

## *Some Things You Need to Know but may have been Afraid to Ask:* A Researcher Speaks to Ombudsmen about Workplace Bullying

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### **ABSTRACT**

Workplace bullying is repeated and prolonged hostile mistreatment of one or more people at work. It has tremendous potential to escalate, drawing in others beyond the initial actor-target relationship. Its effects can be devastating and widespread individually, organizationally and beyond. It is fundamentally a systemic phenomenon grounded in the organization's culture. In this article, I identify from my perspective as a researcher and professional in this area current thinking and research findings that may be useful for ombudsmen in their deliberations and investigations as well as in their intervention and management of these hostile behaviors and relationships.

### **KEYWORDS**

Ombudsmen, workplace bullying, workplace aggression

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In the early 1990's, I became interested in understanding persistent and enduring hostility at work. That interest was spurred by a colleague's experience at the hands of her director. He yelled and screamed at her (and others), accusing her of not completing assignments, which she actually had. He lied about her and other subordinates. He would deliberately avoid when staff needed his input and then berate them for not consulting with him. At other times, he was thoughtful, apologetic, and even constructive. My colleague felt like she was walking on eggshells, never sure how he would be. Her coworkers had similar experiences and the group developed ways of coping and handling it. For example, his secretary would warn staff when it was not a good idea to speak with him. And yet his behavior took its toll on all of them. She called asking for my advice as a dispute resolution person. I gave her some ideas, all things it turned out she had tried already. So like any good academic, I went to the literature to find out what was there. At that time, there was very little about what I had come to view as emotionally abusive behavior as described in the domestic violence literature. I undertook some research to see if emotional abuse was a workplace phenomenon (Keashly, Trott & MacLean, 1994; Keashly, Harvey & Hunter, 1997). Unfortunately, I discovered that it was. As I broadened my search in terms of disciplines and countries, I came across other constructs like bullying (Adams, 1992; Einarsen, 1999; Rayner & Hoel, 1997), mobbing (Leymann, 1996; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), harassment (Brodsky, 1976) and abusive treatment (Bassman, 1992) that in essence described the same phenomenon: systematic and prolonged mistreatment of others at work (Keashly, 1998).

Since that time, there has been a virtual explosion of research in these areas and the addition of related constructs and terms such as workplace harassment (Bowling & Beehr, 2006), abusive supervision, (Tepper, 2000), social undermining (Duffy et al, 2002), incivility (Andersson & Pearson, 1999; Gill & Sypher, 2009;), interpersonal mistreatment (Lim & Cortina, 2005; Price-Spratlen, 1995), ostracism (Ferris, Brown, Berry, & Lian, 2008), emotional tyranny (Waldron, 2009), workplace victimization (Aquino & Thau, 2009), and disruptive practitioner behavior (Joint Commission, 2008). As exciting as this is, I believe it has become confusing because it is hard to wrap one's arms around this area when the terms and their associated definitions multiply. Thus, it is hard to understand this phenomenon and therefore how to address it. Fortunately, several very good reviews of the literature that have come out that can be helpful in summarizing research on these constructs (e.g., Aquino & Thau, 2009; Einarsen, Hoel, & Zapf, 2010; Griffin & Lopez, 2005; Hershcovis & Barling, 2007; Kelloway, Barling, & Hurrell, 2006; Martinko, Douglas & Harvey, 2006; Tepper, 2007). The challenge is there are so many of those reviews that the construct proliferation and its accompanying confusion continues. For professionals who are faced with addressing these persistently hostile behaviors and relationships, it is often difficult to know where to begin and what to include. Also, the professionals' timeframe is often such that there is little time to distill the essence of what is known and not known from the empirical research literature. In this article, I will identify from my perspective as a researcher and professional in this area, the current thinking and findings that may be useful for ombudsmen in their deliberations and investigations as well as their management of these hostile behaviors and relationships with appropriate and timely interventions. To accomplish this, using the term workplace bullying, I will discuss what is known about the nature, prevalence and effects of these hostile relationships as well as current thinking on antecedents and processes of development. Throughout this discussion, I will note the implications of different findings for the work of ombudsmen as they investigate and address workplace bullying. I will end this paper with a brief discussion of the value of taking a contingency perspective on the development and implementation of interventions for the prevention and management of bullying.

