

Sources of workplace bullying in institutions of higher learning

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Abstract

This study aims at exploring sources of workplace bullying in institutions of higher learning in general and among the academic staff of the National University of Lesotho in particular. The methodology for this study is the qualitative research approach, with an overarching intention of making meaning out of the meaning made by interviewees of their experiences related to workplace bullying. Data for this study is collected through a semi-structured interview on twenty academic staff members of the aforementioned institution. Data analysis is done through the iterative and inductive methods of the Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), for the generation of an integrated narrative of interviewees' meaning making of their experiences of workplace bullying. From the sources of workplace bullying in the present study, it emerges that university restructuring of the National University of Lesotho (NUL) is the most important source of workplace bullying, preceding management, colleagues, students, faculty academic hierarchy, and faculty administrative hierarchy in that order. From this study neoliberalist university restructuring is deemed as the primary source of workplace bullying because the former is an ideological rhetoric which compromises the traditional autonomy of universities by fostering an organizational culture and climate of injustice and norm violation, mediated by an atmosphere of insufficient legal recourse.

Keywords: Neoliberalism, university restructuring, workplace bullying, Interpretative phenomenological Analysis.

INTRODUCTION

The multifaceted and seemingly endless controversies surrounding the definition of the workplace bullying phenomenon is further compounded by divergences surrounding the attribution of causal agents to it. Nonetheless, the antecedents of workplace bullying could be hypothetically grouped under the following rubrics: individual, organizational, and socio-cultural factors (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003, p. 173; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, p. 315). Even though simplistic justifications of workplace bullying antecedents at the individual level remain controversial (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper, 2002, p. 25; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003, p. 173), it would also be unrealistic to dismiss their importance (Coyne, Seigne & Randall, 2000, p. 338; Zapf & Einarsen, 2003, p. 173).

Both employees who display either low interpersonal skills or negative self-image (Coyne et al., 2000, p. 338) or demonstrate on the contrary outstanding aspects of these same skills equally become victims of workplace bullying (Coyne, Chong, Seigne & Randall, 2003, p. 219; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006, p. 415; Namie, 2003a, p. 10). In other words, it is evident that the issue of workplace bullying victims is a 'grey zone' in terms of their categorization based on individual personalities.

The perpetrators of workplace bullying just like victims of the latter can also hardly be 'ensconced' under rigidly defined personality categories (Rayner et al., 2002, p. 25). In a nutshell, perpetrators of workplace bullying demonstrate near pathological traits of obsession with

power and control of subordinates, while remaining in the 'good books' of hierarchy (Namie & Namie, 2000, p. 55; Tracy, Lutgen-Sandvik & Alberts, 2006, p. 151). The work environment hypothesis considers the antecedents of workplace bullying to be primarily a function of organizational and work characteristics, which can be considered under the following rubrics: role conflict (Notelaers, De Witte & Einarsen, 2010, p. 492), job insecurity (Baillien & De Witte, 2009a, p. 356), workload (Hauge *et al.*, 2007, p. 231), social support weaknesses (e.g. Zapf, Knorz & Kulla, 1996a, p. 221), and autonomy (DeCuyper *et al.*, 2009, 2011). On the contrary, research findings highlight the paradox that job aspects such as autonomy (Baillien, DeCuyper & De Witte, 2011, p. 198; Hubert, Furda & Steensma, 2001, p. 381), skill utilization (Einarsen *et al.*, 1994, p. 393; Notelaers *et al.*, 2010, p. 492) and social support (Neyens *et al.*, 2007, p. 315; Zapf *et al.*, 1996, p. 221) have been negatively related to targets' reports of workplace bullying.

For some researchers, social and cultural thought, belief and mindset systems could be potential antecedents of the workplace bullying phenomenon. Firstly, the following belief systems are conducive to workplace bullying: integration of religion and work; capitalism; meritocracy; bureaucratic settings; profit fixation; Theory X ideas (Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott 2008, p. 315). Secondly, socio-cultural systems which privilege status symbols, demean human and stakeholder interests, and deride the marginalized, or workplace bullying prone (Du Gay, 1996, p. 25; Deetz, 1992, p. 65; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008b, p. 100). Thirdly, national cultures characterized by high-power distance (United States and Britain) have higher workplace bullying prevalence than societies with feminine-egalitarian communication patterns (Hoel & Cooper, 2000, p. 107; Lutgen-Sandvik *et al.*, 2007, p. 850).

