



The problem with “workplace psychopaths”

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The purpose of this editorial is to scrutinise the recently popularised notion that some white-collar bosses who use bullying behaviour towards others may be psychopathic. Further, we question whether this labelling effectively contributes to the management of workplace bullying, or whether it compounds the problem.

Briefly, for behaviour to be called “workplace bullying”, it must be repeated inappropriate behaviour, and there must be a power imbalance between the people involved in the exchange and a real or perceived inability for targets of the behaviour to defend themselves.¹ The behaviour may include the social or physical isolation, humiliation and unfair and/or public criticism of the target, assigning meaningless or impossible tasks to the target, and many others.^{1,2}

Section 55A of the South Australian *Occupational Health, Safety and Welfare Act 1986* explicitly defines what bullying is perceived to be, and what behaviours are not included in the concept of bullying (for example, “reasonable action taken in a reasonable manner by an employer to transfer, demote, discipline, counsel, retrench or dismiss an employee” is not included). Similarly, recent amendments to the Commonwealth *Safety, Rehabilitation and Compensation Act 1988* provide that reasonable administrative action taken in a reasonable manner does not constitute a cause of injury or disease under the Act (section 5A(1)).

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Workplace bullying presents a number of emotive and complex issues, including controversies in defining bullying, a lack of reporting, problems with follow-up procedures, determining the veracity of the claim, and distinguishing bullying from harassment and violence — to name a few.³ This situation is made significantly worse, however, when the alarmist idea of “workplace psychopath” is introduced. This is because of the numerous theoretical and pragmatic problems associated with the “psychopath” approach to workplace bullying.

Evidence

Among the main problems with the workplace psychopath idea are the lack of evidence specific to the expression of psychopathy at work, and the lack of justification for psychopathy being the most appropriate label or concept for the behaviour observed. Psychopathy is treated as synonymous with antisocial personality disorder (ASPD) in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*.⁴ The use of the term “psychopath” is clearly more emotive than ASPD, though controversy exists over the distinction. Several researchers maintain that ASPD and psychopathy are different, with ASPD being more focused on antisocial and criminal behaviour, while psychopathy is based on other personality traits.⁵ Hare has suggested that, because of this, not all people with ASPD are psychopaths. The prevalence of ASPD is about 3% in males and 1% in females, and similar rates are presented for the prevalence of psychopaths at work.^{4,6} These rates are frequently debated, and depend on the study and cultural context.

In the OHS context, debates on diagnostic criteria and prevalence are somewhat tangential. More importantly, little evidence is presented for the suggested “types” of workplace psychopaths (that is, the organisational psychopath, the corporate criminal psychopath, the violent criminal psychopath, and the occupational psychopath), and the relative prevalence of each.⁶ The workplace

psychopath literature seems to assume that the 1–3% of the population that *may** be psychopaths are all working in white-collar professions, which just doesn’t make sense. The descriptions, when one reads them, ring true — it is plausible that certain people fit the criteria of, say, corporate criminal psychopaths, but this is very different from establishing how frequently this “sub-type” occurs. Accordingly, we don’t know to what extent the descriptions should be used, nor is it clear who should use them. Does workplace psychopathy apply to such a small proportion of the population that most people don’t need to worry about it? Is it possible that not knowing about psychopathy is less damaging than falsely labelling or accusing someone? Is it possible that, if someone has engaged in inappropriate behaviour at work, the consequences of their behaviour could be altered relatively simply and without the stigma of being called a psychopath? These possibilities limit the extent to which the workplace psychopath idea should be used as a strategy for dealing with poor behaviour at work. If there is good evidence for a high or growing prevalence of people with ASPD and/or psychopathy in positions of power in organisations, then this needs to be investigated and presented scientifically, without the frenzy that has thus far surrounded the workplace psychopath approach. Until then, we need to proceed cautiously. Descriptions of behaviour that may be consistent with characteristics of psychopathy are not enough. Formal clinical diagnosis is needed, along with some way of justifying that bullying behaviour is not a more appropriate way to view the situation.

In contrast, ample data on the existence and costs of workplace bullying in diverse workplaces are available.^{1,7-9} Much more scientific research is needed because a lot of workplace bullying research has methodological limitations (for example, the exclusive use of self-reporting from targets of bullying behaviour, inadequate sampling, the inconsistent use of terms, etc). Research is also needed on the efficacy of the standard prevention

* Note that, given the debate on the extent to which ASPD and psychopathy overlap, these prevalence rates might change if a resolution on diagnostic criteria was reached.

strategies. Nonetheless, given what we know about its high prevalence, that it is likely to be underreported, and that anyone can participate in such behaviour at any time, workplace bullying should be seen as the more appropriate concept when dealing with bad behaviour at work, as opposed to workplace psychopathy.