## WORKPLACE BULLYING: THE NATURE OF THE BEAST

Workplace bullying is a special case of workplace aggression. Workplace aggression refers to efforts by individuals to harm others with whom they work (Neuman & Baron, 1997). Before addressing workplace bullying's unique features, it is important to discuss aggressive behaviors more generally. I never cease to be amazed at the range and type of behaviors that fall within this domain. To more completely map out this behavioral space, Neuman and Baron (1997) utilized Buss's (1961) approach of three dimensions to define the space. The dimensions are:

- 1) physical (deeds) — verbal (words, tone);
- 2) active (doing a behavior) — passive (withholding or "failures to do"); and
- 3) direct (at the target) — indirect (at something or someone the target values).

This approach describes the "methods of attack". While much research (e.g. VandenBos & Bulatao, 1996; Kelloway, Barling & Hurrell, 2006) and public attention has been paid to physical, active and direct behaviors such as shootings and assaults, i.e., physical violence, Neuman and Baron's (1997) work and that of others (e.g., Cortina, Magley, Williams & Langhout, 2001; Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002; Richman, Rospenda, Nawyn, Flaherty, Fendrich, Drum & Johnson, 1999; Schat, Frone & Kelloway, 2006) have demonstrated that the more frequent kinds of behaviors in workplaces, particularly among organizational insiders, are often passive, indirect and nonphysical. These types of behaviors have been labeled as psychological aggression. For example, in their representative survey of American workers, Schat, Frone and Kelloway (2006) found the 41% of workers report experiencing psychologically aggressive behavior at work while 6% experienced physical aggression. Workplace bullying actions are predominantly psychologically aggressive (Keashly, 1998). Rayner and Hoel's (1997) categorization of bullying behaviors provides a concise illustration of specific behaviors. This is not a comprehensive listing of all possible behaviors but it will give an idea of ways in which bullying can be conducted.

**1. Threat to Professional Status:** Questioning competence, belittling opinion, professional humiliation in front of colleagues, negative comments about intelligence, questioning a person's ability to supervisors; spreading rumors or gossip. These are primarily active behaviors.

**2. Threat to Personal Standing.** Name-calling, insults, verbal abuse, tantrums, intimidating behaviors, devaluing with reference to age, gender, race/ethnicity or appearance, hostile gestures. These are predominantly active behaviors

**3. Isolation.** Exclusion from work-related gatherings, silent treatment, withholding information, ignoring contributions, not taking concerns seriously, preventing access to opportunities or promotion, poisoning others against the target. These behaviors tend to be passive in nature.

**4. Overwork / Unreal Expectations.** Undue pressure, impossible deadlines, unnecessary disruptions, setting up to fail, unreal or ambiguous expectations; more so than for others in the same environment.

**5. Destabilization.** Others take credit for work; assigning meaningless tasks, removing responsibility, denied raise or promotion without reason; excessive monitoring.

I have several observations regarding these behaviors. First, what is particularly unique about workplace bullying is that it is often about what people **do not do** rather than what they do, i.e., "lack of action" such as withholding information, excluding from meetings, the silent treatment (Rayner & Keashly, 2005). This poses particular challenges for the target, bystanders, managers, and third parties to whom these concerns are brought. Thus, it is important for ombudsmen to note that most aggressive behavior at work is psychological in nature and often passive or "failures to do" behaviors.

