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Article in *International Journal of Workplace Health Management* · March 2011

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Consequences of being accused of workplace bullying: an exploratory study

Consequences of
being accused
of bullying

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to examine the perceptions of accused bullies in terms of their experiences of fairness in the manner in which the complaint against them was managed, and examine the subsequent health and career ramifications of being accused of workplace bullying.

Design/methodology/approach – This exploratory study was carried out through a mixed methodology: 30 managers who had been accused of workplace bullying completed a survey about their experiences, and 24 of these participants were interviewed. A thematic analysis of the interview data was undertaken.

Findings – A number of themes emerged from the analysis including negative psychological health outcomes for accused bullies in terms of depression, anxiety, post traumatic stress, and suicidal ideation. Other dominant themes were the poor perceptions of justice in the way in which the investigations were carried out, negative career consequences, and exit from the organization, whether the accusations of bullying were substantiated or not. Loss of confidence in the participants' managerial abilities and roles also emerged as a significant ramification for a number of the accused bullies.

Research limitations/implications – Despite the methodological limitations of such exploratory research, this study highlights the importance of organizations adhering to the principles of organizational justice when addressing workplace bullying complaints, including recognising the potential health consequences of a bullying investigation for the accused perpetrators as well as for the bullying victims.

Originality/value – This is one of the few studies that examine workplace bullying from the perception of the accused bully and, as such, breaks a long tradition of workplace bullying research being informed only through victims' accounts of workplace bullying.

Keywords Workplace, Bullying, Organizational behaviour, Social justice

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Despite more than a decade of research that has led to better intervention through risk assessment, prevention and improved management, workplace bullying continues to be an occupational health and safety problem in many organizations. The research is unanimous in reporting the devastating health effects workplace bullying has on targets and bystanders and the negative financial implications for organizations (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003; Einarsen *et al.*, 2003; Einarsen and Cooper, 2003). However, research on workplace bullying to date has relied on self-reports from victims and bystanders, and ignored the contributions of other stakeholders such as the alleged perpetrator. This has been identified as a significant gap in bullying research (Coyne *et al.*, 2003; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2007; Rayner and Cooper, 2003).

Most workplace bullying research has relied on standardised self-administered questionnaires and large population samples (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2008). However, a



International Journal of Workplace
Health Management
Vol. 4 No. 1, 2011
pp. 33-47

© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
1753-8351
DOI 10.1108/17538351111118581

number of researchers have argued the importance of using a range of methodologies when investigating bullying at work in order to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena in particularly utilising a more qualitative or ethnographic approach to studying bullying which will provide more information about contextual issues and broader explanations of the phenomena (Fevre *et al.*, 2010; Liefvooghe and Mackenzie-Davey, 2003). The current study aims to adopt both of these suggestions, and also closes the gap of relying on the victims' accounts of bullying by interviewing a group of managers who have been accused of workplace bullying.

What is bullying?

While the term "workplace bullying" has become synonymous with inappropriate workplace behaviours, there are a number of debates in the literature as to how to specifically define and measure the phenomenon (Zapf *et al.*, 2003). The main concepts underlying the operational definition of bullying include repeated negative acts that recur over time, and where there is a power difference between the perpetrator and target (Einarsen *et al.*, 2003).

A number of studies have shown that workplace bullying has a detrimental effect on the target, and also on witnesses and onlookers (Hoel *et al.*, 2003, 2004; Rayner *et al.*, 2002; UNISON, 1997). Workplace bullying can have a harmful effect on a target's physical and mental health along a continuum from increased risk of cardiovascular disease, anxiety and depression (Kivimäki *et al.*, 2003), to Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (Tehrani, 2004; Matthiesen and Einarsen, 2004, 2002; Nielsen *et al.*, 2008), and in extreme cases, suicide (Leymann, 1996). However, despite the literature consistently reporting the negative effects of bullying on the victim, there have been no studies to date that have examined the psychological effects of being accused of bullying. Similarly, there is no literature that we are aware of that have examined the effects of being accused of sexual harassment, or the effects of being investigated for allegations of either bullying or harassment.

