



Distinguishing between workplace bullying, harassment and violence: a risk management approach

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Workplace bullying is a major problem in many industries, but it is frequently confused with harassment or violence. The lack of distinction between these issues can affect their identification, the assessment of their importance, and the ways in which they are controlled. Despite being closely related to harassment and violence, this article aims to outline the ways in which bullying is distinctly different, and goes on to suggest how recognition of this distinction can lead to improved risk management-based interventions. The article describes a risk management model that can be used to deal with the risk of workplace bullying, and reviews suggestions for “dignity at work” policies. By identifying the unique aspects of bullying and implementing appropriate strategies to address them, organisations will be better able to control the risk of bullying in their workplaces, leading to improved outcomes for employees and, in turn, significant positive effects on business performance.

KEYWORDS

- WORKPLACE BULLYING
- HARASSMENT
- VIOLENCE
- CONFLICT
- RISK MANAGEMENT

Introduction

Workplace bullying is increasingly recognised as an important issue by researchers and managers.¹ Large amounts of data are available on the incidence of bullying at work,^{2,4} and the possible costs to individuals and organisations are well known.^{2,5,7} One of the main problems when dealing with workplace bullying is the inconsistent use of the term “bullying” and other terms that describe aspects of poor behaviour at work. Such inconsistency can complicate the issue, and make research findings harder to interpret.

A reflection of the complexity of workplace bullying is that it can be approached from many perspectives. These perspectives include: organisational and clinical psychology; industrial relations and workplace law; human relations, management and leadership disciplines; and workplace health, safety and wellbeing. Health, safety and wellbeing at work is an important paradigm for research and action on workplace bullying because, in many countries, it is underscored by employer obligations. The management of bullying fits neatly into an organisation’s health and safety responsibilities because bullying has clear negative impacts on employees (in terms of stress, depression, reduced self-esteem and job satisfaction, and psychological disorders).^{7,8} The risk management process of identifying hazards, assessing their likely impact, and implementing and evaluating control systems is fundamental to workplace health and safety management practice worldwide.⁹ It can be used to deal with workplace bullying, just as it is used for physical workplace hazards (such as chemicals or equipment).¹⁰ However, without a clear understanding of exactly what bullying is, and how it relates to other aspects of workplace behaviour, identification of it as a hazard is compromised. With a focus on workplace bullying, this article aims to outline how the concepts of bullying, violence and harassment are related but distinct, and to demonstrate how recognising these distinctions can provide benefits for the management of poor behaviour at work. Applying such distinctions can also be of benefit to researchers through more consistent representations of bullying, harassment and violence in data collection and interpretation.

Current conceptualisations of workplace bullying

Though several different “definitions” of workplace bullying exist in the scientific literature and in organisational policies, there is growing agreement in the literature regarding the key features that define bullying.¹¹⁻¹³ The first key feature that is common to most definitions of workplace bullying is that bullying involves the repetition of unreasonable behaviour.^{14,15} Behaviour that might be considered to be bullying includes: undue public criticism; gossiping and name-calling; social or physical isolation; intimidation; withholding information; sabotaging means of communication; humiliation; and verbal abuse.^{15,16} The second key feature is that the unreasonable behaviour causes (or has the potential to cause) harm to the individual who is experiencing the behaviour.

Additional proposed criteria are that bullying behaviour must occur frequently (weekly or more often), and that the behaviour must occur over a particular duration (usually six months).¹⁷⁻¹⁹ There is consensus that the behaviour must be regular and enduring over time (rather than isolated), although the exact timelines for distinguishing between bullying and other behaviour remain somewhat indeterminate due to the need to consider the context and nature of the behaviour. The six-month criterion was based on the duration for assessment of psychiatric conditions, but this may not always be appropriate in practice.²⁰ There is no real reason why people should endure bullying behaviour for six months in order to meet a (relatively) arbitrary criterion when it is obvious that the behaviour is harming them much earlier. The presence of a power imbalance between the parties is often included in definitions, although this appears to be of more use as a description than as a definitional benefit. Power imbalance may come from sources other than hierarchical position, such as expertise, experience, control of information, or social position.¹¹

An equally important aspect of defining bullying is specifying the behaviour that cannot be considered as bullying. This is important because false-positive reporting is costly and can unnecessarily stigmatis

individuals who are accused of bullying. In addition, managers can sometimes feel that if anything could potentially be described as bullying, their ability to “manage” their staff may be curtailed. According to the South Australian *Occupational Health and Safety Act 1986*, actions that are not considered to be bullying include reasonable managerial action (that is, undertaken in a reasonable manner) to counsel, dismiss, transfer, or not promote an employee. This legislation, while not applicable in all jurisdictions, has been used as a model to define behaviour that is not considered to be bullying.

