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Bullying and incivility in higher education workplaces

Micropolitics and the abuse of power

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to explore the lived experiences of workplace ill-treatment of administrative and technical staff in the higher education sector, with a particular focus on organisational response.
Design/methodology/approach – A qualitative interpretative phenomenological research design was employed. Using non-random, purposive sampling strategies nine self-selecting participants from three of the seven universities in the Republic of Ireland were interviewed in person. Data were analysed thematically employing the Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2012) four-stage data analysis model.
Findings – Thematic analysis yielded four main themes: micro-political nature of bullying, cynicism about the informal response, the formal procedures exacerbate the problem and significant and adverse health impact. Participant narratives engender the lived experience for the reader.
Research limitations/implications – As participants were self-selecting respondent bias is acknowledged.
Practical implications – The findings of this study add to the accumulating evidence that organisations are failing to address workplace bullying.
Social implications – In failing to protect employees, the adverse health difficulties experienced by targets of bullying are further exacerbated.
Originality/value – While the literature yields much in terms of types of behaviours and impact, and argues for anti bullying policies and procedures in the workplace, what is evident is the selective organisational use of policy and procedures and inherent biases in place which expose a reluctance to effectively protect dignity and respect in the workplace.
Keywords Bullying, Incivility, Higher education, Power
Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Workplace "ill-treatment" denotes a range of negative behaviours to which employees are exposed within the workplace. It encompasses familiar constructs of workplace bullying, harassment, incivility, abusive supervision and mobbing, and punitive, unfair and/or unreasonable management practices. Legislation now affords most workers reasonable protection from injury, however, a sizeable minority of workers experience ill-treatment and abuse.

Workplace ill-treatment has been researched extensively in recent decades. The extant literature focusses on prevalence and correlational studies. There is now substantial evidence that ill-treatment is pervasive, damaging to health, and exists in most if not all organisations. Difficulties in conceptualization and measurement notwithstanding (Notelaers *et al.*, 2006; Nielsen *et al.*, 2011; Hershcovis, 2011), it is evident that almost half of the working population experience negative behaviour in their workplace (Fevre *et al.*, 2012a; Zapf *et al.*, 2011). Impacts include compromised physical and mental health, often severe (Hogh, Hoel and Carneiro, 2011; Pompili *et al.*, 2008; Nielsen *et al.*, 2015). Employees in large organisations and certain public sector organisations are particularly

at risk. Despite the risk to the health of workers, organisational response is poor at best (Einarsen *et al.*, 2011). Comprehensively evaluated interventions are virtually non-existent (Hodgins *et al.*, 2014).

Workplace ill-treatment

This study focusses on workplace bullying and incivility as aspects of workplace ill-treatment. Workplace bullying is by far the most well researched and has become the dominant way of conceptualising trouble at work (Fevre *et al.*, 2012b). Despite this, there is as yet no universally agreed definition of workplace bullying. Often workplace "anti-bullying" policies provide a list of negative behaviours that are said to constitute bullying, although this cannot be exhaustive as perpetrators draw on a wide range of tactics, which can vary over time, depending on the perceived outcome and on situational factors. Targets also vary in their interpretation and response to different behaviours based on the context in which behaviours are experienced (Fevre *et al.*, 2012a). Targets are often slow to identify that they are being bullied (Hodgins, 2004; Lewis, 2006), due to either shame (Lewis, 2004; Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2011) or uncertainty. It is generally agreed in the literature, and the position taken here is that workplace bullying is a process; it is repeated, deliberate, targeted, and systematic.

Incivility is defined as rude, discourteous behaviour; belittling or humiliating other employees in public, interrupting, and demeaning or disregarding the opinions of others (Anderssen and Pearson, 1999; Cortina *et al.*, 2001). Because a certain degree of incivility is assumed to be intrinsic to organisational life, incivility can be dismissed as unimportant. The experience of incivility is not inconsequential, with accumulating evidence of negative impact on health. While the majority of workers admit to behaving disrespectfully on occasion (Pearson and Porath, 2005) incivility is of particular concern when individuals become habitual instigators, and practice selectively as well as generally. Both bullying and incivility were included in this study in order to ensure that both work-related bullying as well the kind of interpersonal aggressive behaviours that are more readily associated with the term incivility were captured in data collection.

Prevalence

Zapf *et al.* (2011) concluded that 3-4 per cent of workers experience serious bullying, 10-15 per cent less serious bullying (e.g. less often than weekly or less than six months in duration) and 20 per cent of workers experience negative social acts which may include behaviours that while not always falling under the stringent criterion of bullying, are nonetheless significant social stressors at work. The latter figure is consistent with estimates of incivility, for example, 23 (Cortina *et al.*, 2001), 17 (Sprigg *et al.*, 2010) and 20 per cent (Pearson and Porath, 2005). Ill-treatment is more likely to occur in large organisations, in public administration, education, and health and social service sectors (O'Connell *et al.*, 2007; Eurofound, 2012; Fevre *et al.*, 2012a). Prevalence in these sectors may rise to twice the national rate (O'Connell *et al.*, 2007; Parent-Thirion *et al.*, 2007). Taken together, these estimates tell a rather sorry story about rudeness and abusive behaviour in work.