Importance of justice

For the purpose of this paper, the terms justice and fairness will be used interchangeably. Perceptions of justice have been identified as a core value in most organizations, with significant negative consequences in employee behaviour, attitudes and health when perceptions of organizational fairness or justice are violated (Bias and Tripp, 1996; Konovsky, 2000). A number of studies support the view that employees' evaluations of fairness within their organization influence their attitudes and organizational citizenship behaviour (Moorman, 1991). As such, there are practical reasons for exploring the perceptions of justice and fairness following an investigation of workplace bullying or harassment. Perceptions of injustice have been shown to contribute to higher levels of sick leave absenteeism, reports of poor general health (Elovainio *et al.*, 2002), and increased levels of psychological distress (Surinen *et al.*, 2002) and depression (Ylipaavalniemi *et al.*, 2005).

Perceptions of injustice have also been found to influence employees' decisions to sue their employer, including the lodgement of workers' compensation claims following a workplace injury (Winefield *et al.*, 2010; Dollard *et al.*, 1999; Roberts and Markel, 2001) and to make wrongful termination legal claims (Lind *et al.*, 2000b). In contrast, workers who make more favourable evaluations of organizational justice are

more accepting of unfavourable management decisions (Tepper, 2001), and are less likely to take legal action against their employer for wrongful termination (Lind *et al.*, 2000a; Goldman, 2003) or as a result of a workplace injury (Winefield *et al.*, 2010).

Evaluations of justice have been studied according to three main facets of justice. These are distributive justice, procedural justice and interactional justice (Cohen-Charash and Spector, 2001; Colquitt, 2001; Colquitt *et al.*, 2001; Greenberg, 1987). From within a complaint handling perspective, distributive justice refers to the specific decisions that are made at the end of a complaint investigation. These include the specific outcome of the investigation process. Procedural justice refers to the way in which the decision was made in terms of whether the parties were able to express their views and tell their side of the story, the consistency of procedures, the lack of a bias in the investigation process, and the ability of both parties to have equal representation. Procedural justice is concerned therefore with the perceived fairness of the process. Interactional justice refers to the personal interactions between the parties in terms of honesty, respect and goodwill.

Why study the alleged bully's response?

A number of studies have examined the consequence of lodging a bullying or harassment complaint (Boswell and Olson-Buchanan, 2004; Klaas and DeNisi, 1989; Kivimaki *et al.*, 2003; Lewin and Peterson, 1999; Klaas *et al.*, 1991; Cortina and Magley, 2003). However, there have been no studies to our knowledge that have examined the consequences of responding to an allegation of bullying or harassment. The way that an alleged perpetrator perceives the complaint to be managed is thought to have significant bearing on both their own health and on their commitment to the organization, and their decision to take legal action against their organization.

Aims of the study

This exploratory study aimed to elicit the views, perceptions and attributions of the alleged bully. The central questions were: What were the consequences of being accused of workplace bullying for the participant? Did the accused bully feel that the complaint was managed in a just and fair manner? How did their perception of fairness impact on the way they coped with the allegations?

Method

Sample

To achieve the aims of this study, participants were recruited following a media release and subsequent radio and newspaper interviews. Participants were self selected and contacted the researcher if they wanted to participate. They were eligible to participate in the study if they were working in a managerial/supervisory capacity and had been accused of workplace bullying in the previous two years.

A total of 24 participants were interviewed as part of this study. Participants were aged between 29 and 63, with a median age of 49 years. Approximately 37 per cent were employed in the public service including hospitals, schools and government departments, 33 per cent employed in the private sector, 8 per cent employed in local government and 20 per cent employed by non-government agencies such as community run child-care organizations and charity organizations.

Interviews

Telephone interviews were conducted with 19 of the participants who lived outside the metropolitan area. Five participants from the metropolitan area were interviewed face to face. These interviews were either carried out at the University, or on request, at the participants' place of work, and took approximately one hour.

The interview was guided loosely by a series of open-ended questions aimed at assessing the background of the allegations and the impact of the bullying allegation on the participants. Rather than a structured set of questions, the guide provided a list of areas that the researcher wanted to cover. It was important to the researcher that the interviews took on the quality of an "informal conversation with a purpose" as suggested by previous research, in order that participants were able to discuss sensitive issues relating to the allegations made against them.