Ascertaining how frequently workplace bullying occurs is difficult because people do not report being bullied for various reasons (for example, fear of retribution). How people are asked about bullying also affects incidence rates. Salin demonstrated that asking people if they have been bullied results in a lower incidence rate compared with asking people to indicate (from a list) which behaviours they had experienced.²¹ Recent data on Australian public servants suggest that between 15% and 28% of workers reported that they had been bullied in the last year.^{3,22,23} However, these reports include the concept of harassment in their definitions of “bullying”, which risks conflating bullying rates with harassment rates. Different prevalence rates are known to be found when different definitions or criteria are used. Zapf et al found that the prevalence rate of bullying in Europe is between 1% and 4%, while between 8% and 10% of the working population is subjected to less severe bullying.⁴ However, given the methodological and conceptual variations in these and other studies/reports, these figures should be interpreted with caution. Variations in prevalence rates is another reason why conceptual distinctions that exist between bullying, harassment and other related concepts should be clearly identified and applied.

Before distinguishing bullying from the concepts to which it is related, it is important to mention the different uses of the terms “bullying” and “mobbing”. “Mobbing” is sometimes used in Europe to refer to situations in which an individual or a group uses unreasonable behaviour against a target.²⁰ In English, “mobbing” clearly denotes

group behaviour, originating in the behaviour of birds attacking a predator or some other threat as a group. Many United Kingdom, American and Australian researchers thus use “mobbing” to denote group behaviour which is unreasonable, and “bullying” to denote individual behaviour which is unreasonable. Others use bullying and mobbing interchangeably, or theorise that mobbing and bullying are quite distinct, apart from the individual or group nature of the behaviour.^{24,25} Some propositions regarding mobbing (as being independent of bullying) appear to be reasonable, yet others do not appear to be supported by scientific evidence (for example, some studies assert that “bullying” is perpetrated against people who are weak, while “mobbing” is perpetrated against capable, efficient individuals).²⁵ A clear explanation of how “bullying” and “mobbing” are used should always be given if both terms are to be employed.

Bullying, harassment, violence and conflict

The literature acknowledges that the definition of bullying needs to be approached carefully and with a view to distinguishing it from related concepts.^{11,26,27} However, the idea that we need to distinguish between related concepts does not appear to have influenced wider conceptualisations of unacceptable behaviour at work, research on workplace bullying, or mainstream management practice. Several examples in the literature illustrate the confusion that the lack of distinction between bullying, harassment and violence can generate. Some sources state that “bullying” and “harassment” can be used interchangeably.¹⁴ Others suggest that bullying, harassment and violence are subcategories of one another. Hockley lists bullying as a form of violence,²⁸ and Mayhew refers to bullying as “internal violence”²⁹ (although McCarthy and Mayhew have also treated bullying and violence as if they are interchangeable terms⁵). Others equate bullying with harassment,³⁰ or treat it as a subcategory of harassment.^{31,32} Harassment has also been listed as a subcategory of bullying.^{33,34}

These categorisation problems may be dismissed as semantic issues (or as a reflection of the confusion that surrounds workplace bullying), and they may not seem to be significant for managers who are charged with ensuring and promoting employee health and wellbeing. As a result, bullying, harassment and violence are often dealt with by organisations in one policy. The use of one policy is understandable, and appropriate, from an efficiency point of view. However, effective and comprehensive management of these issues is in jeopardy if the unique aspects of each are not considered. The importance of distinguishing between these concepts cannot be underestimated — for both targets of the behaviour and for organisations. Targets need to be able to accurately decide whether they are experiencing unacceptable behaviour, and be able to identify the nature of the behaviour. This helps to prevent spurious or vexatious reporting. The avenues available to targets are vastly different if the behaviour is harassment, discrimination or violence, as opposed to bullying. For example, if the behaviour constitutes harassment or discrimination, anti-discrimination or equal employment opportunity (EEO) law may apply, and assistance could be sought from anti-discrimination or EEO agencies. In the case of suspected violence, the behaviour should be reported to police if a crime is alleged. Further, preventive strategies that organisations can implement are vastly different for these different concepts. Clarification of the factors that unite and distinguish the concepts of harassment, bullying and violence are important for researchers, employees and managers alike.

