

THE BULLYING OF APPRENTICES AND TRAINEES IN THE WORKPLACE: A REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

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This paper reviews the literature of the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees in the workplace. Apprentices and trainees may be considered vulnerable targets of bullying and harassment because of their age, inexperience and hierarchical status. Despite a plethora of media reports and anecdotal evidence of apprentices and trainees as targets of workplace bullying, very few empirical studies have been conducted on this sample of employees. In addition to reviewing the existing international literature, the authors highlight the importance of further empirical research on the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees.

The bullying of apprentices and trainees in the workplace: A review of the literature

ABSTRACT

This paper reviews the literature of the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees in the workplace. Apprentices and trainees may be considered vulnerable targets of bullying and harassment because of their age, inexperience and hierarchical status. Despite a plethora of media reports and anecdotal evidence of apprentices and trainees as targets of workplace bullying, very few empirical studies have been conducted on this sample of employees. In addition to reviewing the existing international literature, the authors highlight the importance of further empirical research on the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees.

Keywords: Interpersonal behaviour, Apprenticeships, Traineeships, Socialisation

Workplace bullying is a serious problem. It has received increasing attention over the last decade and has become a salient issue of concern to both organisations and society. The most recent interest in workplace bullying in Australia has stemmed from the case of victimised teenager who took her own life – prompting subsequent legislative change (Butcher, 2011). Bullying can occur in any workplace. It is not confined to any particular job, industry or sector. Bullying at work can take several forms, some of which (e.g., physical violence) are more obvious to onlookers than are others (e.g., withholding information). The majority of the Australian public were probably first made aware of workplace bullying after learning of young ‘blue collar’ apprentices being tormented physically in various industries (e.g., Kenway, Fitzclarence & Hasluck 2000). Despite widespread interest in such events and reports, only a limited number of studies with a focus on apprentices and trainees have been conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Workplace bullying defined

There have been several definitions of workplace bullying provided in the literature, there is therefore no universally-accepted single definition of bullying. Most definitions of workplace bullying focus on three key themes: (i) the negative behaviour must occur with some frequency over a period of time; (ii) the actions are unwanted by the victim; and (iii) the victim finds it difficult to defend

themselves, usually as a result of an imbalance of power (Einarsen, Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2011). Einarsen et al. (2011: 22) provide a comprehensive definition:

Bullying at work means harassing, offending, or socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work. In order for the label bullying (or mobbing) to be applied to a particular activity, interaction or process, the bullying behaviour has to occur repeatedly and regularly (e.g., weekly) and over a period of time (e.g., about six months). Bullying is an escalating process in the course of which the person confronted ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts. A conflict cannot be called bullying if the incident is an isolated event or if two parties of approximately equal strength are in conflict.

Workplace bullying is described also as a process in which a person is subjected to a series of systematic stigmatising attacks from a fellow employee(s), which are an infringement of the victim's civil rights (Quine, 2001). Bullying is referred to similarly as a situation in which someone is subjected to recurrent negative or hostile acts and behaviour that are oppressing (Vartia, 2001). In most definitions of bullying, the intent of the perpetrator is not central to determining whether or not bullying has occurred, rather the perspective of the target is most important (Hoel, Rayner & Cooper, 1999; Liefoghe & Mackenzie Davey, 2003).

One reason for the inadequate understanding of workplace bullying is the tendency of the media to label as 'bullying' infrequent and extremely violent crimes that occur in the workplace. This tendency creates a misleading impression of workplace bullying and neglects totally the more prevalent and subtle forms of behaviour that constitute bullying.

Apprentices and trainees as a 'risk group' of bullying

There has been research that has included discussions of the experiences of apprentices and trainees regarding bullying and harassment, providing sufficient evidence of their potential vulnerability to such behaviours. In one such study, it was noted that an apprentice was repeatedly the target of unfair criticism about his/her performance and also physical violence (Turney 2002). There is also evidence

of apprentices and trainees being sexually harassed (Fawole, Ajuwon & Osungbade 2005; Roscigno, Lopez & Hodson 2009). Apprentices and trainees can be considered to be 'soft targets' with limited potential to defend themselves.

