Stress and managerial bullying: Affective antecedents and consequences

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Abstract
Change has become endemic in organisations. While the rhetoric of change includes the need to be more globally competitive and to meet changing market requirements, the reality for many people is often increasing levels of stress. In this paper, we argue that one of the by-products of stress is the propensity for some managers to use bullying tactics to achieve their goals. Such a process results in costs not only to the manager and his or her employees, but also to the organisation.

Studies on workplace bullying suggest that it is managers in organisations who are the main perpetrators of workplace bullying. This article argues that one of the reasons for managers acting in this way is that they do not have the appropriate emotional skills or abilities to deal with the demands of an ever-changing workplace. Viewing the problem of workplace bullying from a bounded emotionality perspective, we provide a new insight to the antecedents of workplace bullying.

Keywords
Organisational change; Workplace bullying; Bounded emotionality; Emotions.

Introduction
Organisations within developed countries are facing increasingly frequent organisational change as a result of pressures produced by global competition, consumer demand, technological change, changing labour expectations, environmental awareness, and economic recession (French & Bell, 1995). Accompanying this change is an increase in uncertainty at all levels of organisations (Argyris & Schon, 1996). Within this reality, the phenomenon of bullying becomes common.

Two of the main corporate tactics that have been adopted in restructuring have been downsizing and delayering, each of which has produced increasing levels of stress in the workplace (Hartley, Jacobson, Klandermans & Van Vuuren, 1991). Whereas researchers have focused on the cognitive aspects of downsizing, we argue that the emotional effects may be just as important or more important in determining a manager’s or a worker’s response to downsizing. In this paper, we argue that managerial workplace bullying emerges from an emotional reaction to constantly dealing with change in organisations. This approach is consistent with Ashforth and Humphrey’s (1995) call for the incorporation of emotional variables in organisational research at both the organisational and the individual level.

In response to the pressures placed on organisations to respond to constant change, some organisations appear to have developed a culture whereby the achievement of organisational goals justifies the means. This focus on ends at the expense of means is seen in the increasing research done on ethics in organisations (Cludts, 1999). Moreover, downsizing and delayering have become an accepted method of enhancing corporate earnings which is reflected in share market responses to corporate decisions regarding restructuring with research findings indicating that stock markets favour companies that downsize (Di Maggio & Powell 1983).

At an individual level, D’Aveni (1995) notes that the emphasis on performance and return on investment in organisations has produced a cohort of managers who are only focussed on short term gain without any concern for the implications of their actions. In this culture, some managers perceive that they have a mandate to use whatever technique or behavior is deemed necessary in achieving those goals, including bullying. Indeed, recent research on bullying in the workplace has found that up to 70 percent of bullying emanates from managers (Rayner, 1997).

In this paper, we outline a model of the antecedents and consequences of workplace bullying viewed from a managerial perspective. We argue that in a corporate environment of change, managers are under increasing pressure to perform and get quick results. The emotional reactions that emerge from this pressure contribute to workplace bullying. The reality of restructuring includes declining commitment, work satisfaction, morale and motivation (McCarthy, Sheehan & Kearns, 1995).
Each of these factors contributes to an environment of low contextual performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993) where the consideration of others in the organisation will be minimized. In this environment, bullying may become an accepted practice within some organisations.

This paper uses a bounded emotionality perspective to explore the bullying effect and offers some thoughts on ways of addressing managerial bullying. The use of a bounded emotionality perspective allows us to explore the antecedents of bullying and provides a firmer foundation for examining organisational interventions that can address bullying in the workplace.

The paper is exploratory in nature and is, therefore, largely theoretical. Our intention is to engage in the debate about workplace bullying in a way that will help promote a multi-disciplinary analysis that we consider is needed in order to develop a sound theoretical base for workplace bullying.

**Bullying in the workplace**

Einarsen, Matthiesen and Skogstad (1998) define bullying as, “all those aggressive actions and practices directed at one or more worker(s) which: are unwanted by the victim; may be done deliberately or unconsciously but do cause humiliation, offence and distress; and may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment”(p. 564). Behaviour associated with bullying includes sarcasm, threats, verbal abuse, intimidation, bad-mouthing, manipulation, duplicity, exclusion, isolation and the assignment of staff to unpleasant jobs (McCarthy et. al., 1995).

Recent surveys have found that up to 50% of the working population had experienced bullying (Rayner, 1997). Bullying may also be a hidden phenomenon in organisations with 95% of respondents indicating that they were too scared to report incidences of bullying (Rayner, 1997). Lewis (1999) found that workplace bullying was more prevalent than sex discrimination, sexual harassment and racial harassment in some workplaces. The perceived reasons for the bullying were linked to poor managerial training (Lewis, 1999).

