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Exploration of Upwards Bullying: An interview study.

Workplace bullying is a phenomenon that is attracting increasing interest from researchers and Human Resource Managers throughout the western world. To date, however, most of the research into workplace bullying has focused on managers and colleagues as the perpetrators of bullying in the workplace. Nevertheless, we argue that in the current organizational environment of rapid and discontinuous change, managers are increasingly vulnerable to workplace bullying from their staff, a phenomenon referred to as 'upwards bullying'. In the present study, eighteen managers from a range of public and private organizations were interviewed about their experience of workplace bullying. The data was coded using NVivo and results arranged thematically. While the results indicate that upwards bullying shares some similarities with other forms of workplace bullying, it was specifically characterised by perpetrators using formal grievance systems to bully their managers.

Organizational adaptation and change have become key requirements to ensure organizational survival in the late 20th/early 21st Centuries. This has resulted in the nature of managerial work becoming ever more demanding (Cartwright, 2000; Mann, 1996). Within this organizational context, which often creates high levels of stress and greater pressure to perform, bullying in the workplace is likely to occur at all levels (Davenport, Distler-Schwartz, & Pursell-Elliott, 1999). Moreover, managers may be becoming increasingly vulnerable to being the recipients or targets of workplace bullying (Hoel, Cooper, & Faragher, 2001). Indeed staff may bully their managers (i.e. bully upwards) as a way of dissenting against the manager who they believe is the main cause of their stress (Davenport et al., 1999). Thus, the pressures of contemporary organizational change, exacerbated by the changing nature of interpersonal workplace relationships, may lead to managers becoming vulnerable to workplace bullying from their staff. 'Upwards bullying', that is bullying that is directed at managers from their staff, is thus becoming an issue of central importance for Human Resource Management policy and practice.

Conceptually, workplace bullying is differentiated by definition from a range of workplace experiences. It focuses specifically on particular types of interactions between individuals and groups and does not seek to underestimate legitimate concerns about genuine difficulties (e.g. work intensification). The present paper uses existing theoretical frameworks, in particular power and dependency, to challenge and refine existing assumptions and approaches to workplace bullying, including 'upwards bullying'.

Workplace Bullying

The term workplace bullying has been described as an umbrella term that incorporates harassment, intimidation and aggressive or violent behaviors (Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000). Einarsen (2000) defines workplace bullying as:

"[when] one or more individuals, repeatedly over a period of time, are exposed to negative acts (be it sexual harassment, tormenting, social exclusion, offensive remarks, physical abuse or the like) conducted by one or more other individuals. In addition, there must exist an imbalance in the power-relationships between parties. The person confronted has to have difficulties defending himself/herself in this situation". (pp. 383-384)

According to Einarsen (2000), the regular occurrence of these inappropriate behaviours over a period of time is a core characteristic of the workplace bullying definition, as is the inability of the target to defend themselves. Clearly, a person would not allow themselves to be bullied if they had the ability to defend themselves (Niedl as cited in Einarsen, 2000).

The term workplace bullying is related to a plethora of concepts about behaviour that treats colleagues, managers, supervisors, clients or suppliers in an inappropriate manner. Workplace bullying behaviours include low intensity behaviours often termed incivility, to higher intensity aggressive behaviours that can be characterised by physical aggression or violence. However, for the behaviour(s) to fulfil the definition of workplace bullying the inappropriate behaviour needs to be repeated across a period of time and the target needs to find it difficult to defend him/herself (Einarsen, 2000). In other words, incivility as well as workplace aggression and violence can be seen as examples of workplace bullying only if they are repeated and the target feels they can not defend themselves.

In addition, workplace bullying is also linked to the term harassment. Harassment is considered by some (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994; Einarsen, 2000) as a specific

form of workplace bullying, where a characteristic of the target such as their sexuality or race is the focus of the bullying behaviour. As a result, we surmise that workplace bullying is closely related to a range of counterproductive behaviours, in terms of the nature of behaviours and the impact on the target with regards to defencelessness. In contrast, what differentiates workplace bullying from these similar concepts appears to be the persistency of the behaviours over a period of time.