Workplace ill-treatment and health

Ill-treatment impacts negatively on health. Associations between being bullied and chronic fatigue, sleep difficulties, somatic problems, irritability, lowered self-esteem, anxiety, depression, suicidal intent are evident (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003; Hogh, Mikklesen and Hansen, 2011; Niedhammer *et al.*, 2006; Hallberg and Strandmark, 2006; Hoel *et al.*, 2004; Balducci *et al.*, 2011). Studies of incivility alone find associations with psychological distress (Cortina *et al.*, 2001; Lim *et al.*, 2008), burnout, anxiety, depression and hostility (Langlois *et al.*, 2007). Employees

who experience serious interpersonal conflicts at work have a greater risk of developing psychiatric disorders and being hospitalised (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003). Those who have experienced bullying long-term display a constellation of symptoms that closely resembles post-traumatic stress disorder (Mattheisen and Einarsen, 2004). The uncontrollable nature of the process (Hogh, Mikklesen and Hansen, 2011) and the personal directedness of it make it unique as a stressor and in the way it affects psychological well-being and functioning.

Poor organisational response
Workplaces continue to struggle with preventing bullying and incivility, or managing them when they emerge (Kahn and Kahn, 2012; Keashly *et al.*, 2008; Rayner and McIvor, 2008). The most common recommendation for workplaces is to ensure that there is a policy in place which makes a clear commitment to preventing bullying and outlines transparent procedures for managing cases that occur (Hoel and Cooper, 2000; Richards and Daley, 2003). However, while policies do provide a protective effect, they are weak. Even large organisations with a dedicated HR function fail to navigate manipulations of the system (Klein and Martin, 2011). There is evidence that HR practitioners move to protect the interests of the organisation at the expense of employee well-being (Harrington *et al.*, 2015). There are clearly issues with implementation, specifically; awareness, training for managers and strong follow through after investigation (Woodrow and Guest, 2013; Salin, 2007). Problems that have been identified include that the procedures outlined in policies often only apply to explicit, verifiable actions, rather than the subtle exclusionary tactics and poor/unfair management practices that often characterise targets' experiences (Rayner and McIvor, 2008). A sizeable number of targets do not disclose or report their ill-treatment (BardakçI and GüNüŞEn, 2016). Workers feel highly compromised with regard to confronting negative behaviour in the workplace, usually assuming that the organisation will not reprimand or punish perpetrators and their only option is to "shut up and put up" (Hodgins, 2004).

There is limited empirical research on the thought processes and perceptions of targets who do experience bullying and incivility, and in particular how they have experienced the response from management within their organisation. We sought therefore to explore the lived experiences of administrative and technical staff in the higher education sector, with a particular focus on the nature of the organisational response.

Method
A qualitative interpretative phenomenological approach was adopted for the research in order to facilitate in-depth exploration of participants' lived experience of bullying. Rather than examine the phenomenon from a descriptive phenomenological perspective, which emphasises the "pure" description of people's experiences, we wished to move beyond what is already known to the interpretation of such experiences. Therefore, we drew upon the insights of Matua and Van Der Wall (2015), who advocated the "interpretive/hermeneutic approach" as a way to examine contextual factors such as culture, gender, employment or well-being of people or groups interacting in the experience to arrive at a deeper understanding of the experience, in order to derive requisite knowledge needed to address the persistent problem of workplace bullying. Qualitative in-depth interviews were conducted with nine participants all of whom worked in administrative posts in universities in Ireland. Ethical approval was sought for the study and was granted by the University of Limerick Research Ethics Committee.

Sample
Trade unions representing higher education employees were contacted with the research description and information sheets detailing the requirements for participation

and were asked to circulate it to their members. The information sheet provided contact details for the researchers and invited those who wished to participate to make direct contact. In total, 11 people working in administrative duties made contact and sought inclusion in the study. These 11 came from four of the seven universities in Ireland. Two declined to follow through with interviews after initially agreeing to participate. Reasons cited for declining were "wishing to leave it behind now having left employment" and "fear for career". In total, nine people were interviewed. These nine came from three of the seven universities in Ireland. All were full time staff with permanent contractual status.

Data collection and analysis

Face-to-face interviews were conducted at a location chosen by each participant. The interviews took 1 hour to 1 hour and 20 minutes to complete. Interviews were transcribed verbatim. We adopted four stages of analysis based upon the Pietkiewicz and Smith's (2012) model. The first stage comprised multiple reading of the transcripts and immersion in the data while making notes on observations. This note taking and observation focussed on content (what is actually being discussed), language use (features such as metaphors, symbols, repetitions, and pauses), context, and initial interpretative comments. The second stage involved transforming the notes into emergent themes. This in practice meant formalizing concise phrases to a higher level of abstraction, referring to a more psychological conceptualization while still grounded in the detail of the participants/ account. The third stage involved seeking relationships between themes and clustering them together. In effect, this meant looking for connections between themes, grouping them together according to similarities (Pietkiewicz and Smith, 2012). Themes that did not fit well with the overall emerging structure or those that had a weaker evidential base were discounted at this stage. This then led to the development of a final set of superordinate themes and subthemes. The final stage involved writing up a narrative of the themes. In order to honour the voices of participants, we present two vignettes that engender the lived experience for readers, in tandem with the traditional reporting of research results in thematic format. Cross-validation was employed during the study. Both authors independently analysed the transcripts and then shared their notes with each other to compare analyses.