Rayner’s (1997) study found that managers carried out over 70 percent of bullying incidents. In contrast, Scandinavian research that found the incidence of bullying by one or more superiors is about 54 per cent (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). Both studies indicate that a significant amount of bullying emerges from managerial ranks.

Existing research into workplace bullying has dealt with the legal implications of bullying (Bray, 1992); characteristics exhibited by bullies, and the psychological, physical and work-related consequences of bullying (Leymann, 1996; McCarthy et. al., 1995); and, the characteristics of victims, typical actions of bullying, and initial and long-term effects of being bullied (O’Moore, Seigne, McGuire & Smith, 1998). The majority of this research, however, pays little attention to the organisational context that supports bullying or the organisational antecedents of a bullying episode.

**Managers and Bullying**

Although there is substantial anecdotal evidence of bullying, empirical studies of bullying in the workplace are relatively limited (Keashly, 1998). Rather, the majority of research in the area tends to focus on antisocial behavior (Giacalone & Greenberg, 1997), violence in the workplace (Baron & Neuman, 1996), workplace abuse and/or harassment (Crabb, 1995), or the costs of managerialism (Rees & Rodley, 1995). In particular, little research has been conducted into workplace bullying by managers (Marano, 1995). There is some research however that points to the need for more focus on this issue.

Kets de Vries and Balazs (1997) focused on the coping strategies of the bully and theorized that perhaps managerial coercive, disassociative, or abrasive behavior was a coping strategy of managers during organisational restructuring. Empirical research, however, suggests mixed findings in this regard. Cartwright and Cooper (1993) found a significant negative effect on middle managers well-being resulting from mergers, while Crouch and Worth (1991) could not correlate organisational change with any adverse effect on the manager’s psychological well-being.

In an international context of organisational restructuring, downsizing and layoffs, companies have reported high turnover and general mistrust between managers and staff (Rousseau & Parkes, 1993). The psychological contract that once ensured managers’ loyalty to organisations and their employees (Rousseau & Parkes, 1993) has now been replaced by a more utilitarian focus on personal advancement across organisations (Kanter, 1989). A consequence of this utilitarian focus by some managers contributes to them utilizing bullying tactics to gain compliance and to achieve their objectives. This type of control action in turn produces a stress reaction in the employees who are the subject of this behavior. As noted earlier, bullying has been seen as an extreme form of social stressor (Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996). In this article, we will explicate the antecedents of bullying with a framework of bounded emotionality (Putnam & Mumby, 1993).
Responses to Bullying

A number of strategies and remedies for dealing with the problem of workplace bullying and victimization are also identified in the literature. Strategies range from legislative change (Overall, 1995) to job redesign (AFS, 1993). Other strategies include confronting the perpetrator (Adams, 1992); taking a community approach to the problem (Byrne, 1994); and training and accrediting staff to deal with the problem (Crabb, 1995). Rayner and Hoel (1997) suggest that those identified as “bullies” also need to be heard. Significantly, all of these responses are reactive, rather than proactive. That is, they seek to address the bullying following a critical incident. We argue instead, that a proactive response that identifies and addresses the antecedents of bullying would be more productive.

To date, the major response to bullying has been to legislate against the practice (Overall, 1995). If, as the research suggests, bullying is a hidden phenomenon in organisations then this response is inappropriate. Although current legislation in relation to health and safety in the workplace ought to be sufficient to ensure bullying behaviours do not occur, the evidence shows that it is still evident in organisations. Clearly, both the anecdotal and empirical evidence of a growing and persistent problem suggests that legislative responses have little effect.

Recognizing the shortcomings of legislative solutions, Gorman (1998) argues that a change of attitude is required from confrontational workplaces to co-operative workplaces. While these are worthwhile principles to adopt in any organisation, they will not address the issue of bullying if the antecedents of bullying are not confronted. We argue in this paper that this change should include recognition of negative emotions as well as the encouragement of positive emotions. While creating co-operative workplaces may work in an organisation that does not experience bullying, there is the likelihood that in organisations where bullying exists, co-operation may be used as the clarion call of the bully. In other words, do as the bully insists or risk the stigma of being seen as uncooperative.

Similarly, coping strategies are promoted as assisting in dealing with workplace stress (Lazarus & Folkman, 1984), such as that produced by bullying. Coping strategies, however, assume that there is equal power between the protagonists and rely on the stressed individual to respond. Such approaches suggest an inability or unwillingness to deal with the extent of the problem posed by bullying where there may be little recourse by the victim other than avoidance or withdrawal. We do not imply that it is the victim’s lack of response that is the cause of the bullying. Rather, that all humans have a fight or flight response when confronted. For some the natural reaction will be to confront the bully, while for others the appropriate response will be withdrawal or avoidance. We contend that both responses are reasonable and that the actions of the bully and not the victim need to be addressed.

