

Belittled

The state of play on bullying

Eva Cox and James Goodman

Abused, ignored, sidelined, belittled. It's the human face of a systemic problem. Eva Cox and James Goodman report on a recent study of workplace bullying that highlights its effects on those being bullied, and the rather piecemeal administrative efforts to deal with it so far.

In the last ten years the specific issue of bullying or harassment at work, as against discrimination, has emerged as a new field of concern for industrial relations scholars. In Britain, the first comprehensive practical book on workplace bullying was published in 1992, and gained a widespread readership (Adams and Crawford, 1992; Leifoooghe 2004). In Australia, a practical guide to addressing the problem, *Bullying, from backyard to boardroom* ran to a second edition (McCarthy et al, 2001). A mapping of the international debate, 'Bullying and emotional abuse in the workplace', published in 2002, brought together research from Australia, South Africa, America, and Europe, developing a common agenda for the study of workplace bullying (Hanfling et al 2002).

As work pressures intensify in universities, the problem of workplace bullying and what to do about it has risen up the agenda. Within the university system, and elsewhere, bullying and emotional abuse is widely associated with greater intensity of work, ratcheting stress levels and prevalent managerialism (Salin 2003). Clearly the pressures are mutually reinforcing. In a survey of 5,300 employees conducted by the University of Manchester in 2000, 47% stated they had been bullied over the previous five years, accounting for up to fifty per cent of workplace stress (Hoel and Cooper 2000). In Australia and internationally, the National Tertiary Education Union (NTEU) noted, there is 'an alarming and increasing level of stress amongst university staff' (Winefield et al 2002, p, 95). In the UK researchers have found a 'new public management' in the universities that escalates stress levels, reduces professional autonomy and sharpens workplace conflict (Chandler et al

2002). NTEU's own 2002 survey of occupational stress found that reduced autonomy, increased job insecurity and work pressure all contributed to stress levels, leaving fifty per cent of university staff at risk of work-related psychological illness.

Specific studies of bullying in universities, though, are not common. So the small survey reported in this paper, conducted at an Australian university, is useful because of its implications for university policy. Given some of the changes proposed by the Federal Government for university employment, questions of good workplace relationships and resolution of bullying practices become even more important, particularly if workplace agreements are to be pushed onto staff.

When the research reported in this paper was conducted in 2000, the University had no explicit policy in place to address workplace bullying. The latest Enterprise Agreement, signed in 2004, outlines an intention to develop an anti-bullying policy. There was also an associated statement in the Agreement, that bullying behaviour 'aimed to demean, humiliate or intimidate' has 'no place' in the workplace. The survey played a significant role in assisting the local NTEU branch in gaining this commitment. It highlights what can happen in a university when bullying is not officially acknowledged as a serious issue, and serves as a reminder of the importance of a bully-free working environment in the daily lives of academics and general staff.

Bullying: evidence and obligation

There are many definitions of workplace bullying. Key aspects include its duration, character, subjective effects, intentionality,

and its organisational as well as inter-personal logic. Bullying is generally understood as a product of the workplace context and organisational process as much as inter-personal relations. There is considerable variation though in the definition of bullying, as to whether it must occur over a relatively long period of time, what exact behaviours constitute bullying behaviour, the extent to which an imbalance of power must exist between perpetrators and victims, how subjective emotional effects can be taken into account, whether bullying must be intended or specific to a person or group of people, and the extent to which the organisation or the perpetrator should be called to account. The editors of *Bullying and Emotional Abuse in the Workplace* arrive at a relatively limited definition of bullying at work, as 'harassing, offending, socially excluding someone or negatively affecting someone's work tasks' (Hanfling et al 2002, p. 15). For them the activity must be regular and on-going for at least six months, in the course of which the person 'ends up in an inferior position and becomes the target of systematic negative social acts'. Thus, an isolated event does not constitute bullying, nor does a conflict between two parties of 'approximate equal "strength"' (Hanfling et al 2002, p. 15).

