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Taking a sociological approach to oppression in the neoliberal human services workplace:

The practice gains

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Abstract:

Workplace bullying has become internationally recognised as a major and costly problem. Meta-analyses generally suggest that around 10-20% of the workforce experience moderate bullying in any one year. The problem appears to be particularly prevalent in the hospitality industry, health, social services and educational institutions. At around 50-80%, top down bullying by managers and supervisors is considered to be the most common form of bullying. There is now evidence that upward bullying of managers, especially female managers, and horizontal bullying between peers are significant and underreported phenomena. Much research into bullying has been carried out by academics in the fields of human resources, law, and psychology. This research tends to focus on the negative psychological impacts of bullying. Despite growing recognition that workplace bullying is a consequence of organisational and macro-structural problems, rather than being the result of individual pathology on the part of an easily identifiable "bully" or a "target", there have been few attempts at any sociological analysis of bullying. The lead author of this paper has undertaken research into workplace bullying amongst social workers. All of us have observed increasing issues around institutional bullying impacting on people at all levels in human services and education settings, including in particular on those in middle management. As a result, we have joined forces in an effort to create new knowledge in this area of mutual interest. To do so, we draw on our sociology and social work academic and practice backgrounds, and our current management practice in global locations of Australia, the United Kingdom, and New Zealand. We think realistic analyses and interventions into institutional bullying require an application of sociological perspectives that begin from wider understandings of power than simply power as authority, to consider bullying in new ways. Sociology invites a critical questioning of neo-liberal working contexts to consider the institutional and historical, political, social, and economic influences, in order that we bring challenge to traditional

power relations and hierarchical structures. In this paper we review the extant literature that

has made reference to sociological theory in discussions of workplace bullying. We then

present our thoughts on using the ideas of C. Wright Mills to underpin a theoretical and

methodological toolkit for helping managers of human services cope with institutional

bullying, with particular consideration of the capacity of Mills' ideas to assist practitioners to

connect the "personal troubles" experienced in their own daily practice with wider "public

issues."

Introduction

Over the last three decades, workplace bullying has become identified as a serious problem that impacts on workers in many countries, and that may be particularly prevalent in public service organisations, specifically welfare, health, and education services. The negative impacts of bullying on the physical and psychological health of people who have been targeted by, or have witnessed bullying have been well documented (van Heugten, 2013). Few researchers have examined the impacts on people accused of bullying, but these appear to be similarly serious (Jenkins, Zapf, Winefield, & Sarris, 2012).

The concept of psychological violence in the workplace first received attention in the writing of Heinz Leymann in the 1980s (Leymann & Gustavsson, 1984, as cited in Leymann & Gustavsson, 1996). Leymann (1990) called the problem "mobbing", which is still a commonly used term in Scandinavian countries, whereas in Anglophone countries, the generic term for psychological workplace aggression is bullying. The term mobbing tends to refer to situations in which a group oppresses an individual. The most commonly used definition of bullying is the following:

> Bullying at work means harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks. . . . 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, p. 15).

There are many quantitative and qualitative reports on various aspects of downward bullying of subordinates by managers and supervisors, and some, although fewer, on horizontal

bullying by colleagues. There are, by contrast, only a small number of research reports that explore the experiences of managers and supervisors as targets of upward bullying (Branch, Ramsay, & Barker, 2007; Wallace, Johnston, & Trenberth, 2010). Surveys estimate the proportion of upward bullying at below 10% of all cases: A Danish population survey found upward bullying accounted for 6% (Ortega, Høgh , Pejtersen, & Olsen, 2009). When managers are bullied by subordinates in the workplace, they may start out in a position of equal or superior strength, but over the course of experiencing bullying, they become disempowered. Hierarchically subordinate perpetrators may possess specialist knowledge, and by withholding this knowledge they can impair the manager's capacity to fulfil work commitments. Whereas the gender distribution of perpetrators and victims of bullying is generally equal, there is some evidence that the targets of upward bullying are more often women (Ortega, et al. 2009; Wallace et al., 2010). When groups of workers join together to bully (mob) a superior, their obstructive actions may result in the manager's position becoming untenable.