We contend that in researching the phenomenon of bullying, it is essential to account for affective variables as well as the behavioural outcomes in making sense of bullying. Additionally, we argue that the current prime focus on the victims of bullying and the consequences of bullying will not contribute to this sense making agenda. Rather, we argue that a focus on the bullies themselves may contribute to a better understanding of the phenomenon. As the majority of bullying emanates from managers we want to focus on that cohort in this paper. A bounded emotionality framework provides a good basis for this research.

Bounded emotionality

The application of a bounded emotionality perspective to the phenomenon of bullying will allow the emotional antecedents and consequences of bullying to be explored within a framework that acknowledges the importance of emotions in the workplace. We argue that the regulation of emotions that contribute to bullying will result in a reduction in the incidence and severity of bullying.

A central tenet of the present article is that the process of bullying can best be understood by consideration of the underlying emotional dimensions. From an individual perspective, Goleman (1998) has argued that personal behavior is more of a function of emotional regulation than of rational or cognitive processes. Ashforth and Humphrey (1995) have offered a similar view at the organisational level, arguing that work life is intrinsically emotional and value-based, and that ostensibly rational organisational behavior reflects the extent to which organisational members are able to reconcile emotional issues in the workplace.

Putnam and Mumby (1993) introduced the notion of ‘bounded emotionality’ specifically as a foil to Simon’s (1976) notion of ‘bounded rationality’. The concept of ‘bounded emotionality’ is predicated on the idea that emotional variables underlie organisational behavior.

Martin, Knopoff and Beckman (1998) examined organisational control from a bounded emotionality perspective and argued that organisations can change their existing practices through the introduction of bounded emotionality. The key point for Martin and her colleagues is that a bounded
emotional framework encourages individuals to constrain their emotional expression to create effective relationships with their fellow workers. Martin et al. (1998) suggest that relationships formed as a result of bounded emotionality result in a better understanding of work related emotions.

From our brief review of bullying, the focus of existing research is based on general themes associated with defining the actions and activities of the bully, and the consequences for the target or victim. Yet the very nature of being bullied suggests that an understanding of the actions involved in bullying will only lead to reactive responses focusing on those actions. Consistent with our argument to date, we contend that there is a need to explore the interpersonal and intrapersonal understandings that individuals hold of his or her bullying experiences. Examining bullying from within the bounded emotionality framework is presented as one way of addressing this oversight. In the next section we present a model of the antecedents of managerial bullying.

A Model of the Antecedents of Managerial Bullying

Figure 1 outlines a model of the antecedents of managerial bullying in which organisational and individual factors render a manager susceptible to using bullying tactics.

At the organisational level in Figure 1, we argue that the existence of an organisational culture in which short term gains are valued over the means used to achieve those gains will enhance the climate for bullying. We also argue that bullying will be prevalent in organisations where personal or organisational confrontation is discouraged. Finally, at the organisational level, we propose in Figure 1 that organisations with a high level of workplace stress will increase the likelihood of managers responding with bullying tactics.

At the individual level in Figure 1, we contend that managers with poor social skills may be more likely to use bullying as a tactic. Our model also proposes that managers who are high in empathetic concern and perspective taking (Davis, 1994) would also be less likely to bully. Finally, we argue from a bounded emotionality perspective that the emotions that emerge from the organisation’s culture in a climate of constant change can contribute to workplace bullying. Specifically, managers with poor emotional regulation will be more likely to use bullying tactics in response to their own uncontrolled emotions.

**Propositions**

**Organisational Level**

From our review of literature, bullying is enhanced in an organisational climate where the conflict is not dealt with, but rather avoided. An organisational culture where the primary coping mechanisms are withdrawal and avoidance will therefore enhance the power of the bully. Following this argument:

**P1** Organisations that experience dysfunctional confrontation in the workplace are likely to experience a higher incidence of bullying than those organisations that do not.

D’Aveni (1995) notes the emerging trend for managers to value short-term rewards over long-term outcomes. These trends suggest that some organisations focus on the achievement of goals, at the expense of the method by which these goals are attained (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). A concurrent outcome of this type of behavior would be for the utility of a tactic such as bullying to be seen as appropriate in circumstances where encouragement and inducement may not achieve similar outcomes.

Thus:

**P2** Organisations that focus on outcomes at the expense of the process and the means by which those outcomes are achieved are more likely to have a higher incidence of bullying in the workplace than those organisations that focus on process and means.

