

# Hazards to health

# The problem of workplace bullying

**D**ESPITE the potential pressures of long hours, tight deadlines and performance targets, many aspire to the status and rewards of a job in the City of London. But perhaps few job applicants would consider that they might risk becoming the target of a 'relentless campaign of mean and spiteful behaviour from work colleagues'. Yet these were the words used in the High Court in 2006 to describe the bullying and harassment experienced by Helen Green, from four of her co-workers at Deutsche Bank.

The court found in favour of Miss Green and awarded her £800,000 for damages in respect of the psychiatric injury she has received as a result of being bullied. The size of the award meant that the case made national headlines, but Miss Green is not the first employee to succeed in suing her employer for bullying and lack of organisational care and support. In 2003 Steven Horkulak, another city worker, also successfully pursued his case through the courts and was awarded close to £1 million for being bullied.

Beyond the headline cases, what does psychological research have to say about the extent and nature of workplace bullying, why it occurs and what can be done about it.

## The scale of the problem

According to a 2003 survey of over 300 city workers conducted by the BBC for *The Third Degree: The City Exposed*, one in three reported that they had been on the receiving end of bullying behaviour. However, bullying extends beyond the city boundary, to a wide range of employment sectors and occupations. In a report on workplace violence, the International Labour Organization (ILO, 1999) highlighted that the risk of physical and emotional violence was one of the most serious problems facing the workplace in the next millennium. Indeed, workplace bullying (or mobbing) has been described as 'the silent epidemic' (McAvoy &



**SUSAN CARTWRIGHT and CARY L. COOPER** on causes and possible solutions.

Murtagh, 2003). Yet Sweden and Norway are the only countries with specific bullying legislation (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003).

The prevalence of workplace bullying has been the subject of numerous workplace surveys in recent years. Evidence from a large-scale survey in the UK (Hoel & Cooper 2000; Rayner *et al.*, 2002) found that one in 10 respondents had been the victim of bullying in the six months prior to the survey and almost half of all respondents had witnessed bullying during the previous five years. Furthermore, 65 per cent of victims had been bullied for more than a year. The findings were based on a sample of over 5000 employees drawn from a wide range of organisations and industries. Consistent with other studies (e.g. Rayner, 1999), Hoel and Cooper found that the incidence of bullying was higher in the public than the private sector. This was attributed largely to the high rate of change and increased performance pressures that public sector employees have experienced in recent years.

As well as these broad sector differences, certain occupational groups have also been identified as being more vulnerable to bullying than others. Various studies (Hoel & Cooper, 2000; McAvoy & Murtagh, 2003; Quinne, 1999; Westhuses, 2004) have shown that bullying is more prevalent within the prison service, the healthcare and education sectors and amongst postal and telecommunications workers. For example, Quinne (1999) found that more than one in three healthcare workers in an NHS community trust had been bullied.

Although managers are the most common perpetrators of bullying, individuals can also be bullied by colleagues, subordinates and clients. Younger workers, who know little about their workplace rights, are considered to be particularly vulnerable, as are ethnic minorities (Westhuses, 2004). Individuals who deal with difficult and aggressive clients or customers may feel particularly helpless because their job role requires them to be pleasant and polite and they may feel they lack the personal power or organisational support to confront the bullying behaviour.

According to estimates (Rayner *et al.*,

2002), 18 million working days are lost in the UK each year due to bullying. A study by Einarsen (1999) found that 76 per cent of victims of bullying experienced the same symptoms as victims of traditional trauma. The stress of bullying has been shown to have an adverse health impact not only on the victims but also on those who witness such incidents (Douglas, 2001). Bullying not only makes people ill, it also severely affects self-confidence and feelings of self-worth and leads to diminished performance, job dissatisfaction and obsessive-compulsive behaviour, such as constantly rechecking what one has done. Targets of bullying are also more likely to use sleep-inducing drugs and sedatives than those who have not been bullied (Vartia, 2003). One in four make no complaint (Hoel *et al.*, 2002), and some of these will simply leave.