The topic of bullying has been most thoroughly explored by lawyers, psychologists, and human resources or management academics. This has led to a somewhat individualistic focus, and much attention has been paid to the negative impacts of bullying on health and wellbeing. It is understandable that this has been the focus in a field that is relatively new, and where the primary concern of those engaged in studying and writing about the topic has been to achieve changes in legislation to better protect workers from bullying, and to improve workplace health and safety policies to incorporate measures to prevent, and intervene in, bullying situations. Despite legislative improvements, such as those contained in the New Zealand *Health and Safety in Employment Amendment Act* (2003), people who are bullied are rarely

successful in obtaining legal redress and they tend to ultimately leave the workplace. The Australian Government has recently completed a parliamentary inquiry into workplace bullying and completed a report which made recommendations for improved recognition of workplace bullying, access to education, and to faster dispute resolution mechanisms (House of Representatives Standing Committee on Education and Employment, 2012). In the UK, it is becoming more common for aggrieved parties to seek redress through employment tribunals. This is often financially and emotionally costly for all sides. Legal processes reinforce the construction of bullying as a private individual matter for the plaintiff and accused, and provide little opportunity for organisations to gain an understanding of systemic problems. In this paper we argue that, if we are to facilitate better outcomes for staff accused of or experiencing bullying, it is necessary to apply a sociological perspective to inform an organisational response.

In the popular literature, both bullies and targets are labelled and pathologised, and checklists of personal characteristics are provided to assist in identifying culprits (van Heugten, 2010). Those approaches are generally unhelpful and misleading both from a perspective of identifying causal factors, and from an intervention perspective. Recent research suggests that those accused and found responsible for bullying are not always aware of the hurtful impact of their actions (Crawshaw, 2007). Managers who are accused of bullying may believe they are struggling against a recalcitrant worker's resistance to necessary change. Workers may consider their aggressive actions to be legitimate attempts to protect their employment rights. To further complicate matters, the term "bullying" is frequently loosely used to denote behaviours that workers or managers simply find unpleasant or difficult to deal with. When managers instigate organisational change that results in the loss of formal and informal

privileges, they are frequently accused of bullying. The experience of being accused of bullying can be extremely distressing, and managers have been driven to suicide as a result. It is not surprising then that managers and supervisors who are accused of bullying suggest that such accusations are in fact examples of upward bullying (Jenkins, et al., 2012).

Anti-bullying policies and legislation address bullying on a case by case de-contextualised basis. Although the occasional person achieves redress via such means, the discourse around bullying is constrained and shaped by this piecemeal attention to the problem. Some of the intervention literature has begun to borrow ideas from more community based interventions, such as those employed against school bullying, to recommend more holistic approaches. Scully and Rowe (2009) suggested educating bystanders about the negative impacts of bullying interchanges, and then teaching them how they could turn around discriminating or otherwise oppressive bullying statements (van Heugten, 2011). Others have noted that conversational networks can assist in breaking down oppressive workplace cultures, especially if efforts are made to engage with people who are normally isolated (McDonald, Vickers, Mohan, Wilkes, & Jackson, 2010). Qualitative research into workplace bullying has also found that targeted people can begin to rebuild self-esteem and ultimately achieve resilience, if they can analyse the bullying problem as external to themselves, rather than personalizing this (van Heugten, 2013). It is possible that social workers in van Heugten's research were especially equipped to do this because their social work education allowed them to analyse the situation they found themselves in, from personal problem to public issue, and enabled them to take a more active problem solving approach (van Heugten, 2010; 2013).

Those familiar with the work of C. Wright Mills (1959) might be inclined to observe that this finding, that it is helpful to reflexively depersonalise bullying, and think about it from a person in context perspective, suggests it is beneficial to cultivate what he called "the sociological imagination". Social workers often refer to the notion of connecting "personal troubles" and "public issues" when they engage in reflexive thinking, without necessarily identifying a theoretical source for this idea, instead claiming it as their profession's own. Mills might not have minded, since he did not think the importance of developing this imagination applied only to sociologists. He was, however, undeniably a sociologist himself. Watson (2008) noted that "Mills' call was for social scientists to relate the personal troubles and the biographies of individuals to the historical transformations and the social structures of their times" (pp. 121-122). He suggested that a sociological imagination might be a particularly important capacity for managers in modern workplaces, because it might help them trace and link their experiences to events and processes in larger social structures and institutions.

Mills was interested in power and the social contexts of power relations between individuals, and how to make sense of this in particular contexts, such as human services or educational settings. Situating power as an everyday organisational experience and something more fluid, shifting, and thus malleable and shared, offers a useful way forward in the management of claims of bullying, and might ultimately contribute to sustainable organisational relations and job security in a neoliberal context. We are arguing for the analysis of potential workplace bullying claims to be part of a "managers' toolkit", in order that the experience of both accusing and being accused of bullying can be understood and worked with differently.