As noted earlier in this paper, there is an increasing level of stress being experienced as a result of constant change in the workplace. Research into coping strategies by Hartley, et al. (1991) suggest that employees under stress are initially more likely to attempt to deal with their situation by the adoption of negative coping strategies. Stress has also been associated with lower performance in cognitive tasks (Fiedler, 1986). We contend that this is a consequence of the employee lacking emotional control as a result of the threat of constant change and a fight response being produced resulting in behaviours that are protective, rather than proactive. Following this line of argument:

**P3** Organisations that have a higher level of workplace stress will experience a higher incidence...
of bullying in the workplace than those organisations with low workplace stress.

Individual Level
As noted earlier, we contend that bullying tactics emerge from a manager’s emotional reaction to change within organisations. The production of fear and confusion as a result of a lack of clarity about organisational change can lead to protective and aggressive in behavior on the part of the manager. Following this line of argument:

P4 Managers who are unable to regulate their emotions are more likely to use bullying tactics in the workplace than those managers who are able to regulate their emotions.

Our next proposition is based on the premise that managers with a greater range of personal skills will choose to maintain working relationships, rather than jeopardize them. This is not an altruistic move on their part. Co-operation provides greater commitment than compliance and therefore will produce better performance (Borman & Motowidlo, 1993). Consequently, managers who use coercive means to achieve tasks are risking lower performance from their workers. Given that managers generally desire better performance from their workers, it follows that there must be a lack of skills on the part of the manager who uses coercion or bullying as a motivator. Our fifth proposition is therefore:

P5 Managers who have poor social skills are more likely to use bullying tactics in the workplace than those managers who do have good social skills.

Finally, we argue that those managers who bully will generally be low in empathy. If managers were aware of the implications of their actions on others and were able to empathize with them, then they may be less likely to use bullying as a tactic. It follows then that:

P6 Managers who are low in empathetic concern or perspective taking are more likely to use bullying tactics in the workplace than those managers who are high in empathetic concern or perspective taking.

Implications and Future Directions
In this article we have argued that organisational change produces emotional reactions. We have also demonstrated how the emotions that emerge from this context can lead to bullying. We contend that proactive strategies designed to address the bully’s behavior need to be implemented at the workplace level. From our propositions, some of these strategies will need to address organisational culture and norms, while other strategies will need to address skill deficits in individual managers.

In the case of the bullied worker, we pointed to the need for proactive strategies by the organisation. Substantial economic savings are made through early intervention as part of a strategy for workplace rehabilitation (Hayton, 1995:183). We contend that is better to be proactive in addressing bullying by ensuring that the organisational context does not support bullying. Such a signal will significantly impact upon morale, and loyalty, and will improve contextual performance. Each of these factors will provide immeasurable benefits to any organisation.

Our model is also consistent with the argument that consideration also needs to be given to the social context within which events occur. While the context may include the nature and extent of the bullying experience, the workplace social setting in which the bullying occurred is also of vital importance. Future research needs to be directed to understanding and interpreting these meanings and the intentions of participants in their interactions with others ( Denzin, 1989).

Our model forms the genesis of our ideas to date. To that extent, some might consider the model too simplistic in terms of potential antecedent issues. For example, the social psychology literature increasingly focuses on the interaction of behavioural, emotional, cognitive and situational variables in any explanation of social behaviour. Attributions, goals, perceptions of group and/or situational norms are seen to mediate emotional arousal and its control (that is, P4), and social skills are sometimes not considered as a set of behavioural responses or skills as may be inferred from our argument. Empathy and emotional control, for example, are often considered to be a subset of social competence or skills. Thus, presenting a framework with six specific antecedents that are displayed as independent, and with linear unidirectional effects as shown in Figure 1, may be seen as underestimating the complexity of the issue and of ignoring critical interaction effects.

Clearly, therefore, there is a need for empirical testing of our model, including the aforementioned interaction and feedback effects. We intend to carry this theoretical model forward by initially examining those aspects of the model that have not been addressed in earlier research. As a starting point, we will examine individual traits of managers and organisational climate to determine their impact on bullying.
Conclusion
In this paper we have argued that the phenomenon of managerial bullying should be addressed proactively. Reactive solutions such as legislative change and counselling seek redress for a problem that has already occurred. In this paper we have argued for a more proactive response to bullying based on bounded emotionality. We have contended that organisational level intervention in terms of culture, attitudes and beliefs will provide a supportive environment that will minimize the incidence of bullying. But this tactic needs to be supported by acknowledging the potential emotional reaction of individual managers to change. A bounded emotionality response, coupled with improved social skills, will do more to alleviate the cost of bullying than any legislative program could hope to achieve. Other programs designed to address similar issues such as domestic violence similarly have come to the realization that attitudes and skills are more powerful tools than legislation in addressing hidden phenomena.

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References


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