The NTEU approach, in place from 2002, is somewhat broader, in defining bullying as any behaviour aimed to demean, humiliate or intimidate employees either as individuals or as a group (NTEU 2002). More specifically, bullying behaviour may include: continual unjustified and unnecessary comments about an employee, their work or capacity for work; comments aimed to discredit or undermine an employee or devalue their work; continual exclusion of an employee or group of employees from normal conversation, work assignments, work-related social activities and networks; the making of derogatory or intimidating remarks; unreasonable demands and impossible targets; phone calls, letters or emails which are threatening, abusive or offensive; taking deliberate advantage of a lack of understanding or knowledge; constant, intrusive surveillance or monitoring; the unnecessary intrusion into the personal relationships of an employee; restrictive and petty work rules; being intentionally overworked and being forced to stay back or perform additional tasks; open or implied threats of demotion, dismissal or disciplinary action; emotional blackmail; and constant criticism or denigration of employee(s) in front of others.

NTEU policy states that employers have a clear responsibility to maintain a safe work environment and thus prevent bullying. The policy calls for university managers to define and condemn workplace bullying, and establish effective pro-

cedures for dealing with complaints, including arbitration and penalties. Information on the policy should be widely available, with training on workplace bullying for all staff, especially those in management roles.

The scope and impact of bullying behaviour has been acknowledged as a serious workplace issue by both industry bodies and trade unions. In 2000 for instance, the London Chamber of Commerce highlighted the problem, citing 'overworked and overstressed managers' as the most common workplace bully (LCC 2001). In Australia in 2002 advertising company TMP Worldwide surveyed 5,000 Australian workers, finding eighteen per cent of workers had been bullied, with 10% experiencing violence at work. Twenty-nine per cent believed that over the previous ten years employers had grown more hostile. The survey found bullying to be most

prevalent in white collar jobs, especially in government (22%) and in the legal profession (33%). The head of human resources at TMP commented, 'longer hours and greater workloads mean we spend more time in the office and people are less likely to control outbursts and stress-related behaviour' (Murphy 2002).

Also in 2002 the Australian Council of Trade Unions launched its own national survey of workplace bullying, which attracted 3,000

responses (ACTU 2000). Over half of these experienced intimidating behaviour in the workplace and a third reported abusive language. Of those who had been bullied, over 70% stated that the source was a manager - and 40% were afraid of speaking-up against abuses. Respondents reported a range of symptoms, from stress, anger, depression, powerlessness, fearfulness and physical discomfort and pain. Sixty per cent stated bullying was affecting their home life and forty per cent had taken time off work due to bullying. Just 18% stated something was being done about the problem.

The first survey of bullying at an Australian university was undertaken by the NTEU at Deakin (Deakin NTEU 2001). The survey collected 76 responses, 66 complaining of bullying. Staff reported multiple forms of bullying - intimidation being most common, along with pressure to accept excessive workloads. Half of the respondents stated they were fearful of speaking out. There was pressure on staff to stay behind to finish work, either paid or unpaid, and pressure to reduce academic standards. The majority of bullies were the superiors of those they bully. Almost all those who endured bullying experienced multiple effects on their emotional and physical health and two thirds of the respondents had taken time off because of bullying. Deakin NTEU added 'unless bullying is

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stopped, the university may find that legal costs and fines will add to the other financial costs of bullying’.

These findings, confirmed in large part by the survey discussed here, reflect the particular logic or work in the higher education sector. In other sectors, the logic of bullying can be quite different. In 2004 for instance, a survey was conducted in a health care organisation in NSW, which found 50% of respondents had experienced bullying, but that the main source was fellow workers and clients rather than managers or supervisors (Rutherford and Rissel, 2004). Partly reflecting NTEU policy, but sometimes predating it, anti-bullying policies are now in place at a number of universities in Australia. The definition varies. At the University of Western Sydney, a policy in place since 1998 simply defines bullying as any action that ‘intimidates, degrades or humiliates’. The same definition has been used at Macquarie University since 2000. UNSW is more specific, listing ‘sarcasm, threats, verbal abuse, shouting, coercion, punitive behaviour, isolation, blaming, ‘ganging up’, constant unconstructive criticism, deliberately withholding information needed to exercise a work role, repeated refusal of requests for leave or training without adequate explanation’.

Several universities require managers to establish preventative measures, on pain of disciplinary action. The University of Sydney recognises that tolerance of bullying behaviour may ‘amount to negligence and a breach of the University’s duty of care to its employees and students’, requiring managers to ‘make every reasonable effort to prevent harassment occurring’. Likewise, the University of Wollongong outlines a legal responsibility to take ‘reasonable steps’ to prevent bullying while Southern Cross University identifies a responsibility ‘for harassment prevention... in all performance agreements’.