### What constitutes bullying?

Bullying has variously been defined as:

*...a repeated and persistent destructive process of attempts by one (or several) person to torment, wear down, frustrate, get a reaction from another or exclude him or her from the work environment. It is treatment that provokes, pressures, frightens, intimidates and through its repetition leads to devastating effects.* (Brodsky, 1976)

*...the accumulation, over a long period*

*of time of hostile proposals (and behaviours) expressed by one or several people towards a third person at work (the target)* (Leyman, 1984)

Rayner *et al.* (2002) describe five categories of bullying behaviour – threats to professional status, threats to personal standing, isolation, overwork and destabilisation. Others emphasise that bullying represents a situation whereby an individual (or group of individuals) finds they are on the receiving end of ‘negative actions’ (see box) and experience difficulty in defending themselves against these actions (Hoel & Cooper, 2000).

The key features of bullying – just as with some psychologists’ definitions of school bullying – are that these negative acts are persistent rather than one-off, and they occur because of a power imbalance between perpetrator and victim.

### Why do people bully?

There have been a number of theories (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003; Westhuses, 2004) put forward to explain why bullying occurs. These can be considered in terms of factors related to the individual and aspects of the environment.

The characteristics of a workplace bully are considered to be related to factors such as personality, early childhood experience, unresolved conflicts, poor social skills, and biases and prejudices – rather similar to those discussed in the literature on school bullying (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003). The literature on workplace bullying suggests that a bully is equally likely to be a man or a woman, although there is evidence in Britain at least that women are reported as bullies less often than men (Rayner *et al.*, 2002).

Within the individual characteristics literature, bullies are presented as individuals with strong sociopathic tendencies, who selectively identify their targets with purposeful intent and engage in ‘serial bullying’ (Zaph *et al.*, 2003). Victim profiling studies suggest that there are also personality differences between targets and non-targets in that victims are less independent, less extravert, less stable and more conscientious (Coyne *et al.*, 2000).

However, whilst personality traits may play a role in explaining workplace bullying, research has increasingly highlighted the strong links between bullying and certain aspects of the work

## THE EXPERIENCE OF BULLYING AT WORK

- Having your opinions or views ignored
- Being exposed to an unmanageable workload
- Someone withholding information that affects your performance
- Being given tasks with unreasonable or impossible targets or deadlines
- Being ordered to do work beyond one's competence
- Being ignored or facing hostility (i.e. ‘frozen out’)
- Having gossip spread about you
- Excessive monitoring
- Having insulting or offensive remarks made about your person (i.e. habits and background), your attitudes or your private life
- Having key areas of responsibility removed or replaced with more trivial or unpleasant tasks
- Being disciplined or put down in public

environment (e.g. Hoel & Cooper, 2000; Kelly, 2005; Salin, 2003). Such studies have demonstrated that a high incidence of bullying is associated with highly stressful and changing work environments and work overload. Pearson (2001) similarly highlights the importance of environmental influences and describes the type of organisational culture in which bullies are likely to flourish as being characterised by:

- a high level of competition
- radical change
- a climate of insecurity, e.g. threat of redundancy
- strong ‘macho’ style of management
- hierarchical structures
- low levels of staff participation or consultation
- excessive work demands
- a lack of procedures to tackle bullying and harassment issues.

Peyton (2003) argues that most people are capable of bullying behaviours and may exhibit those behaviours in situations when they become impatient and frustrated by the behaviour of others. When individuals are facing excessive demands to meet key performance indicators and stretching targets, their response may be to ‘micro-manage’ and be over-controlling in their behaviour towards others. This can lead to unintentional or accidental bullying, in an attempt to meet organisational goals.

Downsizing, restructuring and radical

organisational change frequently leads to increased workload, lack of role clarity and heightened anxiety and uncertainty about job future. As a consequence, individuals may become increasingly self-absorbed about their own job status, which causes them to be excessively critical about the work efforts of others. In such circumstances, the resultant bullying behaviour may constitute a form of displacement activity.

Peyton (2003) also suggests that the increased incidence of workplace bullying is a reflection of the wider 'me-centred' culture of Western societies and the highly competitive climate promoted by many work organisations. Salin (2003) similarly suggests that the promotion of a macho management style in organisations is a euphemism for bullying. Evidence from Hoel and Cooper (2000) supports this view in that they found a significant and strong correlation between a highly directive and autocratic management style and the incidence of bullying. Hierarchical organisations, with a strong tradition of positional power and directive leadership, can effectively sanction a form of institutionalised bullying within their organisational culture.

