency of staff, so too can staff abuse the dependency managers have on them with regard to producing and fulfilling the goals of the organization (Mechanic

1962). This perspective of workplace bullying has been largely overlooked in previous research.

Furthermore, we contend that the level of uncertainty and continuous change found in organizations today may further influence the occurrence of upwards bullying (Lewis & Sheehan 2003; McCarthy 1996; Ramsay & Troth 2002; Sheehan 1996, 1999). Moreover, Salin (2003a) concluded in her research into politics and workplace bullying that, within today's organisational climate, some people may actually be 'playing a game' (that is, deliberately working for their own personal ends, as opposed to group or organisational goals), and can be rewarded for behavior that would be considered manipulative, or could be labelled as bullying (e.g., overloading or underloading someone with tasks). In addition, she suggested that individuals who break the social rules of their workgroup (e.g., by performing better than expected and thereby impacting on another individual's ability to achieve their end or game), may be punished accordingly by their colleagues and managers. Interestingly, factors such as de-layering of organizations (Sheehan 1999), changes in organizational procedures (Baron & Neuman 1996), and increased diversity within the workforce (Baron & Neuman 1998), for example the increase of women in managerial positions (Hammond & Holton 1993), have all been suggested as enabling or triggering factors for workplace bullying (Hoel & Salin 2003). We propose that, for some staff members, these changes can create a level of uncertainty that results in an individual acting against their manager. Davenport, Distler-Schwartz and Pursell-Elliott (1999) support this view, stating that staff may dissent against a manager whom they hold responsible for the current uncertainty within organizations. Ramsay and Troth (2002) concur, proposing that:

One partial explanation for increased bullying, and acceptance by bystanders, in such contexts is that the heightened uncertainty and stress in these environments accentuates the in-group/out-group demarcation between the

victim [target] and others, as well as prototype induced depersonalisation towards the victim [target]. (p. 6)

Thus, within current workplace environments, which are characterized by uncertainty and frequent change (Lewis & Sheehan 2003; McCarthy 1996; Sheehan 1996, 1999), the potential for upwards bullying is enhanced. As such, it appears that factors such as organizational change and dependency may play a role in the occurrence of upwards bullying.

Research Problem

We have argued that it is important to explore the nature of upwards bullying in order to fully understand workplace bullying as a whole. Of interest in this paper are the contributing organizational factors that ultimately lead to behaviors that could be defined as bullying, that is, behaviors that go beyond incivility and negative behaviors, and meet the definitional elements outlined previously. Although it is acknowledged that there may be unique personal and group characteristics that can be involved in the bullying process (e.g., ethnicity, Fox & Stallworth 2005; Rayner & Hoel 1997) the exploratory nature and scope of the present study makes an investigation of these processes beyond the bounds of this paper. Thus, while the paper does not dismiss unique personality factors or particular cognitive and group processes that could be present in these situations its aim is to identify particular organizational factors that may prompt upwards bullying or contribute towards it.

This paper presents the findings from an exploratory interview study that sought to investigate the contributing factors related to upwards bullying. Managers who had directly experienced or witnessed upwards bullying, as well as those who were in a position to discuss the workplace environment for managers, were interviewed. Wherever appropriate, details surrounding the interactions presented as findings will be described in order to convey understanding of particular contexts. Furthermore, the term 'target' will be used in preference

to 'victim', which is seen as a label that can add to the target's feeling of helplessness (Magley, Hulin, Fitzgerald & DeNardo 1999). It was expected that power and dependency as well as change may play a role in the occurrence of upwards bullying.

METHOD

As the purpose of this study was to explore the contributing organizational factors of upwards bullying, it is particularly important to understand how an individual, in this case a manager, qualitatively interprets their experience of being bullied by a staff member.

Qualitative research was chosen because it allows the development of data that describes a social phenomenon, including an understanding of the people and events (Lincoln & Guba 1985; Miles & Huberman 1994; Patton 1990). Thus, the focus of this study was to discover emergent findings about the contributing organizational factors of upwards bullying.

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 24 participants (12 males and 12 females, aged between 30 and 60 years approximately) who belonged to a range of small to large public and private organizations (for example, transport, health, education, IT and welfare) with 15 interviewees recruited from one large Government Owned Organization. Those interviewed came from differing managerial levels, including three supervisors, eight middle managers, nine senior middle managers and four senior managers. The managers interviewed also had varying degrees of experience in the role of manager, with two of the managers new to a managerial position, 17 with more than five years managerial experience and five with more than 10 years managerial experience. Participants were recruited for the current study via the HR service within their organization or the research team's network, such as a workplace bullying

support service. Brief information about the focus of the research was provided to all potential participants to assist them to self-identify as people experienced and informed about the topic.

