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The nature and causes of bullying at work

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Abstract *The present paper reviews and summarises the research and literature on the nature and causes of bullying at work. Bullying occurs when someone at work is systematically subjected to aggressive behaviour from one or more colleagues or superiors over a long period of time, in a situation where the target finds it difficult to defend him or herself or to escape the situation. Such treatment tends to stigmatise the target and may even cause severe psychological trauma. Empirical studies on the causes of bullying have concentrated on the personality of the victim and psychosocial factors at work. Most studies treat bullying as a unified phenomenon, in spite of the fact that different kinds of behaviours are involved. The concepts of dispute-related and predatory bullying are introduced in an effort to broaden the perspectives used in future investigations on both the nature and the causes of bullying at work.*

Introduction

During the last 20 years, sexual harassment has gained substantial interest both by the public and by researchers, and has thus been recognised as an important social problem (Terpstra and Baker, 1991). However, in a pioneer work on harassment at work, Brodsky (1976) saw sexual harassment as only one out of five types of work harassment. Name calling, scapegoating, physical abuse and work pressures were claimed to be as frequent and as severe as the former. Brodsky defined harassment as all those acts that repeatedly and persistently aim to torment, wear down, or frustrate a person, as well as all repeated behaviours that ultimately would provoke, frighten, intimidate or bring discomfort to the recipient. Recent studies suggest that such kinds of bullying and non-sexual harassment at work may be as frequent as both sexual harassment at work and bullying in schools, and may even have consequences as severe (Einarsen *et al.*, 1996; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Keashly, 1998; Leymann, 1990; 1996; Rayner and Hoel, 1997).

In a survey among English part-time students, some 50 per cent had experienced bullying at work (Rayner, 1997). Einarsen and Skogstad (1996) reported data on the frequency of bullying at work from 14 different Norwegian "quality of working life" surveys (n = 7,986) including a wide range of organisations and professions such as school teachers, university employees, hotel and restaurant workers, clerks, electricians, psychologists, health care workers and industrial workers. On average, 8.6 per cent of the respondents experienced ongoing bullying and non-sexual harassment at work during the last six months. Leymann (1992) who defined bullying as the exposure to one out of 45 negative acts on a weekly basis for more than six months, found that 3.5 per cent of the Swedish working population could be classified as victims of bullying at work.

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Bullying, or generic harassment at work is claimed to be a more crippling and devastating problem for employees than all other work-related stress put together and may be seen as a rather severe form of social stress at work (Wilson, 1991; Zapf *et al.*, 1996; Niedl, 1995). Many victims seem to suffer from symptoms under the domain of post-traumatic stress syndrome (Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996; Wilson, 1991). In an interview study among 17 victims of harassment employed at a Finnish university, Björkqvist *et al.* (1994a) found that all subjects reported insomnia, various nervous symptoms, melancholy, apathy, lack of concentration and socio-phobia.

Although different concepts have been used to describe this phenomenon such as "mobbing" (Leymann, 1996; Zapf *et al.*, 1996), "emotional abuse" (Keashly, 1998), "harassment" (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1994a; Brodsky, 1976), "bullying" (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996; Rayner, 1997; Vartia, 1996), "mistreatment" (Spratlen, 1995) and "victimisation" (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997a; 1997b), they all seem to refer to the same phenomenon. That phenomenon is the systematic persecution of a colleague, a subordinate or a superior, which, if continued, may cause severe social, psychological and psychosomatic problems for the victim.

The aim of the present paper is to review and summarise the research and literature on the nature and causes of this phenomenon, using the concept of bullying at work. So far as the causes of bullying are concerned, empirical studies have concentrated primarily on two issues: the personality of the victim and psychosocial factors at work. Furthermore, bullying has mainly been presented as one unified phenomenon, in spite of the fact that different kinds of behaviours are involved (Zapf, in press). By introducing the concepts of dispute-related and predatory bullying and by marking the difference between bullying as exhibited by the bully and bullying as perceived by the victim, this paper aims to broaden the perspectives which must be taken when investigating the nature and the causes of bullying at work.