Inappropriate diagnosis and false accusation

In the context of suggesting that workplace psychopaths are common, implicitly encouraging employees to diagnose other people at work is an additional problem with the workplace psychopath approach. Although proponents of the argument are quick to point out that only trained people should make any diagnoses, lists of diagnostic criteria are still provided. Indeed, it is a little naïve to write about workplace psychopaths — describing what they do, how they become psychopathic, and what you should do about them — and not expect lay people to diagnose their workmates. Media attention generated on the issue makes the problem of improper diagnosis worse, with five-point lists designed to establish whether you have a psychopathic boss being recently published in major metropolitan newspapers (for example, *The Age*, 31 May 2007¹⁰). Diagnosis is a highly complex issue which needs to be done by mental health professionals, especially given the controversy surrounding ASPD and psychopathy.^{5,11}

It should also be acknowledged that workers may be “motivated” to diagnose others. Suggesting that the person responsible for bad behaviour at work has a personality disorder (inherent to their psychological make-up) is an attractive strategy for an employee to use when they are the target of this behaviour. Others may diagnose in a more jocular manner, ticking off their boss’ symptoms merrily. The sense of fun that may be felt when identifying someone at work as a psychopath (or the sense of control or protection that this may confer) is probably partly responsible for the popularity of the workplace psychopath approach.

We must also consider the impact of the workplace psychopath approach on people who have been labelled psychopaths. Assuming the person has engaged in behaviour that was inappropriate, labelling them is unlikely to help. This is inconsistent with OHS best practice, where the interaction between personal and environmental factors that may have led to an incident should be recognised. Labelling people psychopaths is akin to the idea of the accident-prone worker that has long been out of vogue. If the accused person has not actually done anything wrong, if there has been a misunderstanding, or if the target of the behaviour is motivated to claim mistreatment, enacting strategies to deal with a psychopath has obvious implications on their reputation and career. It is likely to be extremely stressful, offensive, and potentially defamatory and career-limiting.

Proponents of the workplace psychopath idea don’t deny that not everyone engaging in negative behaviour at work is a psychopath. However, it would seem that, given the lack of scientific investigation of psychopathy at work, the prevalence of bullying behaviour at work and the fact that anyone can participate in bullying behaviour at any time, bullying should be the focus — not psychopathy.

If someone at work does meet the clinical criteria for psychopathy or related disorders (and there would certainly be some that do), the workplace psychopath literature appears to treat these people differently to others with mental illnesses. It is not regarded as good practice to vilify people with depression, bipolar disorder or schizophrenia, for example. The proposed workplace psychopaths, however, are referred to as “monsters” and “snakes” in popular books written to help people identify them.^{6,12} This may be due to the extent of the effects that psychopaths could have on workers or organisations, but this does not excuse the inconsistency. We cannot deal with inappropriate behaviour at work in ways that:

- stigmatise or vilify those people involved in the exchange (regardless of their mental health status);

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- encourage improper diagnostic practices;
- do not account for the role of the work environment and culture; or
- mis-label as a mental health issue behaviour that could be otherwise more appropriately dealt with.

These are the issues that render the workplace psychopath argument inappropriate for managing poor behaviour in all types of workplaces.

Management

After inflicting a huge amount of damage on others in an organisation, it seems that so-called workplace psychopaths often get moved to an outpost, or are forced out of the organisation to another organisation.⁶ This is not appropriate for people who use bullying behaviour. They do not necessarily have intractable conditions that make them behave in the way they do. Risk management procedures, tailored to dealing with the psychological impact that bullying can have, should be used to deal with this problem.

Admittedly, when it comes to psychological hazards (like stress), traditional risk management strategies fit less well than they do for chemical or biological hazards. Nonetheless, there are ways to appropriate these strategies and make a real difference with respect to managing bullying and its consequences. Zero-tolerance policies without optimal reporting and follow-up procedures are just rhetoric. Organisations need to invest in acquiring more knowledge about what bullying is and what it is not, how it affects their staff, what it costs them, and how to develop innovative ways to stop it from occurring. This should be led by science and risk management practice, rather than alarmist positions that blame and shame.

One of the good things that the workplace psychopath idea has generated is that organisations are at least more aware that bad behaviour at work can and does happen in their own operations. Hopefully, more will take up the challenge of controlling this workplace risk in accordance with their OHS responsibilities.

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