Bullying is also on the agenda as an occupational health and safety (OHS) issue. In NSW, bullying comes under the jurisdiction of Workcover, which administers OHS legislation. The NSW *OHS Act 2000* states as an objective to ‘promote a safe and healthy environment for people at work that protects them from injury and illness and that is adapted to their physiological and psychological needs’ (Part 1, Section 3c). The 2001 OHS regulation states employers are required to identify hazards arising from the ‘potential for workplace violence’. Workcover has interpreted this as requiring strategies to prevent verbal and emotional abuse or threats, and other forms of bullying and intimidation – obligations that fall on individuals and managers as well as organisations. Even where there is no evidence of bullying, employers are required to initiate consultations with employees about how effective consultative frameworks may be established to ensure compliance with the legislation. Workcover states that employers are ‘liable because workplace bullying and harassment is seen from the OHS perspective as a foreseeable risk which must be managed for an employer to discharge the duty of care under the terms of the OHS Act’ (Workcover 1999a, p. 7).

Workcover has developed a range of resources addressing workplace bullying, including ‘legal consequences’, and ‘prevention strategies’. Where there are signs of bullying in the workplace, involving grievances and staff absence due to grievance-related stress, employers are under a direct legal obligation to introduce prevention strategies. In its paper, *Legal consequences of bullying*, Workcover NSW clarifies that all employers ‘have a duty to ensure health, safety and welfare at work’, and this includes a set of obligations on workplace bullying (Workcover 1999b). In 2003 Worksafe Victoria released a guidance note on bullying, requiring ‘statements of commitment’ against bullying, jointly developed between the employer, OHS and union representatives, guaranteeing confidentiality, rapid resolution of disputes and regular monitoring (Worksafe Victoria 2003).

The staff survey discussed here was carried out at an Australian university with no explicit anti-bullying policy. In 2002 the NTEU branch of the University took a case of bullying to the Administrative Decisions Tribunal (ADT), after attempts to mediate the grievance both within the university and via the Anti-Discrimination Board. The University settled the matter before the hearing on terms favourable to the member. The time from the lodging of the formal grievance to settlement was about two years. The experience highlighted the issue on campus, suggesting the need for a broader investigation.

Survey results

In October 2000, the NTEU branch at the University distributed a survey about the experience and attitudes to certain types of unacceptable behaviour to all staff. Approximately two thousand survey forms were distributed and 191 were returned. This is a return rate of 9.5%, which is higher than most such self administered distributed surveys, which often have a return rate of less than five per cent. As it was a self selected sample of respondents, it is more likely to have been filled in by those affected by bullying and cannot be statistically accurate in assessing the possible extent of such behaviour.

Summary of findings

The survey instrument sought views from staff members of their experiences at work, by asking whether they had specific experiences of types of incidents which had been defined by the NTEU as possible bullying. The results reported enough examples of poor workplace experiences to assume that these were not isolated incidents and raise questions about workplace cultures. In another question, 100 respondents disagreed with the statement that they had not experienced bullying, the first time this term was actually used, while 91 said they agreed. It is possible that some of these had had experiences that could also have been defined as bullying, even if they did not define them as such.

While it is not possible to use this survey to assess overall levels of unpleasant and unacceptable workplace behaviours, the results show that not only are there many incidents, but that, of those that are reported, many are not been handled adequately. Where issues were reported there were indications that most were either resolved too slowly, or not at all. Some people avoided reporting for fear of repercussions and a small number reported victimisation. The types of behaviour identified in the open-ended questions quoted below offered some descriptions of actual bullying experienced.

Even if one takes the actual 100 respondents as the minimum cases of bullying, this number is far too many. It would be 5% of possible respondents, if one assumed that all bullied staff members who received the questionnaire answered, which is not likely. This number confirms that bullying is happening and should be taken seriously. The good news was that identified disadvantaged target groups did not report higher rates of bullying so the problem is general and not one to be resolved through anti-discrimination procedures. It requires more general provisions to be introduced to change cultures and make complaints procedures more effective.

