

## Power, subjectivity and context in workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment: insights from postpositivism

Workplace bullying encompasses subtle and/or obvious negative behaviours embodying aggression, hostility, intimidation and harm. Generally characterized by persistence, these unwelcome acts are displayed by an individual and/or group to another individual and/or group at work, privately and/or publicly, in real and/or virtual forms (D'Cruz, 2015). Alternatively known as workplace emotional abuse or workplace harassment (and referred to as such henceforth), workplace bullying falls under the rubric of dysfunctional and counterproductive workplace behaviours (Fox and Spector, 2005) and is captured by metaphors of nightmares, demons, slaves and heart-brokenness (Tracy *et al.*, 2006) which underscore its unbelievable, demoralizing, humiliating and damaging nature (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2005). It is not surprising, then, that workplace bullying is described as unethical behaviour which goes against universal social rules of acceptability (Ramsay *et al.*, 2011).

D'Cruz and Noronha (2016a, p. 409) have coined the term “*varieties of workplace bullying*” to describe the several types of emotional abuse at work known to date. These encompass the twin lines of *level of analysis* and *location of the source* of misbehaviour (D'Cruz, 2015, p. 72; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016a, p. 413). Accordingly, bullying could be *interpersonal* and/or *depersonalized* in terms of level (pp. 412-413) and *internal* and/or *external* to the workplace in terms of location (p. 414) (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016a). The concomitance of interpersonal bullying and depersonalized bullying is termed *compounded bullying* (D'Cruz *et al.*, 2014, p. 1454) while the concomitance of internal bullying and external bullying is termed *dual locus bullying* (D'Cruz *et al.*, forthcoming). In addition, each of these varieties of workplace bullying could be either in-situ/face-to-face/real and/or cyber/online/electronic in *form*, described as traditional and/or virtual bullying, respectively (D'Cruz, 2015, p. 8; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013a). Notwithstanding these variants which make workplace bullying a multi-faceted concept, it is important to note that *emotional abuse at work is always relational*, occurring in the backdrop of human interaction.

Power, subjectivity and context are essential attributes of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment and comprise the focus of this special issue. After discussing these three features and underscoring why postpositivism is especially relevant to fathom their subtleties and polemics, we elaborate on the five papers included in the special issue, highlighting each one's methodological details and substantive contributions.

## Studying power, subjectivity and context

Workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment are considered acts of power usually associated with perpetrators while targets are considered powerless (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). Not surprisingly, a sovereign notion of power as a zero-sum game is reified, with bullies and their allies being seen as powerful and targets and bystanders being viewed as powerless (Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Yet target coping demonstrates agency and seeks to achieve mastery (D'Cruz, 2016; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013b, 2017; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006). Further, organizational interventions could also help to rectify the situation and empower targets, in the process negating the position of the bully. In contrast, organizational interventions which side with perpetrators augment the latter's power, exacerbating targets' defencelessness (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2010, 2013a, 2017; Lewis and Rayner, 2003; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008). While power and subjectivity are considered to be critical hallmarks of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, subjectivity – emphasizing



individual perception – renders the experience a contested terrain. Target subjectivity is often downplayed in favour of behavioural measures and clinical parameters which have implications for the definition and identification of a negative experience as bullying (Hoel *et al.*, 2004). With the adoption of behavioural instruments being considered as addressing the challenges linked to self-labelling, target experiences diverging from the ones measured are discounted (D’Cruz, 2015). Consequently, only experiences which fulfill stated criteria qualify as bullying. Further, with targets’ view being seen as their interpretation of the situation (Omari and Sharma, 2016), the bully’s deniability dynamic is effective cover (Rayner *et al.*, 2002). Indeed, intent can only be attributed but never verified unless admitted to (D’Cruz, 2015). More recently, the contemporary neoliberal project is recognized as an underlying factor that triggers and fosters workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, often of a depersonalized nature through managerialism (D’Cruz, 2015; D’Cruz and Noronha, 2009; D’Cruz *et al.*, 2014). The pursuit of competitive advantage which engenders aggression and intimidation entails numerous implications for bullying at work (D’Cruz, 2015), underscoring the significance of studying context. Broadening the conceptualization of context to include other relevant but unexplored or understudied areas such as social relationships at work, new forms of employment, settings beyond the workplace and so on, all of which may be significant to the experience of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, is a worthy endeavour.

It is quite clear, then, that power, subjectivity and context each embody complexities that need to be unravelled if we are to better grasp, and thereby address, the phenomenon of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment. Yet, while recognizing that power, subjectivity and context independently inform situations of mistreatment, it must also be acknowledged that their influence need not be divorced from each other but can play out in various combinations. Moreover, power, subjectivity and context are not restricted to target perspectives alone but are relevant to all actors in situations of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment (such as bullies, bystanders, leaders, supervisors, managers, significant others, interventionists and so on) as well as to researchers involved in studying the phenomenon.