Of those interviewed, nine managers discussed the general managerial workplace environment with reference at times to inappropriate behaviors by staff directed at them or other managers (Group 1). Thus managers within this group had not directly experienced upwards bullying (in that their experiences did not fulfill the definition of workplace bullying). The other fifteen managers discussed personal experiences of upwards bullying (Group 2). Two of these managers recounted witnessing upwards bullying as well.

Procedure

Researchers have proposed that more qualitative studies be conducted as a way of increasing our understanding of the processes involved in workplace bullying (Rayner 1999; Salin 2003b). With this in mind we felt it appropriate to explore the nature of upwards bullying using a semi-structured interview approach. Two one-hour semi-structured interviews were conducted with 19 of the interviewees. Two one-hour sessions were considered ideal because this structure gave sufficient time to allow participants to tell their story, enable the researcher to develop a relationship and level of trust necessary for this type of research, and allow the time necessary for deeper meaning to develop (Jones 1985; Neuman 2006). The sequence of two interviews could also allow the researcher to follow-up any questions or points that required clarification after the first interview (Jones 1985; Neuman 2006; Patton 2002). However, due to particular interviewee time constraints, only one interview of approximately one hour was possible with five of the participants. In each of these cases the researcher obtained permission from the interviewees to contact them within two weeks of the interview to follow up any issues needing clarification or further discussion.

The structure of the interview started with an 'ice-breaker' which asked the manager about their work environment. Gradually specific topics related to the manager's experience were investigated through the use of probing questions (Fontana & Frey 2003). Although semi-structured in nature, the researcher worked from a guide of research areas derived from the literature (Babbie 2001; Denzin 2001; Fossey, Harvey, McDermott & Davidson 2002; Patton 2002). This ensured that the same research areas were explored in each interview (Patton 2002; Taylor & Bogdan 1998). Thus, rather than a structured set of questions, the guide offered a list of suggested research areas to be covered throughout the interview process (Taylor & Bogdan 1998). The interviews therefore tended to take on the feeling of an informal conversation, although the researcher was always clear about the topic to be examined (Fontana & Frey 2003). The interviews covered several questions which related to the manager's experience of the general work environment and any experiences of upwards bullying including the behaviors involved, the impact on the manager and others, and the support they received. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-recorded for future transcription, which enabled the researcher to attend to the participant intently (Bernard 2000). Only one of the interviewees declined audio-recording of the interview; in this case comprehensive notes were taken and a summary of the notes sent to the interviewee for approval.

Data Analysis

It is suggested that coding commence with a list of concepts, in the knowledge that most coding themes are generated throughout the overall process that encompasses the entire data set (Neuman 2006). Therefore, prior to the analysis of the data an initial coding scheme was developed based on the review of the literature. While the initial coding scheme assisted in

focusing the analysis of the raw data (Patton 2002) it did not limit the development of further codes and themes. NVivo (v.2) was used to develop and collate the different themes.

In presenting the results of this study considerable caution was exercised to protect the identity of participants. Pseudonyms as well as limited contextual and specific identifying material was used in reporting the findings. Moreover, in order to be more concise, the term 'inappropriate behavior' will be used to describe behaviors that specifically met the definition of workplace bullying and behaviors that were clearly negative but occurred only occasionally.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Three themes emerged from the data analysis: *the work environment*, *change* and *power* (see Table 1). While the broad concepts of change and power were included in the initial coding scheme, sub-themes within these concepts and the current workplace environment emerged during the analysis. As *the work environment* is seen to encompass the issues of power and change, it was conceptualized as an overarching theme and will be presented prior to *change* and *power*. However, before expanding on each of these themes and their sub-themes, a summary of the bullying behaviors experienced directly by the managers reporting an experience of upwards bullying (Group 2) will be provided.