The survey shows that, in the main, managers and supervisors are the perpetrators of bullying, although colleagues also contribute to the problem. Bullying may involve discrimination, but the survey suggests no specific social group is especially affected but it's across the board. The responses demonstrate that bullying has significant effects on staff, and on their capacity to work. Nineteen per cent of respondents reported ill-health associated with bullying behaviour with a third reporting emotional stress; 10% took time off work and more than a quarter had considered leaving their job, with women much more likely than men to consider this option.

Eighteen per cent of respondents raised their matter and it was resolved, though sometimes not promptly; sixteen per cent raised the matter and nothing happened; eleven per cent did not raise the matter for fear of the consequences; and most worryingly, in seven cases (4%) the matter was raised and the complainant was victimised. This has consequences for others who may not be prepared to raise the issues, or even answer questionnaires.

These findings are limited by the numbers, but can be read as a pilot study but one which indicates problems with workplace culture and dispute resolution mechanisms.

Details of the study

(i) The respondents

The respondents included 106 general staff, 65 academic staff and 20 unidentified respondents. There were 128 female respondents and 43 males and again 20 with no response. Nearly half did not reveal their employment status, but of the rest 73 were on continuing contracts and 30 on fixed term

ones. Only four casuals responded and 84 failed to state their category. There were 22 from non-English speaking backgrounds (NESB), five Aboriginal or Torres Strait Islanders (ATSI) and seven respondents with a disability. While not representative of the staff, it was a reasonable cross section and indicative of the problems occurring

Respondents were asked a range of questions about particular behaviours they may have experienced, as well as how bullying behaviour, affected personal and financial costs for staff and the university.

Unreasonable demands and targets	25
Unreasonably restrictive or petty work rules	23
Unfair rostering or workload	17
Intrusive surveillance / monitoring.....	15
No say in how job is done.....	22
Personal belongings interfered with or work sabotaged	7
Shouted at, abused or spoken at with offensive language	23
Threatened with sack or demotion/not supported for promotion ..	12
Belittled or shamed publicly	18

(ii) Types of bullying behaviour

Respondents were asked whether they had experienced examples of the following types of behaviour along a scale of 'never, rarely sometimes or often'. We added together the sometimes and often category as both were seen as indicating incidence.

There were no significant differences between males and females, nor between the general sample and other disadvantaged groups. The latter category included NESB, ATSI and staff with disabilities, adding up to 33 of the total sample. Amongst those who complained of bullying, academic staff were most likely to report examples of unfairness and incivility, while general staff were more likely to feel over-controlled.

The immediate source of bullying behaviour is in most instances a manager or supervisor. Colleagues are a serious source of bullying - 26 respondents (15%) experiencing bullying by colleagues sometimes or often. Thirty-nine respondents experienced bullying from their immediate supervisors sometimes or often, and 33 from their management. In total, 57 (30%) of respondents had experienced bullying behaviour sometimes or often from either managers or supervisors. This strongly suggests the existence of at least pockets of dysfunctional workplace cultures, including abuse by senior staff.

The open ended question showed some of this came in the form of imposition of an unrealistic workload. Several respondents complained about this:

'Given unreasonable workload and after raising the matter, issue being ignored.'

'Bullied into doing extra time supposedly for time in lieu, but then time in lieu deleted – no recourse.'

'General pressure to work long hours - not necessarily bullying as many others do the same.'

'Unrealistic work expectations based on available resources, under-staffed.'

Table 2: Academics and general staff complaining of bullying, by type (%)

	Academic	General
Unreasonable demands and targets	50	36
Unreasonably restrictive or petty work rules.....	33	39
Unfair rostering or workload.....	41	23
No say in how job is done.....	24	41
Shouted/abused/spoken at with offensive language...38		37
Belittled or shamed publicly.....	31	19

Perhaps the most common examples given were verbal abuse and belittlement, often on a systematic basis, in public.

'Being publicly belittled, being given no choice in how I work.'

'Belittling in front of students and work colleagues was the worst.'

'Being singled out, being abused, being threatened, being intimidated.'

'Being sworn at. Verbally attacked in angry fashion over teaching philosophy.'

'Being treated as an idiot; being denied access to decision making and then been trivialised publicly and forced to accept what the 'in crowd' want.'