The interviewer aimed to elicit the participants' perspective about the allegation of bullying, and questions were designed to engage the participant in talking about various aspects of their complaint experience. The first question asked in all the interviews was "Can you tell me how you came to be accused of workplace bullying?" The informal nature of the interviews allowed the interviewer to deviate from the guide if a participant raised an important issue, or provided an unusual answer to a question. The interviewer asked follow up questions with probes such as "Can you tell me more about that?" or, "There seems to be a discrepancy between what you said ... and ... can you tell me about that?" "what do you mean by ...?" All of the interviews were audio taped and later transcribed. Field notes or memoranda were also made by the researcher in relation to the coded data, in order to describe interesting or common issues that were uncovered through the coding process. The thematic analyses undertaken in this thesis is grounded in "phenomenological epistemology", which seeks to understand the everyday experiences of research participants, in order to gain a better understanding of workplace bullying from their perspective and reality. Therefore the analysis of the interview data focuses on the "individual lived experience" of accused bullies, which is important in applied research that is carried out from within this approach(Braun and Clarke, 2006).

Analysis of transcripts and coding of interview data

Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach was employed to code the data and develop the final themes. The steps of analysis are similar to those described in previous research when describing the procedures involved in analysing transcribed data for grounded theory. This process involved transcribing all the interviews, generating initial codes (open coding), searching for themes within the codes, reviewing themes (axial coding) and defining and naming themes (selective coding). Themes were then compared with and discussed in light of the relevant theories. The guidelines suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006), were followed in the current study and provided a methodology that determined analytical rigor in qualitative data analysis.

Survey measures

All participants completed a short survey, which asked about demographic variables (age, sex, occupation), as well as measures of psychological health and perceptions of justice. They were also asked whether the complaint against them was substantiated.

The Depression Anxiety Stress Scales (DASS) (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995) were chosen to measure respondents' levels of anxiety, depression and stress. The DASS-21 is a 21-item self-report inventory that describes a number of symptoms assessing depression, anxiety and general non-specific arousal (stress). For example, Stress: "I was intolerant of anything that kept me from getting on with what I was doing; Anxiety: I was worried about situations in which I might panic and make a fool of myself or Depression: I found it difficult to work up the initiative to do things." Respondents were asked to report the degree to which each symptom was experienced over the past week, on a four point scale ranging from 0 = Did not apply to me at all, to 3 = Applied to me very much. Interpretation of the DASS is on the basis of percentile scores with scores of 0-78 classified as "normal", 78-87 as "mild", 87-95 as "moderate", 95-98 as severe and 98-100 as "extremely severe" (Lovibond and Lovibond, 1995). In the current study the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory for all subscales and were 0.86 for the Stress subscale, 0.77 for the Anxiety subscale, and 0.89 for the Depression subscale.

The Organisational Justice Scales (Colquitt, 2001) were utilised to measure the three dimensions of organizational justice. The first seven questions provide a measurement of "Procedural Justice" (e.g.; To what extent do you think that the procedures and processes used to address your complaint were free from bias?); four questions measure "Distributive Justice" (e.g. The outcome of my complaint is appropriate forgiven the extent to which I was bullied or harassed), four items measure "Interpersonal Justice" (e.g. To what extent do you think the person who dealt with your complaint treated you in a polite manner?). All items use a five-point scale to measure the extent to each item reflects the way the respondents complaint was managed from 1 = never to 5 = always. In the current study the Cronbach's alpha coefficients were satisfactory for all subscales with an alpha coefficient of 0.91 for the Procedural Justice scale, 0.92 for the Interactional Justice scale and 0.96 for the Distributive Justice scale.

Results

Results from the survey questionnaires will be reported first, followed by the themes identified in the interview data. These results will then be interpreted together in the discussion section of this paper.

Psychological functioning

As illustrated in Table I, 66 per cent of participants reported scores on the Depression, Stress and Anxiety Subscales (DASS) within the Moderate – Extremely severe range of depressive symptoms. Similarly 73.3 per cent of participants reported Anxiety scores on the DASS within the Moderate – Extremely severe range of anxiety symptoms, and 56 per cent of participants reported Stress scores on the DASS within the Moderate to Extremely severe range of stress related symptoms.

As illustrated in Table II, 26.7 per cent of the participants were found guilty of workplace bullying.

No overall differences were apparent in the DASS Depression ($M = 24$, $SD = 14.84$), Anxiety ($M = 18$, $SD = 12.96$) or Stress scores ($M = 27$, $SD = 10.19$) of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying, compared to the Depression scores ($M = 17.7$, $SD = 11.07$, $p > 0.05$), Anxiety scores ($M = 10.42$,

SD = 5.71, $p > 0.05$) and Stress scores (M = 21.4, SD = 9.9, $p > 0.05$) of those participants who had been found not guilty of bullying.

