

A systems psychodynamic perspective of workplace bullying: boundary testing, vacuums and risk.

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Abstract

This paper draws on psychoanalytical theory and in-depth qualitative research, in two contrasting public sector organisations in the UK, to illustrate how bullying scenarios are generated from a systemic interplay of factors.

The paper is in three parts. The first part focuses on the concepts of boundaries, containment and projection and argues that bullying may occur when individuals feel very insecure within a given context. To defend against deep, and often denied, unpleasant feelings bullies project their anxieties on to others, testing the boundaries of colleagues in an attempt to find suitable containers for their anxieties.

The second part of the paper presents the key findings of the research. Drawing on examples of field work, the research shows how bullying occurred around vacuums of support within the organisations. Negative aspects of the culture of the organisations were 'reflected' more in bullying scenarios than where there was no bullying. As bullying escalated individuals became isolated from each other and fantasies replaced reality. Employees became subservient and impasses developed in the group dynamics. A comparison is made between the in-depth characteristics of bullying and non bullying scenarios.

Based on the theoretical concepts and research findings, the paper concludes with a risk analysis, a means of identifying where bullying is most likely to occur within organisations.

Key words: Psychodynamic, systemic, boundaries, containment, projection, vacuums, culture, risk.

1. Introduction

This study aims to show how bullying scenarios develop as a result of a systemic interplay of factors such as pressures on an organisation, vacuums of support, the boundary testing of individuals, and impasses in group dynamics.

The paper begins with some theory. A brief description is given of 'systems thinking' and the psychodynamic concepts of boundary testing, projection and containment. Following an outline of the research methodology, some of the key findings of the research are presented. Finally, based on the theory and findings, suggestions are made for identifying areas in organisations which are at risk of developing into bullying scenarios.

2. A systems psychodynamic approach to bullying

Systems approaches

Since the first research in Scandinavia, in the 1980's, our knowledge of workplace bullying has grown in a fragmented way. Traditionally the focus has been on organisational factors and individuals, usually victims. However it has been known for some time that bullying is much more than a simple cause and effect relationship - i.e. one cause does not always led to the same effect. Thylefors (1987) argued that you simply cannot get away from a systems perspective of bullying as causes are to be found in interactions between individuals, their ways of relating to the surroundings, the workgroup as a whole, the organisation, its structure and the 'overall togetherness'.

Systems thinking is a discipline for seeing the wholes. It is a framework for seeing the inter-relationships between parts of an organisation, the relationship between an organisation and its external environment and patterns of change.

For the purposes of this paper I shall focus on the nature of the boundary between organisations and external stakeholders to argue – if an organisation's boundaries are too loose, it is possible that the outside environment can become too influential and this may be disruptive for the well being of employees. However, if a boundary is too rigid an organisation may stagnate and become inflexible to market and environmental changes (Miller, 1993). Emotions may fester.

Psychodynamic perspectives

For my doctoral research I was interested in exploring the motives of bullies, victims and the role of the audience (those who are aware of the bullying) within organisational contexts. The key research questions were

Why do bullies bully?

Why do some individuals become victims?

What is the role of the audience?

To help me answer these questions I used psychoanalytical theories.

In psychoanalysis, there is an assumption that unconscious ideas and desires have a determining and motivating influence on our conscious thoughts, on our emotions and on our actions. We are often unaware of these influences as they may relate to experiences in childhood or develop in response to traumatic events (Gabriel, 1999).

Although psychoanalysis originated in the clinical setting, today it is also used to give insights into the dynamics of society, groups, interpersonal relationships, as well as for organisational consultancy and research.

Researchers interested in looking at bullying in organisations have a wealth of theory on which to draw. This includes organisational theory such as social defences (Menzies, 1961), theories on group dynamics (Stapley, 2006), a range of theory of the unconscious mind such as Klein's (1957) work on envy, and theories on interpersonal relationships such as attachment theory (Fonagy, 2001). Lines (2008) in his book on bullies, goes so far as to state that he is convinced that issues of attachment and separation lie at the heart of bullying.