Results

Vignette 1: Sarah's story

> Sarah works in financial administration. She describes being "victimized" and "picked on" by her manager for a few years. She linked the reason to her meticulous approach to work which led to her manager questioning her procedural decisions: "My manager was saying, no- and I think it was because I was standing up for myself, saying, I'm not getting myself into trouble because I'm not following work practices. So my manager, 2 years ago threatened my job". She felt treated differentially to peers. "He approved her time off, no problem, with extra leave on top of it. When it came to me, he wanted to know when I was doing my exams, what time I was doing them at, and was reluctant to approve them. I just felt he was trying to get at me". Sarah became disenchanted with procedures not being followed. She informed her work supervisor whom she says ignored it. She then informed her trade union. They contacted the department director, who also ignored and passed the issue back down to the manager. This action set a chain of events in motion with difficult consequences for Sarah.

During the interview Sarah identified being told that her managers were trying to get rid of both her and another colleague, "that we were taking liberties, when we were going on our tea break. It was horrible. We were basically ignored, we were told to 'fuck off'. Next then everyone in the corridor that we work in, ignored us, we were isolated, segregated. I have to say hand on my heart; it was the worst week I've ever put down in my life. And to this day I can't understand why, people do that, I can't […] in my head, I'm still trying to get around that, it was so bad". She describes loss of friendships. "And then, lies were being spread about me, there was one colleague that I was really close to. She started ignoring me, walking past me, and I have never said a bad word about her". She felt blamed for things that were not her responsibility and labelled a troublemaker. She attributed this to her being assertive "because I'm not a yes person, and going to stand up, If I don't agree, with something, especially when it comes to policy and procedures. They are not put in place for nothing. It's my job, at the end of the day".

Sarah's GP diagnosed that she was suffering from work-related stress, which resulted in three months leave. "I lost three stone in the space of a couple of months […] yeah […] I've completely, I mean, my house was falling down around me, for two months, I didn't have the energy to get up and clean it, all I wanted to do was sit there and watch television, and smoke cigarettes, that's all I wanted to do". During her first week of sick leave she received a letter from work directing her to attend the company doctor. She then received a letter informing her to attend facilitation because a complaint had been made against another colleague and her name was included in it despite her own complaint remaining unaddressed. She replied seeking that her work issues would also be addressed in the facilitation process and as yet she has received no response.

Sarah has since returned to work. She described mixed responses to her situation, which remains unresolved. "Sometimes I can leave it here, and go home, other times then I'm actually bringing it home. I'm still being spoken to aggressively; I'm still being ignored. The first day I came back my colleagues walked out of the office and were gone for two hours, first day back, I didn't know what was going on, getting phone calls from suppliers and I hadn't a clue where anything was, it's my first day back […]. The next day, we were asked to stay away from the office, till half two […] because it was hard on the other colleagues, because we returned back to work […] So I was after being out on work related stress for nearly three months and returned back to work, but it's harder for my colleagues […]? I feel like I was a virus or something that people have to stand away from".

She describes unreasonable demands from her manager, who otherwise ignores her. "Every time, he walks past me, he had his head down like, for a manager, that's, it's disgraceful carry on. You wouldn't even treat a dog, like that. But the demands he throws at you, is phenomenal […] like I was inputting there a few weeks ago and the tray was full and my supervisor asks, will they all get done? and I said, hopefully […] And it was like, 'they'd better be'. So you're being intimidated constantly, being threatened". During her interview Sarah raised a cynical note about the failure of policy in this regard. "They [anti bullying policies] look fantastic, but if you're not following them […]? The dignity and respect policy is, the first protocol is you approach the person. If you don't feel comfortable approaching the person, approach the manager. I followed all those steps, and I was the one that was victimized because of it". Sarah has sought redeployment in vain and continues in an unresolved situation in her workplace. "I think I'm the 12th person, that it's been done to, and I'm the only one that ever actually returned to work".

Vignette 2: Tim's story

Tim describes himself as subject to bullying behaviour that is " 'still endemic and still ongoing' with other colleagues. They're still in the same situation, and even with the same individuals". For the first 15 years of working in the university setting he had "a really good job, and worked hard". Then his manager retired and the new manager redeployed him to work on a project setting up another unit. Then Tim describes a sudden change "just one morning, out of the blue, on a bank holiday weekend-I remember I came in on the Tuesday, and I had all these notes to say clear my stuff, get out of the office-no answers-no nothing, and go back over to where you came from". He has never been able to gain answers as to why: "I don't know what; I'm not really sure what happened. It's just […] – I thought I had a good relationship with them all, and I thought I was really working well with this guy, and, then just, that's the way it happened". Tim describes then spending "[…] several years in a room, with no communications, no computers, and only, only doing what work I was asked to do, rather than being able to do the work I would normally do".