Bullying compared with harassment

Harassment at work is something that is currently widely recognised, and many large organisations have anti-harassment policies. In Australia, harassment is dealt with under a collection of state/territory and federal anti-discrimination laws. Sexual harassment is usually specified in the legislation, though supporting information on other forms of harassment are often provided by anti-

discrimination/EEO agencies. Harassment is typically viewed as behaviour that causes humiliation, offence or intimidation on the basis of another person's race, gender, sexuality, ethno-religious background, disability/disease, marital status, age or other characteristic that is endemic to that individual, or their relationship to someone with any of these characteristics.³⁵ The grounds for harassment are worded slightly differently in the various Australian anti-discrimination laws, but the idea that harassment must be on the basis of a characteristic of the target is common across the legislation (both here and overseas).³⁶⁻³⁹ The key feature of discrimination that distinguishes it from harassment is the "unfair treatment" of a person (based on particular characteristics), as opposed to behaviour that causes offence or humiliation, but this distinction may not be the case in all Australian jurisdictions.³⁵ Care needs to be taken to use concepts that are based on science to inform practice and further research, rather than relying solely on legislation and legislative distinctions across jurisdictions. While it is "local" legislation that affects what people and organisations can do, conceptual distinctions are sometimes needed to bring about legislative clarification and development. In some cases, legislation and case law use the terms "bullying" and "harassment" interchangeably, without any recognition of the differences. Using legal concepts to argue about the conceptual distinctions can thus be fraught with difficulty. Unlike harassment, international research-based conceptions of bullying do not require the behaviour to be relevant to "particular characteristics" in order to be considered as bullying.

The distinctions between bullying and harassment are important because people can experience bullying with or without possessing one of the abovementioned characteristics and without any direct or indirect reference to those characteristics. Of course, bullying and harassment will sometimes overlap, or co-occur, and establishing whether particular characteristics are relevant to the behaviour could be difficult. The outcome may be the same, regardless of whether the situation is

labelled “bullying” or “harassment”, because of the internal organisational procedures or courses of legal action available in the jurisdiction. However, the distinction is far more than a semantic one. The distinction between bullying and harassment becomes most important when the target of the behaviour does *not* possess the characteristics highlighted as possible bases of harassment, or those characteristics do not feature in the behaviour. People without these characteristics can be targeted by workplace bullying, and people with these characteristics can be targeted by workplace bullying independently of those characteristics. Accordingly, if we only focus on behaviour that is relevant to the characteristics of harassment, we ignore a significant problem.

In addition, the temporal features of bullying and harassment may be different, leading to different reporting and management strategies. A single event of racial slurring may qualify as harassment (because harassment can be a singular event or repeated). However, a single instance of offensive or humiliating behaviour alone would generally not qualify as bullying, because a defining feature of bullying is the repetition of unreasonable behaviour.^{11,14,16} It is important to note that an isolated event should not be disregarded because it does not fit the criteria for bullying (or harassment). It could still cause harm, and may serve as a warning sign for an emerging pattern of bullying behaviour. It may also indicate bullying behaviour that is targeted at several individuals in a workgroup, rather than repeated behaviour that is targeted at an individual (similar to a recent case in the Australian public sector⁴⁰). Recognising the unique features of bullying behaviour, independent of harassment, is imperative to the effective and comprehensive management of poor behaviour at work.

Bullying compared with violence

The following discussion of workplace violence will be limited to so-called “internal violence” because internal violence is most relevant to bullying.⁴¹

Internal violence occurs between employees of an organisation (as opposed to client-initiated violence or violence initiated by a person outside of the organisation).²⁹ Lay conceptions of violence typically involve the idea of physical contact. However, violence at work usually includes verbal abuse and threats, as well as other behaviour such as stalking, shouting or swearing, damage to personal property, or throwing objects at other workers. The International Labour Organization (ILO) defines workplace violence as “any action, incident or behaviour that departs from reasonable conduct in which a person is assaulted, threatened, harmed, injured in the course of, or as a direct result of, his or her work”.⁴²

Bullying and violence can, and do, share similar features. Both can be precipitated by conflict (for example, dispute-related bullying), or can occur without conflict (for example, predatory bullying).⁴³ Conceivably, both could be planned in advance or be unintentional.¹⁶ Bullying (as it has been defined previously) can certainly lead to violence, though this is not always the case.⁴¹ Despite their similarities, there appears to be no logical reason why one should be seen as a subset of the other.