Undoubtedly, our understanding of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment stands to gain from problematizing received wisdom (Alvesson and Karreman, 2011), with implications for the foundations of the substantive area, which so far has been largely anchored in the positivist paradigm (Samnani, 2013). Ontology and epistemology are the basis for rigorous research (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). The *Naturwissenschaften* of positivism where objectivity, reductionism and contextual understanding prevail (Johnson, 2015) make this tradition ill-equipped to fully answer many questions about the social world (Prasad, 2005). The positivist contribution to research on workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, emphasizing pure data, immutable facts and true knowledge, therefore presents an important but partial picture (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Postpositivism, linked to *Geisteswissenschaften*, is the more appropriate tradition to produce knowledge about the social world (Prasad, 2005). As opposed to the unequivocal imprints of reality that positivism emphasizes, postpositivism, recognizing the influences of culture, language, selective perception, subjective forms of cognition, social conventions, politics, ideology, power and narration, speaks of the socially constructed nature of reality (Alvesson and Skoldberg, 2009). Being amenable to the irrational, paradoxical and complex nature of organizational life (Prasad, 2005), postpositivist traditions serve as ideal foundations to research the phenomenon of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, which highlights the emotive, polemical and complicated face of organizations. Indeed, postpositivism coheres with the human capacity for interpretation and therefore is better suited to answering questions concerning human action and social life (Prasad, 2005), with

serendipitous findings and new concepts and theories being likely to emerge (Miles and Huberman, 1994). It is therefore, particularly pertinent to uncover the nuances and complexities around power, subjectivity and context in relation to workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment.

#### **Furthering our understanding of power, subjectivity and context**

Each of the five papers included in this special issue speaks to the issue of power, subjectivity or context or combinations of these as we elaborate below, making unique contributions to the field of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment, on several counts. The thematic focus across the papers encompasses a wide range including teasing, upwards bullying, coping, complaints and redress procedures and marital repercussions. A geographic spread of Denmark, Australia, India, Ireland and Brazil covers four continents while the postpositivist traditions espoused span interpretivism, critical perspectives and systems thinking. Methodologically, ethnography, critical hermeneutic phenomenology and phenomenology are showcased. Data collection was completed through various methods such as participant observation, in-depth/conversational/semi-structured interviews of a face-to-face or telephonic nature, focus groups and genograms.

Mille Mortensen and Charlotte Andreas Baarts report a hospital-based ethnography in Denmark which captures organizational teasing practice and highlights its linkage with workplace bullying, building on Hogh *et al.*'s (2005) earlier finding that teasing at work predicted mental health problems in the long term. Mille conducted a five month participant observation at the hospital, followed by focus groups and in-depth individual interviews. Adopting the frame of interpretivism to engage with power, subjectivity and context and referring to the workplace humour literature, Mille and Charlotte invoke fluctuate bullying to portray how the teasing practice marks interactions at work such that, despite experiencing and recognizing its adverse consequences, all organizational members participate in and perpetuate it, alternating between the roles of bullies and targets with the result that there are no bystanders. While the use of participant-based ethnography allows the setting and the negative acts to be depicted in a detailed manner, it simultaneously throws light on how derogatory behaviours operate as reciprocal regulation mechanisms in the contextual backdrop of work. The teasing practice is entwined with power relations at work, holding implications for how organizational members negotiate their social status. Mille and Charlotte's paper evidences D'Cruz's (2015), D'Cruz and Noronha's (2013a, 2016a, 2018) and D'Cruz *et al.*'s (forthcoming) assertions that the conceptualization of workplace bullying continues to evolve.

Eileen Patterson, Sara Branch, Michelle Barker and Sheryl Ramsay use an interpretive lens and draw on the organizational power literature to further develop the nascent concept of upwards bullying at work, with a specific emphasis on deciphering the associated power dynamics. Using semi-structured individual interviews and thematic analysis, Eileen, Sara, Michelle and Sheryl report the subjective experiences of Australian participants from a range of public sector organizations. Their findings, depicting a power cycle, show how targeted superiors lose legitimate power while being subjected to the coercive and structural (referent and informational) power of their bullying subordinates. The paper illuminates power dynamics in the substantive area in several ways. It highlights why and how subordinates can exercise power over their bosses despite the latter's formal authority. Such a situation implies that power dynamics around targeted superiors are complicated by a double loss – that of positional authority and due to the harmful effects of being bullied. Advancing Branch *et al.*'s (2007) conceptualization of upwards bullying, as this paper has done, is crucial in the contemporary world of work and employment where individualism and entrepreneurialism are seen as important means of moving ahead (Brophy and

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de Peuter, 2007; Cohen, 2015; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016b) and could lead employees to engage in abusive forms of behaviour with their superiors.