He described being watched all the time and that several attempts to get rid of him were made, "They tried several times to try and get rid of me, where they got information from outside about things I was involved in […] a reason to dismiss me, you know". The work he enjoyed was removed from him. "All the work that I liked doing […] was taken away – I wasn't allowed do that. So, I had to sit in there, then […] go in every day, you know, just sit around a lab doing nothing. Eventually they moved me […] they put me sitting in a kind of a big room […], a room twice the size of this, (indicates a small area) and left me there […] and then they could pass up and down the door and watch me every day". Tim experienced depression and a desire to leave as a result. "I spent a couple of weeks in hospital as a result, and, it came to light. The manager […] he must have […] he some way got the information that I'd been in hospital and what I'd been treated for, and told my colleagues. And, as it just happened, one of my colleagues was in their house […] and she'd asked how I was, and he basically was able to give her, verbally, exactly that I had been in the psychiatric unit, that I had been hallucinating, and I was going mad and all this sort of thing". This spurred Tim to take action. "I decided that's enough, you know, this is like, now this guy is putting out private information that he shouldn't be doing, and I took a case against them". He describes this as "absolutely a waste of time". "The college didn't support me in any way, as a matter of fact, they made me look an idiot-they […] when I was interviewed, they […] even the way it was written up-they wrote it up in a kind of style […] that a 12 year old would write up. Whereas, when they wrote up his, because we had to exchange our different points of view, it was concise, legible and accurate". Tim's experience of HR was not positive; "once the heavies in HR got a hold of it, what they do is they protect the university, obviously, which is their job. But they wouldn't entertain anything about this guy being a bully, at all. You know, like, he was a line manager, and therefore they were going to protect him. So, it meant that, you know, I had nowhere to go except go a legal recourse and I just wasn't prepared to do that". Tim describes other tactics that were employed to isolate and upset him. "He did lots of other things […] So in the end […] what really happened was, I was left to rot, they decided, they all stayed away from me […]."

Tim described systematic isolation. "The core reason I was employed to do the job, was my expertise in [removed to protect anonymity], And what they did was, they stuck me in a room, cut off all this work. Told people, you can't use him for this, in writing! These were copies of all these letters, telling people not to contact me and left me there to stew, just

thinking that I'd kind of throw in the towel, and walk away". Tim maintains that it is still happening to others. "It was like, you know, leaving an abuser with children […] They did nothing about it […] you had people who had been working in various places, doing well for fifteen sixteen seventeen years […] and suddenly this guy comes along and hell. There's still a guy […] and he's still like in trepidation of what's going to happen to him next, because he ran into the wrong side of this particular guy […] and he's well qualified, Phd, good guy to work […] he's lots of skills and he's sitting in a room now, with very little to do". Tim also explained that even when the bully moves on a legacy could remain. "The legacy issues are, you don't get a bite of the cherry, when it comes along, you don't get any promotions. You're black marked. You have a flag over your head saying, trouble […]" "I thought in good faith that I could go there and say, OK, have a hearing, get a result, but it'll be fair. But it wasn't". He describes the culture of the university as "caustic […] I think a lot of people would probably see that, even people who've made it, to the top, they would, still say that it's a nightmare place to work-if you just want to do your job".

Thematic analysis

The nine participants, evidenced different experiences, although all constituted ill-treatment involving either bullying, incivility or both. Three (Tim, Emer and Sarah) reported situations they described as victimization, in which they felt senior staff, sought to intimidate and ultimately get rid of them. Two (Dana and Nuala) were bullied by staff junior to themselves, in one case another woman seconded into a temporary post, the other a man who had unsuccessfully competed with the target for a promotion. Sorcha described bullying by the institution in the form of lack of recognition and opportunity, and Tina, Anna and Mary all discussed situations, experienced and/or witnessed, that could be described as low level, but persistent abusive exercising of power. We identified the four themes in the data and these are described below.

Cynicism about the informal response. For most participants (as recommended in the policies of the three universities in the study), the first port of call was the informal process. There were no instances of a satisfactory outcome for this procedure. Participants were unreservedly cynical about the informal process, seeing it as ineffective, and not to be trusted. This was borne out in Sarah's experience as can be seen in Vignette 1, but also in Tina's experience:

> So, fortunately a job came up (after bullying) and I got it, but before I left, I went to my Head […] and I did say what I felt the problem was, that this had been a really hard 2 years of my life, that it was affecting everything, and that I couldn't stay-blah-blah-blah, and he seemed shocked and surprised, but took it on board, and then I left him with it, and within 2 years she (alleged bully) was promoted to office manager […]. So I thought, wow […] (Tina).

Mary requested an informal meeting with her manager to discuss what she felt to be deliberate persistent exclusion, and work-related communications being regularly ignored. Although she had not invoked the formal process, the manager invited a HR representative and another senior colleague to the meeting, in effect undermining the informal stage of the process.