'Offensive and insulting behaviour of a fellow academic, including being barked at while walking along a street adjacent to the university.'

'Belittled in front of other colleagues, who were in turn bullied in front of me.'

'Have been shouted at, colleagues have tried to interfere in my personal business.'

'Shouted at by Colleague and received attacking emails.'

'Verbal abuse, belittling behaviour – based on my lack of prior knowledge/experience.'

'My supervisor goes behind my back to get his own way. He makes inappropriate comments to staff that offends them.'

'Verbal abuse, emotional abuse, patronisation.'

(iii) *Effects of bullying*

There were actual costs and consequences reported in terms of time off and other effects that affected workplace availability. Thirty-six (19%) actual respondents who reported episodes of ill health sometimes or often as a consequence of workplace experiences; 64 (33%) respondents 'sometimes or

Table 3: Perpetrators of bullying behaviour: total responses (%)

	Never	Rarely	Sometimes /often
Supervisor	68	12	20
Management.....	70	12	17
Colleagues.....	60	26	15

often' experienced emotional stress due to bullying behaviour and twenty two people (12% of the whole sample) who took time off 'sometimes or often' because of this. Fifty-four (28%) had sometimes or often considered resignation or redeployment. Obviously, those who might have actually left were not there to answer the survey. This response was higher amongst women than men, both for academic and general staff.

Reports that respondents had sometimes or often experienced distress or ill health due to workplace bullying (33% and 19%), and had taken time off or were thinking of changing jobs or transferring (12% and 28%) suggest bullying is imposing significant costs on staff and on the organisation as a whole. Bullying translates into real costs in terms of lost days at work, loss of experienced staff, or just poorer workplace performance.

The effects of bullying are immediately personal. Some respondents provided a fuller picture of the implications.

'I had a particular problem with one staff member, which only became evident when they took on a supervisory role in my area. During this period, there was ongoing emotional abuse from the supervisor.'

'Over a six-year period mostly implicit and subtle bullying especially implying that I am untrustworthy, incompetent, inefficient – yet my employment record indicates otherwise. This has been constant.'

'Working in an aggressive atmosphere where staff are afraid. Verbal harassment. Thinly disguised threats of opportunities not coming my way. Not being credited for contributions made. Removal of interesting tasks. Discrimination because of family responsibilities.'

Table 4: Considered resigning or redeployment/transfer (%)

	Never	Very rarely	Sometimes /often	No response
Female	56	6	34	5
Male	67	21	12	—
Total	59	10	28	3

Table 5: Respondents sometimes or often experiencing the effects of bullying, by employment type (%)

	Academic	General
Emotional stress.....	48	58
Time off.....	33	22
Considered resigning.....	43	45

It is impossible to estimate the broader impacts of such behaviour. But even if there were only a few hundred instances, the costs in institutional and personal terms would be unacceptable.

(iv) Responses to bullying

When experiencing bullying behaviour, some respondents discuss this with the union (24%), colleagues (40%) and with supervisors (37%), rather than the Human Resources Unit (HRU) (15%). Academic respondents are most likely to raise the matter with the union – 57% of academic respondents reported this, compared to 30% for general staff respondents. General staff respondents are significantly more likely to approach HRU, with 30% of general staff complainants approaching HRU, and only 10% of academic staff.

Advice may be sought but in the vast majority of cases there is an inadequate response. In 21 cases (11%) the matter was not raised at all due to fear of possible consequences. Such fears appear to be sometimes justified, as in 7 cases (4%) raising the matter led to victimisation, and in 31 cases (16%) the matter was raised and nothing happened. For the remaining complainants, 35 (18%) had raised the matter and had it resolved (10 of these after considerable time). These results suggest that there needs to be urgent attention in this area.

The failure to address bullying is directly reflected in some sentiments expressed by respondents in answering the survey’s open-ended questions. Some of these are particularly revealing of the personal consequences of bullying in terms of working in an environment of intimidation, fear and retribution.

One respondent very clearly expressed the senses of powerlessness that university inaction had created:

‘It is constantly happening that the same people are doing the bullying however nothing is ever done about it no matter how many complaints are made because the people involved are in management.’

Those that do complain are in danger of being labelled:

‘Most staff will not proceed with formal complaints for fear of being seen as a trouble maker.’