The literature on workplace bullying places a heavy emphasis on the imbalance of power or, more specifically, situations in which the targets find it difficult to defend themselves against the bullying (e.g., Einarsen 2000; Hoel, Zapf & Cooper 2002). Five types of social power are outlined by French and Raven (1968) – reward power, coercive power, legitimate power, referent power, and expert power – the first three are powers that stem from a person's position (i.e., positional power) whilst the last two forms stem from the individual's characteristics (i.e., personal power).

An imbalance of power and status is obviously a relevant factor in the bullying of apprentices/trainees (Roscigno et al. 2009), particularly positional power. The control that managers have over rewards and punishment are seen as key elements of power (Aquino 2000) and apprentices and trainees are at the lowest level of the organisational hierarchy. In some organisations, apprentices are outranked (formally and informally) by low-skilled workers (Tanggaard & Elmholdt 2008). The results of numerous studies have suggested that bullies are often managers or senior managers (Rayner, Hoel & Cooper 2002). It must be stressed, however, that bullying exists only in situations where the coercion is perceived as being inappropriate.

Bullying may also occur between people who have the same hierarchical status in the organisation. In some circumstances the bully might even be lower in the organisational hierarchy than the victim – this is known as 'upwards' bullying (Branch, Ramsay & Barker, 2007). The imbalance of power in these situations may come in the form of personal power, meaning the bully is more influential in terms of personal power. Although some conflicts emerge where the parties involved have an equal balance of power, this balance is unlikely to remain stable over time (Einarsen et al. 2011). It should be noted that not all studies indicate that low status employees are more vulnerable to bullying than those of high status (Zapf, Escartin, Einarsen, Hoel & Vartia 2011); nonetheless, both formal and informal power structures continue to be a central theme in the workplace bullying literature.

Young employees – who tend to be relatively junior in organisational hierarchies – can be considered to be ‘soft targets’ for bullying and harassment behaviours (Djurkovic, McCormack & Casimir 2004), while apprentices and trainees in particular have been noted to be a risk group (Mathisen, Einarsen & Mykletun 2008; Vickerstaff 2003). The results of studies in the United Kingdom have indicated that young employees reported the highest level of bullying and it has been suggested that this could relate to the relatively young age that such employees enter the workforce (Rayner et al. 2002). There is also a relationship between age and power in that older employees are more likely than younger workers to hold positions at senior levels of organisations (Rayner et al. 2002). Similarly, Purdy and Levy (2010) reported that young women are particularly vulnerable to sexual harassment from employers or those in senior management positions.

There is evidence that young workers tend to not report workplace bullying and harassment. For example, in a study of workplace bullying in a sample of university students (with an average of 22 years) employed on either a full-time or part-time basis, Djurkovic, McCormack and Casimir (2005) found that the formal reporting of bullying behaviours was the reaction that was used least by targets; their most common response was to avoid/ignore the offender.

Empirical studies on the bullying of apprentices and trainees

Few studies have focused exclusively on apprentices/trainees. Of the studies that the current authors have found, a high proportion is based in the hospitality sector. Within this literature review, the hospitality sector will therefore be examined first, followed by studies from various other sectors.

Hospitality sector: It has been suggested that bullying and abuse have become an expected part of the work culture among employees of commercial kitchens and restaurants (Bloisi and Hoel 2008; Mathisen et al. 2008). Furthermore, the results of a study conducted in the United Kingdom indicate that in kitchens status is a significant determinant of how staff are treated, such that those at lower levels are the targets of aggression, physical violence and exploitation. It was also noted that the behaviour may be tolerated if work performance is considered to be high – for example the bullying

behaviour of the head chef of lower level employees is tolerated if the chef performs well overall (Johns & Menzel 1999).

It has also been suggested that national culture plays a role in influencing what specific behaviours are regarded as acceptable and unacceptable. In a study comparing sexual harassment in France and Sweden (White & Hardemo 2002), differences were found to exist between the two nationalities in attitudes as to what constitutes acceptable behaviour and in the likelihood of targets reporting such behaviours. Education of employees in appropriate workplace behaviours and the development of specific workplace policies are important in reducing the incidences of such behaviours (Schneider, Pryor & Fitzgerald 2011; White & Hardemo 2002).