For some, the informal route was not a viable option as the contact list can include staff who have in fact engaged in bullying, or as Nuala recounted, be a personal friend of the perpetrator. The process was not deemed to offer adequate protection from further victimization. Fear of job security superseded any potential benefit:

> I could have gone to our person (informal contact) – why didn't I? Because I was just in the door. Because I wasn't a permanent member of staff.

The formal response compounds the problem. However, the formal route was equally problematic. For the participants that engaged with the formal process, the organisational response exacerbated the situation. This included increased victimization, exposure, humiliation, and a sense of betrayal when the process failed the target. Anna found that it had backfired. Despite eschewing the formal process, she found her sick note triggered an occupational health (OH) appointment and that this in turn, led her line manager (and perpetrator) to interpret the situation as an allegation of bullying:

> So, without being actually aware of the knock-on consequences of what he was about to write on my medical certificate, he said, "I'm just going to put down work-related stress" so of course me […] not thinking […] said well […] fair enough […] and all of a sudden I have a letter from HR, which rocked me. I'll tell you our HR office have a long way to go learn how to write letters to people on the edge […] because all of a sudden I was being told by HR you cannot come back to work 'til you've been seen by an occupational health physician (Anna).

On meeting the OH service, Anna then spoke with the HR manager who issued the letter:

> […] we had a chat, and he contacted my manager, you know I had never made an allegation, but he contacted the manager, and said you know she (the manager) has to be given an opportunity to refute this, […] I said I haven't made any allegations, its just work-related you know, but of course I had gone to the occupational health physician who […] wrote to HR, and while they may not have discussed the actual content or shown the report […] it was discussed […] which I thought a bit unorthodox (Anna).

A lack of impartiality of HR who were consistently seen to be biased towards senior personnel or the managerial grade featured in most participant accounts:

> They don't make it very easy for you, and they tend to side with management. HR in this one particular case sided with management and made life hell for this lady, so much so she was physically sick every morning, before she went into work […] And she kept on trying, trying, trying to get out […] Eventually after about a year, she did manage to get a position, but it was just sheer push on her part to keep going, going, and going until she actually got out. And 3 months later, somebody else got a job (target's old job), and after about 3 months, applied for redeployment, went through the same process. So that individual manager is still […] (Sorcha).

Mary's experience was that the alleged perpetrator (her line manager) lied and was not challenged by HR, Tim's was that HR would not even entertain the possibility that his line manager was bully, while Dana felt the case was decided before it was heard, and for her this constituted a further bullying experience:

> But I felt let down by the woman who did the investigation, I was extremely angry with her, because of that […] she found against me before I walked in the door, and some of the questions she asked were clearly levied in the favour of this other woman […] and there is a part of me that wants to hang management here for the way I was treated, Because I didn't get an apology from anyone, they can't admit liability by apologising, if they actually called me in and said, I was bullied by, additionally bullied by, you know, the people who are my management […] (Dana).

Tina describes a situation in which the target was valued in her specific role and so in order not to lose her, the perpetrator was promoted to facilitate a move away from the target.

Mediation was unhelpful, for Dana, Emer and Sarah. Nuala avoided organisational processes and eventually resolved her situation without help. However, the approach that would have been taken by the organisation, she was told, was that the target and perpetrator would have been put in a room to "thrash it out", an approach she found alarming, given the fact that her perpetrator had previously been violent in her office.

Ways in which the formal process aggravated the situation included the investigation making the target "re-live everything", being required to continue to work with the person

after making a complaint, or having to manoevere situations to avoid contact with the alleged perpetrator. Dana felt she had to take a lower grade post in order to survive it:

> […] after mediation failed I decided. I resigned my promotional position […] to lessen the interaction with her, I requested a key to the back door of the office, so I wouldn't have to go through the main door of our office, I requested a desk in a different area of the building, so […] I would avoid all contact with her (Dana).

> You're at your lowest point ever, and, the main problem I think we have here, is if somebody does make a complaint, you're left in that situation, to work with that person, the whole time, while this investigation is happening (Anna).

Anna comments that the requirement to record matters, while understandable from a procedural perspective, was realistically not only unworkable, but had the potential to distort the situation:

> I cannot go through my working day writing down every little encounter, because that's just going to fill me full of rage and anxiety anyway, because I'm picking up stuff that isn't there either, I think you get nearly hyper-sensitive! […] You'll always have encounters with people that don't necessarily go well, and that's fine, but if you write every single one of them down, you'll just build them out of all proportion. So, there's a really, really fine balance between documentation, and building something that isn't there. (Anna).

Participants found HR's tendency to reduce incidents to "just personality clashes" or "communication issues" dismissive, and reinforced distrust in and disappointment with policies and processes.

Impact on health: deep and wide. The depth and extent of the impact of ill-treatment on health was evident across all interviews. Reduced self-confidence frequently emerged, with Anna, for example, claiming that she was at her lowest point ever when HR contacted her, and that until then she did not realise "how far down a hole" she gone. Tim was hospitalised. Sarah was out of work for three months and lost three stone in weight. Nuala described sleeplessness and anxiety but was afraid she would be seen as suffering from anxiety or depression in the job, as this would affect her future prospects. Dana reports:

> […] it was like as if I was in post traumatic stress, because I was obsessing constantly, and I mean its over five years, over probably six years, and its still affecting me that I don't […] I can't hold my head up and ask for what I deserve in work.