The nature of bullying at work

In lay language the concept of bullying may be used in many situations describing a variety of behaviours (Crawford, 1998). It may even be used in a joking manner describing good-natured horseplay or refer to minor events of aggressive behaviour that tend to be easily accepted and tolerated (Munthe, 1989). However, in the scientific studies reviewed in this paper, the concept refers to a rather specific phenomenon where hostile and aggressive behaviours, be it physical or non-physical, are directed systematically at one or more colleagues or subordinates leading to a stigmatisation and victimisation of the recipient (Leymann, 1996; Björkqvist *et al.*, 1994a). Following Hadjifotiou (1983), bullying has been defined as all those repeated actions and practices that are directed to one or more workers, which are unwanted by the victim, which may be done deliberately or unconsciously, but clearly cause humiliation, offence and distress, and that may interfere with job performance and/or cause an unpleasant working environment (Einarsen and Raknes,

1997a; 1997b). This definition emphasises the two main features of most definitions of bullying at work: repeated and enduring aggressive behaviours that are intended to be hostile and/or perceived as hostile by the recipient (Einarsen, 1996).

The behaviours involved seem mostly to be of a verbal nature and seldom include physical violence (Keashly, 1998). In a study among male Norwegian shipyard workers, where 88 per cent had experienced some form of harassment during the last six months, only 2.4 per cent reported having been subjected to physical abuse or threats of such abuse (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997a). Among 137 Norwegian victims of bullying and harassment at work, social isolation and exclusion, devaluation of one's work and efforts, and exposure to teasing, insulting remarks and ridicule, were the most commonly negative acts. Such acts were reported by some 138 victims working, a wide range of professions and organisational settings (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994). Looking at both empirical and theoretical evidence, Zapf (in press) categorises five types of bullying behaviour. They are:

(1) work-related bullying which may include changing your work tasks or making them difficult to perform;

(2) social isolation;

(3) personal attacks or attacks on your private life by ridicule, insulting remarks, gossip or the like;

(4) verbal threats where you are criticised, yelled at or humiliated in public; and

(5) physical violence or threats of such violence.

Leymann (1990) has pinpointed that the behaviours involved in bullying may in fact be fairly common in everyday life. Yet, they may cause much harm and humiliation when occurring on a regular basis. Hence, it may not be the nature of the conduct in itself that makes the victim suffer. The frequency of the acts, situational factors relating to power differences or inescapable interactions, or the victim's attributions about the offender's intentions may cause as much anxiety, misery and suffering as does the actual conduct involved (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994). Niedl (1995) claims that a target will perceive repeated aggressive or unwanted behaviour as bullying if the behaviour is perceived as being hostile, directed towards oneself and conducted in an inescapable situation where the target is unable to defend himself. Personal factors, as well as the social circumstances of the victim or even economical and physical circumstances, may make the individual more or less able to cope and defend (Einarsen, 1998a; Niedl, 1995; Zapf, in press). The power difference between actor and target, be it real or perceived, making the victim especially vulnerable, is a feature of the phenomenon that is pinpointed by some researchers.

Since managers and supervisors are seen as the bullies in many cases, the power difference is inherent in the relationship between the parties. In surveys among some 8,000 Norwegian employees, some 54 per cent of the victims

reported being bullied by a superior (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996). Yet, in German, Austrian and English studies, between 70 and 80 per cent are bullied by a superior (Zapf, in press). Victims bullied by their superiors also seem to suffer more in psychological terms than victims of co-worker bullying (Einarsen and Raknes, 1997a; 1997b). It is an interesting question whether peer-bullying and leadership-bullying in essence is one phenomenon, or whether they are distinct enough to be addressed with different concepts.

Empirical studies indicate that bullying is not an either-or phenomenon, but rather a gradually evolving process. During the early phases of the bullying, victims are typically subjected to aggressive behaviour that is difficult to pinpoint by being very indirect and discreet (Björqkvist, 1992). Later on more direct aggressive acts appear. The victims are clearly isolated and avoided, humiliated in public by being made a laughing-stock of the department, and so on. In the end both physical and psychological means of violence may be used. Victims with a long history of victimisation have also been found to be attacked more frequently than those with a shorter history as victims (Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996). Among a group of 268 Norwegian victims of bullying, the majority of those with a case history of more than two years reported being victimised on a weekly or daily basis. Only a small group of victims with a case history of less than 12 months reported being bullied this often.

Bullying seems to contain at least four phases: aggressive behaviour, bullying, stigmatisation and severe trauma (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994). First there is a situation where rather subtle aggressive outlets start to be directed against one or more persons in the work group. Yet, Leymann (1990; 1996) claims that the concept of bullying, or mobbing, which is his preferred term, should be used only on the following phase, where these aggressive outlets become more open, direct and frequent. In this second phase it becomes evident that the victim has problems in defending him/herself either as a consequence of already existing psychological or social factors, or as a consequence of the bullying itself, which after a while seems to place a social stigma on the victim. Bullying often preys directly on the inadequacies of the victim's personality (Brodsky, 1976). This situation then seems to affect the mental and physical health of the victim quite dramatically (Brodsky, 1976; Einarsen and Skogstad, 1996: Leymann and Gustafsson, 1996). Furthermore, the prejudices against the victim produced by the bullying seem to cause the organisation to treat the victim as the problem (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994; Leymann, 1990; 1996). When stepping into the case, upper management, union representatives, or personnel administration tend to accept the prejudices produced by the offenders, thus blaming the victim for its misfortune. Third parties or managers may see the situation as no more than fair treatment of a difficult and neurotic person (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994; Leymann, 1990).