Power, Dependency and Workplace Bullying

Introducing Power, Authority and Influence

The term power has often been used interchangeably with similar terms such as authority and influence. However, power differs significantly from these terms. While power is the ability to provide or remove resources or punishments (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002), **authority** is the *formal power*, which is sanctioned by the organisation (or similar body) (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002; Keltner, Gruenfeld, & Anderson, 2003). For instance, a consultant can be given the authority by the organisation to interview staff about a critical incident which occurred within the workplace. Thus, authority is power as it relates to a *role or position* within an organisation, suggesting that power can still occur without the need of any formal authority (Keltner et al., 2003).

Influence on the other hand is a *consequence of having power*. That is someone who has the ability to provide or remove resources or punishments has the ability to use this power to influence others (Anderson & Berdahl, 2002). For example a manager who can provide their staff with \$500 bonuses will have considerable influence. Alternatively an individual who can punish a colleague through social exclusion can also have a lot of influence. Therefore, power provides individuals with the ability to influence others.

Significantly it is the control of valued resources which provides a range of individuals in organisations power to influence others. In addition the definition of influence also suggests that power is not always used by those who have it, indicating that there is a potential for power to be used or not used (Emerson, 1962). Thus, power can exist without authority and both managers and staff have the ability to use power to influence those around them.

Power and Workplace Bullying

As introduced earlier the concept of power is central to the definition of workplace bullying. According to Bacharach and Lawler (1980), power is relational, and is based on dependency. They also emphasise that power is multidirectional, suggesting that power can flow up, down and across. We argue that staff members have a number of sources of power and that, in upwards bullying cases, this power may be abused for individual motives. Salin (2003) concluded in her research into politics and bullying that, within today's organisational climate, some people may actually be 'playing a game' and are rewarded for behaviour, which would be considered manipulative, or could be labelled as bullying. She suggested that members within a workgroup who break the social rules within that group, for example, by performing better than what is expected, may be punished by their colleagues and managers for breaking those rules. Although Salin's (2003) study focused on bullying between colleagues and from a manager directed at a staff member it is possible to consider that a

manager who breaks the social rules of the group could also suffer the same punishment from their staff.

Salin's (2003) research emphasises the importance of power in cases of workplace bullying. Even when not explicitly referred to, the notion of power is entrenched into definitions of workplace bullying by the way reference is given to vulnerability or the defencelessness of the recipients (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Power and control are closely related to bullying (Hoel & Salin, 2003) in that there is an imbalance of power between those involved. The power imbalance may reflect the formal power relationships within the organisation or "perceptions of powerlessness resulting from the bullying process itself" can occur (Hoel & Salin, 2003, p. 204).

Typically, within the workplace bullying literature the abuse of power in relation to workplace bullying is typically associated with organizational structure and the position of the perpetrator (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf, & Cooper, 2003; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). The argument tends to be that those in the lower levels of an organization are more vulnerable to being abused by those in the higher levels of the organization due to the position of the latter (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). That is, staff members and employees are vulnerable while those in positions of power or authority, such as managers, are identified as the perpetrators (Beed, 2001; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). While this is a logical framework for which there is supporting empirical evidence (Rayner, Hoel, & Cooper, 2002), there is a risk in assuming that formal organizational authority alone contributes to abuse. The recognition that power is multidirectional (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980) and that power can be derived from a range of sources other than organisational position or authority (such as control of information (Pfeffer, 1981; Raven, 1993; Yukl, 1989) and expertise (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980; Brass & Burkhardt, 1993; French & Raven, 1959; Yukl, 1989); further questions that only those in lower levels of the organisation are vulnerable to abuse. The assumption 'only managers are bullies' fails to identify cases where the abuser is in a lower organizational position (Rylance, 2001).

Similarly, Keashly and Jagatic's (2003) question the suggestion that power is only related to a position a person holds within an organisation (or authority). Stating that by operationalising power in terms of organisational position alone, we may limit our understanding of workplace bullying. Instead they suggest power can be defined "as a process of dependency" (p.48). Within this conceptualisation it is possible for a dominant-subordinate relationship to exist, thereby enabling a staff member to bully a manager. Consequently, the focus on managers as perpetrators of workplace bullying may limit our understanding of workplace bullying (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003; Rylance, 2001).