### Implications for organisations

There are several ways in which organisations can tackle the problem of workplace bullying.

### Improved selection and assessment

Obviously, it is important for organisations to have robust selection systems in place which help them to identify potential bullies. In addition, they also need to have systematic appraisal systems that provide 360 degree feedback on the management and leadership style of their employees, and provide ongoing training to redress any identified needs. Such feedback mechanisms are particularly useful in highlighting to unintentional and accidental bullies the impact that their behaviour may be having on others.

### Training and development activities

As well as generic training in the area of leadership and associated interpersonal skills, some researchers (e.g. Douglas, 2001) have emphasised the value of emotional intelligence development programmes. Such programmes have already demonstrated that increased emotional intelligence is a significant moderator of stress and is highly correlated

with effective leadership behaviour (Slaski & Cartwright, 2003). Similarly, one-to-one coaching is likely to provide individuals with a greater insight into their behaviour and its antecedents. However, there are some who claim that coaching could provide the bullies with greater emotional understanding which they then use in more sophisticated ways to cause mental suffering (see e.g. [www.bps.org.uk/4oi1](http://www.bps.org.uk/4oi1)).

Training in the area of transactional analysis (Berne, 1964) can also play a positive role in making individuals aware that interactions which are regularly initiated from 'Critical Parent' are likely to be interpreted as bullying. Training in conflict management skills are also worthy of consideration.

### Addressing environmental factors

Researchers who have emphasised the role of environmental pressures in triggering high levels of anger and aggression, the antecedents of bullying behaviour, assert that the most effective way to reduce bullying is to reduce or eliminate the sources of stress inherent in the workplace. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of handling change events in a more sensitive and consultative way.

Organisations also need to take steps to ensure that they do not create the kind of 'macho' hierarchical culture in which bullying is regarded as merely 'strong' or over-exuberant management. This means that those at the very top of the organisation need to lead by example, to demonstrate that intimidating behaviour will not be rewarded and create a positive climate which enables employees to speak out about bullying problems rather than suffering in silence.

**Policies and awareness campaigns** As employers have a defined duty of care to protect the health and well-being of their employees, they need to have effective, safe and fair policies to deal with the problem of bullying should it arise. The reason why so much bullying goes on in organisations is that the bullying behaviour is not confronted and has no adverse consequences for the bully. Organisations need to increase awareness of workplace bullying, clearly articulate the kinds of behaviour which will be deemed as unacceptable and outline the procedures that will be followed in the event of a complaint. Those who have been bullied need to be assured that the reporting

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and counselling, to both victims and those facing allegations of bullying.

However, policies in isolation are unlikely to solve the problem unless they are supplemented with initiatives directed at reducing the environmental pressures and developing a more positive and inclusive organisational culture. This means that organisations should conduct regular workplace surveys to establish stress and health levels and monitor the prevalence of bullying amongst their employees.

Psychologists have a role to play here as well. We need to encourage clinical, occupational, health and social psychologists to work together to explore the issues of bullying in the playground, at work and in society through antisocial behaviour. Only by taking an interdisciplinary approach can we tackle what is becoming a real problem in contemporary society. Mark Twain came up with a wonderful thought which should motivate us all: 'Keep away from people who try to belittle our ambitions. Small

systems are 'safe' and that there will be no repercussions for them. This may mean that reports are made through Occupational Health rather than Human Resources. In addition, organisations should provide support, in the form of harassment advisers

people always do that, but the really great people make you feel that you, too, can somehow become great.'

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## DISCUSS AND DEBATE

Do we have more bullies now than in previous generations? If so, why?

What role can psychology play in dealing with school, workplace and societal bullies?

What can we learn from how other countries deal with this problem?

*Have your say on these or other issues this article raises. E-mail 'Letters' on [psychologist@bps.org.uk](mailto:psychologist@bps.org.uk) or contribute via [www.psychforum.org.uk](http://www.psychforum.org.uk).*