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What we *need* to know about workplace bullying

According to a 2019 external review, bullying and harassment are “systemic” in the New Zealand parliamentary workplace (Francis, 2019). Its culture is “toxic,” involving “harmful behaviour by and between staff, managers, members, media and the public,” and “unacceptable behaviour is too often tolerated or normalised.” Destructive gossip, undermining, lack of cooperation and support, aggressive behaviour and demeaning language are common. Although there is “a majority of absolutely lovely MPs and Ministers,” others engage in “frequent shouting, abuse calls or texts, character assassination ... or ‘just continually being aggressive and shouting ...’.” One staff member said “I was warned ... But I just couldn’t cope with it. It shocked me. It’s taken me years to recover.” The review concludes with a list of 85 recommendations to improve matters, including the development of training programmes on combating bullying, a zero-tolerance approach to bullying and harassment, leadership development programmes, and providing access to the services of accredited social workers or psychologists.

Is the New Zealand parliamentary workplace a rare bad apple among an unspoiled bunch? I doubt it. The prevalence of bullying, mobbing, harassment, emotional abuse, and mistreatment (to name just a few very similar terms, Einarsen, 1999) is high. In an 86-sample review study, Nielsen et al. (2010) found that on average 14.6% – 1 out of 7 – of the participants in these samples was bullied. This implies that most of us have experience with this type of behaviour; as a (colleague of a) victim, a witness, but perhaps also as a perpetrator.

In his seminal paper on workplace bullying, Heinz Leymann (1990) defined mobbing as “hostile and unethical communication which is directed in a systematic way by one or a number of persons mainly toward one individual ... These actions take place often ... and over a long period ... and ... result in considerable psychic, psychosomatic and social misery” (p. 120). Other definitions (notably that of Einarsen & Skogstad, 1996) emphasise that bullying is subjectively experienced by a victim, that bullying not only concerns communication issues but negative acts in general (e.g. physical violence or changing work tasks), and that victims should have difficulties in defending themselves against these acts (Nielsen et al., 2010). Several reviews on the antecedents and outcomes of bullying have been conducted, identifying among others perpetrator characteristics, victim characteristics, work design problems, deficiencies in leadership behaviour, and organisational characteristics (such as a low moral standard, bad leadership, or a toxic culture) as possible antecedents (Cao et al., *in press*; Einarsen, 1999; Einarsen et al., 2002; Van den Brande et al., 2016). Outcomes of bullying include physical health problems, depression, posttraumatic stress, burnout, and strain in general (Boudrias et al., 2021; Nielsen & Einarsen, 2012). Overall, it is fair to say that the antecedents and outcomes of bullying in the workplace have been addressed in a large body of research.

Yet, when by chance *Work & Stress* recently received five papers on bullying, we decided to use these as the basis for the present special edition. Apart from their subject, these papers have in common that they go beyond current insights on the predictors and consequences

of workplace aggression. In doing so they address three issues that have so far received relatively little attention in bullying research, yet are of major importance if we are to understand and deal with this phenomenon more fully and/or effectively.

Intra-individual processes: What happens when workers are bullied? It seems obvious that being exposed to aggressive interpersonal behaviour from clients, colleagues or supervisors is a thoroughly unpleasant experience. Consistent with this reasoning, previous research has shown that bullying is associated with adverse outcomes (e.g. Boudrias et al., 2021). However, the psychological processes underlying this association have received little attention. Do bullied workers get angry, depressed, or sad? It is likely that these short-term reactions may trigger different behaviours in the victim; angry victims may well react more aggressively (e.g. by attempting to retaliate) than depressed or sad victims. Therefore, it is imperative to obtain a more fine-grained overview of the psychological processes linking experienced workplace aggression to individual-level effect, motivation, behaviour and cognition.

In the first contribution to this issue, Adiyaman and Meier (2022) present a daily diary study in which they show that experiencing incivility tends to lead to higher levels of anger and depression, and negatively affects one's self-esteem. Further, these effects were more pronounced if the victim felt that they were the only person in the workplace who was exposed to such incivility; if others were exposed to similar behaviours, the impact of bullying was weaker – perhaps because victims attributed the cause for being treated aggressively to an external cause rather than to question their social standing.

In another diary study, Niven et al. (2022) report that incivility impacts workers' exhaustion and turnover intention, and that these associations are mediated by increased feelings of sadness and anger (but not fear). Interestingly, they compared face-to-face incivility to online incivility. They found that the effects of incivility were considerably more pronounced for face-to-face interactions, possibly because cyber incivility is emotionally less intense than face-to-face interaction due to the deprivation of strong emotional cues. In conjunction, these two studies show that it is worthwhile to study the intra-individual processes that relate workplace aggression to their outcomes, and that it may be important to take boundary conditions into account when examining its consequences.

How do workers react to being bullied, and how effective are these strategies? As previous research has shown, many workers are exposed to aggressive behaviours of others. However, not all victims react similarly when being confronted with such behaviours. Lyubykh et al. (2022) focused on the retaliatory behaviour of victims of abusive supervision. They show that employees indeed retaliate against abusive supervision by engaging in supervisor-directed aggression (e.g. by being rude to or yelling at their boss) as well as threats and physical violence. These effects were even stronger when organisational norms signal that such retaliatory behaviours are appropriate.

The idea that victims of bullying may retaliate was also studied by Vranjes et al. (2022). In two studies they showed that employees who are exposed to bullying behaviour are likely to reciprocate by engaging in such behaviours themselves. Moreover, those who engage in this type of aggressive behaviour tend to become exposed to such behaviours themselves. Especially active and problem-focused copers tend to react aggressively to uncivil behaviours of others, possibly resulting in a "bullying spiral" in which victims become perpetrators and vice versa.

Which situational boundaries prevent or facilitate bullying in the workplace? The studies by Adiyaman and Meier (2022), Lyubykh et al. (2022) and Vranjes et al. (2022) already suggested that organisational factors may promote or inhibit aggressive behaviour of workers. This idea was studied more explicitly by Plimmer et al. (2022), focusing on the idea that constructive

(laissez-faire) leadership is negatively (positively) related to the occurrence of bullying, and that organisational factors (especially the presence of a high-psychological safety climate) affect both leadership styles and workplace aggression. In a large-scale multilevel study, Plimmer et al. largely confirmed their expectations, showing that the presence of a high-psychological safety climate was associated with lower levels of bullying, lower levels of laissez-faire leadership, and higher levels of constructive leadership. Thus apparently the psychological safety climate in an organisation both directly and indirectly (through leadership) affects the degree to which workers are being exposed to bullying, underlining the importance of organisational factors in dealing with workplace aggression.

We believe that the five papers in the present special edition contribute significantly to our understanding of workplace aggression, going beyond the basic “what predicts the occurrence of workplace aggression, and what are its outcomes?” paradigm. Workplace aggression emerges as a multifaceted phenomenon in which external circumstances, such as the presence or absence of organisational norms regarding engaging in aggressive behaviour, dictate how victims feel after being exposed to aggression and whether they will attempt to retaliate and become perpetrators themselves. Although these studies suggest that there is certainly the potential for aggression to spread in an organisation and to become contagious, the reverse also applies; when occurring in organisations that effectively deal with workplace aggression, workplace bullying can be addressed and their adverse implications can be minimised. We hope that the present set of papers will spark further research on the important questions they address.

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