Dependency

One concept that is closely related to power is the notion of dependency. The literature suggests that, in the case of workplace bullying, it is the target's dependency on the offender which produces a power imbalance, enabling bullying in the workplace to occur (Einarsen et al., 2003; Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). Bassman (1992) states: "one common thread in all abusive relationships is the element of dependency. The abuser controls some important resources in the victim's life, the victim is dependent on the abuser" (p. 2). This suggests that dependency is a significant factor in any bullying experience. As such, an individual's "power resides implicitly in the other's dependency" (Emerson, 1962, p. 32) on them and not their

dependency on the other person (Lawler, 1992), which suggests that the more dependent one person is on the other the less powerful they potentially are (Emerson, 1962).

In a truly interdependent relationship in the workplace, staff rely on their managers for direction, resources and rewards, while managers are dependent on staff to be productive and fulfil the goals of the organization (Cook, Yamagishi, & Donnelly, 1997). However, either party can deny, hinder or help the other person in achieving their goals (Emerson, 1962). When a person's goals are denied or hindered and another person values the item in question (such as a reward or information), then power can be derived (Emerson, 1962). Bass (1990) suggests that the power of a staff member is significant especially when the knowledge, skills and expertise of the staff member are difficult to replace. It has been suggested that a manager's dependency on their staff (some more than others) provides staff with a form of power that could be abused (Keashly & Jagatic, 2003). We argue that, just as manager can abuse the dependency staff have on them, staff can also abuse the dependency managers have on them to produce and fulfil the goals of the organization (Mechanic, 2003). This perspective of workplace bullying has been overlooked in previous research.

Most of the workplace bullying research has focused on 'downwards bullying', conducted by managers towards their staff and, more recently, 'horizontal bullying', which entails bullying from one colleague to another (Lewis & Sheehan, 2003). Upwards bullying is reported anecdotally, with a few studies indicating that upwards bullying could occur (for example, Hoel et al., 2001; Mayhew, McCarthy, Barker, & Sheehan, 2003; Miller, 1997) and none that empirically explore upwards bullying as a phenomenon. In response to this oversight in the literature, a study that sought to explore the nature of upwards bullying was conducted.

Potential Impact of Upwards Bullying

Research demonstrates that workplace bullying has significant consequences for those who directly experience or witness the bullying, as well as the organization more generally. For the individual recipient, the consequences of bullying at work can range from physical harm through to an increase in psychological stress (Hadikin & O'Driscoll, 2000). A review of the bullying literature reveals an extensive range of physical and psychological symptoms commonly associated with workplace bullying including fatigue, muscular complaints, lack of self-esteem, sleeplessness, depression, feelings of abuse and victimization, nervousness and psychosomatic complaints (Einarsen, 2000), all of which can interfere with work performance. While the literature has focused on employees, it may be postulated that managers who have experienced or witnessed upwards bullying will be affected in a similarly negative manner, and their ability to perform their role effectively will also be reduced.

Given the complex and vital role managers perform, it is also suggested that the cost to the organization will be considerable. It is expected that cases of upwards bullying will impact not only on managers, but also on their workgroup. For instance, the manager and workgroup witnesses may not function effectively because of resultant physical or psychological health related symptoms. Additionally, the workgroup may be drawn into the conflict with further negative impacts on performance. Additional resources may be expended to employ specialized staff to mediate or help resolve the situation, such as human resource staff and organizational counselors. In addition, the costs associated with potential tribunals and legal representation are considerable (Sheehan, McCarthy, Barker, & Henderson, 2001).

These costs to the individual, those around them, and the organization emphasize further the need for research into the phenomenon of upwards bullying. We argue that, by researching this new perspective of workplace bullying, a better understanding of the behaviors and processes will be gained and approaches to prevent and manage it can be developed in the future. We suggest that dependency and power play a significant role in the nature of upwards bullying. This paper presents the findings from an interview study that sought to explore the nature of upwards bullying.