[Insert Table 1 here]

Upwards Bullying Behaviors

As noted earlier, the persistency of inappropriate behaviors (or an on-going threat) over a period of time and the inability of targets to defend themselves, are referred to as fundamental characteristics of the definition of workplace bullying (Einarsen 2000). Managers who

discussed an experience of upwards bullying (n = 15) recounted behaviors that persisted for various periods of time, for example, a few months, 1 year, and up to 3 years. Managers also expressed feelings of powerlessness and isolation as well as feelings of being bullied, intimidated, or threatened. These managers recounted experiencing a range of inappropriate covert (indirect or not attributable to an individual) and overt behaviors as well. It appeared that in most cases a negative spiral began with the perpetrator seemingly displaying a pattern of covert behaviors such as failure to attend meetings, disruptions in meetings, sabotage, failure to inform the manager of meetings, 'setting up' the manager in meetings, challenging the manager, constant scrutiny of the manager's behavior, gossip, snide comments, and graffiti. In addition to the covert behaviors outlined here, the data suggests the use of overt behaviors by staff. Examples of overt behaviors expressed by managers included yelling, throwing furniture, standing over the manager, confrontational e-mails and phone calls, threats to disrupt work, verbal intimidation or threats, and physical intimidation or threats.

Interestingly, in response to their experience, two-thirds of managers who reported an experience of upwards bullying discussed how they became reflective, and asked themselves questions like: "Am I a bad manager?"; "Is this all my fault?"; and "How did this happen?".

The following quote illuminates this perspective further:

I kept questioning myself all the time, thinking, are they right. "Am I going mad here" ...And then they started accusing me of either forgetting things or saying things I hadn't said, and I said, I just thought, this isn't right. (Dawn—Group 2)

However, managers who discussed the general managerial environment did not express this sub-theme. It may be that managers who experience persistent abusive behaviors or workplace bullying become reflective of their managerial practice in terms of whether or not they have been bullying the staff member, if there was anything different they could have done, or if they are a good manager. Moreover some of the managers recognised that their

behavior contributed to the staff member's behavior escalating. Behaviors such as doing nothing, withdrawing or avoiding the situation were identified, with two managers recognising that their unwillingness to address the situation allowed the inappropriate behaviors to continue.

Theme 1 - The Work Environment

The work environment appeared to be a central focus for all managers within the present study. Five sub-themes that emerged included; work pressures (1a); ineffective work environment (1b); workgroup disharmony (1c); acceptance of inappropriate behaviors (1d); and lack of power (1e). Each of these sub-themes will be explained further.

Work pressures (sub-theme 1a) in relation to large workloads for managers and staff emerged as a sub-theme in the analysis specifically because it was linked to the occurrence of upwards bullying. For instance a manager who reported an experience of upwards bullying stated how, during the time when issues with the staff member began to occur, they were under an enormous workload (e.g., Toni-Group 2; described persistent covert behaviors such as not doing work when assigned, not being contactable, and an accusation that she had bullied the staff member which was found to be unsubstantiated when investigated). Discussion by both groups also related to how the work environment was in some way ineffective (sub-theme 1b). For example, Jan (Group 1) in discussing the general work environment referred to how unresolved issues from the past had created a work environment that was full of conflict, implying that inappropriate behaviors could readily arise in such an environment:

There was a lot of buck-passing and a lot of blame laying and that sort of thing. But again that all came from past stuff.

Furthermore, in some cases senior management were perceived as encouraging the ineffective work environment, for example, by becoming involved in the bullying behavior. Such

environments can in some way, as suggested by Jan, lead to further disharmony in the workplace (sub-theme 1c).

Issues of workgroups generally being unhappy or not talking constructively about issues were raised by a number of the managers interviewed. For instance Brenda (Group 2) who described an experience with an individual in an administration role who was persistently withholding information and verbally abusive for up to a year, outlined how the general work environment was disharmonious:

The stuff with [Administrative Officer] was only a part of what happened at [the organization]. That feeling of disharmony and covert violence was endemic. It was in the walls. There was always someone backstabbing or making waves, putting wedges between workers or stirring the pot.

Similarly, another manager who reported an experience of upwards bullying referred to how the team in general was feeling disappointed and under-valued by the organization. Such environments may result in increased competition and ‘game playing’ behaviors, identified by Salin (2003a) as manipulative or bullying behaviors.