NEOLIBERALIST ETHOS IN UNIVERSITIES AS A WORKPLACE BULLYING RHETORIC

Neoliberalism is described as a seductive and invidious discourse and set of practices which make the former co-implicated in workplace bullying. The general aura of ambivalence which characterizes staff response to neoliberal rhetorics, ideology, and management approaches has left a vacuum in which workplace bullying can flourish, (Davies & Bansel, 2010, p. 136; Davies, Browne, Gannon, Honan & Somerville, 2005, p. 351; Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b, 2010). Neoliberalism becomes a 'workplace bullying ideology' on the basis of the following characteristics:

There is the inevitability of employee stress and even burnout due to the anxiety generating sense of 'inevitability', 'do or die', 'comply or perish' thoughts

and rhetorics which accompany its radical restructuring efforts.

Neoliberalism is proving to be intolerant of dissent and negative criticism of government, especially when the specter of institutional survival is linked to government funding (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 136)

The nature of work dynamics is radically re-created through the individualism and competitiveness which characterizes neoliberal management approaches (Davies *et al.*, 2005, p. 351; Davies & Petersen, 2005a, 2005b). Neoliberalism leads to conscious or unconscious employee compliance to its demands despite its negative effects on wellness, and its capacity to compromise collegiality and stifle open debate (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 136; Davies & Bansel, 2005, 2010).

Neoliberal universities are labeled as institutions which are conducive for fostering employee psychological problems, incivility, bullying, and general employee mistreatment (Lewis, 2004, p. 290; McKay, Arnold, Fratzi & Thomas, 2008, p. 85; Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 90). Characteristic features of neoliberal universities which foster workplace bullying include: ever-intensifying workload, short-term contracts, job insecurity, funding pressures, excessive competitiveness, the power imbalance between managers and academics, and weakened union power (Keashly & Neuman, 2010, p. 57).

There is a 'grey zone' between "authoritarian" management approaches and bullying, in which case 'strong management' could easily become a 'mask' for workplace bullying (Simpson & Cohen, 2004, p. 172). With the introduction of corporate culture into academia, bullying management practices such as assigning unmanageable workloads or giving unwarranted or public criticism have gradually become part of the 'normal' neoliberal workplace culture (Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 90). Neoliberal discourse becomes subtly cynical and sarcastic, when it declares that a multiplicity of jobs for each person is part of the game of life, thereby justifying and normalizing even irrational job rotations. Even if bullied victims quit the institution, bullying would have become more or less 'institutionalized' and normative, since unchallenged.

METHODOLOGY

Qualitative research was chosen to guide the research design and methodology of this research because it facilitated the description of workplace bullying as psychological violence experienced by academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. Secondly, qualitative research described the world of workplace bullying and staff psychological wellness as personal experiences through 'natural language'. Thirdly, qualitative research

Table 1. Excerpts on sources of workplace bullying

Line / page / speaker	Quotes
L 3-4, 8 / 302 / Albert	'For me it's academic hierarchy...second there is restructuring.'
L 4, 6, 9 / 303 / Bill	'Students...management and colleagues...university restructuring'
L 5, 7, 8, 9 / 304 / Camara	'...management...academic hierarchy...colleagues...university restructuring'
L 4, 9 / 306 / David	'management...university restructuring'
L 4, 8, 10, 16 / 307 / Epanty	'colleagues...students...management...university restructuring'
L 2, 6, 7 / 308 / Francis	'management...colleagues...university restructuring'
L 4, 7 / 309 / George	'management...university restructuring'
L 3, 5 / 310 / Hans	'management...university restructuring'
L 4, 7, 9 / 311 / Ivo	'students...management...university restructuring'
L 3, 5 / 313 / Jacqueline	'management...university restructuring'
L 3, 5, 7 / 314 / Kate	'management...colleagues...students...university restructuring'
L 5, 7 / 315 / Luther	'faculty administrative hierarchy...university restructuring'
L 3 / 316 / Mani	'students...university restructuring'
L 3, 12 / 317 / Nero	'management...university restructuring'
L 5, 10 / 318 / Opondi	'management...university restructuring'
L 3, 5 / 320 / Paul	'management...university restructuring'
L 3, 5 / 321 / Quarant	'management...university restructuring'
L 4 / 322 / Raul	'academic hierarchy...university restructuring'
L 7 / 325 / Samuel	'administrative hierarchy...university restructuring'
L 3, 5 / 326 / Thomas	'management...university restructuring'