From a psychodynamic perspective 'boundaries' are taken to be unseen, immeasurable limits or barriers that simultaneously create an inside, and outside, separating us from others. Individuals who have a well developed sense of themselves have firm boundaries. They will resist attempts by others to define feelings or to re-define identity without permission. However if individuals develop weak boundaries they are more vulnerable to the influence of others and also at risk of becoming the targets of bullies

At times of organisational change most of us feel insecure but we cope in different ways and have different defensive responses. Some individuals, including bullies, get rid of their anxieties by projecting them onto others. Projection means 'throwing', just like a light being projected on to a screen. Boundaries of colleagues are tested, e.g. by denying information and constant criticism (White, 1998). Employees who have strong boundaries will stand up to these projections. However, individuals who are vulnerable in some ways, may have weaker boundaries, and when a bully finds these weaknesses then attacks begin in earnest (White, 2004). The target becomes a 'container' for a bully's unwanted and often denied aspects of the self. The bully's perception of the victim becomes fixed, or gridlocked, with the victim becoming an unwanted 'psychic garbage can' for the bully's unwanted and disowned projections. Over time the victim is discarded.

3. Case studies

My research was carried out in two public sector organisations in the UK, a civil service organisation and a university.

I needed a research methodology which would give insights into the systemic nature of bullying and capture an in-depth understanding of the

motives of the individuals, interpersonal relationships and group dynamics within organisational contexts. There was no suitable methodology available so I designed a new reflexive methodology which I called EGAPA (a mnemonic for ethnography, grounded theory and applied psychoanalysis). The researcher is a primary tool of data collection and, in keeping with the ethnographic foundations, there are no predefined hypotheses and no testing of hypotheses. Data was gathered from numerous sources such as the history, structure, and culture of the organisation, first impressions, emotional responses of myself and others, observations and interviews. The data analysis was iterative and continued until a picture emerged of the individuals and groups within the organisational context. The aim of this type of reflexive research is to provide rich data and new theory.

The HR directors of the organisations each selected two departments in which they thought there was bullying and I carried out interviews, on sources of stress and coping strategies, with volunteers from those departments.

The findings showed that the cultures of the two organisations differed in many respects. The civil service was very target focussed, and at the time of the research was undergoing a radical change programme. Its boundaries were very open to the influences of external stakeholders. Pressures cascaded down from government ministers to the board, to team leaders and then to the staff. The university, on the other hand, was experiencing incremental change and the management style could best be described as *laissez faire*. This organisation had comparatively closed boundaries.

Although the organisations were very different, three common features appeared to create contexts in which bullying scenarios developed.

- Poor communication

Communication in the civil service organisation was top down. Although this could be clear it was often inconsistent and generated cynicism. In the university there was a lack of communication from the top and little effort was made to foster effective communication across the organisation.

- Lack of care of employees.

The civil service organisation had undergone a radical change program but senior managers failed to recognise the impact of the changes on the health and emotional well-being of the staff. Employees were generally unwilling to seek help, even if they needed it. Stress was bottled up.

In the university there were high levels of tiredness and a pervasive lack of care for staff. Unhealthy emotions were left to fester.

- A lack of recognition for the value of employees

'Recognition is that response from the other which makes meaningful the feelings, intentions and actions of the self' (Benjamin, 1988, p 12).

Interviewees in the civil service organisation generally felt that they were not valued by top management. With the lack of recognition from above they sought recognition from within their teams. These teams had developed very different cultures.

The top management team in the university seemed almost in denial that the two departments, student services and the library, were needed for the organisation to operate effectively. Staff did not feel valued by top management and so sought recognition from their colleagues thereby increasing pressures on interpersonal relationships.

Although both organisational contexts created the potential for bullying to develop, I found that bullying did not occur in all teams, or departments. In the civil service there was no evidence of bullying in one team but in the other the team leader tested the boundaries of his staff by constantly changing his mind and in team meetings he picked on staff and publicly humiliated them. In the university there was little evidence of bullying but some scapegoating. However in student services bullying had been rife for about ten years. Colleagues bullied colleagues, staff bullied students and students bullied staff. One of the bullies had bullied her line manager for seven years until the HR director moved her manager to a different part of the university.