While the above three sub-themes emerged from the complete data set, the remaining two sub-themes were associated largely with managers in one organization. For a number of interviewees within this organization the acceptance or tolerance of inappropriate behavior was perceived to create a work environment where such behavior was condoned (sub-theme 1d). Furthermore, interviewees from the same organization also expressed concern over the lack of power or resources managers now have to address and deal with inappropriate behavior or productivity issues (sub-theme 1e). Indeed, the lack of power could be related to the issue of inappropriate behaviors being accepted or tolerated within this particular organizational culture. For instance, Jack (Group 2) who experienced consistent gossip and verbal abuse and witnessed a supervisor who experienced similar abuse, expressed how

difficult it was to deal with inappropriate behavior or performance issues, particularly when senior managers did not appear to understand his circumstances.

[They have] never had any experience with dealing with abusive people, or non-performing people in the workplace, where you've got both hands tied behind your back. They've never been there like that. They don't understand what exists down there, and they rarely, if ever, want to get their hands dirty.

Therefore, it appears that lack of resources and power to address and manage the occurrence and continuation of inappropriate behaviors could be contributing to an environment that could or does support upwards bullying within this particular organization.

By comparison, the amount of pressure that managers (and staff alike) are under within ineffective work environments was expressed by managers from all organizations. Similarly, the literature suggests that managers may be the recipients of upwards bullying because of a range of workplace stressors. For instance, Davenport et al. (1999) proposed that staff may bully upwards as a way of dissenting against the manager whom they believe is the cause of their experiences of workplace stress. In support, Salin (2003b) argues that dissatisfaction, feelings of uncertainty, or powerlessness may lead to workplace bullying. Indeed, staff may actually be using the term bullying as a weapon against management (Einarsen, 1999) as a way of voicing their dissatisfaction with organizational issues and the work environment, as proposed by Liefoghe and Davey (2001).

Theme 2 - Change

Interestingly, change appears to play an important role in contributing to the pressures that are present in the current workplace environment, with over half of the interviewees referring to some form of change. For those managers who reported an experience of upwards bullying, change within their organizations and possibly the manager being seen as responsible for the

changes could be the main influence for the inappropriate behavior of the staff member. Half of the managers who discussed the managerial work environment and the majority of managers who reported an experience of upwards bullying referred to some form of change preceding the occurrence of inappropriate behavior. These changes included the sub-themes of organizational change (2a), new manager and/or a manager pushing change (2b).

Furthermore, half of the interviewees raised the related topics of staff members trying to pressure the manager to change a decision they had made (2c); as well as how inappropriate behaviors directed at managers can be a form of 'payback' for making changes in the workplace (2d). Each of these sub-themes will be expanded upon here.

Within 'change issues', organizational change (sub-theme 2a) emerged as a theme within the data for one of the possible contributing factors of upwards bullying. For those managers who reported an experience of upwards bullying, over half referred to organizational change occurring prior to the inappropriate behaviors intensified. For instance:

So when we stepped in and tried to make changes, I think that's when the retaliation became far more obvious...oh it's come to a head probably in the last few weeks, the amount of abusive and bad language, graffiti on toilet walls, for example, with specific threats and abusive statements made about specific people, people's names mentioned quite frequently. All supervisors, all managers, all people who are seen to be trying to do the right thing. (Jack-Group 2)

While it appears that changes at an organizational level may contribute to staff reacting against a manager, a change of manager and/or the manager's endorsement of, and associated actions around the change, can create further fear and uncertainty for staff, which may contribute to bullying behaviors (sub-theme 2b). Interestingly, of the 15 managers who reported an experience of upwards bullying, five were new to the organization or position when they proceeded to make changes to work practices. Another five managers, although not

new to the organization, were in some way attempting to make changes in the workplace.

Sally (Group 2 – reported an experience of repeated verbally abusive behavior and intimidation) also referred to how:

I was new to the organization and I suppose he saw me as the one that was initiating and implementing [the changes]... You know he lost a lot of status in his mind.

Therefore, it appears that change and the uncertainty it produces may trigger some staff to feel resentful of the decisions managers make (Davenport et al. 1999), possibly creating a level of uncertainty that makes some staff feel they need to act (Ashmore, Jussim, Wilder & Heppen 2001).

The related topic of staff trying to pressure managers to alter a decision that has been made was another issue that a number of the managers referred to (sub-theme 2c). As one manager who reported repeated covert behaviors and accusations to a number of third parties indicated:

From what I can gather, his motive was simply that he didn't want to conform to reasonable workplace rules, and deliver on reasonable expectations. So he saw an avenue to bully and get conditions that were unreasonably expected. (Lena-Group 2)

Thus, what appears to be occurring is that inappropriate behavior by staff may represent an attempt to have the manager change a decision. Alternatively, some managers viewed inappropriate behaviors as 'payback' for a decision they had made (sub-theme 2d). One manager who reported a case of upwards bullying (including repeated verbal abuse and threats) believed the staff member: *was seeking revenge from the start* (in relation to a poor performance review; Margaret-Group 2). Thus, some staff appear to be reacting to organizational changes within the workplace and directing their angst towards the manager.