In order to explore the nature of upwards bullying, managers who had directly experienced or witnessed upwards bullying or were in a position to discuss the workplace bullying environment, were interviewed. Specifically, the behaviors and approaches used by staff were investigated. The impact upwards bullying can have on the manager who experiences or witnesses it was also explored.

Method

Participants

Interviews were conducted with 18 participants who were divided into two groups. Group One consisted of 11 managers from an Australian Government Owned Corporation (GOC; eight males and three females). In order to develop an understanding of upwards bullying beyond a single organization, interviews were also conducted with seven managers (all females) from a range of organizations (Group Two). The GOC from which 11 of the participants were interviewed has provided a public service for over 100 years and comprises a number of business and support groups that conduct the commercial activities of the organization across a large geographical state of Australia. The organization has been a traditionally male dominated, with women representing nine per cent of the total workforce. Group 2 comprised managers from private business, public health and education sectors, and a community organization.

From both groups, managers included one supervisor, seven middle managers, five senior middle managers and five senior managers. The managers interviewed also had varying degrees of experience in the role of manager. Five of the managers were very experienced (more than 10 years of experience) as a manager, while 12 were experienced (more than five years), and one was new to a managerial position. Participants from the general managerial population were contacted via the research team's network such as a workplace bullying support service, while participants from the GOC were contacted via the HR network within the organization. Brief information as to the focus of the research was provided to the potential participants to assist them to self-identify as people experienced and informed about the topic.

Procedure

Two one-hour unstructured interviews were conducted with 17 of the interviewees. Two one-hour sessions were considered sufficient time to allow the participant to tell their story, enable the researcher to develop a relationship and level of trust necessary for this type of research, as well as allowing the time necessary for deeper meaning to develop (Jones, 1985). The sequence of two interviews also allowed the researcher to follow up on any questions or points that required clarification after the first interview (Jones, 1985). One interview was conducted in one and a half hours to suit the interviewee's needs (as two interviews were not possible). In this case the researcher obtained permission from the interviewee to contact them directly after the interview (within a couple of weeks) if any issue needed to be clarified. With the permission of the participants, the interviews were audio-taped, which enabled the researcher to attend to the participant intently (Bernard, 2000; Morton-Williams, 1985). Only one of the interviewees declined audio-taping of the interview;

in this case comprehensive notes were taken and a summary of the notes sent to the interviewee to approve.

All the audio-taped interviews were later transcribed. Data was analyzed by using bracketing to isolate the key factors revealed in the transcribed interviews (Denzin, 2001). Bracketing is the method of identifying common themes or events running through the interview data (Denzin, 2001). The meaningfulness of the themes was considered to be strengthened if the themes were mentioned by a number of the participants. NVivo (V.2) was used to develop and collate the different themes.

Results and Discussion

The purpose of the present study was to explore the nature of upwards bullying. Specifically, the behaviors and approaches used by staff were investigated, as well as the impact upwards bullying can have on managers who experience or witness it. Overall, the interview data supported the concept of upwards bullying. The broad themes discussed are: Managers' legitimate power; Upwards bullying behaviours; and Impact of Upwards Bullying.

Managers' Legitimate Power

Lack of Respect for the Manager's Authority

Legitimate power is often linked to the role or position a person holds within the organisation (French & Raven, 1959). French and Raven (1959) suggest that legitimate power stems from internalized values, which acknowledges another person's right to power. If a manager is seen to lack any one of these values or aspects of legitimate power, for example a young manager or their senior manager is not seen to support them, then the power sourced from their position will be effected. Similarly Bacharach and Lawler (1980) suggest there are three dimensions of authority, domain authority, scope of authority and legitimacy of authority. Both domain authority, scope of authority are formally defined by the role and legitimacy of authority, which is similar to French and Raven's (1959) explanation that the manager is seen to have authority because of the position they hold and they are endorsed by a legitimising agent. Finally, Bacharach and Lawler (1980) propose that the third dimension, legitimacy of authority is the most important of the three but state that is a perceptual phenomenon. Therefore, the legitimacy of a manager's authority is dependant on the perception of others (Bacharach & Lawler, 1980).