Differences between bullying and non bullying scenarios.

- Complexity

The most obvious difference between the bullying and non bullying teams and departments was the degree of complexity of the dynamics. This affirmed Thylefors's (1987) view that when the workplace situation becomes complex the structure falls apart and personalities of individuals come to the fore. Where there was bullying employees took a range of defensive actions. Many had left. Some employees bullied others by projecting their anxieties and testing boundaries of colleagues to find weak points and containers for their unwanted psychic products. Other employees coped through becoming isolated from each other, or using fantasy and idealisation.

In situations where I could find no or very little evidence of bullying, the dynamics were less complex. In the civil service one of the team leaders was getting angry with his staff, but there was no evidence of bullying. This leader was well respected, and he in turn respected his staff. Issues of concern were talked about openly. He was able to work through most of the anxieties generated within the culture of the organisation, within the team and within himself. Using Long's (2000) criteria for successful groups, this leader was more present for his staff, than the bully, there was greater engagement with reality and roles were clearer.

In the university library the director tried to engage with her staff and devolve responsibilities by introducing a matrix management system. This had limited success in getting staff to work together in more effective ways.

- Negative aspects of the organisation's culture

The more negative aspects of the culture of the organisation were reflected more where there was bullying than where there was no or little evidence of bullying. In bullying scenario in the civil service, communication was more inconsistent, there was also a greater lack of concern for the psychological welfare of staff, and stress was more bottled up.

Likewise, in the university the laissez faire management style was very noticeable in student services, communication between the teams was poor and there was a distinctive lack of concern for the well being of staff.

- Vacuums of support

The findings also showed how bullying occurred around vacuums of support in the organisations. The vacuums offered few boundaries and little containment of anxieties, and as a result many employees felt insecure. In the civil service a vacuum was created beneath a team leader, also a bully, by his colleagues who denied him information.

In the university the lack of effective leadership by the director of student services created a vacuum at the top of the department. There was a high turnover of staff with vacancies left unfilled for months at a time. These vacancies also created vacuums and the potential for further bullying.

- Group collusions of subservience

Where there was bullying there were group collusions of subservience on subconscious and unconscious levels in both organisations with staff being unwilling, or unable, to stand up to bullies and to take effective action to improve their working environments. Further bullying appeared to be a futile attempt to break the impasse in the relationships and to create new dynamics.

4. Risk Analysis

The research findings show that organisational contexts of poor communication, lack of care of staff and lack of recognition for the value of the work of employees created the potential for bullying to occur. Given the new insights into bullying and non-bullying scenarios provided by this research, suggestions can be made for identifying areas in organisations where employees may be at risk of becoming bullies or victims.

Bullying is more likely to occur in organisations where

- There is little acknowledgement of psychological well-being.

- Communication is poor.
- Anxieties are repressed.
- Vacuums of support are created.
- There is a lack of healthy group cohesion.
- Individuals feel insecure.
- There is a lack of containment and working through of anxieties by managers.

5. Conclusion

The research findings show how a systems psychodynamic perspective of workplace bullying offers a means of capturing the complex interplay of factors which generate bullying scenarios and put employees at risk of being bullied or accused of bullying others. These factors include the permeability of an organisation's boundaries, cultural factors, the creation of vacuums and the testing of boundaries.

Although organisational cultures such as poor communication, lack of care and recognition of staff created contexts for bullying to arise, conflict was not widespread. The prevalence of bullying was determined, in part, by the presence of vacuums of support, and by the ability of the leaders to contain and work through anxieties generated within the organisational culture, within the group and within themselves.

Where bullying was prevalent the audiences took defensive actions by becoming isolated from each other and retreating from reality into fantasy, thereby further fostering the negative behaviour of the bullies.

By assessing risk factors, and through knowledge of how bullies bully, HR directors and managers can identify the potential for bullying scenarios to develop within their organisations and hence take positive preventative action.

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