Interestingly, Tehrani (2003) suggests that, during times of high stress and when a relationship is perceived as negative, small issues (e.g. not responding to a request) may be

interpreted as aggressive acts. She surmised from her experience of counseling targets and perpetrators of workplace bullying that the ‘bully/victim [target] relationship’ (Tehrani, 2003: 280) is not always clear. Instead she suggests that an accusation of bullying is often ‘triggered by the individual’s responses to a series of interactions that are built up over a period of time’ (Tehrani 2003: 280); this may well be describing the process that occurs with upwards bullying. Indeed, some staff may perceive the actions of the manager in implementing change (for example) as bullying, which then results in retaliatory behavior by the staff member. Similarly Social Identity Theory would suggest that staff may seek to reduce the level of uncertainty that surrounds them by taking actions, which then creates a cycle of action, increased risk, and need for further action (Ashmore et al. 2001). Interestingly, just under half of the managers interviewed expressed empathy for staff members. These managers expressed an understanding of how the changes would impact on the staff member personally and could give rise to associated negative behaviors. However, this empathy did not extend to condoning the inappropriate behavior of the staff member.

Theme 3 – Power

A further contributing factor of upwards bullying may relate to perceptions of managers lacking legitimate power (French & Raven 1959). The issues of lack of support during change (3a); lack of respect for the manager (3b); and the staff member being critical to the workplace (3c) emerged as sub-themes that fell within the topic of power.

Interestingly, four of the managers who discussed change also referred to the lack of support managers receive during change (sub-theme 3a). References to wishing for greater support included the following:

[upper management] have done an extremely poor job in supporting managers and supervisors through change. In fact the support from the corporate levels for the changes has been virtually nil. (Jack-Group 2)

The lack of support for managers during change may in turn suggest that staff members are also feeling unsupported. In part, this apparent lack of organizational support for managers during change could be related to a perception by staff that some managers have illegitimate power (French & Raven 1959). Lack of support from upper management could be seen as a violation of a legitimizing value proposed by French and Raven (1959). That is, lack of a legitimizing agent from the organization during change may result in staff perceiving the manager as lacking legitimate power. For instance lack of respect for the manager's role and dependency on staff members were both referred to by the majority of managers interviewed.

Analysis of the interview data revealed that the majority of the 24 managers either explicitly or implicitly referred to a lack of respect or a challenge to their position by staff members (sub-theme 3b). For instance, one manager who reported an experience of upwards bullying noted that: *obviously she had no respect for me at all* (Katherine-Group 2; described a situation where a staff member lodged a grievance, which was found to be unsubstantiated), while another said: *there's not just the distrust, there's a disrespect* (Jack-Group 2; reported an experience of consistent gossip and verbal abuse and witnessed a supervisor who experienced similar abuse). Similarly, others referred to how their role or authority was being constantly challenged. As one interviewee said:

[he was] testing how much strength my role of being able to direct staff to do things [was]. (Sally-Group 2)

Another recounted a situation where:

they come like as a group [to meetings] with a planned attack, and it's very hard to deal with that at meetings. It's like a concerted attack. It's not only about undermining me, it's about undermining the systems. (Heather-Group 2; alleged bullies were two key individuals (females) who had group support)

Alternatively, expressions of how support does strengthen your legitimate power were also made. For example:

[I get support from my senior manager], which to me is a pretty important thing. You like, you can't make change in the workplace when the staff see that every time that they whinge you [the manager] get into trouble. (David-Group 1)

...if you haven't got support from your manager, you might as well...just let these blokes carry on and do what they want to do. But I've got good support from [senior management]. (Greg-Group 1)

Thus it would appear that a manager whose position is not respected could be vulnerable to upwards bullying. Furthermore, lack of support from senior management could play a vital role in exacerbating the situation.

In addition, dependency on a staff member's knowledge, skills and expertise that are difficult to replace may also be playing a role in managers feeling vulnerable to upwards bullying (sub-theme 3c). A number of managers interviewed indicated how the staff member being essential to the functioning of the workplace creates a dependency on the staff member.