It was found that 10 of the 18 managers interviewed perceived that their authority or position was not being respected or was being challenged. One manager noted that, "*obviously she had no respect for me at all*" (Group Two- Participant One), while another said "*there's not just the distrust, there's a disrespect*" (Group One - Participant Three). Others referred to how their role or authority was being constantly challenged. As one interviewee said, "*[they were] testing how much strength my role of being able to direct staff to do things [was]*" (Group Two - Participant Four) while another recounted a situation where "*there was a conversation we had once where she was sort of daring me as if to say well what are you going to do about it...they were the exact words she said*" (Group One - Participant Five).

Organizational change

Most of the managers referred to significant organizational change within their organizations, and the manager being seen as responsible for the changes as the main influence for the behavior of the staff member. Interestingly, nine of the managers interviewed were all new to the workgroup or organization. This may suggest that they were perceived as an outsider and may have, as Salin (2003) suggests, broken some of the unwritten rules in the workplace by making changes or pushing through changes in the workplace. As one manager put it, "*in other words this is the way we've done it for twenty years, and you'll find there are still a large number of people here that are like that. [They say] we've been doing it this way for 20 years and I can't see why we have to change*" (Group

One - Participant Four). Therefore, it appears that change and the uncertainty it produces may trigger some staff to be resentful of the decisions managers make, which is supported in the literature (Davenport et al., 1999).

Upwards Bullying Behaviors

Withdrawal of Information

Denying the target of workplace bullying access to information is one of the most common methods by which individuals are bullied (Einarsen & Raknes, 1997; Rayner et al., 2002). Six of the interviewees referred to information or expertise being withheld from them, which resulted in making it difficult for them to perform their role. As one interviewee stated *“it just got worse and worse and worse...she wouldn't give me any information, anything”* (Group One - Participant Five). Also being un-contactable and not attending meetings or coming in late appeared to be more subtle methods by which information and expertise were withdrawn (seven interviewees discussed these behaviors). Not doing work when assigned was also another method used in four of the cases expressed in the interviews. For instance, *“He'd tell his supervisor...that yes everything [is] fine...he'd get that work to them, and the day it was due he'd go home sick”* (Group Two - Participant Four).

Dependency. Three of the managers interviewed referred to the staff member being critical to the functioning of the workplace, which created a dependency on the staff member. *“I can see him as an asset because of his skills and [when] he tends to perform at a high level with so much history and knowledge that I wouldn't like to lose that”* (Group Two - Participant Four). The managers also expressed that this dependency on the staff member made them reluctant to do anything initially when the staff member initially demonstrated 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”* (Group Two - Participant One). Therefore, a number of the managers interviewed perceived that staff member/s were using the withdrawal of information or expertise as a way of impacting on the manager's own performance. This trend is supported by the literature, which suggests that the control of information or knowledge can be a source of power for staff (French & Raven, 1959; Pfeffer, 1981; Raven, 1993). Furthermore, it also supports the assumption that it would be possible to use these sources of power against managers as a form of punishment.

Knowledge of the rules of the organization. According to the interviewees in the present study, it appears that managers are gradually worn down by the staff member's behaviors. As expected, most interviewees reported some staff used their knowledge of the rules of the organization to bully their managers. Thirteen of the managers in the present study reported that staff, whom they perceived as perpetrating the bullying, used a lengthy grievance investigation involving most members of the workplace to circumvent or stop any disciplinary action or mediation initiated by the manager (for each of these cases the substantial grievance was found to be unfounded). As one manager stated *“basically what happened is that a staff member used the system that has been put in place to protect employees from abuse or mistreatment, he misused that system as a tool to bully his employer”* (Group Two - Participant One). Similarly another manager said *“here was somebody who knew the rule book backwards, and who knew exactly what she could and could not do in the rule book”* (Group One - Participant Eight).