The phases of bullying proposed above, have a strong resemblance to the model proposed by Allport (1954) on how prejudices are acted out. In his first phase, called "anti-location", prejudicial talk starts, but is restricted to small circles of the "in-group" and "behind the back of the victim". This is followed by

a second phase in which one moves beyond talking and starts to avoid the victim. In the third phase the victim is openly harassed and discriminated against by being alienated and excluded, or subjected to offensive remarks and jokes. In the fourth phase physical attacks occur, which may lead to the final stage called "extermination". Although victims of bullying are not literally killed, some do commit suicide (Leymann, 1990), others are expelled from working-life (Leymann, 1996) or at least driven out of their organisation (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a; 1994b).

The investigated causes of bullying

Empirical investigations into the causes of bullying at work have mainly addressed two issues: the role of the personality of the victims and the role of psychosocial factors. In addition, the perceived reasons for bullying have been addressed in some studies. A phenomenological approach is highly valuable to the understanding of all kinds of aggressive behaviour (Felson and Tedeschi, 1993). Since most people view their own behaviours and perceptions as legitimate and even moralistic, knowledge about the parties' assignment of blame and their accounts of both behaviours and perceptions are therefore of central importance. In an interview study among 30 Irish victims of bullying, all victims blamed the difficult personality of the bully (Seigne, 1998). Some half of them felt that this was combined with a change in the job situation for the alleged bully into a position of power. Some two out of three victims also felt that the bully was envious of them, in particular of their qualifications.

Perceived reasons for bullying were also addressed in a survey among employees at a Finnish University (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1994a). The three main reasons were competition concerning status and job positions, envy, and the aggressor being uncertain about his/her self. A high proportion also felt that the personality of the victim contributed to the bullying. The victims themselves were uncertain whether or not this was the case. Another Finnish study among 95 victims who were members of the Union of Municipal Officials (Vartia, 1996), showed similar results. In this study 68 per cent saw envy as an important reason for why they were being bullied, followed by a weak superior (42 per cent) and competition for tasks or advancement (38 per cent) or the superior's approval (34 per cent). Envy was also the most common factor mentioned by 278 victims in a Norwegian survey (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a) followed by a general negative evaluation of the leadership style of one's immediate superior. However, these victims also felt that their own lack of copying resources and self-efficacy, such as low self-esteem, shyness, and lack of conflict management skills, contributed to the problem. Only a few of the victims blamed factors external to the offender and the victim itself, such as a stressful work situation and the social climate at work.

Envy may of course be an important reason why some are subjected to degrading behaviours or punished by other kinds of aggressiveness. On the other hand, envy as a perceived reason for being bullied may be no more than a self-preserving attribution (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a) or it is possible that some

victims are punished by others due to an unrealistically high self-esteem. Victims of bullying at work have been described as overachievers with an unrealistic view both of their own abilities and resources and the demands of their work tasks (Brodsky, 1976) and as highly rigid (Zapf, in press). By viewing themselves as more accurate, honest and punctual than their colleagues (Zapf, in press) they may be experienced by others as patronising. Employees who are perceived as annoying may provoke aggressive behaviours in others (Felson, 1992). In research among children, a small group of victims were characterised as "provocative" victims (Olweus, 1993). These victims were both anxious and aggressive, and were experienced by most other pupils as annoying.

As seen above, victims of bullying have been found to differ from their non-bullied colleagues in terms of personality. Gandolfo (1995) compared the MMPI-2 profiles of a group of US victims of work harassment claiming worker's compensations with a group of non-harassment complainers. The victims of harassment were more oversensitive, suspicious and angry than other claimants. Further, both groups showed a mixture of depression and a tendency to convert psychological distress into physical symptoms. Victims of bullying at work have also been shown to have low self-esteem and to be anxious in social settings (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994). Others have described them as conscientious, literal-minded, somewhat naïve (Brodsky, 1976) and with a tendency to neuroticism (Vartia, 1996). While Zapf (in press) and Einarsen *et al.* (1994a) argue that the personality of the victim may provoke aggression in others, Leymann (1990; 1996) claims personality to be irrelevant as a cause of bullying. Leymann and Gustafsson (1996) argue that the observations on personality must be seen as a consequence of the bullying. What is diagnosed is claimed to be the destruction of the personality. Since no longitudinal study has yet been presented, this explanation cannot be ruled out.