Workplace oppression and the sociological imagination

Recently, some researchers have noted the near absence of a more sociological perspective from the literature. Such a perspective might assist in achieving a better grasp of the complex dynamics underpinning workplace incivility, conflict, and bullying. Beyond that, it might encourage the development of a more critical understanding of how definitions, perceptions, research and policy agendas, and suggested remedies of and for bullying are constructed. These too are the products of particular economic, political, and historical contexts and hence, Mills has a lot to offer a critical analysis of trends of organisational bullying in the western neoliberal context.

Rather than labelling protagonists and victims as bullies and targets, the scant sociologically oriented literature draws attention to workplace dynamics and wider socio-economic contexts that lead to instability and power struggles (Salin & Hoel, 2011; van Heugten, 2011). Salin (2003) argued that wider economic and political trends such as "globalisation, increased pressure for efficiency, and restructuring" play a part in bullying among senior professionals who are increasingly working in environments of competition for positions and promotions (p. 43). Salin went on to suggest that these forces also contribute to the normalization of bullying through the neoliberal approaches to bullying that are commonly adopted, which reduce the impact and cost of bullying to organisations. It is convenient to consider acts of bullying at the level of individual or hierarchal discourse and adopt solutions which will only impact on the individuals involved, in a case management type approach, while avoiding scrutiny of organisational practices. This offers a possible explanation for the contemporary micro focus on bullying that narrates this as being about interpersonal relationships or particular individual identities—bullies and targets; coping mechanisms or personal

resilience. There may be an economically functional reason for maintaining this status quo approach to inquiry, policy making, and piecemeal legislation and redress. Salin therefore stressed the importance of considering wider societal factors, not necessarily in a cause and effect manner but in the same way that Mills would consider the complex interplay between structural factors such as economics, organisational change, ideologies or value systems, and the personal effects on individuals.

As Salin (2003) argued, those who bully or experience bullying might reflect wider societal inequalities such as those caused by sexism or racism, more closely than their positions in hierarchical organisational structures. In turn, organisational cultures of bullying might reflect wider societal power structures. Salin suggested that the degree of gender equality in a country is likely to affect the significance of gender in organisational bullying. We believe that consideration of wider structural inequalities can help frontline workers and managers "make sense" of new trends they witness or experience, such as horizontal or upward bullying.

The act of recording and sharing experiences can help them to begin to make links between their own experiences in an organisation and the wider social context within which organisational pressures, like budget cuts, gender and racial inequalities occur. This would enable managers to assess whether inequalities are being perpetuated in change processes. It would assist them to consider how necessary changes can be appropriately implemented and communicated. The need for this capacity is becoming ever more pressing. For example, the United Kingdom is experiencing severe budget cuts in public services with restructures

commonplace and efficiency changes required to be implemented by managers. The unions are accused of arguing publically against any changes, and this and multiple other discourses reinforce the simplistic dyad of "powerful manager/powerless worker" relationships.

Mills was a pragmatist who evaluated theory by its usefulness in helping people deal with the circumstances or organisational structures in which they found themselves (Watson, 2008). Below we consider several theories that offer insights into bullying from a more sociologically orientated position. All highlight the importance of critically considering power dynamics.

Liefooghe and Mackenzie Davey (2010) drew attention to the way in which the concept of bullying has become institutionalised. Standard definitions of bullying have constrained discourse about the topic. As Salin (2003, p. 50) argued, "What kinds of violations are problematised and what behaviours are recognised as bullying are thus dependant on social relations and power aspects of these relationships". We argue that these power dynamics are in turn embedded in wider societal relations and discourses of inequality, so that those who have the power to bully are often those who have the power to construct, define, and manage bullying and its distribution in organisations. Salin made the point that, "when members of organisations internalise such norms it can thus lead to unquestioned compliance with organisational practices, even though they might be discriminatory or disadvantage certain groups" (2003, p. 50).