Einarsen (2000) suggests that a key element to workplace bullying is the perpetrator's ability to reduce the recipient/s capacity to defend themselves. Ironically, as the phenomenon now termed bullying gains increasing recognition in society, it is a new weapon that can be used against one's colleagues and one's managers. The ability to defend oneself is complicated by the growing awareness of workplace abuse and the misuse of the label 'victim' by either party (subordinate or manager) in interpersonal conflict (Einarsen, 1999;

Einarsen et al., 2003). When this process occurs, the perpetrator may gradually weaken the target through constant accusations of bullying to the point that, if a power imbalance did not previously exist, it is created (Einarsen et al., 2003). Similarly, Zapf (2004) states there may be situations where a single event could be seen as workplace bullying, for example when the event induces an ongoing threat to the target or is perceived as having an ongoing threat, as in the case of a investigation. In summary, the misuse of the label ‘victim’ appears to be an essential part of the upward bullying experience of a majority of the interviewees.

Upwards influence tactics

Within the past couple of decades, researchers have attempted to understand the political tactics staff can use to upwardly influence their managers. In 1988, Kipnis and Schmidt, using a version of the Profile of Organizational Influence Strategies (POIS), measured six upwards influence strategies identified in the original Kipnis, Schmidt and Wilkinson’s study in 1980 (Kipnis & Schmidt, 1988, 2003), one of the most widely used measures of upwards influence strategies in the literature (Terpstra-Tong & Ralston, 2002). The six strategies were reason, friendliness, assertiveness (often referred to now in the literature as pressure tactics, see Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl, Guinan, & Sottolano, 1995), coalition, higher authority, and bargaining. Although all of these tactics can be appropriate, if used in an inappropriate manner, regularly and across a period of time they may be perceived as bullying behavior, according to the definition of workplace bullying and identified bullying behaviors (Einarsen, 2000; Rayner et al., 2002). Thus, we contend that these tactics, when extreme or inappropriate can be examples of upwards bullying behaviors within a broader range of behaviors.

From the managers interviewed it appears that pressure tactics and going to a higher authority or a third party can be mis-used. Five of the managers interviewed expressed the belief that many of the staff member/s behaviors were aimed at pressuring them to change a decision or action they had taken. As one manager stated *“until he gets his own way he’ll just keep the pressure on and hope that eventually everyone will back down and he’ll get his own way”* (Group One - Participant Ten). Another manager expressed, *“I believe [it was] to try and weaken my resolve on how things are done”* (Group One - Participant Four).

Going to a higher authority also appeared to be a common behavior in the upwards bullying experience. Six of the managers reported that the first time they knew they had a problem was when their senior manager or a union representative contacted them, saying the staff member has come to see them. In most cases the staff member had not discussed the issue with the manager prior to approaching the senior manager or union representative. This may indicate the lack of a positive working relationship between the manager and the staff member in the first place, and suggests a need to enhance the relationships between management and staff. Although this tactic by staff may be appropriate and necessary in most cases, the managers interviewed expressed the view that the staff member could have come to see them initially about their concerns and this was a way of placing pressure on them. As one manager stated *“I’ve known guys for a long time, rather than coming to talk to [me] about an issue, they’ll go to the union, or they’ll go to an old friend who now works in a senior position within the organization. And I find that’s a strange quirk,...that because I’m now the manager, all those years of history don’t count any more. They feel that they can’t talk to you any more”* (Group One - Participant Ten). In most cases the managers felt this was a tactic for the staff member to get what they wanted; *“very frequently they would go around us to whatever level was necessary until they got what they wanted”* (Group One - Participant Three). When this happens pressure from above or the union often makes the manager change a previous decision. A few of the managers stated that a lack of senior manager support for a manager’s decisions undermines their role and thus, their legitimate power, but even more importantly, the perception of legitimate power in the eyes of the staff member.

Subtle and Overt Behaviors

According to Hoel and his colleagues (2001), staff members are at greater risk when they are involved in bullying a manager as opposed to bullying a peer or subordinate due to the positional power of the manager. Results from the interviews suggest that sometimes the behaviors can be quite subtle, while at other times the negative behaviors are very overt. Analysis of the interview data reveals that in most cases the negative spiral often begins with the perpetrator displaying a pattern of subtle behaviors such as failure to attend meetings, being disruptive in meetings, making snide comments at meetings, failing to meet deadlines, and spreading gossip about the manager. A number of the managers referred to this type of behavior by staff as playing a “game” (Group One - Participants Three, Six, Eight and Ten), while another referred to it as “manager bashing” (Group One - Participant Two).