increased the probability that the individual provides his or her own version, view, account, and expression of their own 'world' of workplace bullying. Lastly, qualitative research provided a framework for an in-depth understanding of the meaning that individuals made of their original and authentic experiences related to workplace bullying as psychological violence. The purposive sample for this study comprised twenty members of the academic staff at the National University of Lesotho. There are two reasons why purposeful sampling was chosen for this study. Firstly, the choice of purposive sampling was in respect of the qualitative principle of appropriateness, i.e. having participants who are articulate, reflective, and willing to share their experiences with the researcher (Morse, 1991, p. 127). Secondly, purposive sampling was based on choosing participants who represent information-rich cases from whom the researcher could learn much in relation to the issues under study (Patton, 1990, p.169). Twenty academic staff members of the National University of Lesotho constituted the purposive sample on which the semi-structured interview was administered. Among the respondents were two females, eighteen males, in the categories of three associate professors, nine senior lecturers, and eight lecturers. The ages of the respondents range from thirty three (33) to fifty five (55) years.

Data was collected through a semi-structured interview and data was analyzed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), which seeks to enable the researcher to understand how individuals make sense out of their major life experiences using a double hermeneutic. IPA was chosen because it elicits from

respondents' accounts, a detailed and "substantially rich" depiction of the phenomena under study, from phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 11). Secondly, IPA favors the use of semi-structured phenomenological interviews for data collection and highlighting of potentially grey areas which structured and rigid formats will not adequately uncover (Eatough & Smith, 2008, p. 11). Thirdly, data analysis using IPA focuses on making an in-depth appraisal of the phenomena of workplace bullying and psychological wellness through its triple pronged methods of analysis, that is phenomenological, hermeneutical and idiographic perspectives (Smith *et al.*, 2009, p. 11).

RESULTS

Sources of workplace bullying are generally categorized under individual, organizational, macroeconomic and socio-cultural factors (Zapf & Einarsen, 2003, p. 173; Lutgen-Sandvik & McDermott, 2008, p. 315). Information from the present study concerning the sources of workplace bullying is presented in Table 1. This information highlights the following sub-themes:

1. University restructuring
2. University management
3. Colleagues
4. Students
5. Faculty academic hierarchy
6. Faculty administrative hierarchy.

From the excerpts of sources of workplace bullying in

Table 2. Workplace bullying sources in the National University of Lesotho

No	Workplace bullying sources	Frequency	Percentage
1	University restructuring	20	100%
2	Management	15	75%
3	Colleagues	5	25%
4	Students	5	25%
5	Faculty and academic hierarchy	3	15%
6	Faculty administrative hierarchy	2	10%

Table 1, we can deduce that bullying among the participants of this study originates from individual (students, colleagues), organizational (university management, faculty, academic and administrative hierarchy), and contextual factors (university restructuring).

DISCUSSION

From the literature review, sources of workplace bullying could include situational, organizational, individual and socioeconomic factors (Chappell & Di Martino, 2000, p. 15; Leather et al, 1999, p. 25). If we consider Table 1, we realize that the sources of workplace bullying in the National University of Lesotho are principally related to organizational and individual factors. These organizational and individual factors in descending order of importance as sources of workplace bullying, according to the respondents of this study are: university restructuring (100%); management (75%); colleagues (25%); students (25%); faculty and academic hierarchy (15%); faculty and administrative hierarchy (10%).