Perceptions of justice

No significant differences were found in the Procedural justice scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying (M = 12.6, SD = 5.7), and those who had been found not guilty of workplace bullying (19.05, SD = 8.05, $p > 0.05$).

No significant difference was found in the Interactional justice scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying (M = 11.57, SD = 3.15) and those found not guilty of bullying (M = 15.57, SD = 5.25, $p > 0.05$). However, a significant difference was found in the Distributive justice scores of those participants who had been found guilty of bullying (M = 4.57, SD = 0.97) and those found not guilty of bullying (M = 12.36, SD = 6.19, $t(20.2) = -5.31$, $p < 0.01$). This result is not surprising and suggests that those participants who were found not guilty of bullying perceived the outcome to be much fairer than those who were found guilty of bullying.

It was interesting to note that correlations showed that there were no significant relationships found between the perceptions of organizational fairness (in terms of Distributive justice, Procedural justice and Interactional justice) and participants' level of Anxiety, Depression and General stress as reported on the DASS.

Dominant themes in the interview data

Negative impact on participants' health

A major theme to emerge from the qualitative analysis was the negative impact of the allegations on the participants' health. Half (50 per cent) of participants reported taking time off work because of anxiety, depression, stress, or being diagnosed with a specific psychological disorder. A total of 27 per cent ($n = 8$) participants reporting taking up to five sick days during the investigation, and 23 per cent ($n = 20$) reporting having

Table I.
DASS scores of accused
bullies

	Depression		Anxiety		Stress	
	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>
Normal range	26.7	8	23.3	7	26.7	8
Mild range	3.3	1	0	0	16.7	5
Moderate range	26.7	8	46.7	14	10.0	3
Severe range	13.3	4	13.3	4	23.3	7
Extremely severe	26.7	4	13.3	4	23.3	7

Note: Total numbers of participants are not equal due to missing data

Table II.
Outcome of bullying
complaints

	Number	Per cent
Found guilty	8	26.7
Found not guilty	20	66.7
Unresolved/not investigated	1	3.3
Missing data	1	3.3

more than two weeks off sick during the bullying investigation. At the time of the study, one participant reported being on workers compensation leave because of psychological injury as a result of the psychological consequences of being accused of bullying, and had been unable to work for the last ten months despite being found not guilty of the allegations. Another two were in the process of applying for workers compensation as a result of sustaining a psychological injury.

Participants described a number of physical as well as psychological concerns that they associated with being accused of bullying or harassment. These concerns were reported by all participants independently of whether they were found guilty or not guilty of bullying or harassment. The participant cited below was a senior manager in a multinational firm. He retired early shortly after being found not guilty of sexual harassment and bullying.

He said:

It affected me severely. I became suicidal. Seriously, I was devastated, mortified, and began to question what I had done, and to whom [...] it was the worst period of my entire life. I suffered a racing heart – my blood pressure escalated; I experienced my first ever panic attack; I had a continual pressure in my chest; I could not eat; I felt I could trust no-one; I became deeply depressed (senior manager, private industry).

Another participant talked about having suicidal thoughts after being accused of bullying. She had been off work on stress related leave since the allegations against her had been made. She said that following the investigation she had been found not guilty of bullying.

She said:

I would sit in my car, I would pull up in the car park in the morning and I would sit there and cry and I'd think I can't go in. One day I actually turned around and came home. The other times I just sat there and by the time I had sort of cried a bit I would go in and I'd get myself a cup of tea, look at my e-mails, collect myself and go right, what's going to be the best part of my day to start with first. I'd reached a point where I sat in my office one day and I could understand how people could kill themselves and I just sat there and I was crying and for about three hours I sat there and I looked at the ceiling and I thought it would be really easy because I had bars across there and I said gee that would be so easy and then I am sitting there and I suddenly realised what I was doing and I am thinking this is madness (nurse manager).

As well as those who had been found not guilty of bullying, participants who were found guilty of workplace bullying also described significant distress. Although she had been found guilty of bullying, this participant reported:

I had a lot of anxiety. I was anxious, I was like walking on eggshells and then the following week I just couldn't [...] I went to my GP [doctor] and he gave me a one week work related stress leave. I had to control myself at work [participant crying]. Even up to now [...] like since [...] because of that incident when he said I was talking about someone and he first accused me in August, and since then I'm not sleeping well. I would sleep till about two o'clock, three o'clock am, and I would have to have [...] it takes a lot of energy to face the day and say you have to go to work [crying, and finding it difficult to talk]. And it takes a lot of effort to smile to my kids, especially at the beginning because they could also feel my stress. But I have to go to work. I have to create a positive environment (team leader in private industry).