In another study based in the restaurant sector, Mathisen et al. (2008) identified apprentices as being a 'risk group'. The results of Mathisen et al. indicated that apprentices reported being the target of bullying behaviours more than did other employees in the restaurant in which they work.

Other sectors: In an interview-based study of apprentices and trainees in regional Victoria, Snell and Hart (2008) found that bullying was a common theme among apprentices and trainees who raised issues about an unpleasant working environment. In a study based in the United Kingdom of people who left school between 1945-75 to undertake an apprenticeship (Vickerstaff 2003), several participants described scenarios that they thought would not occur nowadays. Several also suggested that as adults they would now be better able to 'stand their ground' than they could as young apprentices, which was a time in which they felt more vulnerable.

In a study of violence against female apprentices in Nigeria, Fawole et al (2005) found that interventions in the form of skills training workshops, sensitisation training and the development of educational materials led to significant reductions in the incidents of violence and sexual forms of violence. There was also a significant increase in the proportion of victims of violence who sought formal redress.

Trainee teachers have reported bullying on their school placements from Heads of Department in the school as well as assigned 'mentors' (Maguire 2001). In a study conducted in England, younger age cohorts, particularly females, reported the highest level of bullying. This result may potentially

explained by several factors, such as having relatively little experience of the pressures and demands of full-time employment, being less able to distinguish between constructive criticism and workplace bullying, and being less familiar with performance appraisal systems than experienced teachers. It is also noteworthy that Maguire's (2001) study found evidence of the bullying of trainee teachers at teacher training institutions.

According to Turney (2002), trade apprentices are subjected to forms of bullying that are 'working class' and are likely to involve violence or threats of violence; the trainee professional is however subjected to verbal criticism and intimidation that is subtle, insidious and almost impossible to detect.

In a study of the relationship between assessment and learning in apprenticeships, Tanggaard and Elmholdt (2008) discuss the findings of previous research, noting that some apprentices report that their relationships with other apprentices and unskilled workers are a significant source of distress, due to the spreading of gossip and rumours or being spoken to in a harsh tone of voice. The gossip may be seen as a way of 'trailing' the apprentice and a way of reinforcing their low hierarchical status. Some apprentices, moreover, see such behaviour as an inevitable aspect of work assessment (Tanggaard & Elmholdt, 2008).

Another area that has been studied is the health and medical professionals. For example, in a study of psychiatry trainees (Ahmer, Yousafzai, Siddiqi, Faruqi, Khan and Zuberi 2009), it was reported that most psychiatry trainees experienced bullying behaviours and the perpetrator was most often the consultant: similar results have been found for samples of trainee doctors (Bairy, Thirumalaikolundusubramanian, Sivagnanam, Saraswathi, Sachidananda & Shalini 2007; Imran, Jawaid, Haider & Masood 2010). Turney (2002: 142) argues that the nature of the "master-apprentice relationship in such professions is sacrosanct and immune to intervention... there is no allowable margin for error. The master cannot be wrong. Internal regulation of individual members is integral to the maintenance of professional power."

Outcomes of the bullying of apprentices and trainees

As noted earlier, Mathisen et al. (2008) found that apprentices reported being the target of bullying behaviours more than did other employees in the restaurant in which they work. Mathisen et al. (2008) also reported that bullying had a direct relationship with intention to quit the job, and that this relationship was mediated by job satisfaction, burnout (cynicism) and calculative (continuance) commitment. Interestingly, bullying was not associated with intention to leave the profession, which suggests that targets would either prefer to gain employment at a different restaurant, or are not confident in their employment prospects in alternate industries. Furthermore, the researchers found that bullying also had a negative impact on bystanders as well as the actual targets.