Counter to the suggestion by Hoel et al. (2001), staff also appeared to be using very overt behaviors such as yelling, standing over the manager, confrontational e-mails and phone calls, threats to disrupt work, verbal threats and physical threats (11 interviewees referred to one or a range of these behaviors) as well as the subtle behaviors outlined before. One manager stated *“he’d come into my office and stand over me”* (Group Two - Participant Four); another manager expressed how there were threats of *“I’m going to expose you”* (Group Two - Participant Seven); while another manager recounted an experience where a staff member who had been recently disciplined approached the him in the car park as they were going home. *“He made serious threats, we were the only two there, and threatened me with physical violence, fist clenched, and was trying to intimidate me”* (Group One - Participant One). Interestingly, for most of the managers interviewed, when they initiated disciplinary action or a mediation process with the staff member to address these counterproductive behaviors, the staff member retaliated with a grievance or accusation of bullying (or similar) against his or her manager. Thus, it appears that staff are using subtle and overt behaviors as well as the grievance system to circumvent the manager’s problem-solving strategies or disciplinary action.

Impact of Upwards Bullying

Concern about Seeking Support

It seems that managers are concerned about seeking support and assistance because they feel it may hurt their standing in the organization (Lee, 1997). Despite their concerns, in most cases, the interviewees did seek support from either their senior manager or Human Resource Management staff. However, a number of managers interviewed expressed frustration that there was little assistance available for them when they sought support. Eight of the managers interviewed expressed a concern about the lack of support that was available for managers. As one manager recounted *“I said to him [my senior manager] I feel bullied, what’s there for me and he goes disciplinary action...and I said was it? - it’s different cause when you read all the policies and everything it’s not that same perceptual issue. If you look at the codes of bullying...it’s about how the person receives it...as opposed to the disciplinary action which is rules”* (Group Two - Participant Four). Another manager stated *“you feel pretty isolated, you’re the manager, you’re there by yourself, but where do you go with it...if I rang my manager and said one of my staff is harassing me, he’d say, you sort it out. You’re isolated. Where do I go to?”* (Group One - Participant One). Although a few of the managers stated that they were especially frustrated with the lack of support they received from their immediate manager (a few suggested their immediate manager may have fueled the situation) a number of the interviewees expressed that when they did approach their senior manager for assistance they were helpful in terms of advice and suggestions on how manage the situation. It appears that specific intervention strategies and skilled assistance is needed for managers who are faced with upwards bullying by their staff in order to reduce the deleterious impact of such behavior on the manager.

Impact on Career

Interestingly, 13 of the interviewees expressed concern over how situations like a vexatious grievance may impact on their career. As one manager stated *“It will impact on me, with my credibility with senior managers”* (Group One - Participant Eleven) while another manager said *“I’m very scared, particularly of the effect it’s going to have on my career”* (Group Two - Participant Eight). Similarly, managers also expressed how in situations like the ones they had experienced or witnessed it was often easier to give in or as one manager stated *“the message...is, roll over and die and don’t challenge”* (Group Two - Participant Two). Another manager referred to how most managers *“walk before it gets too [far] for their own career protection”* (Group Two - Participant Four). Concern therefore, as to the impact of vexatious grievances on their career appears to a significant impact for managers.

Wary about addressing performance issues. Managers interviewed also expressed how their experience of feeling upwards bullied or witnessing others in upwards bullying situations made them wary about addressing performance issues in the future (eight interviewees referred to this). As one manager put it; *“I’ll tell you what it does do though. It does make you a bit gun-shy in terms of tackling, trying to clean up that kind of thing next time...next time I’m just going to turn a blind eye, I’m going to sweep that under the carpet. I’m just going to ignore it and hope it goes away”* (Group One - Participant Eight). One manager summed up the impact of her experience by saying *“so why would I do it again. I wouldn’t expose myself to the risks professionally and more the risk emotionally”* (Group Two - Participant Four).