The visceral dimension to the experiences was evident, with Anna describing trembling and her stomach lurching if she had to walk past the office of the perpetrator. Now (several years later) although still not comfortable, she can go into the building. Emer experienced panic attacks in work:

> […] when it first started hitting me I actually ended up having an attack in the office and I didn't realise what it was […] I thought I was having a heart attack, I was actually sent to the hospital […] I felt I couldn't breathe and I was getting numb in my face, and my legs were like jelly, and I kept-I couldn't catch my breath, and I'd say I fainted a couple of times […] So, I was off then for three weeks at that, because I was finding it very hard to catch my breath and she put me on Valium and things like that […] (Emer).

Sarah's account indicates that the experience in the workplace has deeply affected her sense of self. She experienced respiratory infections, raised blood pressure, dramatic weight loss and depression. She has engaged in coping strategies but the experience she had continues to affect her:

> I'll never forget the day […] I think I cried so much […] the first day I came out of work sick on a Thursday, and on the Friday, I went to my doctor, and it all just came out […] I came home to tell

my mother, and she was crying, looking at me, she wanted to ring here, and give out to them, and I was like, you can't […] Yeah, and then it's like going back over it again and its draining, and like even now I look back and go, why did I leave these people do that to me? Why did I let them do that? Like, I would have always classed myself as a strong person, I don't show emotion in front of people, […] That's how it is, and for me, that day to cry in front of my mother the way I did-I couldn't even breathe. And to this day, I still cry at home, myself (Sarah).

Sarah's self-blame here fed into her negative self-appraisal. Others too, even having come to the realisation that the problem lay with the perpetrator and the organisation for allowing it to happen, engaged in self-blame at various points in the process. Anna, for example, recalls "[…] literally beating myself up, and going, what sort of idiot are you to get yourself into this situation".

The potency of the language used by participants provides a further insight into the way in which the experience has left a deep scar. The working environment is described as "caustic", "poisonous", with participants describing themselves as "fighting a losing battle", being "in the line of fire", a "virus", and "left to rot".

Bullying as micropolitics. Many of the experiences featured ill-treatment in the form of micropolitics, some of which could be seen as being driven by the particular structures found in large public sector organisations. Isolation featured in many of the accounts, either as experienced by the target in the context of poor organisational response or as a strategy employed by the perpetrator. Tim was both physically and psychologically isolated. Dana recounts moving herself physically from her work-space and away from others to avoid the perpetrator. Anna found that after she had gone out on stress leave that others did not want to have a relationship with her. Mary felt she was physically removed from her colleagues, yet takes the blame for isolating herself:

> I kind of stopped going in then, talking to the girl I would have worked with, because I just felt there was no point, you know, it was kind of – I really isolated myself then (Mary).

Participants were in no doubt of intentionality, they perceived the people who ill-treated them did so deliberately, aiming to hurt or intimidate. Tactics such as "divide and conquer" and favouritism were discussed, also the abuse of the power to approve leave, or targeting someone because they were perceived to have had undue "autonomy and freedom" in a previous posting. Mary talks of how people in her unit can be in favour, but "then they'd say or do something, and then that's it, they're cut". The exercise of power, for the sake of it, was a particular feature of many accounts. Like Tim, Tina draws analogy with abuse:

> […] I suppose it's like an abusive relationship, if you're listening to it, and listening to it, it slowly just grates you down and you suddenly […] you doubt yourself for the work you are doing […] (Tina).

> You nearly doubt yourself, because its very hard to explain it, because sometimes you sound like you are just being petty, when you actually experience it and when it's a long period of time […] (Mary).

The bullying not being halted by former friends or colleagues was particularly difficult. Emer strove to make sense of her situation, not just insofar as one person with power sought to inflict damage but as to how so many others apparently uncritically followed suit:

> I feel we were victimised, because we did make complaints, and initially our complaints were only against our supervisor and our manager […] but it spiralled out of control that day, that they started telling people different versions and different stories and breaking confidentialities about situations, that, and lies were told that the majority of the department stopped speaking to us, so it went from four people to […] forty people against two (Emer).

A number of participants experienced ill-treatment in the context of local or unit-level changes in the hierarchy, e.g. one member of a unit took temporary leave, resulting in a

lower grade staff member working at a higher grade for a temporary period but then returning to the lower graded post. Such movements clearly upset the rank order, but especially so if they involved an inversion after a relatively short time period. Anna, for example, describes being "half time manager, half time my own job", a situation that was tense and difficult to manage. Nuala was appointed as team leader after a short time (six months) in the unit, but then returned to her lower grade. She was targeted by a peer who unsuccessfully applied for the temporary promotion. Tina's comment illuminates the sensitivity to the grading structure:

> […] now she was senior in the sense that, on grades, she was a 3 and I was a 2, so even through we had very distinct and different areas of responsibility within the job, it just escalated […] (Tina).