Second, the nature of the relationship between the target and actor will influence the specific expressions of hostility (Aquino & Lamertz, 2004; Neuman & Keashly, 2010; Hershcovis & Barling, 2007). This has to do with the means and opportunity available to the actor (Neuman & Keashly, 2010). For example, a supervisor due to his/her control over rewards and job assignments has the opportunity and the means to bully through overwork and destabilization types of behaviors. Opportunities available to peers may have more to do with information sharing and other working

relationships. Thus, behaviors falling under threats to personal and professional standing as well as isolation are more likely under their control. Subordinates, due to their less powerful organizational position, may engage in more indirect kinds of behaviors such as rumors or gossip or withholding of information. These examples of actor means and opportunity illustrate that bullying is not limited to one type of relationship. Indeed, bullying can be top-down (boss-subordinate), horizontal (peer-peer) or bottom-up (subordinate-boss) (Rayner & Keashly, 2005). Thus, workplace bullying is considered to be **relational** in nature — harming others through purposeful manipulation and damage of relationships. This is important for ombudsmen to know as it requires that the relational context of the experience be assessed. Thus, investigations will need to involve at the very least assessment of target and actor and consideration of the nature of their relationship organizationally, e.g., the kind of contact that is typically required for this type of relationships.

Third, identifying the behaviors, while necessary, is insufficient for understanding workplace bullying (Leymann, 1996). Indeed, in isolation, each of these behaviors may be seen as minor and people may wonder what all the fuss is about (So he glared at you? So what?). What makes these behaviors more than they appear is their **frequency** and the **duration of exposure**. Workplace bullying and its related constructs are **repeated** and **enduring** forms of workplace aggression. **Persistency** is the core feature that distinguishes workplace bullying from more occasional aggressive treatment (Leymann, 1996; Einarsen et al, 2003). The defining characteristics are as follows:

**1. Negative actions that are repeated and patterned.** This element captures both frequency of occurrence (daily, weekly, monthly) and variety (more than one type of behavior). Regardless of the construct, it is the frequency of exposure to hostile behaviors that has been directly linked to a variety of negative individual (health, job attitudes and behaviors) and organizational (productivity, turnover) outcomes, i.e., the greater the exposure, greater the impact (Keashly & Neuman, 2002). Being exposed to a number of different hostile behaviors contributes to this sense of frequency. We found that the number of different events uniquely contributed to negative individual outcomes beyond the mean frequency of exposure (Keashly, Trott, & MacLean, 1994). But

the number of behaviors and the frequency of occurrence do not adequately capture the nature of exposure. Frequency of exposure must also be considered in terms of the overall frequency of contacts with the actor. For example, perhaps the boss only yells at an employee once a month but if the employee only sees him/her once a month that is 100% of the time. The implications of that for a target are very different than for a target whose actor behaves this way once a month but they see him/her daily, i.e., they are exposed to other behaviors, hopefully positive, that will influence their overall experience. Further, the frequency of exposure can be created (or enhanced) by the target reliving the experience, i.e., rumination (Harvey & Keashly, 2003). Finally the repeated nature of exposure may be linked to the involvement of more than one actor, i.e., mobbing (Zapf & Einarsen, 2005). The repeated and patterned nature of these behaviors highlights the importance of investigating a pattern of behavior rather than each incident as a separate item (Rayner & Keashly, 2005). Further the frequency of contact that would be required organizationally "normally" for the relationship is also important to consider in any assessment.

## **2. Prolonged exposure over time (duration).**

It is duration that is particularly distinctive about workplace bullying. Researchers have used timeframes for assessing these actions ranging from six months (which is typical in the European literature, e.g. Einarsen et al 2003) to a year (e.g., Keashly & Neuman, 2004; Schat, Frone, & Kelloway, 2006) to 5 years (e.g. Cortina et al, 2001). These timeframes pale in comparison to the reports of those who self-identify as targets of workplace bullying. They report exposure ranging up to 10 years (Burnazi, Keashly & Neuman, 2005; Zapf, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia, 2003). Zapf and Gross (2001) report that average duration of those who were bullied by one person was 28 months, for those who were bullied by two to four people or more than 4 people (i.e., mobbing), it was 36 months and 55 months, respectively. Thus, the question of "how long is too long" is important to consider in this discussion of workplace bullying. While researchers often specify at least one event weekly for a minimum period of 6 or 12

months, this timeframe does not necessarily appeal to those for example, in Human Resources or indeed, ombudsmen who will want to be able to address a developing hostile situation as quickly as possible, before irreversible damage sets in. Thus, codifying a specific minimum duration in policy may hamper reporting of problems and ultimately effective management. It is sufficient to note that bullying tends to occur over an extended period of time.