From Table 2 we realize that university restructuring is the most prevalent source of workplace bullying among interviewees of this study, who are academic staff of the National University of Lesotho. All twenty respondents of this study (100%) affirm that university restructuring is the source of the workplace bullying they experience. Secondly, 75% of the interviewees say management is source workplace bullying. If we consider that for 15% and 10% of the respondents both academic hierarchy and administrative hierarchy are sources of workplace bullying, we can buy extension say that 100% of the interviewees consider themselves as having being by bullied by one category or another of management. Furthermore, 25% of the interviewees state that colleagues and students are sources of workplace bullying they experience.

We shall at this juncture, consider the different sources of workplace bullying expressed by respondents in this study in the light of existing literature. From literature, the researcher will attempt to justify the assertion by participants of this study that university restructuring, management, colleagues, students, faculty academic hierarchy, and faculty administrative hierarchy are sources

of workplace bullying they experience in the National University of Lesotho.

Through a neoliberalist ideology, university restructuring can be a source of workplace bullying as psychological violence for several reasons. Through neoliberalism, there is the introduction of corporate culture into institutions of higher learning (Twale & De Luca, 2008, p. 90), with the following associated workplace bullying features. University restructuring is easily accompanied by authoritarian management (Simpson & Cohen, 2004), compromising the traditional autonomy of universities, linking funding to reforms, and stifling critique (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 51). Furthermore, university restructuring under a neoliberalist ethos can lead to workplace bullying by compelling employees to comply with its demands (Davies & Bansel, 2005, p. 51), ever-intensifying workload, short-term contracts, job insecurity, funding pressures, excessive competitiveness, the power imbalance between managers and academics, and weakened union power (Keashly & Neuman, 2010, p. 57).

If we consider the preceding bullying features of university restructuring from literature and the fact that all twenty respondents of the study state restructuring as source of workplace bullying, we can conclude affirmatively that university restructuring is a main source of workplace bullying in the National University of Lesotho for the respondents of this study. Restructuring as a primary source of workplace bullying is substantially depicted by Kate when she states that:

In the restructuring process, management does not seem to conform to certain strategic operations that are regulated by the statutes of the university, prescribing roles and procedures for doing things. It rather attempts to implement certain objectives outside of statutory norms, in a non-consultative way, to the extent that certain office bearers are forced by virtue of subordination to take part or participate in certain operations. This to me can be interpreted as bullying them into doing things. I have the impression that management is groping in the dark. I think the current restructuring entails workplace bullying because it is non-consultative, the academic staff, community has no sense of direction as to the ultimate goals of the process, and

consultations are reduced to unilateral “dishing out” of directives with neither comments nor questions admitted from staff.

We shall consider ‘management’ for the purposes of this study as ‘management, faculty and academic hierarchy, and faculty and administrative hierarchy’ as seen in Table 1. In response to the question of knowing whether management is a source of workplace bullying, according to existing literature, Glendinning (2001, p. 274) states that bosses become bullies to have power, control their subordinates, impose their will on the latter, make their subordinates ‘lose ground’ psychologically, and struggle to ingratiate themselves with them. The reasons that Glendinning advances as to why he thinks bosses have become bullies correspond to the sub-themes from definition of workplace bullying as experienced by participants of this study. These include: abuse of status; covert and or overt negative behaviors; premeditated intention to impose one’s will and suppress that of others; devaluing others; causing harm to victims of workplace bullying. This implies that management is effectively a source of workplace bullying both in existing literature and from the participants’ experiences. The following quotes from George highlights the role of management as a source of workplace bullying within the context of study:

Top management are academics but they are implementing restructuring with no sensitivity to the plight of their colleagues. They have like switched off their academic profile to become hardened, insensitive administrators.

In summary, institutional power structures and power imbalances could justify the high prevalence of workplace bullying in organizations, bullying generated by situational and contextual factors, bullying in authoritarian institutions, and bullying through the autocratic style of management (Cortina *et al.*, 2001, p. 68; Hoel & Cooper, 2000, p. 107; Cleveland & Kerst, 1993, p. 51; Ireland, 2000, p. 210; Vartia, 1996, p. 208).