Based on interviews with victims, Leymann (1993) claims that four factors are prominent in eliciting harassment at work:

(1) deficiencies in work design;

(2) deficiencies in leadership behaviour;

(3) a socially exposed position of the victim; and

(4) a low moral standard in the department.

The influence of psychosocial factors on the occurrence of bullying has gained support from a couple of studies. Some 30 Irish victims of bullying described their workplace to be a highly stressful and competitive environment, plagued with interpersonal conflicts and a lack of a friendly and supportive atmosphere, undergoing organisational changes and managed through an authoritarian leadership style (Seigne, 1998). In a Norwegian survey among 2,200 members of six different labour unions, both victims and observers of bullying at work reported being more dissatisfied than others with their work environment. Respondents noted a lack of constructive leadership, lack of possibilities to monitor and control their own work tasks and especially a high level of

role-conflict (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a). Incompatible demands and expectations around roles, tasks and responsibilities may create frustration and stress within a work group, especially in connection to rights, obligations, privileges and positions. This situation may then act as a precursor of conflict, poor inter-worker relationships and a need for a suitable scapegoat. In a Finnish survey, victims and observers of bullying described their work unit with the following features: a poor information flow, an authoritative way of settling differences of opinion, lack of discussions about goals and tasks, and insufficient possibilities to influence matters concerning oneself (Vartia, 1996). A few studies have also showed a link between organisational changes and bullying at work (e.g. McCarthy, 1996; Sheehan, 1998).

Although most studies theoretically seem to regard bullying as an objective and observable phenomena which is not only in the "eye of the beholder", the empirical data have so far been gathered by the use of self-reports from victims, with only a few exceptions (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994b; Vartia, 1996). While Wilson (1991) included both real and perceived malicious treatment in his concept of work abuse, Brodsky (1976) made a distinction between subjective and objective harassment. "Subjective harassment" refers to the awareness of harassment by the victim and "objective harassment" to a situation where actual external evidence of harassment is found. As evidence of objective harassment, statements from co-workers, employers or independent observers may be used. Although these two phenomena may be highly overlapping in real life, future studies do need to clarify their object of research.

The story told by the victim should of course be considered as a description of a very real pain suffered by the victim and an expression of how the victim perceives his or her interaction with significant others in the workplace. However, victims may not be the best source to give an accurate estimation of behaviours and characteristics of the offenders. Perhaps a fruitful distinction in future research would be between bullying behaviour exhibited by the alleged offender and bullying as perceived by the victim (Einarsen, 1996; 1998b; Lengnick-Hall, 1995). Quite different causal factors may be involved in these two phenomena. For instance, those personality factors of the victim that may provoke aggressive behaviours in others, may be quite different from those traits that may make them vulnerable when facing aggressive behaviour.

The aetiology of bullying at work

Although different types of behaviour are involved, bullying is still treated by most authors as one phenomenon (Zapf, in press). When looking at the causes of bullying, I think we have to be aware of the fact that we are really talking about a host of different situations and contexts where repeated aggressive behaviour may start to occur (Einarsen, 1996; 1997). First of all, bullying, as any kind of aggressive behaviour, may be both dispute-related or predatory in kind (see Felson and Tedeschi, 1993), although mixed cases may exist.

Predatory bullying refers to cases where the victim personally has done nothing provocative that may reasonably justify the behaviour of the bully. In

such cases the victim is accidentally in a situation where a predator either is demonstrating power or in other ways is trying to exploit an accidental victim into compliance. For instance, in some organisations harassment is institutionalised as a part of the leadership and managerial practice (Ashforth, 1994; Brodsky, 1976). It may also be the case that the victim is attacked because he or she belongs to a certain out-group, for instance by being the first woman in a local police force. In such cases the victim is attacked as a representative of an out-group which the employees of the said organisation justify as legitimate to subject to aggressive behaviour. The victim may even be bullied by being an easy target of frustration and stress caused by other factors. In situations where stress and frustration are caused by a source who is either indefinable, inaccessible, or too powerful or respected to be attacked, the group may turn its hostility towards a person who is less powerful than themselves, using this person as a scapegoat (Thylefors, 1987; Björkqvist, 1992; Brodsky, 1976). Examples of predatory bullying are therefore destructive (highly aggressive and authoritarian) leadership, scapegoating processes and acting out prejudice (Einarsen, 1998b).