Fourth, while persistence or chronicity is the important marker of workplace bullying, it is also important to recognize that the nature and intensity of behaviors directed at the target do not stay the same throughout. Long-standing bullying situations will often show a progression or escalation of aggression from covert and indirect behaviors to increasingly overt, direct and in some situations physical (Einarsen, 1999; Glomb, 2002). Research suggests that such escalation will have the effect of rendering target attempts to constructively and actively respond ineffective (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty & Freels, 2001; Zapf & Gross, 2001). This puts the target at increased risk for injury psychologically, emotionally, and physically (see further discussion below). The failure of constructive methods also may promote target resistance and retaliation behaviors (Liefoghe & Davey, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006) that may further an escalatory spiral. Such spirals can result in drawing others into the situation, often as actors (Zapf & Gross, 2001) and may even result in secondary spirals or cascades of aggression elsewhere in the unit or organization (Anderson & Pearson, 1999) i.e., the development of a hostile work environment.

Given the above description, a question is often raised as to how workplace bullying, particularly at advanced stages is different from an escalated conflict between employees. What appears to distinguish bullying from "normal" workplace conflict is the existence of a power imbalance (Einarsen et al, 2003). This imbalance can be pre-existing in the structure of the workplace (boss-subordinate) or it can develop as a conflict escalates and one party becomes disadvantaged relative to the other. The importance of the imbalance is the potential impact on the target's resources and ability to defend him/herself as well as the actor's ability to continue their actions (Keashly & Jagatic, 2010). This has implications for the nature and

intensity of negative effects and highlights the importance of prevention and early intervention, as well as the necessity of strategies for remediation of effects.

Taken together, the prolonged exposure to repeated hostile actions with an inability to defend creates a situation in which the target becomes increasingly disabled (Keashly, 1998). Further such a relationship, if allowed to continue, has the potential to not only spread its impact beyond the immediate dyad to others in the organization (e.g., witnesses) but it also has the possibility of creating hostile work environments where many workers are now “behaving badly”. The bullying process with its progression and its span of impact illustrates the **communal** nature of workplace bullying (Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2010). That is, a variety of different parties are involved in or impacted by workplace bullying. This communal nature requires that ombudsmen will need to engage a number of people in the investigation and ultimately the management of the bullying.

**Cyberspace: The next (and current) frontier.** Before leaving this section on bullying’s nature, it is important to acknowledge modern technological devices as the new medium for bullying, e.g., bullying through the internet, email, text messaging, video/picture clips and social networking sites. Lois Price Spratlen (1995) ombudsman for the University of Washington at the time was among the first to identify how email was being used to bully and harass others. Known as cyberbullying or cyberaggression (e.g., Slonje & Smith, 2008; Weatherbee & Kelloway, 2006), several unique features of the medium conspire to make it a particularly virulent and destructive forum for and form of bullying. Some of these features are:

- a) the ability of the actor(s) to be anonymous making it more difficult for both targets and those investigating to identify the source. By reducing detection, actors may become emboldened to engage in more extreme and destructive attacks on the person’s reputation (Bjorkqvist, Osterman, & Hjelt-Back, 1994);
- b) span of impact from a few organizational members to millions of new media users globally; and

c) once these messages or images are released, they are difficult to expunge from cyberspace, creating a situation in which exposure can be continually renewed and thus relived, increasing damage to the target and others.

It is critical that researchers and professionals focus their efforts on understanding the nature and impact of cyberbullying and to seek ways to manage its use and impact.