Suppression of emotion

One of the themes to emerge from the analysis was that, despite the high level of emotion reported by all participants, many talked about having to control their emotional responses to the allegations during the investigation, especially at work. One participant who was found guilty of bullying described putting on a “professional face” She said:

But I also had to [. . .] I felt like I had to show as a team leader in the position that I am in that I am strong enough to deal with something like this, even with the feelings that I had. I felt that if I had fallen apart then they might have looked at me a little differently and possibly thought maybe she shouldn't be in the team leader role; and that I wouldn't be able to cope with it (manager, private organization).

In the example cited below, the participant who was cleared of the bullying allegations reported:

I don't know that I did have a [coping] strategy, and you know, I just [. . .] I don't know. I just basically gritted my teeth and went in there and did my job. I tried to be as normal as possible and it was incredibly hard and I obviously didn't succeed particularly well. In hindsight I wish that I had gone and sought some counselling to deal with it. But I just kept it to myself and sort of gritted my teeth [. . .] I felt as if I should have been able to manage it on my own (middle manager, public service).

Another said:

Well I didn't express anything at work. I didn't say anything, I didn't show any anger, I didn't try and talk to other people there about how I was feeling. I just kept everything to myself internally [. . .] (senior manager, private industry).

Participants who were found guilty of the workplace bullying allegations also described having to suppress emotions. The theme of unfairness is also present in a number of these transcripts, with participants having to suppress negative emotions such as anger. One participant who had been found guilty of bullying said:

Yes they have accepted her claim [bullying allegation] and I am still coming to terms with that. That makes me quite angry. They are saying that I did bully her and there are a whole lot of implications from that. You know apart from the fact that it pushes our premiums up through the roof. There are implications for me with future employment if anyone does any investigation, and I feel like I have got no right of reply. You know, we threw all the evidence at them that we had and that was quite a lot and it still wasn't enough, and I feel like I can't even react angrily because that would justify the claim in the first place. I feel like I am having to restrain or temper my reactions and my emotions. I have to be really conscious when something comes up in the workplace. I think through it for a longer length of time and more clearly about how I am going to respond to it. Even if it is a simple thing, I just go through it so much more in my head to analyse it and think – if I react in this way or if I respond in this way can't that be construed as bullying. Every action that I take at the moment I go through that process [middle manager, public service].

Perceptions of unfairness

A significant theme to emerge from the analysis was the perception of unfairness in the way the organization managed the complaint. Many participants, both those found guilty and not guilty of the allegations felt that the organization did not abide with the

policies that outlined how allegations were to be investigated. The manager cited below was found not guilty of bullying. He said:

It was managed completely wrong. At all stages the policy said you have got to try to deal with it at the time, and try to resolve it at the lowest level, but basically there was no chance given to us to try to resolve it at that level. The policy wasn't used at all I don't think. The first thing I heard was well you are stood down (middle manager, public service).

Others felt that the organization sided with the complainant or, as illustrated in the transcript below believed they were bullied themselves by the union or the complainant's advocate:

They got the union to write to our CEO demanding a meeting behind closed doors about me without me present; I didn't know any of this to start with. Eventually when I found out about this it was my director that actually advised me and I have to say I was fairly upset. The director offered to respond to the union stating that he would not meet with them unless I was present, if that was my choice. I said no, I wasn't going to be ganged up on, because that is how I was feeling. But really there was one person leading it and I was aware of that [...] My point was that they should have never even agreed to the meeting without talking to me. The process was undertaken incorrectly. I wasn't involved in the process at all [...] they just bowed down to this person, who is quite powerful in her own right, and bowed down to the union (middle manager, public service).