Discussion

In the nine interviews presented a diverse range of behaviours were experienced and witnessed, perpetrated by both managers and subordinates. These included work-related ill-treatment, incivility and predatory bullying. Organisational responses were, as reported previously, consistently weak, but also damaging.

The negative impacts of bullying on physical/mental health are well documented in the literature although the pathways that lead to these impacts are less well understood (Parzefall and Salin, 2010). The findings contribute to mapping this pathway. The nine targets all described negative impact on health, some quite extreme, and this extremity lay in the way in which the experience challenged the sense of self. Three participants describe moving from seeing themselves as strong and positive people who did not succumb to stress, to being forced to accept that they were "unable" to cope. Sarah's explanation of how crying in front of her mother, signaled to her a profound change in how she viewed herself, and she realized that the experience had completely undermined her completely undermined her self-image. (Hallberg and Strandmark, 2006) similarly cite a participant who claimed "the everything that was the earlier me, is no longer me". For Nuala, protecting "self" was important, evidenced in not being seen to cry and not being perceived by the perpetrator or colleagues as emotional or weak. Self-isolation was chosen as a form of self-protection. Tina described those ill-treated in her workplace as "shells of people". These accounts suggest that the devastation inherent in the experience is in the way it erodes the certainties of the self, and in effect facilitates a destruction of the self as previously known. Participants reported engaging in coping behaviours that in some way addressed reassertion or enhancement of self through new activities such as educational courses, mindfulness classes, and skills training, all of which, it can be argued, are ways of re-establishing the self.

The literature has tended to focus on bullying as an expression of interpersonal aggression and often fails to acknowledge the role of organisational policies and management practices in the bullying dynamic as actively contributing to bullying (Salin, 2003; Omari, 2007; Fevre et al., 2012b). Fevre et al. (2012b) describe this as the tendency to cast bullying as "private trouble"; individual cases requiring individual solutions, and call for a sociological perspective that focusses attention on how bullying is symptomatic of a fundamentally troubled workplace. Yet, while these are public events per se, their impact was both public and private, in the effects on selfhood. The data here attest that, contrary to popular belief, bullying is not due to individual weakness or vulnerability but that it is an outcome. The data reveal that when experiencing bullying, a change occurs for the target, which they can detect and track, and which renders the target undone, shattered and outwardly vulnerable. Thus, recognition of the complexity of the intersection of the personal and organisational dimensions of workplace incivility and bullying is essential as are interventions that address the causes both at public/organisational levels and the effects at the personal/ private ones.

There was remarkable consistency in the poverty of organisational response. Responses were wholly inadequate and adversely compounded issues, representing a particular problematic for the rhetoric of anti-bullying policies in these organisations. Our data are consistent with the findings of O'Donnell and MacIntosh (2015) in this regard. This twofold effect explains why workplace bullying has been described as a more crippling problem for employees than all others kinds of work-related stress combined (Einarsen and Mikkelsen, 2003). Not only does bullying impact self-worth and confidence, but the failure of organisations, to effectively protect their employee, further reduces self-worth and conversely increases cynicism and bitterness. Adverse impact upon health and well-being notwithstanding, there is the additional cost of perceived unfairness in the workplace being a predictor of burn out (Maslach and Leiter, 2008). The data show that the policies and procedures are clearly not fit for purpose. The inability of organisations to deal with workplace bullying is well documented (Klein and Martin, 2011; Rayner and McIvor, 2008; Einarsen *et al.*, 2011), but the reality that the organisational response compounds and aggravates the situation is novel. Participants here found that processes backfired, leading to further victimization and a greater sense of betrayal and isolation.

We interpret our findings in the context of power theory. Power is complex and is exercised and abused in multiple pathways, some less visible than others. Definitions of workplace bullying refer to imbalance of power (Beale, 2011; Keashly and Jagatic, 2011; Branch, 2008; Caponecchia and Wyatt, 2011), that is, the bully is in a position of power over the target, either hierarchical or emotional. However the failure of the organisation to deal with bullying is an additional abuse of power, but significantly, a more subtle one.

The participants recognised that bullying was happening because power was being inappropriately exercised towards them by perpetrators with more power, usually in the form of hierarchical power, but not always. Social power was manifest in Dana's case and coercive power, in Nuala's. This is the visible, first face of power, commonly understood as "power-over". The specific context of the workplaces in which our participants work, put them in a situation where they were susceptible to overt abuses of power. The grading structure for administrative staff in Irish universities is based on a public service structure of eight/nine levels and is described as narrow and excessively hierarchical, where the only means of progression is through promotion "up" the grading ladder (O'Riordan, 2008) yielding an employment context that lends itself easily to exercises of power. The participants describe a work environment in which people are highly sensitive to the grades of others and the where small advantage of rank was regularly and ritually exploited. This recognition was reflected in comments on the pettiness of the behaviours experienced such as making an example of someone who failed to wash a coffee cup or insisting that staff sign in and out for coffee break. For these participants, systematic undermining was intended to be a constant reminder of the superior status of their perpetrator.