## THE FACES OF HARM

The consequences of workplace bullying have been demonstrated at individual, group and organizational levels. At the individual level, direct targets show disruption of psychological, emotional and physical well-being as well as decrements in cognitive functioning (e.g., distraction, rumination), poor job attitudes, problematic job behaviors, and decreased performance (see Einarsen et al, 2003). Of particular note is the evidence of genuine trauma associated with prolonged mistreatment. Some targets manifest symptoms characteristic of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) such as hypervigilance, nightmares, and rumination (Glomb & Cortina, 2006; Hauge, Skogstad, & Einarsen, 2010; Janson & Hazler, 2004). Witnesses/bystanders to workplace bullying manifest similar symptoms and outcomes (e.g., Hoel, Faragher, & Cooper, 2004; Vartia, 2001). At the work group or unit level, there is evidence of destructive political behavior, lack of cooperation, and increasing incidence of interpersonal aggression (e.g., Glomb & Liao, 2003; Lim, Cortina, & Magley, 2008). At the organizational level, bullying’s impact is manifested in organizational withdrawal behaviors of targets and other employees such as increased sick leave and presenteeism, lowered organizational commitment, increased turnover and loss of talent, retaliation behaviors such as theft, sabotage and violence, and reputational damage in the broader community (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Rayner & Mclvor, 2008; Tepper, Carr, Breux, Gelder, Hu, & Hua, 2009). Recent research has begun to expand the victim net beyond organizational boundaries to include friends and family members who experience distress and strain as support for the targeted loved one (Barling, 1996; Hoobler & Brass, 2006). Clearly, workplace bullying left unchecked can have profound implications both inside and outside the organization.

## HOW BIG IS THE PROBLEM?

So workplace bullying is hurtful and its effects are expansive. Just how big a problem is this? The prevalence depends on how workplace bullying is assessed, the nature of the sample (convenience, organizational or representative of the nationwide workforce), and the country. Regarding measurement, there are two methods by which researchers assess exposure to bullying: operational (objective) or self-labeling (subjective). The objective approach identifies someone as bullied based on whether they have experienced at least one hostile behavior weekly or more often for a period of six months (characteristic of European research) or 12 months (typical in American studies). This method measures **exposure** to workplace bullying by means of a behavioral checklist. For example, a person will indicate whether they have experienced someone at work withholding critical information from them. The self-labeling method provides people with a definition of bullying and asks if they have had such an experience in the past six months, year or longer. This method measures experience of victimization. It is the **experience of victimization** that targets will provide to an ombudsman, not simply exposure to specific behaviors (Keashly, 2001). Thus, ombudsmen need to prepare to probe for the fullness of the target's experience as well as help the target provide specifics of incidents.

Typically, rates of exposure are generally higher for the operational method than for the self-labeling method that requires a person to acknowledge s/he has been a victim, which sometimes people are reluctant to do. So the self-labeling method can be considered a conservative estimate while the operational is a more liberal estimate. European literatures show rates ranging from 2-5% (in Scandinavian countries to 55% in Turkey (see Nielsen, Skogstad, Matthiesen, Glaso, Aasland, Notelaers & Einarsen, 2009 for fuller details) while US literature reports from 10-14% (labeling) to 63% (operational; see Keashly & Jagatic, 2010 for fuller details.) These rates apply to direct targets. If we extend the victim net to include witnesses, the rates of exposure to workplace bullying jump dramatically. For example, in a representative sample of over 7000 US workers (Lutgen-Sandvik, Namie, & Namie, 2009) 12.3 % of respondents indicated they had witnessed others being bullied at work in the previous 12 months. Adding to this the 12.6% who said they had been bullied during this same period, almost 25% of the American working adults are exposed to and

affected by workplace bullying in a 12-month period. These rates refer to general working populations. Exposure may be higher or lower in different organizations and occupations. In short, workplace bullying is part of many adults' working lives.