Interestingly, the majority of those who discussed dependency on a staff member were those who related a direct experience of upwards bullying. For instance, Sally (Group 2) who discussed a prolonged case with a staff member who was very reluctant to accept an organizational restructure and as a result exhibited bullying behaviors (e.g., verbal abusive and withholding information), stated:

I can see him as an asset because of his skills and he tends to perform at a high level with so much history and knowledge that I wouldn't like to lose that.

Another manager who also discussed an experience of upwards bullying involving verbal abuse, snide comments, graffiti and gossip referred to the range of personal power that one staff member had that made them a person critical to the workplace.

As he is the one who negotiates with management it gives him control over only perusing the issues that affect him, it also gives him a certain status among some

of the staff and allows him to control the flow of information and influence the points of view. (Brad-Group 2)

It was also expressed that dependency on staff made some of the managers reluctant to do anything initially when the staff member began demonstrating inappropriate behavior. As one interviewee said:

by that time he had become somewhat critical to a project that he was working on...it's really expensive to replace someone once they've achieved that level of familiarity...I guess he took advantage of that situation. (Lena-Group 2)

Dependency by managers on some staff may explain why certain staff engage in this behavior while others do not. For instance, those who have substantial power within the workplace may have managers who are dependant on them and also have 'more to lose' when change happens. For example, a staff member who has a significant role in a team and is central to a network could perhaps lose this position should the team be disbanded in an organizational restructure. Thus, it appears that challenging or disrespecting a manager's role, lack of support that results in reducing a manager's legitimate power, or dependency, may be contributing to the creation of an environment where upwards bullying could occur.

Summary of Contributing Factors of Upwards Bullying

In summary, the findings from the interviews with managers indicate that organizational factors, such as the organizational environment, organizational change and power may be acting as factors that contribute to upwards bullying. As suggested in the literature, work pressures, like those identified by the managers in this study, may result in the manager or supervisor being unable or less able to deal with bullying or even inappropriate or disruptive behavior by staff (Leymann 1996; Vartia 1996; Zapf, Knorz & Kulla 1996). Furthermore, it could be that general feelings of disharmony, as suggested by Salin (2003b), may lead to an environment where workplace bullying can occur.

Similarly, the literature suggests that managers may be the recipients of upwards bullying because they are perceived as responsible for a range of workplace stressors (Davenport et al. 1999; Hoel et al. 2001). Likewise, upwards bullying may be one of the few ways by which dissatisfaction with organizational issues can be voiced by staff (Liefoghe & Davey 2001). Findings from the present analysis appear to support these perspectives. Interestingly, for over half of those who discussed an experience of upwards bullying, organizational changes, such as a restructure, were described as occurring prior to an escalation of inappropriate behaviors by staff members. Thus, the occurrence of organizational change, and the manager being seen as responsible for these changes, may lead to staff blaming the manager for their stress. Furthermore, a change of manager and/or that manager then enacting change also appears to be playing a role in creating fear and uncertainty to which staff react, as demonstrated by behaviors that can be labeled as 'bullying'. Consequently, it appears that change and the uncertainty it produces may result in some staff feeling aggrieved by the actions of managers (Davenport et al. 1999). According to Social Identity Theory, this change could threaten a staff member's position within the in-group or the in-group itself, leading to some staff acting against the person they see as responsible, often the manager (Ashmore et al. 2001).

Limitations and Future Research

The purpose of the current study was to develop an understanding of the contributing factors towards upwards bullying from the experiences of those interviewed (Fossey et al. 2002). A broad understanding of the phenomenon was achieved by interviewing managers from a range of organisations and managers who discussed the workplace bullying environment in general. One inherent limitation of any face-to-face interview study is that the interviewees may not be completely truthful in their responses (Catania 1999). This may relate to a need to please the

researcher or to protect their own role and sense of self within the situation being described. Because of this concern, the researcher was careful not to indicate agreement with the interviewee or a preference for the direction of the discussion, thus reducing the potential for this bias to influence the research outcome.