Intra-organisational policies as well as laws further concretise the concept and draw parameters around the capacity to consider whether bullying has taken place. As we already noted, most frequently academic, organisational, and legal definitions frame bullying as a personal or interpersonal problem. Liefooghe and Mackenzie Davey's (2010) empirical investigation showed how some workers point to bullying as being organisational oppression. Examples narrated by workers included being forced to sign flexible contracts, and being threatened with being fired. By excluding such activities from definitions of bullying, the discourse around the problem is constrained away from dynamic sociological explanations. Liefooghe and Mackenzie Davey noted that actual workplace discourse around bullying is less fixed than may be presupposed. Rather than this less fixed discourse being perceived as a problem to be corrected, this reality can be used to unsettle the more restrictive formulations. While the officially proscribed type of text casts bullying as an individual problem, giving rise to the notion that there is an individual victim requiring rescue from experts, the other type of text resists this and gives rise to more industrial relations texts.

Hutchinson, Vickers, Jackson, and Wilkes (2010) agreed that what is required is a deeper analysis of power and organisational dynamics. Writing from within the context of nursing they noted that the power dynamics that are implicated in bullying are antithetical to the nursing profession's concerns with caring and justice. They noted increasing pressures within healthcare to be focussed on productivity, outputs, following orders, and instrumental reasoning. They suggested that rather than bullying being personally directed verbal attacks, bullying attacks tend to revolve around work tasks (for example making it difficult for people to carry these out), suggesting power rather than personal conflict issues are in play. They drew up a model that frames organisational characteristics as mediators in the dynamics of bullying. They drew on Clegg's (1989) "circuits of power" framework. Applying Clegg's

circuits of power framework revealed apparently normal everyday interactions to be focussed on disciplining of out of step non-normative interactions, and showed how interference with the power of cliques led to efforts to overcome resistance, for example by isolating those being disobedient. Their focus was on how organisational obedience is achieved.

Beale and Hoel (2010) and Beale (2011) drew attention to power dynamics beyond the workplace. They considered both social agents and macro level social structures in their analyses. They compared the situations of Sweden and of Britain, reflecting on the impact of the different contexts of work in those countries, and the changes that have occurred in industrial relations over time. In the Swedish context, there has been a stronger emphasis on worker collectivism and there appears to be less bullying by managers. Bullying has mostly taken the form of mobbing by a group of workers of an isolated colleague. Such horizontal bullying is seen to happen especially when an otherwise homogeneous group is attempting to adjust to change. Hoele and Beale explained that when worker to worker bullying occurs, unions in Sweden have less investment in dealing with it. By contrast, when workers are not protected against downward bullying, they rapidly lose faith in their organisations and there are strong constraints against it.

In Britain, there has been a more fundamental imbalance in the power relationship of workers and employers. From the 1980s, since Thatcherism, changes in industrial relations have increased managerial control seeking, including via downward bullying. Particularly in the public sector, management has taken increasingly authoritarian measures against a professional workforce that values autonomy. In many cases, downward bullying managers

are in turn bullied from above. In addition to considering how relationships between workers and employers are constructed, Beale and Hoel (2010) suggested it is therefore also necessary to consider how relationships between employers and managers are constructed. Dealing with the issue of bullying is difficult since workers mistrust their managers to do so, and managers and their employers are concerned about the cost of litigation. From the workers' perspectives, trade union and collectivist approaches may be required to deal with workplace bullying. We note that managers have little recourse to such assistance and are frequently constrained from complaining by, for example, individual employment contracts that require them to keep secrets. Beale (2011) referred to John Kelly's (1998) "mobilisation theory" for understanding the importance of the attributions that workers make, and how they then make decisions to act individually or collectively around workplace oppression. He noted the importance of considering power from the perspective of distributive power, how one party or group obtains power at the expense of another.

People are not only shaped by work and their changing conditions of employment over time, but also help shape their surroundings. Managers, including middle managers and supervisors, do "identity work" whereby they actively position themselves in organisational discourses, sometimes in opposition to organisational mandates. In doing so they not only draw on, and struggle with, conceptualisations of ideal and organisational identities, but how they think others perceive them (Sveningsson & Alvesson, 2003; Watson, 2008). While neoliberal power dynamics privilege economics over traditional human service and public sector values, workers at all levels in the hierarchy can, using a sociological imagination and qualitative research techniques, reflexively consider the constraints within which they labour, their responses to those, and the resources and actions available to them. Much work is yet to

be done to better understand how we might turn workplace oppression into open communication. However, the way forward is unlikely to lie in continuing to attribute dynamics of power to the personalities of social actors. Employing a sociological imagination is more likely to offer constructive opportunities for healthy contextually appropriate workplace interactions.