## WHY BULLYING? ANTECEDENTS AND PROCESSES.

Discussion of the causes or contributions to workplace bullying requires the recognition of the multi-causal nature of this phenomenon (Zapf, 1999). Characteristics of the target, the actor, the work environment, and the organizational context all play a role to varying degrees and often in interaction in the manifestation of (and on the flipside, the prevention and management of) workplace bullying (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper, 2003 for review). A useful framework for considering what some of these antecedents are and how they may combine with one another comes from Baillien, Neyens, De Witte, and De Cuyper (2009) who propose three interrelated processes that may contribute to the development of bullying: intrapersonal, interpersonal, and intragroup/organizational. Individual and work-related antecedents are implicated in either being the source of these processes or influencing how employees cope with the challenges created by these processes. I will briefly describe these processes and how different factors are linked to them.

**The Intrapersonal pathway** is one in which workplace bullying is a result of stressors and frustration and how employees cope with them. Research in this area focuses on individual characteristics that may enhance vulnerability to be a target or propensity to be an actor. Relevant target characteristics are those that may affect what the individual **perceives** as occurring (i.e., interpreting ambiguous behavior or situations as hostile) or may provoke affective and behavioral reactions that are provocative to others or make them seem as "easy" targets for displaced aggression (De Cuyper, Baillien & De Witte, 2009). Individuals with a propensity to experience negative affect such as anger, fear, worry, anxiety, sadness and depression and associated traits of neuroticism reported higher levels of hostile treatment (Aquino & Thau, 2009; Bowling & Beehr, 2006; Coyne, Seigne, & Randall, 2000; Milam, Spitzmueller & Penney, 2009). Similarly, relevant actor characteristics are ones associated with anxiety or anger and hostility such as negative affectivity, trait

anger, poor self-control, emotional susceptibility and irritability, dispositional aggressiveness, (hostile) attributional bias and unstable self-esteem (Martinko et al, 2006; Neuman and Baron, 1998; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003), all of which have been associated with increased aggressiveness. An actor's lack of self-reflection and poor perspective taking ability has been linked to engaging in bullying behaviors (Parkins, Fishbein, & Ritchey, 2006; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003).

What is interesting is that characteristics broadly characterized as negative affect and anxiety appear relevant to both targets and actors. So the question becomes what may explain an employee becoming either target or actor? Baillien et al (2009) suggest that it is ineffective coping behavior in response to frustrations (which can come from both interpersonal and group level circumstances) that may provide the key. Specifically, in their analysis of 87 workplace bullying cases, they found that an employee might become vulnerable to victimization by others when they cope with frustrations in a passive-inefficient way (e.g., by withdrawing, becoming helpless, or reducing productivity). Such behavior may be perceived as violating existing norms (not carrying one's load) and result in other workers responding negatively towards them. When an employee copes with an experienced frustration in an active-ineffective way, they may displace their frustration onto an "innocent" coworker, resulting in bullying (e.g. Tepper, Duffy, Henle & Lambert, 2006). Bullying grounded in these dynamics can be viewed as a form of "predatory bullying" (Einarsen, 1999). To the extent this process is operational, strategies for prevention and management would focus on developing more effective stress and emotional management strategies on the part of workers.

**The Interpersonal pathway** is one where workplace bullying may result from interpersonal conflict that is ineffectively managed and escalates, i.e., dispute-related bullying (Keashly & Nowell, 2003; Zapf & Gross, 2001). In escalated conflicts, everyone engages in increasingly hostile and damaging actions. These conflicts become bullying situations when one party becomes notably unable to defend themselves yet the other continues on an increasingly punitive path. Indeed attempts by the target to actively address the issues are often unsuccessful and such failure is often tied to increasingly negative impact on the target (Richman, Rospenda, Flaherty & Freels, 2001). In this process, the more powerful employee becomes the actor and the less powerful employee becomes the

target. These can be challenging situations to assess as their genesis may have been mutually determined but the balance has swung. To the extent these processes were predominant, prevention efforts would focus on the development of constructive conflict management strategies and conflict intervention strategies for third parties (e.g., managers, bystanders).