Bullying and violence can also differ in ways that affect how they are recognised, the attitudes people have towards them and, ultimately, how they are dealt with. Compared with bullying, instances of violence may be more obvious, especially in the case of overt physical attacks. Several people may witness an attack or threat, or witness its physical consequences. In contrast, an examination of behaviour that is typically classed as bullying shows that it may be quite covert (for example, perpetrators may socially isolate targets or sabotage chains of communication), making it difficult to gather evidence. There may be no “event” that can be witnessed in the same way, or with the same certainty, as physical violence. The potential subtlety of bullying behaviour can cause it to go unnoticed, and this is likely to be compounded when bullying and violence are viewed as one and the same.

According to a study by Barron, the legal avenues available to targets of workplace violence are often quite different to those available to targets of workplace bullying, given that violence is more likely to include elements of criminal behaviour (for example, assaults, threats, damage to property, and so on).⁴¹ Accordingly, the way in which people respond to the issue of violence is likely to be different to their reaction to bullying (violence is seen as criminal behaviour for which one can be punished by a society's criminal justice system).

The factors described above make the risk management process of identifying, assessing and controlling the hazards of workplace bullying different compared with workplace violence.⁴¹ Some of the same strategies will serve both issues, but the factors that distinguish bullying (such as the low salience or availability of evidence, and the presence and nature of previous disputes) should be recognised and accounted for in an organisation's plan for dealing with poor behaviour in the workplace. If not, the more subtle aspects of workplace bullying behaviour may be overlooked.⁴⁴

Bullying compared with conflict

An additional concept that is related to bullying, but often not distinguished from it, is conflict. Although bullying is sometimes seen as the result of the escalation of conflict, the differences between bullying and conflict which does not escalate into bullying need to be recognised.¹⁶

First, as indicated above, in order to be considered as bullying, the behaviour needs to be repeated. However, repetition is usually not required for behaviour to be considered as conflict. Second, conflict is not necessarily harmful.⁴⁵ Conflict can actually be beneficial to organisations because it can promote the development of new ideas and innovative solutions. Of course, conflict may cause harm, but it is not intrinsic to the concept. In contrast, a pattern of behaviour must cause, or have the potential to cause, harm if it is to be considered as bullying.

Third, the various types or origins of conflict may be appropriately solved in ways that are different to solving the problem of bullying. Moore identifies five types of conflict: data conflicts; interest conflicts; value conflicts; structural conflicts; and relationship conflicts.⁴⁵ A data conflict, for example, may involve people disagreeing about information, such as rates of payment. A data conflict is usually not as difficult to resolve as bullying, because it simply requires the clarification of information or the gathering of new information. A conflict of interest may exist where there are scarce resources and people are competing for them. While a complete analysis of all types of conflict is beyond the scope of this article, it is important to note that conflict and bullying are related and can co-occur, but they often need to be managed differently.

Social values and bullying, harassment and violence

The following section considers some of the reasons why bullying may be thought of as a component or subtype of harassment or violence, and how far the social censure of bullying has progressed to this point in time. The responses to harassment and violence compared with the responses to bullying in an organisation may have developed from the wider social values with which they are associated. Behaviour that is considered to be harassment has met with increased social censure over time, with evidence of increased policy-making and recognition of sexual harassment as a social problem from the 1970s.⁴⁶⁻⁴⁸ The development of anti-harassment policies and laws has enshrined these social values in workplaces. Even though harassment still occurs, there are means for addressing the problem or, at the very least, there is an awareness that this kind of behaviour is unacceptable. Similarly, it would be fair to say that there is social censure of violence at work (and, more generally, in society — particularly in terms of overt physical violence). Consequently, infrastructure exists for dealing with harassment, discrimination and violence (for example, government human rights organisations, union-based advocacy groups, etc).

Workplace bullying has not yet established a negative social value to the same degree. Bullying may, in some cases, be an ingrained part of the culture of an organisation or industry, being perpetuated over time as “the way we do things around here”.⁴⁹ Bullying is often referred to as something that takes place “under the radar”, and is often less obvious than other workplace issues. Being less obvious may have had an impact on why the issue of workplace bullying was not dealt with sooner, that is, organisations may have tackled the more salient and less controversial problems first. Raising the profile of bullying, and highlighting how it can be different from harassment and violence, is therefore important to reducing it in workplaces. Bullying now needs to be promoted as an important social issue — as the next frontier in reducing inappropriate behaviour in the workplace — and should not be allowed to hide behind other workplace issues.