For the manager accused this is, however, easier said than done. The experience of being accused is often emotionally fraught and gets swiftly located within processes of investigation that are ruled by policies and procedures that support an individualised rights discourse. We are not suggesting that holding Mills' concept of sociological imagination in mind will alleviate how it feels to be accused of bullying, but we do think this can help those involved to cope and understand things better. Ideally, records of these experiences would be collected, analysed, and used to contribute to wider policy change. The goal is to trace the connections from the personal to the wider organisational context, through qualitative analysis, and help guide resiliency based thinking. This could be particularly helpful in informing the work of human resources staff and the most senior of managers who often lead investigations and any organisational responses to the outcomes. The sociological imagination toolkit offers a method for widening the analysis of what is before us, to locate what can feel distressing and perhaps be unclear, and trace these experiences to our place in an organisation and wider social context. This may be particularly useful for human resources colleagues who often advise on investigations into allegations or complaints of bullying, but whose education might have led them to be more heavily influenced and shaped by an individualistic rights discourse. We argue that a more sociological perspective provides a useful way of thinking about workplace dynamics for those accused, those who

make claims of bullying, and the managers and colleagues working alongside. The opening up of this all too often private experience to more holistic exploration offers something back to the organisation and to those who inhabit it.

The sociological imagination toolkit for managers explores three lines of questioning:

1. What is happening around me that might help explain why the experience, observation, or accusation of bullying has occurred here and now?
2. Has this happened before? If so what happened? When, and who were involved?
3. What is my role here? What is my story, and what are others' stories about the accusation of bullying?

The first step in the toolkit is to consider our relationship with our organisations and wider society as being both biographic and contextual: We stand and work within the context in which we are embedded. The next step is to stand outside of our direct experience by drawing on historic analyses of both where we work and how we work. The third step alerts us to reflexive identity discourses and how these construct views of "reality". We take these steps in order that we can consider how managers can be positioned as leaders, being "in charge", and thus perceived as holding power and being powerful, while at the same time vulnerable to arguments and resistance to organisational change or, in our cases, severe fiscal cut backs. What connect these three lines of inquiry into a tool for change, are explorations of contexts and discourses akin to those used in qualitative research and analysis. For busy managers, pursuing these may seem too onerous or time consuming. However, as we argued above, the causes of bullying lie in wider social systems rather than in personality clashes between

people. Deeper inquiries are needed to enable more effective solutions to be found. We believe effective solutions are likely to be located along communitarian lines.

Conclusion

Organisational change in public institutions is on-going. The work settings for all three authors are telling in this regard: Universities in Australia and New Zealand and social service departments in the UK are all under huge financial pressures resulting in staff cuts and budget cut backs. We credit Mills with inspiring our efforts to hold in mind our and others' relationships to change. His concept of sociological imagination has assisted us in the conversations and planning we have been in involved with as social work educators (Stanley & Kelly, 2010) and now as we each inhabit senior positions in our organisations. We are located in different contemporary public institutions, in three neo-liberally influenced countries, where organisational change and financial pressure show no sign of abatement. Structural reform informed by organisational experience, collective memory, and alternative discourses are something we believe can greatly assist the experience of change in organisations. Through the sociological imagination and the collection of qualitative findings, what can be difficult experiences at work can be usefully worked with to show the organisation and its staff new ways of making sense of bullying experiences, observations, or accusations made.

We hold that there is a need to move to a use of more qualitative sociological analysis, which considers the meanings managers bring to the experiences of their roles, particularly in exploration of the trend in upward and horizontal bullying. The collection and sharing of

qualitative narratives can inform a deeper understanding of the connection between the personal experiences, wider social forces and trends. Such a deeper understanding can assist managers and staff to "make sense" of what is happening around them while also providing a tool to challenge less critical micro perspectives, for effective change. The sociological imagination used as part of a management toolkit invites a different way of thinking about and responding to issues such as bullying. The gift of sociology is the way it helps us connect the individual circumstances of one person into a wider social context: that is our shared society. The capacity to make such connections is, we think, a crucial skill for managers. Mills argued that our "private troubles" are always in a traceable relationship with wider "public issues" (1959).

Staff are our most important resource and resiliency amongst our managers and workers can be enhanced though the "sociological imagination" toolkit. Paying attention to how and when concerns over bullying and other types of organisational conflict arise, and thinking sociologically about the power relations at play—from the personal to the public—is a critical step in the intellectual crafting of management practice.

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