**Intragroup/organizational pathway** is one in which workplace bullying is viewed as a result of unit or organizational features that enable or directly stimulate bullying. These can be particularly challenging to deal with as they are grounded in the way of doing work. Salin's (2003) model of enabling, motivating, and precipitating organizational features helps clarify how these factors may influence bullying development. Briefly, **enabling** features are structures and processes whose existence or nonexistence affect whether bullying is even possible. These include **power imbalance** which, as noted earlier, affects both the ability of the target to respond and defend and the means and opportunities available to an actor to mistreat; **low perceived costs and risks** to engaging in bullying behaviors as reflected in organizational cultures in which harassment is equated with way to do business styles of leadership linked to controlling (authoritarian) and uninvolved (laissez-fair) leadership. Also, lack of a clear and enforceable policy suggesting these behaviors are not problematic; and the **qualities of the working environment** that create stress and frustration for employees such as unfair or inequitable treatment (perceived injustice), lack of autonomy and decision control, poor communication, role overload, conflict and ambiguity and uncomfortable physical environments (e.g., Neuman & Baron, 2010). . As noted above, bullying may be the result of inefficient coping with these stressors. **Motivating** features are structures and processes that "make it rewarding to harass others" (Salin, 2003; pg. 1222). These are conditions that promote the functionality of bullying, i.e., as a rational response to those perceived as "threats" or "burdens" (Hoel & Salin, 2003; Felson, 2006). This includes internally competitive environments, where employees are promoted or rewarded for outperforming other coworkers so it could be construed to be in an employee's interest to undermine or sabotage another, i.e., micropolitical behavior (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003). Bullying can also be a response to perceived norm violation on the part of a coworker such as a "rate buster" in an effort to bring them "back into line"

with production norms. Bullying behavior can also be a way of establishing social dominance. Bullying can be used as constructive dismissal where the work environment is made so uncomfortable for someone that they leave. Westhues (2002) talks about mobbing by professors against another as just such a strategy. Finally, **precipitating factors** are structures and processes that may actually trigger an episode of bullying assuming other factors as noted above are in place. These factors are typically associated with some organizational changes such as changes in management or work group, restructuring, downsizing, and increasing diversity (Baillien & De Witte, 2009; Neuman & Baron, 2010). The argument is that these changes create stress, anxiety and frustration, which can lead to aggressive responding as discussed above. Salin (2003) argues that bullying is a result of an interaction among at least two of these factors if not all three. This set of processes are perhaps the most challenging to address as we are in essence talking about re-designing a work environment and changing its culture and resultant climate.

### THE CHALLENGE OF ADDRESSING WORKPLACE BULLYING.

As can be seen from this admittedly brief and selective presentation of research on workplace bullying, this is a phenomenon that is dynamic, relational, and communal in nature. Its dynamics can spiral to encompass and impact other organizational members and extend its reach outside the organization. While played out by individuals, it is the organization's structure and processes that play pivotal roles in whether and how bullying is manifested, i.e., bullying is fundamentally a systemic problem (Keashly, 2001; Namie & Lutgen-Sandvik, 2009). It is this belief of the systemic nature of bullying that has researchers and professionals calling for organizational leaders and managers to take responsibility for leading the efforts in prevention and management of workplace bullying. Recent scholarship has begun to identify and assess what organizational and management efforts are important for developing a culture and climate that are antithetical to bullying (for detailed discussion see; Einarsen & Hoel 2008; Fox & Stallworth, 2009; & Giga, 2006; Keashly & Neuman, 2009; Osatuke, K., Moore, S.C., Ward, C., Dyrenforth, S. R. & Belton, L., 2009; Rayner & McIvor, 2008; Salin, 2006).

Organizational culture change, however, is a long-term process. In the meantime there will be workplace bullying and the question is how to intervene to effectively manage and mitigate its impact. As is hopefully clear from the research, there are different points in the process at which action could notably change its course. There are also a variety of actions that could be undertaken at each of these points. What I have found useful as a way of thinking about how to ameliorate workplace bullying is applying the contingency approach of conflict intervention. While full exposition of this approach is beyond the scope of this article (See Keashly & Nowell, 2010 for more detail), I would like to briefly describe its fundamental principles and what it highlights about addressing bullying.