The extent of distrust extends to not feeling able to participate in the NTEU survey:

‘I would like more information on privacy and who sees this survey before I put down anything here.’

Table 6: Sources of advice for those experiencing bullying behaviour (%)

	<i>Academic staff</i>	<i>General staff</i>
Supervisor	41	58
Union	57	30
EDU	33	28
HRU	10	30
Colleagues	86	58

Table 7: Outcomes for those experiencing bullying behaviour (%)

Raised the issue and it was resolved promptly	13
Raised issue and eventually resolved	5
Raised issue/nothing happened	16
Did not raise because of possible consequences	11
Raised and was victimised	4

The buried nature of bullying – seen as normal, and not even named as bullying – is best highlighted by the following:

‘I sense that many staff do not realise that they are being ‘bullied’. The issue of the power associated with a position of authority seems to go unquestioned.’

One respondent emphasised that it is the one off or ‘rare’ instances of bullying that are just as important as the more regular instances, stating:

‘I am glad you are doing this survey. However the main problem I see with bullying is not its frequency, but its impact. I have been here several years and have observed the power of just a one-off incident to intimidate and control workers.’

Several respondents stated they were happy the Union was taking up the issue. One said:

‘Knowing you are there enables me to stand up for myself without fear. I support the Union’.

What can be done?

Many respondents filled in the section on what should be done about bullying. Some respondents emphasised the need to address structural causes of bullying. One called for ‘adequate staffing so that there is not so much stress on a small number of people.’ Another simply suggested the university ‘Do a survey of actual hours worked over the last twelve months.’

Many respondents stressed the need for the university to make it clear that bullying is not acceptable, and to provide training for managers. Suggestions include:

‘Education of senior administrative – ie heads of school/deputy heads of school – through personal interviews on issues.’

‘Encourage ethical and non-aggressive behaviour in the workplace.’

‘An advertising campaign – including posters outlining managers responsibilities – duty of care.’

‘Distribute information about what constitutes bullying; what one can do about it and the repercussions for offenders.’

‘Encourage people to speak up. Bullying can’t be tolerated in a university environment. People should know they will get the support they need if they complain.’

'Counselling, training on how to deal with it/ prevent it, awareness of who to go to.'

'University management should condemn any such acts'

'It needs to be known that it is not OK to yell at people.'

Others emphasise the need for effective procedures for bullied staff to seek redress. One respondent simply said 'sack em!' Another emphasised the need for 'Anonymous intervention.' One put it thus:

'It's really up to the management and unless they are clear that bullying is not to be tolerated, occurrences such as the ones I have experienced will continue.'

Others expressed similar sentiments:

'From my experience of bullying I think they can make it widely known they [management] can mediate on this as much as other issues like appointments, promotions and workload. Also specify that bullying can be addressed.'

'How about a 'what to do with bullying people' session ie not assume we cant stand up for ourselves necessarily, but that advice about the non-escalating response is very useful.'

'Management staff to attend conflict management short course. General reminder to all staff of their responsibilities and expectations of professional staff in terms of behaviour towards colleagues. Tips on how to resolve conflict before it escalates.'

'If we report to someone that the issue will be followed up.'

'If workers experience repeated physical stress symptoms supervisors should think about how they are contributing to the pressure.'

'Acting on reports [of bullying] immediately.'

'Maybe coach or train some rough speaking people to be able to communicate with staff in a reasonably affirmative and pleasant way.'

'Get rid of the bullying staff who seem to be getting away with "blue murder"'

Those who experience bullying do not find it is adequately resolved by a generic grievance handling system. They are most likely to approach colleagues, a supervisor or the union, with general staff significantly less likely to approach the union.

Conclusions

The survey also clearly shows that staff want something to be done about bullying. Respondents suggest a range of necessary measures, including action to address the structural causes of bullying, in terms of work overload, poor management cultures and other direct measures. There is overwhelming support for university-backed anti-bullying campaigns, and for sets of policies and procedures to ensure the issue is dealt with. It is clear that employers need to take their obligations

seriously – and ensure they provide a safe workplace, in the social as well as the physical sense.

Eva Cox and James Goodman lecture in Social Inquiry at the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, University of Technology Sydney.

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