Predatory bullying is probably caused by a combination of a social climate where hostility and aggressiveness prevail and an organisational culture tolerant to bullying and harassment (see Fitzgerald *et al.* (1995)) in the case of sexual harassment). Brodsky (1976), who studied some 1,000 cases of work harassment in the USA, concluded that for harassment to occur the harassment elements must exist within a culture that permits or even rewards such kinds of behaviour. Bullying will only take place if the offender feels he has the blessing, support, or at least the implicit permission by his superiors to behave in this manner. If not being permitted or supported by the people in power, a bully knows he/she may find him/herself the victim of aggressive counter-attacks and severe punishment. The organisational tolerance of bullying is communicated by those sanctions, or rather lack of sanctions, enacted towards people violating informal norms and values, and the existence and enactment of organisational policies against bullying. A potential aggressor must always calculate the possible effects and benefits to be gained by aggressive behaviour against the possible dangers involved (retaliation, social condemnation, and so on) (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1994a; 1994b).

According to Felson and Tedeschi (1993), dispute-related aggression develops out of grievances and involves social control reactions to perceived wrong-doing. Although Felson and Tedeschi claim that bullying is an example of predatory aggression, Leymann (1996) and Einarsen *et al.* (1994a) claim that a bullying case typically is triggered by a work-related conflict. In some instances, the social climate at work turns more than sour and creates conflicts that may escalate into harsh personified conflicts (van de Vliert, 1984) and even office wars (Kaye, 1994). The total destruction of the opponent is seen as the ultimate goal to be gained by the parties (Glasl, 1994). In such highly escalated conflicts both parties may deny the opponent's human value, thus clearing the way for manipulation, retaliation, elimination and destruction (van

de Vliert, 1984). If one of the parties acquires a disadvantaged position in this struggle, he or she may become a victim of bullying (Björkqvist *et al.*, 1994a; 1994b).

Interpersonal conflicts where the identity of the parties is at stake – for instance, when one of the parties attacks or denies the other's self-image – are often characterised by intense emotional involvement (van de Vliert, 1984). The latter includes feelings of being insulted, of fear, suspicion, resentment, contempt, anger and so forth. In such cases people may subject each other to highly aggressive and abusive behaviour. Some may even resent the behaviour of their opponent to a degree where they themselves feel harassed and victimised (Einarsen, 1998b). It may also be true that claiming to be a victim of bullying may be a very effective strategy in these interpersonal conflicts, in some cases even used by both parties (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a). In highly intense interpersonal conflicts, aggressive outlets may spring forth from both parties.

Hence, dispute-related bullying occurs as a result of an highly escalated interpersonal conflict and may be of three kinds:

(1) aggressive behaviours used as a struggle tactic in an interpersonal conflict,

(2) malingering as a tactic; and

(3) resentment to perceived wrong-doing or unfair treatment by one's opponent (Einarsen, 1998b).

The latter may occur when whatever the alleged offender does is perceived as deeply offensive by the recipient. In highly escalated interpersonal conflicts, where the distrust and lack of respect between the parties is high, a recipient may perceive all kinds of behaviour from the alleged bully as a sign of hostility (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994a).

Conclusion

There is still a considerable need for empirical studies on the nature and causes of bullying at work. Research on the causes of bullying must, however, continue in two directions: investigations of factors influencing the target's perceptions and feelings of being victimised; and investigations on the causes of bullying behaviour. As far as the nature of bullying is concerned, there is an especial need for studies that explicitly address how bullying is perceived and construed by recipients, offenders and observers. No study was found to have investigated factors determining feelings of victimisation from bullying or how a given bullying situation is perceived, with the possible exception of Liefooghe and Olafsson (1998). In a theoretical work, Keashly (1998) has identified seven dimensions or qualities that may influence how bullying is perceived. The dimensions are:

(1) verbal vs non-verbal/physical conduct;

(2) repeated vs single acts;

(3) degree of unwanted or unsolicited behaviour;

(4) the perception of violation of a person's rights;

(5) the degree of harm to the target;

(6) intent or controllability of the actions; and

(7) power differences between offender and target.

A host of studies has emerged on this topic in the area of sexual harassment at work, using experimental designs based on hypothetical scenarios (see for instance Tata, 1993).

In addition, there is a need to clarify the level of analysis used in the different studies. Personality, attributions, work environment quality, scapegoats, organisational culture, and organisational changes, may not be competing models, but rather explanations on different levels of analysis. They may also be models addressing different kinds of bullying, such as dispute related bullying or predatory bullying. Future studies on the nature and causes of bullying must take into account the very different aetiology that may exist in behaviours and situations that on a descriptive level seem to be identical.

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