The contingency approach is grounded in the idea that effective intervention in a conflict depends upon matching the action(s) to the phase of conflict development (discussion, polarization, segregation and destruction) and different issues that are prominent in each stage. For example, in the early phase of a conflict, parties while disagreeing are still openly communicating and see value in maintaining their relationship. Thus, a useful action might be helping parties have constructive discussions through negotiation or if somewhat heated, through mediation. At a much later stage, where parties are polarized, communication distorted and behavior is becoming destructive, initial action involves stopping the destructive behavior and if successful, then perhaps utilizing a version of shuttle diplomacy to focus on more substantive issues. The other aspect of a contingency approach is the recognition that de-escalation cannot be accomplished by a single action but requires coordinating a sequence of activities over time to move parties back down the spiral. Applying this perspective to workplace bullying, highlights a number of important considerations:

1. The need to thoroughly and critically assess the history and current status of the bullying situation. This knowledge makes it possible to select methods of intervening that increase the chances of at least minimizing damage and at most (re) building the parties, particularly the target, the working relationship as well as the working environment for others.



2. Individuals observing the actor and target interactions can play critical roles in helping to manage the situation. As revealed by research documenting span of impact, other people have a stake in this situation being resolved constructively. Bystanders represent a critical yet untapped group that could have profound influence in bullying situations, particularly in the not-yet-bullied phase (Ashburn-Nardo, Morris, & Goodwin, 2008; Keashly and Neuman, 2007; Scully & Rowe, 2009)

3. The need to view dealing with bullying as a comprehensive and coordinated effort of a number of different activities and a number of different parties. It highlights the importance of coordinating short-term crisis management interventions such as separation of the parties with longer-term methods directed at fundamentally altering the parties' relationship specifically and the system generally. Such coordinated and comprehensive efforts require organizational awareness of bullying and a commitment to dealing with it directly. Ombudsmen's location in the organizational system positions them well for developing and facilitating these types of efforts.

4. It provides an explanation for why some actions may fail, i.e., they were inappropriate for the circumstances. For example, mediation has been recommended as an approach for addressing workplace bullying (e.g., Hoel, Rayner, & Cooper, 1999; Schmidt, 2010). Critics argue that in cases of severe bullying, the target is not able to participate fully as an equal party. Further, mediation's focus on the future can be a way for the actor to avoid having to take responsibility for their actions. Thus, mediation may be more appropriate early on but less effective and even detrimental in later stages.

5. Recognition that damage inherent in severe bullying limits the means of handling such situations. As discussed under harm, long term exposure to bullying effectively disables and damages the target and often others so that a "return to normal" is highly unlikely. This highlights the importance of preventive measures addressing harmful interactions early (not-yet-bullied; Rayner, 1999) before more damage occurs and when there is a chance for (re)building productive relationships. Individual skill development on the

part of all parties such as communication, anger management, stress management, perspective taking and conflict management skills) may be relevant in these relationships preventing bullying from becoming entrenched. While enhancing individual skills is important, the organizational context can either support or undermine them (Salin, 2003). So any efforts must acknowledge organizational culpability and focus change at this level as well.

## CONCLUSION

Workplace bullying is persistent relational aggression. It has tremendous potential to escalate, drawing in others beyond the initial actor-target relationship. Its effects can be devastating and widespread individually, organizationally and beyond. It is fundamentally a systemic phenomenon, grounded in the organization's culture. Ombudsmen are in a unique position organizationally to become aware of these types of relationships and to provide leadership in assessing and responding effectively and constructively to the benefit of all organizational members. It is my hope that the research discussed in this article has provided information and insight that will help ombudsmen in their efforts to address this devastating phenomenon and to develop a culture of respect and dignity for all employees where bullying has no place.

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