Other participants referred specifically to the principals of fairness being important, but being absent in the way the allegation against them was managed. For example, this senior manager who was found guilty of bullying, felt that the investigation into the allegations against her had been biased and had not been carried out in accordance with the "principals of natural justice" or "procedural fairness". She sought legal advice, and at the time she was interviewed was in the process of suing her employer. She reported that:

[...] He basically said that my behaviour and performance is no longer acceptable and that I needed to consider my options. I was just totally shocked. I said I have been here for 16 years and never had any negative feedback [...] "Can you give me specific examples"? And he said "well, no not really". I said "are you going to give me something in writing about this" and he said "no". [...] and I said to him well, "What exactly are my options"? I said "are you talking about an option here which I will be coached and supported to ensure my alleged poor behaviour improves"? And he said "oh I guess that could be one of your options" and then he vaguely said something about a package and I said "well, again are you going to put this in writing" and he said "no" [...] and by that stage I was in tears and in total shock and I said you know there is no natural justice here or procedural fairness. You have not followed any of the organizations policies or processes around any of this. I don't understand this [...] I just didn't understand what was happening. I couldn't comprehend this because as a manager I am really aware of all the policies we have, and that we need to follow the policies and procedures set out by the organization, and so I was quite devastated by this... and this was done in an open plan office. This [termination] was basically done in his glass office (senior manager, local government).

Some of the participants who were found guilty of bullying appeared to have little insight into the severity of the behaviours that they had carried out, and reported feeling that the judgment against them was unfair and too harsh. The transcript below provides a good insight into the participant's perception of poor procedural justice, as well as outcome. Following his employment being summarily terminated he took his

employer to court for unfair dismissal, but lost the case. The court found that his dismissal was reasonable under the circumstances. He reported:

It was an instant dismissal basically because I was called into a meeting with the chief IT officer and one of the HR representatives. Called into a meeting mid morning and then half an hour later I am pretty much left out on the street, feeling like a criminal for want of a better word. During the dismissal meeting there was no [...] They like presented the five e-mails that I had e-mailed around this was their only form of evidence. They didn't give me any explanation of what constituted bullying and harassing. Like I know that some of the e-mails might constitute harassment to a degree [...] I say to a degree because no one actually raised with me prior to or beforehand that this was harassment. I wasn't given any forewarning, or written notices, no formal warning, no official warning or nothing like that. I was just dismissed after a half-an-hour meeting. After four-and-a-half years, I am plugging along, being a valuable contributor to the organization and then in half an hour I am made out to be the worst person in the world (middle manager, private industry).

Exiting the organization

Of the participants, 25 per cent ($n = 6$) were either dismissed or reported they were forced to resign from their jobs as a result of the bullying allegations; one had been with the organization for 15 years and was a senior executive position. He had been found not guilty of bullying. Another was summarily dismissed following allegations of bullying and sexual harassment. Two were escorted from the workplace and told to stay home until after the allegations had been investigated. Despite one of these allegations not being substantiated, neither of the participants returned to the workplace, and one took his employer to court for wrongful dismissal and discrimination based on his sexuality (this was settled out of court), and the other was in the process of taking legal advice on her options. Two other participants decided to leave because they no longer trusted the organization, because of lack of support during the investigation, and ongoing rumours and gossip regarding their management abilities. A number of other participants talked about how they wanted to leave, but were unable to because of financial constraints or lack of available jobs to transfer to.

Participants reported a number of difficulties returning to their roles as managers following the allegation of bullying made against them, whether they were found guilty or not guilty. Loss of confidence and trust was a strong theme that emerged from the interviews. For example, this participant reported:

I've now become a lot more suspicious, a lot less trusting of my staff, I was never the sort of person who kept records of conversations or meetings or times, and that caught me out during the investigation because [name of accused] did document meetings, times, actual words that were spoken in the meetings and when that was put to me I had limited recollection or no recollection of it; and I've now become, if I have a meeting with a staff member where I have to counsel them or I have to give them some bad feedback or criticism I'll make a record and make a note of what I've said and that's made me less trusting of my staff and the other thing I've done which I never used to do before was I always believed that performance management was sort of like a two-way street where you sit and talk about opportunities and have a general open discussion with people, I'm much more reserved now in what I say to people and how I give them feedback on work and as I said I keep records and documents of everything, keep every e-mail. I never used to do that.

All talked about the loss of reputation, and believed their reputation as a manager had been compromised because the accusations that had been made against them. For example, the participant below talked about his behaviour being questioned even after he was found not guilty of sexual harassment and workplace bullying. He ended up retiring early partly because of the experience that he had gone through:

[...] there's now this question mark about you. Your judgment is scrutinised and your value as a person is looked at with question mark [...] because there's rarely ever smoke without fire if you can say that, there's something there well now there's a question mark about how did you allow this to happen, the circumstance to come. So I felt as though there was a black mark now placed against me in terms of just my role and my capacity as a senior manager in the organization (senior manager, private company).