Workplace implications

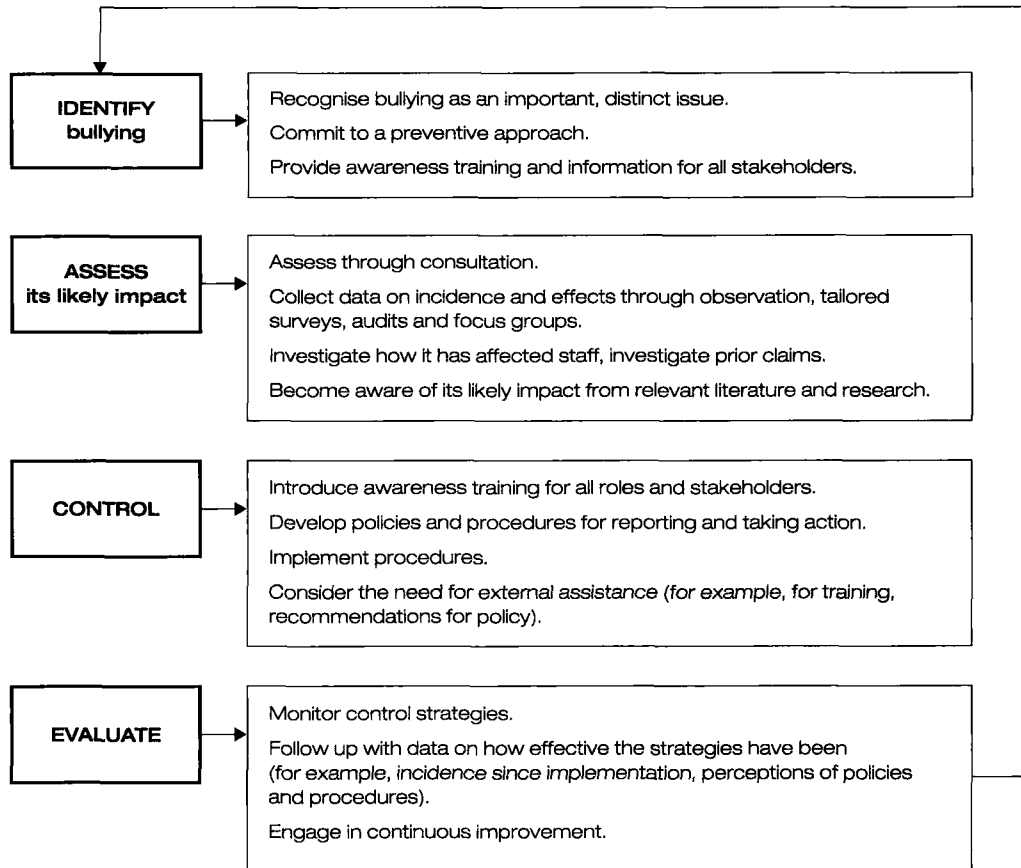
Incorporating bullying into risk management processes is an effective and appropriate way of dealing with the risks that bullying brings to an organisation.^{9,10} Figure 1 outlines a model for how basic risk management processes can be used to deal with workplace bullying (the suggestions are by no means exhaustive, and need to be tailored to the context of individual organisations). It describes the steps that an organisation can take (as part of its overarching health and safety strategy) to identify the risk of bullying, to assess the impact that it is likely to have on staff, and to prevent its occurrence. Similar methods may be used when identifying and assessing the risk of bullying, including exit interviews, the use of past records of bullying behaviour, focus groups, and confidential surveys. Focus groups and surveys are best conducted and analysed independently of the organisation because it is likely that any reluctance to report problems to managers or supervisors will also affect internally administered surveys. A clear understanding of the concept of bullying (and how it differs from other issues) must be communicated at all times to ensure that data are valid.

While the hierarchy of controls is applied to most other health and safety hazards, it does not always readily translate to psychological hazards, such as workplace bullying. The controls for bullying are probably best conceptualised using the public health model, that is, primary, secondary and tertiary prevention controls. Primary prevention controls aim to stop bullying before it occurs; secondary prevention controls aim to reduce the impact of bullying and mitigate negative effects; and tertiary prevention controls are used after bullying has occurred to aid in the recovery of the target and to prevent the hazard from recurring. A combination of all of these levels of control needs to be implemented, particularly given that a range of factors contribute to the occurrence of workplace bullying.¹⁶