Overall, the interviews indicated that upwards bullying is an identifiable phenomenon. In essence, the exploration associated with the propositions suggested that change within the workplace, the manager being seen as responsible for change and a lack of respect for the manager appear to be significant contributing factors. The behaviors reported by the interviewees suggest a range of behaviors from subtle to overt behaviors, with the use of the grievance system a common behavior. Finally, it was also found that managers are concerned about how situations as they experienced or witnessed them could impact on a manager’s career. Some of the managers interviewed reported unease about where they can go for assistance when presented with bullying behaviors by a staff member/s, as it appeared there was nothing currently available for them.

Limitations and Future Research

The generalizability of the current study is limited due to the limited sample used. Concerns over the sample were overcome somewhat by the inclusion of managers who discussed the workplace bullying environment for managers, therefore obtaining a more general view of the issue. Furthermore the Government Owned Corporation from which 11 of the participants (Group One) were sourced is predominately male dominated; only three of the interviewees from this population were female. Interestingly all the interviewees from the general managerial population (Group Two) were female. Additional research within other more gender balanced organizations is needed to further understand the nature of upwards bullying and to study whether gender is a significant factor within this phenomenon.

In order to overcome some of these limitations further research using a quantitative methodological approach of self-administered questionnaires will be administered within a wider range of organizations. This study will build on the analysis undertaken in the current study in relation to the nature of upwards bullying and investigate the prevalence of upwards bullying. We anticipate that this study will be administered within the same Government Owned Corporation as well as a large public service department. A further objective of the follow up study will be to develop strategies on how to prevent and manage upwards bullying.

A further limitation of the current study is that the perspective of only the managers was obtained. This limited our ability to assess the situations and behaviors involved. The

perspective of all parties involved in workplace conflicts such as upwards bullying would enhance our understanding of the factors and processes involved in these situations. Future research will seek to obtain the perspective of all parties involved in upwards bullying research. Furthermore, as some of the behaviors described by managers as upwards bullying may at times be appropriate (e.g. expressing a legitimate concern), further exploration into what makes these behaviors appropriate or inappropriate is needed. Again, obtaining the perspective of all parties will assist in this understanding. Notably, focusing on one organization may assist in revealing such in-depth information in relation to a particular culture.

Conclusion

The present results from an interview study exploring the nature of upwards bullying, indicate that some staff are bullying their managers using similar behaviors to other forms of workplace bullying. One identifying aspect of upward bullying is the apparent mis-use of the grievance system against managers. Of course, this approach could also be used against colleagues. This finding may suggest a need to strengthen the grievance system. Therefore, while still encouraging targets of workplace bullying to come forward, it is also important to develop a system that reduces the occurrence of vexatious claims.

Upwards bullying, however, does not appear to be recognized by organizations as an issue. As a result it appears that managers feel unsupported and reluctant to seek assistance when faced with a case of upwards bullying. This lack of support and concern about seeking assistance may have severe physical and psychological impacts on the manager as well as their workgroup. There are also serious potential financial costs for the organization. We propose that the primary strategy Human Resource Managers should employ in order to address upwards bullying is to accurately recognize the existence of upwards bullying and to initiate strategies to assist managers when they are faced with upwards bullying. Although this may sound simple it may mean going against the current thinking and culture within the workplace. For instance, managers may normalize cognitions about inappropriate behavior by staff as part of the job. It needs to be made clear, however, to both managers and staff, that just as bullying behaviors are unacceptable when perpetuated by a manager or colleague, they are also unacceptable when carried out by a staff member and directed at a manager.

By acknowledging the occurrence of upwards bullying, organizations will be taking the first step in addressing the phenomenon of upwards bullying. Further actions, such as implementing support mechanisms for managers, 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 organization. Broader issues of cultural change are inherent in this approach, which does not underestimate problems associated with legitimate organizational pressures. The present paper adds to the literature by developing a conceptual understanding of upwards bullying. The current study and a future follow up study will assist in exploring this conceptualization of upwards bullying and add to the current body of knowledge within the workplace bullying literature, as well as contribute to informing and assisting organizations in how to address upwards bullying.

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