Discussion

Health consequences

Results indicated that there were significant health consequences through being accused of workplace bullying. The high levels of anxiety, depression and stress as reported on the DASS were reflected in the interview data.

Over half the participants in this study took sick leave as a result of the negative health effects that they were experiencing, and at the time of the interviews three participants were either on, or were in the process of applying for, workers compensation as a result of obtaining a workplace (psychological) injury. One had been on workers' compensation for ten months as a result of a psychological injury sustained through the bullying accusation. The economic cost of psychological injury claims is significantly higher than physical injury claims, and it takes more than double the time to return the worker to the workplace if they have sustained a psychological injury (Australian Occupational Health and Safety Compensation Council, 2007). Therefore from an economic perspective it is important to pay attention to the health of both the victim and the alleged perpetrator during a bullying investigation.

Perceptions of organizational justice

Results indicated no difference in the perceptions of procedural justice and interactional justice between those participants who were found guilty of bullying and those found not guilty of bullying. These results need to be interpreted with caution given the small sample size and the sample. However, when examined in relation to the qualitative data, most participants, whether they were found guilty or not, reported concerns with the way the investigation was managed. As a result, several participants, had taken or were in the process of taking legal action against their employer as a result of either a perception of unfair termination, or because they believed they sustained a workplace psychological injury and were seeking compensation. This qualitative finding supports research that suggests that anger and poor perceptions of justice contribute to legal claiming by employees (Goldman, 2003; Lind *et al.*, 2000a) following employment termination, and supports Australian studies that suggest that perceptions of unfairness at work can contribute to workers making compensation injury claims against their employer (Winefield *et al.*, 2010). It follows that it is particularly important for organizations to treat all respondents in a

fair and just manner, and provide appropriate support and counselling during investigations, even if they are accused of heinous behaviours.

Career consequences

Results indicated that 25 per cent per cent of participants left their organization, even if they were found not guilty of bullying. This finding supports other studies where exit from the organization is the final stage in workplace bullying (Zapf and Gross, 2001). However, whereas other studies focus on the victim leaving the organization, the current study draws attention to the perpetrator at times being forced to leave, whether they are found guilty or not. Those that stayed with the organization reported loss of confidence in their abilities as managers. Given the mental health symptoms they were describing, this loss of confidence is not surprising. Many reported not getting the support they required at work. However, given that a number of participants masked their distress and regulated their emotions and behaviour, it is not surprising that the need for support, coaching and perhaps mentoring during and following a bullying investigation may not have been recognised.

Conclusions and recommendations

Although results cannot be generalised to the wider population, this study is the first to have examined the perceptions of accused bullies. These results challenge the populist view of all bullies as being unfeeling and insensitive, and psychopathic in character (Clarke, 2007, 2005; Babiak and Hare, 2006). Results suggest that many respondents to bullying complaints may hide or regulate severe emotional distress, and managers who have been accused of workplace bullying require support, education about their behaviours, and mentoring, whether they have been found guilty of bullying or not. If managers are not functioning effectively because of the negative impact of a workplace bullying complaint, it is reasonable to expect that this impact will not be confined to them alone, but will also impact on the workgroup itself and ultimately the organization. Because a person's perception of fairness has a significant impact on the decision whether to submit a workplace injury compensation claim (Winefield *et al.*, 2010; Dollard *et al.*, 1999), or take legal action against an employer (Lind *et al.*, 2000a), ensuring that the accused bully is accorded a just and fair investigation is paramount.

There are some inherent methodological limitations to an exploratory study of this nature. As all data were obtained through interviews with managers accused of workplace bullying, a socially desirable response bias is expected. It is reasonable to presume that these participants will have expressed themselves in a positive light and will have viewed themselves as victims as opposed to perpetrators. However, because generalisability is not the main objective of this study, the convenience sampling and the small number of participants is legitimate (Nielsen and Einarsen, 2008) in addressing the main aims of this study. Despite the methodological limitations of an exploratory study such as this, it is one of the first studies of bullying that has been undertaken through the perspective of the accused bullies. Furthermore, the results are not necessarily at odds with the findings of dominant paradigm in bullying research, and research into consequences of perceptions of injustice at work. Further research examining bullying from the perspective of the accused is recommended in order to broaden the scope of workplace bullying research, to take into account the voice of all the participants involved in workplace bullying.

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