Policy development is often used as a (primary) control, but the above discussion does not necessarily advocate separate policy documents for bullying, harassment, violence and conflict. It is merely argued that the distinction between the issues should be made clear in policies and accompanying processes. Some organisations have begun to do this, developing documents called “dignity and respect charters” (or similar), which clearly: (1) state the organisation’s values regarding dignity and respect at work; (2) outline what bullying is (and is not), and separately outline what harassment, violence and conflict are; (3) state what actions will be taken if any of these issues, respectively, are reported; (4) list the relevant legislation in the particular jurisdiction; and (5) provide a simple set of principles that employees can act on (such as a “three-point guide”, or similar). Other suggested inclusions in such a charter are to name some trained employees who can help to explain the policies, outline informal and formal courses of action, and give advice to people who feel that they are being harassed or bullied.⁵⁰

In addition to any policy or charter, effective primary controls would include investment in awareness training with respect to bullying, and training in the policies/processes themselves (as with any other workplace hazard). Awareness training for

FIGURE 1
Model of a risk management process for workplace bullying



all staff is particularly important in relation to bullying because, as outlined previously in this article, the unique aspects of bullying that do not occur with harassment or violence need to be recognised. Additional training specific to employees' roles should also be used, for example, training for supervisors in administering informal reports of bullying, training in the proper use of grievance procedures, and training in issues of confidentiality, conflicts of interest and due process.

Improving the nature of reporting systems for workplace bullying would constitute an important secondary control. It is well known that bullying is underreported for various reasons.⁵¹⁻⁵³ These issues need to be accounted for when designing better

reporting procedures. This might include consideration of informal reporting procedures or internal grievance procedures, or consideration of external reporting systems. The use of independent reporting systems, investigations, and alternative dispute resolution interventions is being increasingly advocated.⁵⁴

Documented risk management processes are beneficial for many reasons. Apart from the obvious advantage of providing a systematic method for controlling risks, a well-functioning, well-used system can be seen as a sign of genuine commitment to addressing workplace problems.⁵⁵ The health, safety and wellbeing of workers is often a "hard sell", but it does influence an organisation's bottom

line.^{56,57} This occurs through reducing turnover, improving commitment and satisfaction, attracting skilled staff, and possibly improving public perception. With the spiralling incidence of workplace bullying, and the scale of its effects on employees, the manner in which an organisation addresses workplace bullying could be seen as a part of an index of good business practice, similar to that of corporate responsibility indices.⁵⁸ The other major advantage of using a risk management model for workplace bullying is that risk management systems already exist in most organisations. The call to use a risk management approach does not require any new “architecture”, but a considered attempt to best manage this hazard alongside those currently recognised. While Figure 1 outlines a model for a risk management approach to workplace bullying, there is a real need for appropriate guidance material on how the risks associated with workplace bullying can be effectively assessed, rated and ranked.

As with all workplace hazards, identifying who in an organisation is responsible for managing bullying is an issue that needs to be addressed. Placing the responsibility for OHS on human resources departments is often seen as an appropriate way of integrating health and safety hazards with other management priorities, rather than being somewhat removed from the core business.^{55,59} However, this may not always be the most appropriate way to manage bullying.

One of the principles of HR management is that managing HR is the responsibility of line managers. Lewis and Rayner suggest that this can make reporting and dealing with bullying quite difficult if, for example, the line manager is using bullying behaviour or does not have the necessary skills or training to address the issues in a useful way.⁶⁰ Further, Lewis and Rayner argue that, because HR departments play a role in representing and protecting the organisation, dealing with reports of bullying from employees constitutes a conflict of interest. Due to this conflict of interest (or other factors, such as lack of training), research indicates that the outcomes for targets are not very positive when HR departments are responsible for managing

workplace bullying.⁶¹ This point is not raised to detract from the important role that HR personnel play. It merely highlights that reporting and management systems for bullying need to be designed to circumvent any biases that may be intrinsic to existing organisational structures.

Conclusion

This article has argued that bullying and its “cousins” harassment, violence and conflict need to be recognised as related, but distinct, workplace issues. The presence of an anti-harassment policy conveys the idea that workers should not treat other workers poorly on the basis of their race, gender, religion, sexuality, disability, etc. The presence of an anti-bullying strategy, in contrast, conveys that workers should not treat other workers poorly at all. What matters is not whether an organisation’s policy covers the issues of bullying, harassment, violence and conflict when they overlap, but whether it excludes some issues by focusing on others. Such an exclusion is the result of a failure to recognise how workplace bullying is related to, but distinct from, other issues. Organisations have a responsibility to take a systematic approach to identifying the risk of workplace bullying, assessing its likely consequences, and preventing the risk from occurring.

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