An important limitation within the research program relates to the focus of the study, wherein only the voice of managers was heard, which could reflect a potential bias in relation to the situation or environment that was discussed by the interviewees. This tendency to focus on the targets of workplace bullying is a common issue within workplace bullying research (Zapf & Einarsen 2003), mainly due to the reluctance of perpetrators of workplace bullying to be involved in research. The voice of staff and not only those who are identified as perpetrators is needed within future research to fully understand the dynamics of upwards bullying and the position of all parties within this complex and multifaceted phenomenon. For instance, if change and dissatisfaction with change are reasons staff begin to bully their managers, then it is only through obtaining the perspective of staff that this conclusion can be further tested. As a result, future research should investigate case studies that include all parties involved in upwards bullying cases. Furthermore, this study did not differentiate between managers who had been bullied by an individual staff member or a group of staff. The factors associated with these different types of bullying need to be explored.

In addition, the definitional features of workplace bullying and upwards bullying require further refinement. For example, because it appears that staff may be reacting to the work environment, change and lack of support in upwards bullying cases, the concept of intent needs further exploration. In particular, it may be that the intention of the staff member is not to cause harm to the manager but to voice their discontent with organizational issues, as

proposed by Liefvooghe and Davey (2001). A planned quantitative study will seek to explore managers' attributions in relation to the contributing factors of upwards bullying, as well as the behaviors and impacts related to upwards bullying. In conclusion, further research is needed to validate the findings of this study and in particular to explore the possible links between the occurrence of upwards bullying and the ineffective work environment, disharmony in the workplace and organizational change.

CONCLUSION

This paper aimed to investigate the previously under-explored area of the contributing factors of upwards bullying. Following consideration of definitional aspects, the experiences of managers were identified as containing upwards bullying behaviors. By conceptualizing workplace bullying as a 'process of dependency' (Keashly & Jagatic 2003: 48) we are able to gain a better understanding of how staff can bully a manager. Perhaps due to the often correct perception that those in lower levels of an organization are more vulnerable to workplace bullying (Keashly & Jagatic 2003; Rayner et al. 2002) it appears that upwards bullying has been overlooked as an issue of considerable organizational and personal importance. As a result, ways in which organizations conceptualize and address workplace bullying is limited, with little understanding that workplace bullying can occur at all levels within an organization. Recognizing upwards bullying is even more important when the vital role managers perform within organizations is considered (Bartol, Tein, Matthews & Martin 2005). We propose that there is a need to recognize the existence of upwards bullying and initiate policies and strategies to assist managers faced with such behaviors.

Furthermore, support for both managers and staff members alike is needed during change as this appears to be a potential contributing factor of upwards bullying. Importantly, it needs to

be made clear to both managers and staff that, just as bullying behaviors are unacceptable when enacted by a manager or colleague, these behaviors are also unacceptable when carried out by a staff member and directed at a manager. In practical terms, recognizing the phenomenon of upwards bullying may involve shifting the current thinking and culture within the workplace (e.g., the expectation that some staff may display inappropriate behaviors as part of the usual work environment) (Archer 1999; Hadikin & O'Driscoll 2000; Rayner 1997, 1999; Salin 2003b) thereby enabling managers to resolve potential bullying situations early.

Acknowledgement of the occurrence of upwards bullying would enable organizations to take the first step in addressing the phenomenon. Further actions, such as implementing support mechanisms for managers as well as staff, can then occur. Such action on the part of organizations is seen as vital, not only for the well-being of managers, but also the workgroup and the broader organization. The current study adds to our conceptual understanding of workplace bullying, through the application of dependency and power theory to workplace bullying. In addition, it makes a practical contribution by including upwards bullying in our current awareness of workplace bullying and contributes to informing and assisting organizations on how to address workplace bullying in general and upwards bullying issues in particular.

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Figure 1: Contributing factors of Upwards Bullying

Research Area	Theme	Sub-theme	Group 1	Group 2	Total
Contributing Factors of Upwards Bullying	Theme 1 Work Environment	1a. Work pressures	4	3	7
		1b. Ineffective work environment	3	3	6
		1c. Workgroup disharmony	2	4	6
		1d. Acceptance of inappropriate behaviors	3	2	5
		1e. Lack of power	3	1	4
	Theme 2 Change ✧	2a. Organisational change	3	7	10
		2b. New manager and/or manager pushing change	5	9	14
		2c. Pressure to change a decision	5	6	11
		2d. Payback	5	5	10
	Theme 3 Power ✧	3a. Lack of support during change	4	7	11
		3b. Lack of respect for manager	7	14	21
		3c. Staff member critical to the workplace	1	4	5
	Personal reflections			Nil	9

Note. Group 1: Discussed the managerial work environment, Group 2: Reported an experience or witnessed upwards bullying;

✧ Themes within original coding scheme.