In addition to intention to leave, actual turnover of apprentices and trainees has been found to be an outcome of bullying and harassment (Snell & Hart 2008; Turney 2002). Snell and Hart (2008) argue that unpleasant working conditions contribute to non-completion of apprenticeships; workplace problems (including safety hazard issues, abuse and bullying) was the single most common reason for apprentices and trainees to withdraw from their apprenticeship or training.

In examining the literature on the outcomes associated with the bullying of apprentices and trainees, such as those noted above, there seems a general consistency with outcomes that have been noted with broader samples of employees. It is reasonable to assume that the consequences of bullying that have been discussed elsewhere in the literature – both individual consequences (e.g., diminished physical and mental health: Høgh, Mikkelsen & Hansen, 2011) and organisational consequences (e.g., absenteeism: Hoel, Sheehan, Cooper & Einarsen, 2011) – apply also to situations where apprentices and trainees are the targets.

DISCUSSION

Apprentices and trainees are a group with characteristics that render them particularly prone to workplace bullying and harassment. This elevated risk is due to a range of factors including their lack of positional power and relative youth. Given the increasing awareness in society of workplace bullying and harassment, it is perhaps somewhat surprising that relatively few studies have focussed on this group as the target of such behaviour.

The studies of the experiences of apprentices and trainees that have been undertaken have been concentrated in particular industries and occupational groups. These include hospitality and the medical profession. It seems that both these sectors have features that render them particularly prone to such behaviour. In the case of hospitality, behavioural norms and expectations are believed to create a climate that commonly tolerates bullying behaviours, while in the medical profession an attitude that does not encourage questioning of the mentor may likewise facilitate the acceptance of such behaviour.

The outcomes of the bullying of apprentices and trainees include diminished job satisfaction and general health and increased cynicism, intention to leave and turnover. In Australia, bullying has also been identified as a major contributor to apprentices and trainees reporting workplace problems and resultant non-completion of their training. Given the well-documented skill shortages, such a waste of potential talent and learning is costly for employers, the apprentices/trainees themselves and for society.

Kempster (2006) noted that, according to some individuals in some organisations the 'bully' approach was considered to be successful, and that the 'ends justify the means'. It was also noted, however, that this once-accepted management practice is no longer considered to be acceptable. Kempster (2006) adopts an 'apprenticeship' as a metaphor for leaders in organisations – that leaders in organisations influence how others behave when they reach senior positions. Apprentices are in a socialisation process, so they may then carry out these behaviours on other apprentices in future (Mathisen et al., 2008), which continues the cycle of the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees.

Overall, organisations with widely divergent status and power gaps between employers and employees should be particularly sensitive to the possibility of bullying and enact specific policies and processes to prevent it (Roscigno et al. 2008). It has been argued that, in such organisations, workplace bullying and harassment can be most effectively countered by guardians (e.g., effective unions, workplace policy, the legal system) and the setting-up of grievance channels, whilst the prevention of bullying remains the ultimate aim (Roscigno et al 2008).

Given the above review of the literature, it seems that research that attempts to identify relevant antecedents in different industry and occupational settings involving apprentices and trainees is warranted. If such antecedents can be identified, it may be possible to develop more effective and tailored prevention policies. Such research is particularly important given that apprentices and trainees are a vulnerable group and are possibly less likely than established employees to report bullying or harassment. It would seem imperative that, whatever methodology is used in such research, the perspectives of apprentices and trainees are included: their experiences are likely to enlighten theoretical development and application, and aid in effective policy development.

Concluding comments

There is a need for a more comprehensive and thorough understanding of the phenomenon of workplace bullying of apprentices and trainees: This need is heightened by the organisational and individual effects of bullying on targets and bystanders, as well as by evidence that non-completion of apprenticeships is a common outcome from such behaviour. In order to gain a better understanding of this phenomenon, more empirical research, both qualitative and quantitative, needs to be conducted on the bullying and harassment of apprentices and trainees. Such studies can potentially shed light on the dynamics of workplaces in which apprentices and trainees are employed. Given the aforementioned reasons why the apprentices and trainees may be considered to be particularly 'at risk', it is important that the issue be better understood and subsequently addressed – only then will the development of effective policy and procedures to counter this phenomenon for this risk group be possible.

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