Premilla D'Cruz and Ernesto Noronha, based on a combination of interpretivism and critical perspectives, use critical hermeneutic phenomenology to study workplace cyberbullying on online labour markets. Examining target coping as a means to mastery and well-being, Premilla and Ernesto's focus on digital workplaces brings a new context into the substantive area since, thus far, insights into emotional abuse in employment situations come from conventional workplaces. By locating online labour markets within the capitalist project, they add another layer to contextual underpinnings. Implementing a case study design, data gathered from Indian freelancers via conversational interviews and analyzed thematically captured targets' subjective perceptions. Undertaking ideology-critique through the psychological/behavioural lens of coping theory brought in a sceptical stance (Prasad, 2002), privileging micro and macro level analyses, through which targets' actual and potential pathways to power and control could be traced. Addressing power, subjectivity and context, the paper unravels the nuances of workplace cyberbullying beyond the extant literature which has attended to virtual abuse in conventional workplaces (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013a, 2017; Farley *et al.*, 2015; Gardner *et al.*, 2016). Premilla and Ernesto show how critical hermeneutic phenomenology, in linking individual schema with social ideologies and pointing out means by which well-being at the micro level and emancipation at the macro level can both be realized, embodies political and applied dimensions and opens new doors to understand and address power imbalances and inequalities.

Patricia Mannix-McNamara, Kathleen Fitzpatrick, Sarah MacCurtain and Michael O'Brien describe bullied Irish school teachers' and principals' experiences of seeking redress. Anchoring their study in the critical perspectives of Foucault and Giddens and espousing a phenomenological approach, Patricia, Kathleen, Sarah and Michael speak to the interface with power, subjectivity and context. Through in-depth individual interviews and interpretive phenomenological analysis, targets' attempts at asserting agency were documented. While targets sought redress in their bid to regain mastery, fear and diffidence marked their efforts, with further victimization being commonly reported. Complaints procedures served as means of agency for targets in their quest to resolve the bullying situation and as technologies of power for bullies who launched counterattacks against the former. In detailing how power unfolds across the protagonists and highlighting the culture of collusion within workplaces, Patricia, Kathleen, Sarah and Michael describe targets' resistance within the context of complex social interactions at work. Through its meticulous attention to the power dynamics which characterize redress, this paper extends the limited available literature in the substantive area about the ineffectiveness of complaints procedures (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2010; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2006; Thirlwall, 2015). In so doing, it reinforces Morgan's (2007) image of organizations as political systems, lending credence to Ferris's (2009) stance that top management's commitment is pivotal to the amelioration and elimination of bullying at work.

Priscila Gasperin Pellegrini, Júlia Gonçalves and Suzana da Rosa Tolfo have engaged the frame of systems thinking as a new-paradigmatic approach and the psychological mechanism of spillover drawing on the family studies literature to show how the marital relationship of targets of workplace bullying and their partners is impacted. Examining the effects of workplace emotional abuse on significant others beyond the workplace is only recently gaining ground (Rodríguez-Munoz *et al.*, 2017). While the role of relatives and friends as sources of social support to targets has been well documented (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2010, 2012, 2018; Lutgen-Sandvik, 2008), the relational boundarylessness of workplace cyberbullying has been found to render targets' families into victims as well (D'Cruz and Noronha, 2013b). Priscila, Julia and Suzana, adopting a case study design which includes

targets from different sectors in Brazil, use both individual and couple semi-structured interviews and genograms in a two stage process. They show how the marital relationship moves from distant to hostile to harmonious as the targets and their partners negotiate the experience of workplace bullying. Priscila, Julia and Suzana's paper brings attention to an important context in the substantive area, portraying it as a dynamic entity and capturing how its fluid nature entwined with participants' subjectivity to influence the manner in which workplace emotional abuse unfolded and was experienced beyond the confines of the organization.

### Conclusion

The purpose of researching workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment is to find appropriate means to tackle the phenomenon. It is only through an in-depth and comprehensive understanding of the problem that effective intervention addressing the intricacies of the issue can be developed. Workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment is multi-faceted, existing at different levels and forms within and beyond organizations and involving several actors who influence the causes, course and outcomes of the situation. Measures to deal with the phenomenon in terms of primary, secondary and tertiary prevention are discussed in the substantive area, taking prescriptive, descriptive or evaluative positions (see, e.g. Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2011; Catley *et al.*, 2017; D'Cruz and Noronha, 2016a; Fox and Stallworth, 2009; Hanley and O'Rourke, 2016; Hodgins *et al.*, 2014; Lippel, 2010; Saam, 2010; Tehrani, 2012; Vartia and Leka, 2011). Yet nuanced insights into workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment are crucial to provide a holistic and robust foundation to intervention endeavours. Together, both positivism and, in particular, postpositivism have much to offer the pursuit of this agenda and must be jointly considered in the quest to ameliorate and eliminate situations of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment. The papers included in the special issue, engaging power, subjectivity and context so pertinent to the unfolding of the phenomenon, are a step in this direction. Through their specific thematic focus, undergirded by a specific postpositivist tradition and its attendant methodological imperatives and methods toolkit, the papers illuminate and present to us the complexity of workplace bullying, emotional abuse and harassment. In so doing, they contribute to efforts to manage this extreme workplace social stressor.

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