In the specific context of universities, workplace bullying is frequently associated with perceptions of inconsiderate treatment by others (Neuman, 2004, p. 84), through, for example, subjective peer-review processes, procedural injustice, marginalization from decision-making, and competition for scarce resources (Greenberg & Colquitt, 2005, p. 251; Higgerson & Joyce, 2007, p. 63). Colleagues can become bullies in a variety of scenarios (Matthiesen, 2006, p. 65) which we can label as follows:

1. Scapegoat bullying (Thylefors, 1987, p. 20);
2. Sexual harassment (Einarsen, Raknes, & Matthiesen, 1993, p. 393);
3. Asymmetrical form of humor-oriented bullying

(Matthiesen & Einarsen, 2002, p. 53)

4. Work related stalking (Purcell, Pathe, & Mullen, 2004, p. 162).
5. Whistleblower retaliation bullying (Near & Miceli, 1996, p. 519).

The fact that participants of this study say colleagues are a source of workplace bullying is effectively confirmed by the aforementioned findings of existing literature. Camara for example demonstrates the role of colleagues in workplace bullying as follows:

...being reminded that you are an expatriate worker and should do things in a certain way...being called names; being spoken to behind your back, since you do not master the local language.

Some researchers presume that there is a difference between workplace bullying as it obtains among academic staff of university institutions on the one hand, and deviant student behaviors in classrooms and on campus on the other (Braxton & Bayer, 2004, p. 5). Nonetheless, other researchers think that student assessment of employees for staff promotions, reappointments, salary increases, and tenure decisions could be considered as workplace bullying (Neuman, 2004, p. 84). The participants of the study on their part explicitly state that students constitute a non-negligible source of workplace bullying, especially as 25% of the twenty respondents say so. Student bullying is illustrated by Epanty who says that:

I supervised a student who was so bad he could not just make it. The student then comes to me later and says; ‘Ntate (Sir), I think you are very unfair with me.’ ‘Ntate, so and so told me that my project should have passed.’

In relation to the findings of this study, the researcher makes the following conclusions in relation to sources of workplace bullying within the context of this research:

1. University restructuring is the main source of workplace bullying among all the twenty interviewed academic staff of the National University of Lesotho, who acted as participants of this study. The fact that university restructuring constitutes the main source of workplace among interviewees undoubtedly constitutes a major finding of this research. The role of university restructuring as a source of workplace bullying is confirmed both in the context of this study and in existing literature where it is associated to changing organizations and ineffective downsizing (Wheeler, Halbesleben & Shanine, 2010, p. 69).
2. According to UK National Workplace Bullying Advice Line (1996) and from frequencies associated to workplace

bullying sources on table 1, the researcher concludes that participants of this study experience the following types of workplace bullying:

- a. Corporate bullying through restructuring: all twenty interviewees of this study state university restructuring as source of workplace bullying.
- b. Hierarchical or vertical bullying: three-quarters of the twenty respondents say NUL management is source of their workplace bullying experience; three respondents indicate faculty and academic hierarchy as source of bullying; two interviewees say it is academic administrative hierarchy that is accountable for their workplace bullying hassles.
- c. Horizontal or peer bullying: one quarter of the twenty respondents of this study report that colleagues are source of workplace bullying they experience.
- d. Upward or bottom to top bullying: five of the twenty interviewees say students are the source of their workplace bullying experience.

In conclusion, the sources of workplace bullying in the context of this study as experienced and expressed by the twenty respondents of this study are contextual, situational, and individual.

CONCLUSION

There are multiple sources of workplace bullying which can be situational, organizational, individual and socio-economic (Chappell & Di Martino, 2000, p. 15; Leather *et al.*, 1999, p. 25). Six sub-themes emerged in relation to the sources of workplace bullying experienced by respondents of this study. These sources are in order of importance: university restructuring, management, colleagues, students, faculty and academic hierarchy, faculty administrative hierarchy. A major finding of this study is the fact that university restructuring is the most important source of workplace bullying among the respondents of this study. This is important for the researcher because this finding calls the attention of stakeholders of higher education, and especially decision makers to become aware of the links of university reforms with workplace bullying as psychological violence (Bansel & Davies, 2010, p. 136).

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