The second face of power (Bacharach and Baratz, 1962), where power is used to determine what is important and unimportant, has been described as a covert or hidden form of power (Sadan, 2004). Organisational inaction is an example of this second, hidden form of power, evident in participants' recognition that HR was not offering protection and that they were neither objective nor evenhanded. Sadan identifies the mechanisms of covert power as how "people with power mobilize game rules which work in their favour at other expense" (Sadan, 2004, p. 43) One such mechanism is the "mobilization of bias", described as "reinforcing and emphasizing of values, beliefs, ceremonies and institutional procedures which present a very particular and limited definition of problems" (Sadan, 2004 p. 43). The framing of workplace bullying as an interpersonal problem or as due to a personality clash and the finding that participants felt they were expected to adopt HR's perspective in this matter (Fevre *et al.,* 2012b; Johnson *et al.*, 2015) is clearly an example of the covert exercise of power, as is the strongly held view by participants, and also discussed in the

literature (eg Keashly, 2010) that that HR are not impartial but will adjudicate in favour of the more hierarchically senior person.

The failure of organisations to recognise that the way in which they address workplace bullying is an exercise of covert power faciliates bullying to flourish. This turning of the organisational "blind eye" results from taking an overly simplistic view of power or because it is in the organisation's interest (Beale and Hoel, 2011; Harrington *et al.*, 2015). From a rationalist perspective power is perceived as the capacity to influence others to ensure compliance with organisational goals, and is commonly reduced to "superiors rightfully exercising power over subordinates in order that the supposedly more nobler ends of the former are served" (Kearins, 1996, p. 3). However, the reality suggests that frequently managers exercise more subversive uses of power that cross-boundaries of reasonable management and that organisations fail to respond effectively to the ensuing bullying.

The micropolitics of organisational life includes a number of much more subtle uses and abuses of power (Kearins, 1996; Vredenburgh and Brender, 1998), some of which are actually antagonistic to organisational goals. Tactics employed by perpetrators in this study did not contribute to organisational goals, but conversely could have increased inefficiencies. Providing mediation as a solution to bullying, as recounted by participants, is also indicative of naïve perspectives of power. Mediation, one the most common interventions for workplace bullying has been shown to be relatively ineffective, and was experienced as such by participants in this study, due to the fact that it is based on pre-requisite assumptions that are clearly unmet, for example, parity between the mediating parties (Saam, 2010; Ferris, 2004). The listing of peers as "informal contacts" to be approached to resolve bullying issues is also evidence of naivety with regard to the exercise of hierarchical power. The anti-bullying policy in one of the universities sampled here encourages targets to approach the perpetrator first to explain how their behaviour is effecting the target and request a change in behaviour, clearly naïve (if not unsafe) in the extreme.

A more cynical view would hold that it is in the interests of organisations to cast bullying as an "employee problem" and to deliberately distract from the exercise of hegemonic power, which links with discussions of workplace bullying in the context of the labour process. It is in the interests of organisations to distort processes to "investigate" bullying in favour of the powerful, an argument that cannot be dismissed, as the experiences of participants in this study demonstrate. The management directive to maximise production or service delivery can and does include bullying tactics, thus inadvertently or unwittingly blurring the boundaries between unacceptable behaviour and legitimate management practice (Ironside and Seifert, 2003; Beale, 2011).

Conclusions

The findings of this study not only add to the evidence that organisations are failing to address workplace bullying but, based on Bacharach and Baratz's (1962) concept of the second face of power, argue that the failure on the part of organisations to deal with this pernicious problem is an exercise of power in itself. Current policies and practices are, at best, developed in ignorance of the dynamics of human behaviour in the context of a hierarchical power structure, and at worst, a deliberate attempt to prevent employees from weakening the management worker relationship, by re-casting problems as due to interpersonal difficulties that are impervious to intervention.

Given the impact of bullying on the targets in this study we argue strongly for a radical revision of anti-bullying policies and procedures. Current policies allow the organisation to be judge and jury in its own case (Sullivan, 2010). Management, and HR have a vested interest in not addressing workplace bullying evident in their willingness to defend or avoid

"taking on" bullies who were more powerful than targets. Employees will benefit more from external intervention, such as use of an ombudsman service, where the investigator is neutral and does not a have a vested interest in protecting the powerful.

Commitment to a proactive approach is essential, yet the policy approach seen in most organisations and certainly those sampled here, is reactive and falls significantly short of prevention. Prevention requires addressing the wider working environment, through creating a positive culture that supports equity, health and well-being. Injustice and unfairness are central to the perception and prevalence of bullying (Fevre *et al.*, 2012a) and organisations can do much to ensure that practices and treatment are fair and seen to be fair. The "power and politics" in workplaces requires acknowledgement. Power is part of the daily dynamic in work organisations, but appropriate protections need to be in place to prevent its abuse a more democratic approach to power may contribute to a more benign working environment. Abusive power can be moderated by fostering norms and values about its careful use (Vredenburgh and Brender, 1998), and would seem to be the way forward if we are to seriously address workplace bullying. Organisations must recognize that their processes of redress are also "power-full" processes thus they need to be careful and critical in their engagement.

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